

Displays of uncertainty and proximal deontic claims: The case of proposal sequences



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Abstract

Joint planning consists of people making proposals for future actions and events, and others accepting or rejecting these proposals. While proposals convey their speakers' judgments of some ideas as feasible, however, in anticipation of and in an attempt to pre-empt the recipients' rejection of their proposals, the speakers may begin to express doubt with the feasibility of their proposals. It is such "post-proposal displays of uncertainty," and their interactional corollaries, that this paper focuses on. Drawing on video-recorded planning meetings as data, and conversation analysis as a method, I describe three ways for the recipients to respond to post-proposal displays of uncertainty: the recipients may (1) *overcome*, (2) *confirm*, or (3) *dispel* their co-participants' doubts. Even if the outcome of the proposal, in each case, is its abandonment, the analysis points out to important differences in how these response options treat the first speakers' "proximal deontic claims" – that is, their implicit assertions of rights to control the participants' local interactional agenda. The paper concludes by discussing the idea of proximal deontics with reference to other related notions.

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Keywords: Conversation analysis; Epistemics; Deontics; Mitigation; Proposals; Planning meetings

1. Introduction

Joint planning is an activity that people in everyday life commonly engage in. It consists of people making proposals for future actions and events, and others accepting or rejecting these proposals. While proposals convey their speakers' judgment of some ideas as feasible, the speakers may afterwards change their minds. This is what happens in Extracts 1 and 2, drawn from interactions where pastors and cantors plan their joint work tasks.

(1) (MT 30:12)

01 C: *herran siunauksenhan vois laulaa.*
 benediction-GEN-CLI could sing-INF
 the benediction could be sung.

02 (0.4)

03 C: *#kanssa että#,*
 also PRT
 #also#,

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- 04 (0.5)
- 05 C: -> .h vai oliko niin että Marjaana puhuu.
or be-PST-Q PRT PRT FemaleName speak
.h or was it so that Marjaana speaks.
- (2) (KM1 6:41)
- 01 P: voisko se olla toi, (2.0) viel tohon aikaan
could it be that, (2.0) still at that time
- 02 vuodesta toi suvivirsi?
of the year that Summer hymn?
- 03 (2.0)
- 04 P: kesäkuun lopussa,
at the end of June,
- 05 (4.0)
- 06 P: -> vai pitäskö se olla joku (.) nuorten virsi
or should it be some (.) hymn for the youth

In both instances, the participants are preparing the next Sunday's mass. In Extract 1, a cantor (C) makes a proposal on how the Benediction (Lord's Blessing) could be realized (line 1). After a silence (line 2), an increment (line 3), and yet another silence (line 4), the cantor, however, invokes a potential objection to her idea (line 5). Similarly, in Extract 2, a pastor (P) makes a proposal for the Hymn of the Day (lines 1–2), but later, after two lengthy silences (lines 3 and 5) separated by an increment (line 4), expresses doubt with the proposal (line 6); she raises a question about a potential necessity (the verb *pitää* 'should') in light of which her proposal appears inapt. It is these kinds of "post-proposal displays of uncertainty," and their interactional corollaries, that this paper will focus on.

Post-proposal displays of uncertainty are regularly preceded by a lack of the recipient's engagement with the proposal, which was also the case in Extracts 1 and 2. This regularity can be clarified with reference to the conversation analytic notion of preference. While proposals make relevant both acceptances and rejections, these are not "symmetrical alternatives" (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973: 314) but, instead, embody quite different alignments toward the first speakers' projects (Schegloff, 2007: 58). Thus, while both acceptances and rejections are relevant responses to proposals, acceptances are "preferred" in that they promote these projects and rejections are "dispreferred" in that they obstruct them (Schegloff, 2007: 59; Pomerantz, 1984). Given that human social interaction is ordered in ways that allow the participants to maximize their mutual solidarity (Heritage, 1984: 265–280; Clayman, 2002), preferred actions tend to be performed more straightforwardly and faster than the dispreferred actions, which are often accompanied by delays. Such delays not only soften the force of the dispreferred responses, but also facilitate the avoidance of such responses altogether. In the context of proposals, this means that, during the delays, the first speakers have a chance to withdraw their proposals (Pomerantz, 1984; Clayman, 2002: 235; Schegloff, 2007: 64–65), which, indeed, neatly explains the empirical observations about the rarity of rejections to proposals (Houtkoop, 1987; Ekberg, 2011; Stevanovic, 2012). Hence, it seems that it is largely in anticipation of and in an attempt to pre-empt recipients' rejections that proposal speakers begin to express doubt with the feasibility of their ideas.

How do the recipients then respond to post-proposal displays of uncertainty? Commonly, their responses lead to the abandonment of the original proposals. There are, however, several different ways for the recipients to achieve that outcome, and, as I will show in this paper, the recipients' choices in this regard are not without social implications for the proposal speakers. The analysis of these implications draws on the insight of there being different kinds of tacit assertions of social rights that people make in conjunction with their actions (Stevanovic and Svennevig, this issue). The notion of "epistemics" (Heritage, 2013) refers to people's positions vis-à-vis their knowledge of what is being talked about; through the particularities of their interactive conduct, they cannot avoid making *epistemic claims* – that is, implicit assertions of relative knowledgeability in the matter at hand (Heritage and Raymond, 2005; Heritage, 2012, 2013; Stevanovic and Svennevig, this issue). The notion of "deontics" (Stevanovic, 2013b), then again, signifies people's relative authoritative capacities in different domains of action. As epistemic claims, also *deontic claims* are ubiquitous to human social interaction (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2012; Stevanovic, 2013b; Stevanovic and Svennevig, this issue). Deontic claims are of two different types: *distal deontic claims* are about people's rights to control and decide about their own and others'

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