Handling knowledge: Using classroom materials to construct and interpret information requests

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Abstract

This article contributes to the recent conversation analytic interest in exploring the mechanisms of action formation and ascription by investigating how embodied interactional practices involving material objects relate to the organization of social action. Using as data information request sequences in student–student interaction, the study highlights the material nature of an interactional context and examines how students orient in talk and by bodily-visual means to their and their co-conversants' textual documents during individual task work. Sequential analyses illustrate how the manual handling of such everyday learning materials as handouts and tasks sheets is not only an important resource for constructing the social actions of requesting and asserting information, but is also oriented as a basis for drawing inferences about the participants' relative epistemic statuses. The article concludes by considering how embodied action and joint activities contribute towards action formation and ascription. Finally, it is also suggested that investigating the interactional use of learning materials is central if we wish to understand how they may support students' task work by organizing epistemic practices specific to classrooms and, through those practices, construct particular institutional identities for students.
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1. Introduction

A key focus of the naturalistic enquiry into social interaction is in exploring the processes whereby turns-at-talk come to 'do' things. This is of interest not only to analysts, but it also represents a challenge for speakers, who are faced with the task of designing their turns so that they recognizably conduct a specific social action such as a request, telling or disagreement. Similarly, turn recipients need to investigate an ongoing turn for finding out just what that turn is doing in that specific context. Besides these very general tasks, there are also action-specific tasks that participants attend to. In constructing an action as a request for information, participants are not only managing their epistemic relations – which party is more knowledgeable than the other regarding some targeted information – but they also engage in the task of identifying *what* the targeted information itself is, in what sense and for what purpose it needs to be known. This article examines how students manage these concerns by handling everyday material objects such as textbooks, task sheets and notebooks to construct social action during task work. The ways in which these materials are handled are an intimate

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part of requests and responses, and provide rich interactional data for investigating how visible bodily conduct around objects contributes to action formation and ascription (Levinson, 2012), and how such conduct can support students in their task work. By focusing on the interactional use of semiotic resources and material objects that are at hand – and the handling of which other participants can see – this study also adds to the emerging body of research that investigates how the material environment around us figures in sequentially evolving interactional activities (e.g. Nevile et al., 2014; Streeck, 2009).

The data reported in this study are interactional sequences in which a student requests either information or assistance from another student while accomplishing independent tasks in a Content and Language Integrated (CLIL) classroom. While such sequences routinely address vocabulary-related gaps in students' second language (see also Markee and Kunitz, 2013), also the medium of instruction, many are embedded in, and construct, literacy practices that are relevant to students, such as locating task-relevant information in textbooks and using it to formulate task answers. Looking at these kinds of situations can also help educational researchers better understand how learning materials may or may not support students in the construction of action in the classroom, as well as what the competent use of these materials looks like.

2. The embodied and material nature of action formation: interactional functions for learning materials in classrooms

In recent conversation analytic (CA) literature, the range and composition of resources that interactants mobilize to construct distinct actions have been investigated under the rubric of action formation (see Schegloff, 2007, xiv) and recognition. Levinson (2012) notes that the term 'ascription' describes the work of participants perhaps better than 'recognition', carrying the implication that the business of attributing an action to a turn is one of negotiation and interpretation, as opposed to infallibly identifying one action in a turn.

Action can be constructed using a broad range of means. Schegloff (2007, xiv) identifies ''the language, the body, the environment of the interaction, and position in the interaction'' as resources that participants assemble together into ''conformations designed to be…particular actions''. While the multiplicity of resources that are potentially relevant for interaction is widely acknowledged within CA, prior theorizing of action formation and ascription has tended to revolve around the role that talk and its grammar play in these processes. Thus, in reviewing existing work on the topic, Levinson (2012, pp. 104, 110) raises two factors, a turn's (linguistic) design and its location in the ongoing sequence, as crucial for the ascription of an action to that particular turn.

However, the linguistic shape of an utterance in social interaction is not always a reliable indicator of the action that it accomplishes, and participants can draw on other sense-making resources in attributing action to a turn. This has been forcefully demonstrated by recent CA work on participants' orientations to knowledge. Using the analytical constructs of epistemic status and stance, Heritage (2012) has shown that when determining whether a turn is requesting or asserting information interactants orient to a presupposed and somewhat enduring 'real life' distribution of knowledge between them (i.e. relative epistemic status) as a more significant resource than the epistemic stance of an individual turn as encoded by morphosyntax and intonation. Heritage (2012) argues that epistemic stance works as a 'secondary lamination' to epistemic status, and in cases of incongruence between status and stance, the former takes precedence. Extending this work, Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2014) have recently proposed that participants use three distinct orders – epistemic, deontic (i.e. power, control and agency) and emotional – as ''omnirelevant heuristics'' (see S&P, 2014, footnote 6) in recognizing action. Similar to the relative distribution of knowledge in social interaction, Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2014) argue that participant orientations in the deontic and the emotional order are anchored in a distinction between a relatively enduring status, part of the interactants' social relationship, and a linguistically encoded stance.

The distinction between status and stance, whether epistemic, deontic, emotional or even benefactive, brings to the fore the relative weight of interaction-internal vs. interaction-external resources in (participants' and analysts') interpretation of what an utterance is doing. According to Heritage (2013, pp. 572–573), the distinction is also a way of integrating social contexts, identities and organizations into the analysis of interaction. While the notion of status is generally thought of as a more enduring and presupposed expectation by the participants, a kind of a sum of their shared history and social relationship, it is still something that can, in Heritage's (2012, p. 4) words change as a result of ''specific interactional contributions''.

Less prominent in recent theorization about action formation has been what might be called multimodality, that is, the role that conduct other than talk plays in the formation of actions, either in absence of talk or together with it. As Levinson (2012, p. 128) usefully reminds us, not all social activities are first and foremost verbal, and everyday activities such as talking while eating routinely involve a coordination of 'multiple action streams'. In fact, many everyday activities are distinctly embodied and material, often in the sense that participants have visual access to each other and they may handle objects of various kinds. Although multimodality has not been central in investigations of action formation, the rapidly emerging body of CA studies of objects in social interaction (see e.g. volume edited by Nevile et al., 2014) has demonstrated that participants do indeed mobilize different kinds of objects within the material environment to construct action. It has also shown that objects themselves can be interactional accomplishments. The latter is the case, for