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**Basics of Action**

Words are part of action and they are equivalents to actions.

(Malinowski 1935)

The central problem of linguistic pragmatics and the anthropology of language is to understand the relation between speaking and doing, between language and action. Since Austin (1962) it has been widely appreciated that in speaking, persons are inevitably understood to be doing things, yet, somewhat surprisingly, a comprehensive account of just how action is accomplished through the use of language (and other forms of conduct) in interaction has been slow to develop. In this chapter we begin our sketch of an approach to this problem, by pointing to some of the materials that are relevant to such an account, some of the questions that must be addressed, and some of the central conceptual problems that require consideration.

If we are going to understand what human social action is, we must first acknowledge (1) that action is semiotic, i.e., that its formal composition is crucial to its function, because that formal composition is what leads to its ascription by others; (2) that action is strongly contextualized, i.e., that the shared cultural and personal background of interactants can determine, guide, and constrain the formation and ascription of an action; and (3) that action is enchronic, i.e., that it is a product of the norm-guided sequential framework of move and counter-move that characterizes human interaction. In other words, if

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we are going to understand action, composition matters, context matters, and position matters. We begin with an example that illustrates these three indispensable features of action in interaction.

Consider the following exchange from a small community of people in the Kri-speaking village of Mrkaa in Laos (300 km due east of Vientiane, just inside the Laos-Vietnam border). This recording is a representative sample of the sort of everyday human social reality that we want to explore in this book. Figure 1.1 is from a scene recorded on video on a humid morning in August 2006.

The participants are sitting on the front verandah of the house of the woman named Phùà, the older woman who is sitting at the rightmost of frame. Here are the people in the frame, going from left to right of the image:



Figure 1.1 Screenshot from video recording of Kri speakers in Mrkaa Village, Laos, 8 August 2006 (060808d-0607).

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- Sùàj = older woman in foreground, leftmost in image, with headscarf
- Nùàntaa = teenage girl in doorway with her hand raised to her mouth
- Mnee = young girl with short hair, hunched in doorway
- Phiiw = middle-aged woman with black shirt near centre of image (Nùàntaa's mother's older sister)
- Thin = young mother in background
- Phùrà = older woman at right of image with headscarf (Nùàntaa's mother's mother)

The people in Figure 1.1 are speakers of Kri, a Vietic language which is spoken by a total of about 300 upland shifting agriculturalists in the forested vicinity of Mrkaa, a village in Nakai District, Khammouane Province, Laos (Enfield and Diffloth 2009). The time of recording is around 9 o'clock in the morning. The women in Figure 1.1 are just chatting. Some are sitting and doing nothing, others are preparing bamboo strips for basketry.

As the transcription in (1) below shows, at this point in the conversation the two older women, Sùàj and Phùrà, are talking about people in the village who have recently acquired video CD players. They are voicing their opinions as to whose CD player is better, and whether they prefer black and white or colour. Our focus of interest for the purposes of our discussion of action is, however, not this trajectory of the conversation but the one that is started in line 13 by the teenage girl Nùàntaa (NT), who sets out to procure some 'leaf', that is, a 'leaf' of corncob husk, for rolling a cigarette. A few moments before this sequence began, Nùàntaa had asked for something to smoke, and was handed some tobacco by Sùàj.

(1) 060808d-06.23-06.50

01 (0.4)

02 Phùrà: qaa tàà nòò lèêq sd- sii
 CT.FAMIL DEM.DIST PRT take C- colour
 It was them who got a C- colour (CD set).

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03 (1.0)

04 Phùà: sdiì sii
 CD colour
A colour CD set.

05 (1.0)

06 Phùà: teeq kooq prak hanq teeq dêêh lêêq
 1SG have money 3SG 1SG NEG take
(If) I had money I (would) not take

07 qaa sdiì (.) khaaw dam naaq
 HES CD white black DEM.EXT
um a black and white CD set.

08 (2.7)

09 Sùàj: khaaw dam ci qalêngq
 white black PRED look
(With) a black and white (CD set, one can) see

10 môôc lùùngq haar lùùngq=
 one story two story
one or two stories (only).

