

# Accounting for the right to assign a task in meeting interaction

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## Abstract

This article analyzes how meeting participants account for their right to assign a work-related task to a colleague in meeting interaction. It focuses on accounts which appeal to benefactive effect, that is, the benefits of the proposed action to the operation of the organization. Such accounts are often formulated as general strategies or policies for action. They are shown to be related to the deontic rights of the participants in that subordinates engage in more extensive accounting practices than do managers. Accounts that evoke other interests than benefits to the organization are shown to be vulnerable to being questioned or rejected. The study thus contributes to understanding how benefactive stance is used for legitimizing requests for institutionally relevant actions.

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## 1. Introduction

Assigning work tasks is commonplace in the day-to-day operation of organizations and in workplace meetings. One of the main purposes of meetings is to decide who should do what. The job descriptions of certain institutional positions such as managers include the right to assign tasks to subordinates. Thus, persons occupying certain institutional roles have a deontic status (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014) that can be used as a resource in interaction, providing for the legitimacy of requesting certain services from their co-workers. In such cases, task assignment is not followed by an account. However, work tasks can vary both in complexity and novelty. Certain tasks are a part of the work routine and meeting participants can treat them as clearly pertaining to a specific participant due to her area of responsibility. Managers often assign such tasks just by formulating a decision. Another option is that a participant assigns such a task to herself. In both cases participants treat the core action as unproblematic and not requiring a discussion or an explanation. Other tasks may not be treated as grounded in pre-defined rights and obligations inherent in the speaker's institutional role. For instance, employees sometimes make requests to their peers or to their manager, or managers assign tasks that are new, complex or for some reason treated as difficult to perform. In such cases, participants commonly give accounts for making the request. In this article, we describe the forms such accounts may take and what sorts of reasons or motivations are invoked in them. Furthermore, we analyze how accounts may be challenged and negotiated in cases of disagreement about the legitimacy of a specific request.

Before proceeding to the analysis, we will present some previous studies of requests and task assignment, and we give some theoretical background on accounts and deontics.

## 2. Task assignment in meeting interaction

The setting under investigation here is management and team meetings in various companies (cf. below). Previous studies of meeting interaction have to a large extent focused on such things as turn-taking patterns and topic management

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(Svennevig, 2012a). This study instead focusses on a central and typical *activity* enacted in such settings, namely negotiating the responsibility for carrying out workplace tasks. Task assignment may be considered a type of directive action that is rather specialized to organizational contexts. They are most often realized as requests, but may also involve other actions as well, such as offers in cases where speakers assign tasks to themselves (cf. example 5 below).

Directives have been studied in workplace interaction by several researchers. Using a speech act approach, Vine (2004) gives an extensive overview of forms of directives in a corpus of meetings and other workplace encounters. Not much has been written about task assignment specifically, but Svennevig (2011) describes how managers may assign tasks to subordinates using different interactional styles, taking a more collaborative or a more authoritative stance vis-à-vis the interlocutor. Concerning epistemics, they may either claim superior knowledge in diagnosing the situation and prescribing a solution, or instead invite opinions from the subordinates and contribute to a more dialogical establishment of solutions. Concerning deontics, they are observed to choose request formats that vary in the degree of imposition, presenting the task as either a common or an individual responsibility.

Djordjilovic (2012a) also gives relevant background for the current study in that she analyzes how concrete, ‘practical’ requests for action are grounded in general, ‘strategic’ claims of necessity and desirability. Evoking strategic claims is shown to be an especially useful resource for subordinates that do not in principle have deontic rights to decide on the future actions of their managers. A typical example of such a claim is “we have to be proactive”. These statements incorporate condensed aspects of organizational logic and values which are presented as generally known and accepted.

In a different type of setting, Rossi (2012) found that linguistic realizations of requests varied according to whether the requested action was part of a more encompassing common project or not. We take this as a point of departure for investigating whether the common organizational ‘project’ of the employees is consequential for how requests are accounted for. A characteristic feature of interaction between colleagues in an organization is that they can be considered as involved in an overarching ‘joint project’, namely the operation of the organization. Interacting in the capacity of fellow employees, they may be expected to share a commitment to the goals of the organization and orient to them as the ultimate legitimation of their professional activities.

### 3. Theoretical background

In this paper we base our identification of accounts on Antaki’s understanding of them as a window into “the social reasoning that people go through to make sense of their words and (perhaps) impose that sense on other people” (1994: 1). Accounts are recognized not by their form, but by the interactional function they have in reference to the surrounding sequential context. Accounts address some puzzle, rather than just provide information. Consequently, we can say that accounts suspend the progressivity of the core activity. In our examples, this core activity is assigning work tasks. Antaki presents three main types of accounts: those that propose a causal relation, accounts that “make plain”, and warranting accounts (1994: 4). In this paper we deal with the last type of accounts, those that warrant task assignment by presenting the logic behind it and thus address the legitimacy of the proposed action and/or the legitimacy of assigning it to a particular meeting participant.

Clayman and Heritage (2014) show how in mundane conversation requests may be accounted for by expressing the beneficial effects of the action for the speaker. This may be relevant in an organizational context as well, as we will show in our analysis. But in addition, we consider another type of beneficiary that occurs prominently in our data, namely the organization. Through our examples, we will investigate how the operation of the organization is invoked as a type of overarching project and an important basis for legitimizing requests.

In our analysis we refer to concepts of *deontic stance* and *status* (Stevanovic, 2011; Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2014). As described in the introduction to the special issue (Stevanovic and Svennevig, 2015), deontic stance refers to interactional displays of authority in certain domains of action relative to a co-participant. Deontic status, by contrast, refers to the relative position of authority that a participant has vis-à-vis others by reference to external features, such as personal history or position in societal and institutional structures. In our case, the participants’ relative positions in the organizational hierarchy are especially relevant to consider in analyzing how their entitlement to assign tasks is displayed and accounted for in the talk.

### 4. Data and method

The data for the present study comes from two corpora of video-recorded business meetings in various corporations. The first is a collection of 5 management meetings in a Norwegian holding company owning various broadcasting infrastructure and distribution companies across Scandinavia. At the time of the data collection, the company was undergoing a major restructuring process. The language used in these meetings is Norwegian, and all the participants are native speakers.

The second is a collection of 17 management and team meetings in two companies, one in the production sector and the other in the finance sector. They are both merged from originally Swedish and Finnish companies, and the participants

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