

From entry proposals to a joint statement: Practices of shared text production in multiparty meeting interaction



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Abstract

This article investigates the practices of shared text production in multiparty meeting interaction. Using ethnomethodological conversation analysis as a method, it aims at shedding light on how the activity of text production is locally brought into being through the interplay between verbal, embodied and material resources of the setting. The data come from a planning meeting, in which 20 project members and a facilitator construct a public statement concerning a city's customer services. The analysis focuses on two social actions through which shared text production is accomplished: (1) project members' proposals concerning the textual changes and (2) the facilitator's proposal concerning the final entry in the text. Examining the sequential positioning and formation of these actions, the study shows how they intertwine with writing and thus enable a step-by-step evolvement of a written document in multiparty interaction. Moreover, the study demonstrates how they advance larger social processes by making the organizational identity of the project members visible and by establishing a shared will, needed for committing the participants to ongoing organizational change.

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1. Introduction

It has been recognized that contemporary workplaces are increasingly characterized by heightened textual demands (Iedema and Scheeres, 2003). This textualization of work has been connected to the 'audit culture' (Strathern, 2000) and seen manifested in the way staff members engage in documenting their work practices for the sake of accountability (Tusling, 2010). However, workers are not only expected to report about their own work, but also to take part in crafting various organizational texts, such as strategic plans, in which the future visions of the organization are laid out (see Pälli et al., 2009). As a result, written texts are circulated among the members of an organization as a part of the editing process. Often this kind of collaborative text production takes place in face-to-face interaction, with the text under construction being revised and born step-by-step as the conversation around it unfolds.

In this article, my aim is to shed light on how shared text production is locally brought into being in an organizational meeting. Surprisingly, despite the omnipresence of written texts in today's working life, very little is known about their interactional and situated production. Earlier studies in the area have largely focused on institutional encounters, in which the construction of a text facilitates the accomplishment of institution-specific tasks, such as questioning in police interrogation (Jönsson and Linell, 1991; Komter, 2006, 2012), order taking in customer service (Moore et al., 2010) or goal setting in

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performance appraisal interviews (Pälli and Lehtinen, 2014). These encounters are typically distinguished by divergent opportunities for the participants to carry out the editing work, which is related to their differing rights to perform certain actions as well as their asymmetrical accessibility to the material resources of the setting. In police interrogation, for example, the suspect waits while the interrogator types the answer on his/her computer – this marked distribution of activities is related to the substance as well as the completion point of the typing being known only to the latter (Komter, 2006). Contrary to this, the other party may be able to monitor and interrupt the writing, making the text construction more of a joint achievement (Moore et al., 2010), or both parties may even be expected to take up the writing independently (Pälli and Lehtinen, 2014).

However, these encounters still differ from those in which the actualization of a new text document is not a by-product of other activities, but the main goal of the gathering. It has been shown, for example, how a shared object construction is actively supported by the spatial arrangements of the setting in constructing a strategic document between work colleagues. Thus, physical proximity to another participant enables the tracking of each other's gaze and resolves the indexical properties of pronouns referring to the text (Samra-Fredericks, 2010; see also Koshik, 2002). Similarly, the text may be projected on a screen in order to ensure visual accessibility to both interlocutors (Asmuß and Oshima, 2012). Despite orienting to the text production activity as a joint project, a particular speaker may still carry the actual writing or typing, giving rise to subtle asymmetries in participation. Nonetheless, all previous studies have investigated dyadic conversations, and shared text production may entail further complexities in cases where it involves more than just two people. This is because unlike in a dyad, in multiparty interaction the participants are not only faced with the task of identifying a transition relevance place, but also deciding who is going speak next. In meetings, this is regularly resolved by having a chair, who regulates the distribution of turns (Asmuß and Svennevig, 2009). However, as shown by Mondada (2013), restricted access to the floor may pose specific problems in settings where the participants are all supposed to contribute to the conversation by providing ideas and opinions.

The question of participation and the way it is managed is also a fundamental one in this article. My data come from a planning meeting in which a written text is jointly crafted by approximately 20 project members and a facilitator, who leads the conversation. Importantly, the project members have been specifically chosen to take part in this meeting and are all expected to provide insights concerning the text under construction. Yet, there are time restrictions for the meeting, which, in turn, is expected to conclude with a completed text document. In terms of organizing the text production activity, these contextual constraints pose two interrelated problems: how to allow everyone to express their view on the text and how to then fit these views into the written document. In meeting interaction, these problems are manifested in the way text production is accomplished through the interplay of two social actions. In the first one, the project members produce a series of proposals concerning the entries that should be included in the text, and in the second one, the facilitator proposes a final entry that is based on the preceding entry proposals. Using ethnomethodological conversation analysis as a method (see Sidnell and Stivers, 2012), I will investigate the sequential positioning and formation of these actions, focusing on two questions: (1) how they enable real-time, shared text production in multiparty interaction and (2) what kinds of opportunities for participation in the editing work they, for their part, create for different meeting attendants.

The article has the following structure. In section 2 I will review previous studies on proposals in talk-in-interaction and especially in meetings, and in section 3 I will provide a more detailed description of my data and specify how the analysis was conducted. These are followed by the analytical sections 4 and 5. While the empirical analysis focuses on the question of *how* multiple voices are managed in the text production activity, in the discussion I will still reflect on the reasons *why* multiple voices have to be allowed in the mentioned activity in the first place. Here, I will iterate my findings from the viewpoint of participants' different institutional roles, rights and responsibilities, and discuss how situated text production can also be seen to advance larger social processes.

2. Proposals in meeting interaction

Proposals can be described as actions in which the speaker names a course of future action and simultaneously suggests that the specific action will be realized (Houtkoop, 1987). Thus, by constructing a proposal the speaker does not decide the matter under discussion by him/herself (such as in requesting) or leave it for others to decide (such as in advising).¹ Instead, proposals project joint decision-making among the participants, as the suggested action is shown to be contingent on the approval of the recipient (Stevanovic, 2012) and make acceptance (or rejection) of the proposed matter relevant as a next action (Maynard, 1984). In terms of future action, Houtkoop (1987) has divided proposals into *proximal proposals* and *remote proposals* depending on whether they suggest some immediate action in interaction (e.g. *shall we have a break now*) or an action that is expected to be carried out in the more distant future (e.g. *shall we have a meeting next Monday*). However, as has been noted by Stevanovic (2013), these subclasses are somewhat overlapping, as remote proposals also suggest taking part in joint decision-making about more distant matters then and there.

¹ More broadly proposals can be seen to belong to directives, namely, actions, in which the speaker urges the recipient to perform some action.

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