11 Phùà: =hak longq haj paj-
 but CLF nice COP
But the ones that are nice are-

12 Phùà: longq [tak] paj haj
 CLF correct COP nice
The ones that are 'correct' are nice.

13 NT: [naaj]
 mez
Aunty

14 ((0.7; Mnee turns gaze to Phiiw;
 Phiiw does not gaze to Nùàntaa))

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- 15 NT: piin sulaaq laa
 give leaf PRT
Please pass some leaf.
- 16 ((1.0; Mnee keeps gaze on Phiiw;
 Phiiw does not gaze to Nùàntaa))
- 17 NT: naaj= (('insistent' prosody))
 mez
Aunty!
- 18 Sùàj: =pii qaa
 like HES
Like um-
- 19 (0.5)
 ((Phiiw and Phùrà both turn their gaze to Nùàntaa))
- 20 NT: piin sulaaq
 give leaf
Pass some leaf.
- 21 Phùrà: sulaaq quu kuloong lêêh,
 leaf LOC inside DEM.UP
The leaf is inside up there,
- 22 sulaaq, quu khraa seeh
 leaf LOC store DEM.ACROSS
the leaf, in the storeroom.
- 23 (0.7)
- 24 Phùrà: môôc cariit hanq
 one backpack 3SG
(There's) a (whole) backpack.
- 25 (5.0)
 ((Nùàntaa walks inside in the direction of the storeroom))

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The course of action that Nùántaa engages in here, beginning in line 13, is an instance of one of the most fundamental social tasks that people perform: namely, to elicit the cooperation of social associates in pursuing one's goals (see Rossi 2014; and Chapter 3 below). It presupposes that others will cooperate, that they will be willing to help an individual pursue their unilateral goals. This is the most basic manifestation of the human cooperative instinct (Enfield 2014), which is not present in anything like the same way, or to anything like the same degree, in other species (Tomasello 2008). In this case, Nùántaa is indeed given assistance in reaching her goal – here not by being given the leaf she asks for, but by being told where she can find some.

Now that we have introduced this bit of data drawn from everyday human social life, how, then, are we to approach an analysis of the actions being performed by the people involved?

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It is obvious, but still worth saying, that an adequate account of how social actions work must be a semiotic one in that it must work entirely in terms of the available perceptible data. This follows from a no telepathy assumption, as Hutchins and Hazlehurst (1995) term it. If actions can be achieved at all, it must be by means of what is publicly available. More specifically, this requires that we acknowledge the inherently semiotic mode of causation that is involved in social action. When we talk about action here, we are not talking about instrumental actions in which results come about from natural causes. In the example that we are exploring, the girl Nùántaa launches a course of behaviour that eventually results in her getting hold of the cornhusk that she desired. For a semiotic account of the social actions involved, we need to know how Nùántaa's behaviour – mostly constituted in this example by acts of vocalization – could have been interpreted by those present, such that it

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came to have the results it had (namely, that she quickly came into possession of the leaf she was after).

A first, very basic, issue has to do with units. It is commonplace and perhaps commonsensical to assume that a single utterance performs a single action. Whether it is made explicit or not, this is the view of the speech act approach. If something is a promise, for example, it cannot at the same time be, say, a request. However, there are obvious problems with this. For a start, the very notion of an utterance is insufficiently precise. Rather, we have to begin by, at least, distinguishing utterances from the discrete units that constitute them. In the conversation analytic tradition, we can distinguish a turn-at-talk (often roughly equivalent to ‘utterance’ in other approaches) from the turn-constructive units (or TCUs) of which it is composed (roughly equivalent to ‘linguistic item’ in other approaches, thus not only words but other meaningful units, some being smaller than a word, some larger; see Sacks et al. 1974; Langacker 1987). A turn may be composed of one, two, or more TCUs, and each TCU may accomplish some action. Consider these lines from our example:

(2) 060808d-06.23-06.50 (extract)

- 13 NT: [naaj]
 mez
 Aunty
- 14 ((0.7; Mnee turns gaze to Phiiw;
 Phiiw does not gaze to Nùàntaa))
- 15 NT: piin sulaaq laa
 give leaf PRT
 Please pass some leaf.

The utterance translated as ‘Aunty, please pass some leaf’ is composed of two TCUs. In the first TCU (line 13) the speaker uses a kin term, *naaj* ‘(classificatory) mother’s elder sister’, to summon one of the

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co-participants (Schegloff 1968). Notice that this TCU projects more talk to come and with it the speaker obligates herself to produce additional talk directed at the person so addressed (thus a common response to a summons like this might be *What?* or *Hold on*). One cannot summon another person without then addressing them further once their attention has been secured. In the second TCU of this turn, the speaker produces what can, retrospectively, be seen as the reason for the summons: a ‘request’ that Aunty pass some leaf (this move to be discussed further, below).

