

Moving into interaction—Social practices for initiating encounters at a help desk



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Abstract

Opening an interaction is a crucial step in establishing and maintaining social relationships. In this paper we describe how participants in an institutional setting, a help desk counter for exchange students at an international university, literally move into interaction. This is accomplished through a range of publicly available and sequentially organised movements in space. These steps are highly systematic and are open to participants' ongoing negotiation of the situation at hand. Secondly, the paper describes how participants in and through their bodily movements, the use of space and the manipulation of material objects 'embody the institution'. The paper adds to the growing field of multimodal conversation analytic work on space, mobility and objects in interaction as resources for participants' ongoing sense-making practices.

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1. Introduction¹

In this paper, we describe the everyday recurrent and mundane situation of initiating a social encounter in an institutional setting. More specifically, we look at how participants at the help desk for (current and future) international exchange students at an international university co-ordinate their spatial trajectories and, quite literally, move into interaction. Moving into interaction is managed through a range of publicly available and co-ordinated embodied trajectories, during which participants constantly monitor the actions of the (incipient) co-participant and organise their next-actions accordingly. Following Goffman (1963), we argue that the transition from unfocused to focused interaction forms the very beginning of a 'face engagement' (Goffman, 1963:89), as a constitutive feature of a social encounter rather than as a preliminary to it (cf. Schegloff, 1979). It is in and through the move from unfocused to focused interaction, from co-present individuals to co-participants, that participants establish and maintain social relationships, negotiate whether they 'just' happen to share some public space or whether space is used as a resource for entering into social interaction, (institutional) identities and participation roles are projected and negotiated, and participants 'get ready' for the incipient interaction, e.g., by disengaging from the ongoing-so-far activities.

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Our methodological approach is ethnomethodological conversation analysis (EM/CA). Although CA has predominantly investigated the role of verbal and vocal conduct in interaction, the acknowledgement of bodily conduct such as gesture, gaze and body posture as relevant and oriented-to resources in and for interaction is not new (e.g., Goodwin, 1986; Heath, 1986; Sacks and Schegloff, 2002[1975]). More recently, research endeavours which explore topics of situated, co-present interaction, have come to constitute a now-integrated field of interaction studies, drawing primarily on EM/CA, context analysis (Birdwhistell, 1970; Kendon, 1990a, 1990[1970]; Scheflen, 1972) and gesture studies (e.g., McNeill, 1992; Kendon, 2004). Together, they argue for approaching social interaction in all its complexity by describing how human action is constructed in and through various types of semiotic resources (Enfield, 2005; Goodwin, 2000), most noticeably talk, gesture, gaze and body posture.² In line with this, a range of studies have also documented how features in the setting such as material objects, graphic structures and textures of the environment provide resources through which participants construct their actions (e.g., Goodwin, 2000; Hazel and Mortensen, *in press*; Streeck, 2011, 2013; Streeck and Kallmeyer, 2001). In this sense, “the environment, through the interpretive uses the participants make of it in their situated activities, becomes a component of the process of communication” (Streeck, 2011:67, *italics in original*). Human action, then, is constructed by members acting in a social and material world (see e.g., Streeck et al., 2011).

Our paper adds to a long list of interaction studies documenting how institutions are ‘talked-into-being’ (Heritage, 1984b) rather than existing as a mere context for participants’ actions (e.g., Arminen, 2005; Drew and Heritage, 1993; Heritage, 1997; Heritage and Clayman, 2010). According to these studies, participants in institutional interaction employ different sets of parameters for the organisation of turn-taking in institutionally oriented interaction – for instance, who asks/answers questions; who selects a next-speaker – than those found in informal, ordinary conversational settings (Sacks et al., 1974:701). More recently, studies have argued that the resources participants employ are not only vocal and verbal, but include the full spectrum of participants’ bodies in a physical, material surround (e.g., Streeck, 1996; Goodwin, 2003; Heath and Luff, 2011); indeed, that institutions are ‘embodied into being’ (Hazel and Mortensen, *in press*). Here we argue that participants’ orientation to the institutionality of the encounter is negotiated and made visible already prior to the first turn-at-talk, i.e. during participants’ initial moves that constitute the opening of the social encounter.

1.1. ‘Openings’

A focus on ‘openings’ is far from new in EM/CA studies. Indeed, it constitutes one of the classic topics in CA – in particular openings of telephone conversations (Schegloff, 1968, 1979, 1986), and institutional variations thereof, such as openings of radio talk shows (Hutchby, 1999) and emergency calls (Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987). These studies focus on the action sequences that form the telephone opening, i.e. summons–answer, greeting–greeting, and how in calls in institutional settings the adjacency pairs that constitute the beginning of the call are modified, e.g., with an absence of a greeting sequence in emergency calls. Recently, these have been supplemented by ‘telephone calls’ involving new technologies such as mobile phones (Arminen, 2005; Licoppe, 2009), video conferences (Mondada, 2010), and Skypecasts (Jenks, 2009).

Additionally, a range of studies focus on the interactional accomplishment of moving into focused interaction, i.e. the very set-up of the participation framework (Goffman, 1981) out of which ‘talk’ may emerge. These studies build on earlier research, primarily conducted through recollection and/or field notes, of how verbal and embodied conduct are integral features of interactional openings (e.g., Greenbaum and Rosenfeld, 1980; Schiffrin, 1977; see also Goffman, 1963). For instance, Heath (1986) describes how doctor and patient coordinate their movements when entering the consultation room (see Limberg, 2010, chapter 4 on academic office hours). Kendon and Ferber (1973) refer to the opening phase of an encounter as a ‘greeting’, which they define as “when people come into one another’s presence, which includes a distinctive exchange of gestures or utterances in which each person appears to signal to the other, directly and explicitly, that he has been seen” (p. 153, *emphasis added*). Duranti (1992), in describing ceremonial greetings in Samoan, notes that “the actual exchange of verbal expressions called here ‘ceremonial greetings’ is contingent upon a number of other activities, including socially guided perception (e.g., seeing or being seen) and the utilisation of the human body as a socially effective communicative resource” (p. 659). From a speech-based perspective, these movements may well be seen as preliminary to the interaction. However, in adopting a strict emic perspective we argue that they are indeed an intrinsic part of the orderly accomplishment of social interaction – as highly systematic practices of social conduct. In line

² At the time of writing, terms such as ‘multimodal interaction analysis’ and ‘studies of embodied interaction’ are used to demarcate this field of interaction research from the perhaps more established discourse analytic traditions such as Conversation Analysis. We would contend, however, that as interaction is always in some way or other multimodal and embodied, the use of such terms is problematic (see Hazel et al., *in press* for discussion).

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