Scriptlines as emergent artifacts in collaborative group planning

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Abstract

By adopting a process-oriented, praxeological approach to planning research, this study illustrates how group planning is collaboratively achieved as a situated activity during interactions-for-classroom-tasks. Such approach, based on the theoretical tenets of Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis, gives an emic (i.e., participant-relevant), non-mentalist account of planning as a nexus of situated discursive and embodied practices. The analysis focuses on a planning session during which three adult learners of Italian as a foreign language prepare for a classroom presentation in their L2; the final planning product is a written script for the presentation. Specifically, the participants' plan for their classroom presentation emerges as orally formulated scriptlines, which are collaboratively shaped until they come to constitute a written script for the presentation. Overall, this process-oriented study provides a moment-by-moment documentation of the participants' planning practices, such as inscribing, writing aloud, translating into their L2, and retranslating into their L1. The findings suggest that teachers should give students planning time in the classroom, in order to observe the students' practices and make sure that their respective interpretations of the final task follow the same agenda. Moreover, the direct observation of the planning process could provide an opportunity for assessment for learning.
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1. Introduction

Planning has been studied in various research fields, from different theoretical perspectives. Broadly speaking, it can be defined as a goal-oriented activity that is carried out to prepare for the performance of a given task. The present study, which is part of a larger project on planning sessions as language learning environments (Kunitz, 2013), focuses on planning as a socially situated activity. This project aims at documenting how planning is collaboratively accomplished by adult learners of Italian as a foreign language as they prepare for a classroom presentation in their L2; the planning outcome is a written script that the students will subsequently perform.

The significance of this project lies in the distinctive contribution that a process-oriented, conversation analytic approach can give to planning research in general and, more specifically, to the study of group planning in L2 learning environments. Such an approach – which aims to produce an emic (i.e., participant-relevant), sequential, and local account of observable behaviors – allows us to document the participants' planning practices, thereby showing how group planning can be collaboratively achieved, in situ, on a moment-by-moment basis.

This praxeological approach, based on the theoretical tenets of Ethnomethodology (EM; see Garfinkel, 1967) and Conversation Analysis (CA), is widely applied to the study of multimodal, collaborative interactions (see, for example, Goodwin, 2013; Hazel et al., 2014; Mondada, 2014; Nevile et al., 2014; Streeck et al., 2011). Specifically, in planning

research, it has already been fruitfully adopted in the study of interactions-for-design (Buscher, 2006; Ivarsson, 2010; Mondada, 2012; Mortensen, 2013; Murphy, 2004, 2005) and in the fields of human–machine interaction (Suchman, 2007). The present paper thus aims to extend the body of research conducted so far to another type of interactions; i.e., interactions-for-classroom-tasks. Furthermore, this study contributes to planning research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) with a praxeological approach that is quite novel in that field.

In what follows, I introduce the EM/CA approach to planning, framed within a discursive and empirical view of pragmatics (Bilmes, 1993; Kasper, 2006). In doing so, I contrast it both with rationalist actor models – such as the one described by Clark (1996, 2005) – and with the classical SLA perspective on planning. Finally, I analyze how a linguistic artifact emerges during planning talk among the participants in this study as an instance of hypothetical discourse (HD) and how it is collaboratively shaped until it reaches its final form as a written scriptline (i.e., a line included in the script for the students' presentation).

2. Planning

2.1. Discursive and rationalist views

The EM/CA approach to planning adopted in this study is framed within a discursive and empirical view of the "sociology of action" (Bilmes, 1986:1) and, specifically, of pragmatics (Bilmes, 1993; Kasper, 2006). Such a view focuses on how participants jointly accomplish actions in and through the sequential, turn-by-turn unfolding of their interaction. Discursive pragmatics contrasts with rationalist pragmatics (see for example Brown and Levinson, 1987) in that it does not make assumptions about the participants' motivations and intentions with regard to a specific activity, but rather examines how the actions performed by the participants reflexively define and construct the activity. In other words, rationalist pragmatics is based on a definition of rationality "as a goal-directed means-ends relationship" (Kasper, 2006:285) and develops intention-based accounts of social action as rational choice. In this view, plans represent a rational selection of the processes through which the participants' goals can be achieved. On the other hand, the discursive approach focuses on the sequential organization of actions, and on the emergent situated understandings of their actions that the participants display to each other through embodied talk-in-interaction (Mondada, 2011). Plans then are no more than orienting devices (Suchman, 2007; see below) that contingently adapt to the unfolding circumstances of action.

An example of rationalist pragmatics based on a rational actor model can be seen, for example, in Clark's work (1996, 2005; Bangerter and Clark, 2003). In his view, joint activities are planned and built around a dominant goal on which the participants' intentions converge, while their actions and responsibilities are shaped by the role they "inherit" (Clark, 1996:34) from the activity itself. In order to perform such activities, the participants must coordinate on what they want to do (i.e., the content of the activity) and how (i.e., the processes). Coordination, in turn, is made possible by the participants' common ground (i.e., by their awareness of sharing mutual expectations about their future actions) and by communication. Through communication the participants create joint construals of what each of them is taken to mean. In Clark's (1996:195–196) words: "One way of reaching consensus is by displaying construals of what is taking place for the others to accept or correct, and that often leads people to revise their intentions in greater or smaller ways. The process is sequential and interactive".

Although this type of research considers the collaborative, sequential, and emergent aspects of joint activities, it is different from the EM/CA approach in that it provides intention-based accounts of the participants' actions, of their expectations, goals, and plans. Moreover, dialog is deemed to be at the service of the basic joint activities, which are considered to be primary (Bangerter and Clark, 2003). On the other hand, the EM/CA approach is inherently praxeological and discursive. It is praxeological in that it is agnostic about the participants' intentions and rather focuses entirely on what they accomplish with the actions they enact in the sequential, moment-by-moment unfolding of talk-in-interaction. And it is discursive in that the participants' discursive practices are taken to be constitutive of their actions. Moreover, the participants' role in the activity they co-construct is not deemed to be pre-determined by the type of activity, but rather constructed on a moment-by-moment basis, through the participants' unfolding actions and their displayed orientations to their situated and locally managed identities (Kasper, 2004).

According to Clark (1996), upon realizing that they share the same goals, participants coordinate their interdependent actions into joint actions that will allow them to reach those goals. Such a view is in line with the cognitive sciences account of plans as determinates of actions, which assumes a cause–effect relationship between plans and actions (Suchman, 2007). This is also the perspective adopted in product-oriented studies of planning, which examine the product to infer that planning took place. In contrast, a process-oriented, praxeological approach to the study of planning relies on two basic tenets: (a) plans are inherently vague, orienting devices that project actions, but can never fully specify them, since the emergent implementation of actions is "contingent on the circumstantial and interactional particulars of actual situations" (Suchman, 2007:183); (b) planning itself is "a form of culturally and historically situated activity, manifest in specific practices and associated artifacts" (Suchman, 2007:187).