This TCU/turn account in which each TCU is understood (by analysts and by the participants) to accomplish a discrete action appears to work reasonably well for the present case, but there are complications. First, there are cases in which a series of TCUs together constitutes an action that is more than the sum of its parts. For instance, a series of TCUs that describe a trouble (e.g., *I’ve had a long day at work, and there’s no beer in the fridge*) may together constitute a complaint (*This is bad, there should be some beer*) or a request (*Could someone get some beer?*; see, e.g., Pomerantz and Heritage 2012). And there are cases in which a single TCU accomplishes multiple actions. Indeed, there are several senses in which this is the case. There is the telescopic sense, whereby a given utterance such as *What is the deal?* constitutes both a question (which makes an answer relevant next) and an accusation (which makes a defence, justification or excuse relevant next), or *That’s a nice shirt you’re wearing* is both an assessment (saying something simply about my evaluation of the shirt) and a compliment (saying something good about you). It seems obvious in this case that ‘assessment’ and ‘compliment’ are not two different things but two ways of construing or focusing on a single thing. Similarly, we might look at a labrador and ask whether it is a ‘dog’, an ‘animal’, or a ‘pet’. It is of course all of these, and none is more appropriate than the other in any absolute sense.

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There is also the possibility that an utterance is ambiguous as to the action it performs, in the sense that an utterance might have two possible action readings but cannot have both at the same time. For example, consider the utterance *Well, I guess I'll see you sometime* said during the closing phase of a telephone call. What is the speaker doing by saying this? It might constitute a guess at some possible future event. Or it could be a complaint about the recipient's failure to make herself available.

And, finally, there is the idea that different actions can be made in parallel, by means of different elements of a single utterance: for example, a given word or phrase, embedded in an utterance meant to accomplish one action, might accomplish another simultaneous action. In one case, a mother has rejected her daughter's request to work in the store, and she explains this rejection by saying *People just don't want **children** waiting on them*. With the use of the word 'children' – implying 'you are a child' – she is effectively belittling her daughter in the process of giving an explanation (see discussion of this case in Chapter 4, below).

Much of this follows directly from the semiotic account we are proposing. Specifically, although TCUs may be typically treated as 'single-action-packages', they are in fact outputs/inputs of the turn-taking system (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) and only contingently linked to the production of action per se. Participants, then, apparently work with a basic heuristic which proposes that one TCU equals one action, but the inference this generates is easily defeated in interaction. The more general point, following directly from the semiotic assumptions of our approach, is that TCUs – and for that matter talk in general along with any other conduct – is nothing more and nothing less than a set of signs that a recipient uses as a basis for inference about what a speaker's goal is in producing the utterance (or, essentially, what the speaker wants to happen as a result of producing the utterance).

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Whatever a speaker is understood to be doing is always an inference or guess derived from the perceptible data available. That includes talk, but it includes much else besides. In the case of language, things get complicated (or look complicated to analysts) because the specifically linguistic constituents of conduct appear to allow for a level of explicitness that is unlike anything else. It is as though a speaker can merely announce or describe what they are doing. Moreover, such formulations may be produced at various levels of remove from the conduct they are intended to describe. One can thus distinguish between a reflexive metapragmatic formulation (*I bet you he'll run for mayor*) and a reportive metapragmatic formulation (*He bet me that he would run for mayor*), and within the latter one can distinguish between distal (as above) and proximate versions (*Oh no I'm serious, I meant to put a wager on it when I said I'll bet you!*), etc. One can already begin to see, however, a major disconnect between action-in-vivo and explicit action formulations using language. Thus, when someone says *I bet you he'll run for mayor*, thereby apparently formulating what they are doing in saying what they are saying, they are almost certainly not betting (in the sense of making a wager) but rather predicting a future state of events.

All of this leads us to the conclusion – originally developed most cogently within conversation analysis (see Schegloff and Sacks 1973 and Schegloff 1993) – that any understanding of what some bit of talk is doing, whether the analyst's or the co-participant's, must take account of both its 'composition' and its 'position'. To take one example, the word *well* can function in different ways depending both on exactly how it is pronounced and on where in an utterance it is placed: thus, using a lengthened *We::ll* at the beginning of a response to a wh-question routinely indicates that something other than a straightforward answer is coming (see Schegloff and Lerner 2009); by contrast, a *well* produced at the end of a stretch of talk on a topic during a telephone call may initiate closing (Schegloff and Sacks 1973).