

Team decision-making in workplace meetings: The interplay of activity roles and discourse roles



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Abstract

Decision making in team meetings has become routine organisational practice in contemporary work life. Beginning with a theoretical discussion of role positioning at the micro-interactional level, the present study adopts as its analytic focus the management of participant roles, specifically the interplay of activity roles and discourse roles, in examining interprofessional meeting talk and decision making. Weekly meetings for optimising maintenance plans on offshore oil and gas wells on the Norwegian Continental Shelf were recorded and analysed within the framework of Activity Analysis, which combines sequential nature of turn-taking with the structural components of a given activity type vis-à-vis role-relationships among participants. Our findings show that interprofessional meeting talk in this activity type is characterised by shifts between discourse roles and activity roles in complex and overlapping ways, thus affording the meeting participants the opportunity to cumulatively add to the joint production of decisions based on their organisational role-responsibility and expertise. The present study points to the need for further differentiation of role categories in the participation framework, especially with regard to professional/institutional discourse.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing body of workplace communication studies adopting discourse analytic and social pragmatic frameworks (Angouri and Marra, 2011; Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Koester, 2006; Sarangi and Roberts, 1999; Schnurr, 2013; for an overview see Sarangi and Candlin, 2011). Parallel to this, a discursive turn is noticeable in organisation studies (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Grant et al., 2004), steered by disciplinary contributions from psychology, anthropology, sociology and discourse studies, among others. This is reflective of the contemporary workplace moving away from traditional hierarchical structures to more team-oriented work practices, with team work and team talk in decision making gaining increasing relevance. Of particular significance is the focus on meetings which have become routine organisational practice underpinning how intra- and inter-professional collaboration is accomplished in situ.

Team meetings in organisations take different shapes and serve different functions. It may be useful to distinguish between ritual meetings which are characterised by reporting/exchange of information and meetings which are targeted at problem solving and decision making in high risk scenarios. We are concerned here with the latter type of meetings within an international oil and gas company, namely the meeting for optimising maintenance plans for oil and gas wells located on the

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Norwegian Continental Shelf. In order to optimally coordinate the maintenance activities, professionals from several departments meet weekly to decide how to prioritise limited and shared resources across a field of oil and gas installations. Decisions made at this front line, operational level are crucial for the day to day functioning of the organisation and have significant economic, environmental and safety consequences. The site is representative of a form of meetings in the industry under the heading *Integrated Operations*, which is an overall industrial strategy for overcoming boundaries between professionals, fields of knowledge, departments and organisations. In the attempt to integrate what traditionally have been functional silos, one significant move has been to establish interprofessional and cross-functional arenas for decision making.

Our focus is on how interprofessional team decision making is accomplished in the meeting activity type. The research question can be posed as follows: Within the activity type of an interprofessional meeting, how do the participants occupy and shift between specific activity roles and discourse roles in their attempt to arrive at decisions? And by extension, how can such shifts in role-relationships offer useful insights about tacit professional practice?

The paper is structured as follows. First, we outline our conceptual framework of role-positioning in activity types, drawing a clear distinction between activity roles and discourse roles and showing how discourse roles afford shifts in activity roles, and vice versa. Second, we revisit relevant discourse analytic studies of meeting talk, paying special attention to studies on team decision making. Before undertaking data analysis, we offer details about our data setting and the framework of activity analysis. The analysis will explore the affordance of activity roles and discourse roles available to the participants within the given activity type. We suggest that the dynamics of role positioning in this meeting setting facilitates contingent decision making.

2. Conceptual framework of participant roles: linkage between activity roles and discourse roles

Over the decades the notion of role has been theorised at the interface of disciplines such as psychology, sociology and anthropology (see Sarangi, 2010a for an overview). Goffman (1961) marks a point of departure with his focus on role performance (or role enactment) and his conceptualisation of role as a basic unit of socialisation: “it is through roles that tasks in society are allocated and arrangements made to enforce their performance” (p. 77). In social encounters, according to Goffman (1961, 1981), participant roles, unlike social roles, can be understood in terms of *participation framework* and shifts in *footing*. His claim that “[. . .] all who happen to be in perceptual range of the event will have some sort of participant status relative to it [. . .]” (Goffman, 1981: 3) challenges the folk categories of participation, i.e. speaker and hearer as pronounced in speech act pragmatics. His participation framework differentiates more nuanced participant roles such as Author, Animator, Principal, Overhearer, Bystander, etc.

Among others, Goodwin (1981), Thomas (1986) and Levinson (1988) have offered different typologies of participant roles. However, Irvine (1996) critiques more generally the decompositional approaches that devise participant categories as universal, decontextualised and finite in numbers. Her empirical focus, insult poems in rural Senegal, makes evident the activity-specific constraints and opportunities in any encounter and the need for contextual sensitivity in analysing participation. She suggests a few primary roles with subtle sub-categories closely related to activity-specific goals and frames, and stresses the need to separate between participant roles at an utterance level and at a speech event level.

Participant roles at the utterance level can be called *discourse roles*, which is akin to Goffman’s (1981) production and reception roles. Sarangi and Slembrouck (1996) point out that discourse roles, referring to the relationship between the participants and the message, are fundamentally dependent on social mandate. Participant roles at the speech event level can be termed *activity roles*. Drawing upon Levinson’s (1979) notion of ‘activity types’, Thomas (1986) suggests activity role as central to participation structure. Activity role refers to the relationship between participants and the activity type in which the participants are embedded, for example, meeting chair, meeting members and minutes-taker (see Section 4.2).

Many researchers – although not explicitly invoking the notions of ‘activity role’ and ‘discourse role’ – concur that static descriptions of role ignore human agency and the skilful negotiations in which people engage as they shape and form meaningful social interactions (Cicourel, 1972; Jackson, 1998). Hilbert (1981) gave an early description of role as a resource for social members, claiming that “roles are not behavioural matrices to be described and explained but are conceptual resources actors use to clear up confusion, sanction troublemakers, instruct others in the ways of the world, and so forth” (p. 216). Likewise, Halkowski (1990) conceptualised ‘role’ as an interactional device, thus moving away from role as a self-evident, social-scientific resource for analysis. Within social psychology the concept of ‘positioning’ is an attempt to overcome the constraints of traditional role theory by paying due attention to local context, episodes, storylines, access and opportunities for action (Davies and Harré, 1990; Harré and Van Lagenhove, 1999). From a discourse analytical perspective, the argument for a more dynamic conceptualisation of role urges us to acknowledge how participant roles (i.e. activity roles and discourse roles) are accomplished situationally and in activity-specific ways, especially in professional settings (Housley, 1999; Linell, 2009; Sarangi, 2010a). By adopting or assigning particular discourse roles, participants implicitly make claims about their role positioning and relationships with co-participants, and at the same time redefine or reframe the activity in which they engage (Bennert, 1998). In light of the research question posed earlier, our analysis will show how

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