

Embodying the institution—Object manipulation in developing interaction in study counselling meetings

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Abstract

This paper discusses the emergent progression of courses of action proposed and negotiated between co-participants in interaction. Each of these actions makes a subsequent range of next actions relevant, but which of these is produced by the co-participant is not pre-determined. The trajectory of an activity is not scripted, but is contingent on the choices made at each step by the participants involved, and the understanding displayed by them of the prior action(s). Body visual displays such as gaze, gesture and postural orientation, as well as vocal, material and linguistic resources, together afford participants a rich reserve of raw materials from which to fashion public displays of understanding regarding the particular juncture in the interaction.

Participants in interaction are faced with the practical issues of delineating one situated practice from another, transitioning into and out of bounded activities and across successive juncture points within an activity. These may need to be furnished with some form of individual demarcation in order to avoid disorientation between co-interactants with regard to the particular frame in which they are currently engaged. We explore here how co-participants utilize aggregates of interactional components to construct such sequentially relevant action. Particularly, we focus here on how objects in the material surround are used in conjunction with talk, gaze and postural orientation to construct local social order in study guidance counselling meetings at a university.

The analysis demonstrates how physical objects and bodily conduct are drawn on to project social actions that are used “symbolically” (cf. [Streeck, 1996](#)) to institutionalize interaction. Following [Streeck \(1996\)](#), it is the arranging of the body and objects into recognizable configurations for undertaking particular types of task that is utilized as a gestural displays of institutional orientation. © 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In Jorge Luis Borges’ story “The Garden of Forking Paths”, life’s journey resembles a “cascade of possible directions” ([Mitchell, 2010](#)) to be negotiated by the wayfaring traveller. The resulting route constitutes the sum of decisions made along the way. At a more micro level, the analogy also aptly applies to the trajectories of action sequences in interaction. These too are organized along a similar emergent ‘cascade’ of alternative courses of action proposed and negotiated between co-participants. Each action makes a subsequent range of next actions relevant, but which of these is produced by the co-participants is not pre-determined ([Schegloff, 1996](#)). As such, the eventual trajectory of an activity cannot be considered pre-scripted, but is contingent on the choices made at each step by the participants involved, and the understanding displayed by them of the prior action(s).

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Action sequences are made up of strings of such events. Each sequential position represents a choice of possible next actions, the negotiation of which is consequential to the unfolding trajectory of the interaction. With reference to Beach's work on discourse markers, these interactional components, both of the visual and vocal kind, can be "employed *pivotal*ly, in the midst of yet at precise moments of *transition*, by recipients and current speakers alike, across a variety of speech exchange systems (both casual and institutional), not just in any sequential environment but where what is 'at stake' involves movements from prior to next-positioned matter(s)" (1993: 326, italics in original).

In the dynamic arena of a moment-by-moment unfolding social encounter, participants draw on a range of resources that are 'found' (Streeck, 1996) in the local environment to negotiate the challenges involved in coordinating a situated 'contact improvisation' of co-present interaction. Body visual displays such as gaze, gesture and postural orientation, as well as vocal, material and linguistic resources, afford participants a rich reserve of raw materials from which to fashion public displays of understanding regarding the particular juncture in the interaction (e.g., Robinson, 1998; Laurier, 2008; Robinson and Stivers, 2001; Deppermann et al., 2010). A finely wrought coordination of such resources allows for participants to display and monitor one another's reading of the state of play and so effectively manage the unfolding activity without recourse to repeated confirmation checks (e.g., Mondada, 2007; Glenn and LeBaron, 2011). As such, the practices discussed here operate at the level of being "seen but unnoticed" (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 36) elements featured in institutional work. The particular setting investigated here, a university counselling office, is characterized by participants being primarily engaged in institutional activities, and the data used for the current analysis involves members transitioning between different stages of an institutionally goal-oriented encounter. In this study, we hone in more specifically on how particular material objects are drawn on as a representational resource, brought to bear on the interactions at particular sequential positions, and used to signpost (proposed) directions for next actions.

This article considers the resources drawn on by participants in an interaction to coordinate sequentially ordered series of intersections, and in particular the material resources brought to bear on the unfolding trajectories. In this study, we are concerned specifically with social encounters organized around some or other institutionally pre-ordained goal. Here, participants must coordinate together a step-wise progression of stages of sometimes complex activities, which includes the transitioning into institutionally relevant activities and between different tasks within the overall activity framework, and the enacting of social identities pertinent to the interactional setting. What we are interested in exploring is how co-participants employ aggregates of interactional components to construct sequentially relevant action in co-present institutional interaction. This draws on Charles Goodwin's insights on the ways through which members are able to coordinate their interactions by relying on combinations of different types of interactional resources in situ: "[w]ithin the rich matrix of diverse semiotic resources that create relevant contextual configurations, action, setting, and the meaningful body reflexively constitute each other through temporally unfolding processes of situated human interaction" (Goodwin, 2000, pp. 1519 and 1520). Particularly, we will focus here on how objects in the material surround are used in conjunction with talk, gaze and postural orientation to construct local social order of institutional interaction.

1.1. Institutional interaction

Researchers working in Ethnomethodology (EM) (Garfinkel, 1967) and Conversation Analysis (CA) (Sacks et al., 1974) have argued convincingly that institutions, rather than existing simply as macro-social contexts within which institutional interaction occurs, are 'talked-into-being' (Heritage, 1984) by participants. For example, members in interaction demonstrate an orientation to the institutionality of an encounter by co-producing markedly different sequential patterns of turn-taking from those found in informal everyday conversation (Drew and Heritage, 1992; Heritage, 1997). They orient to more asymmetrical speakership rights and obligations, and modify the range of linguistic resources their talk is constructed from.

One practical problem for members in institutional interaction is that participants are faced with delineating one situated practice from another, transitioning into and out of bounded activities and across successive juncture points within an activity. Each activity or activity phase may imply a particular participation framework (Goffman, 1979), and may need to be furnished with some form of individual demarcation in order to avoid disorientation between co-interactants with regard to the particular frame in which they are currently engaged (Kendon, 1992). To successfully negotiate such dynamic interactional variation, participants must draw on interactional competencies developed through experience in such and similar settings, including knowledge of the normative 'seen-but-unnoticed' (Garfinkel, 1967) practices.

At the same time as this line of inquiry has been pursued, a growing body of research has elaborated on CA's findings on verbal production in talk-in-interaction, to include other embodied features of interaction, including gaze, prosody, gesture, and the spatial environment (Goodwin, 1996, 2000; Hayashi, 2005; Schegloff, 1984, 1998; Sidnell, 2006; Stivers and Sidnell, 2005). Such moves towards more holistic descriptions of situated practices are commensurate with the

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