THE CONCEPT OF ACTION

When people do things with words, how do we know what they are doing? Many scholars have assumed a category of things called actions: 'requests', 'proposals', 'complaints', 'excuses'. The idea is both convenient and intuitive, but, as this book argues, it is a spurious concept of action. In interaction, a person's primary task is to decide how to respond, not to label what someone just did. The labelling of actions is a meta-level process, appropriate only when we wish to draw attention to others' behaviours in order to quiz, sanction, praise, blame, or otherwise hold them to account. This book develops a new account of action grounded in certain fundamental ideas about the nature of human sociality: that social conduct is naturally interpreted as purposeful; that human behaviour is shaped under a tyranny of social accountability; and that language is our central resource for social action and reaction.

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The Concept of Action

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Preface

If we are to understand human social action, we need to see that language is at the centre of it. By 'language' we mean the directly observable collaborative practices of using words, grammar, and associated semiotic resources, in human interaction. This book is about how people use language to act in the social world, what properties language and human sociality have that make this possible, and how the linguistic nature of action helps us understand the ontology of human agency.

Let us declare some core claims at the outset.

First, we recognize that people have goals, and their behaviour is designed as means towards attaining those goals. The business of knowing what to do in interaction is dependent on working out what other people are doing; and working out what other people are doing is intimately bound up with the task of figuring out their objectives, or at least attributing rational objectives *to* them.[1]

Second, accountability is a definitive element of social action. We can only know what a person has done when we know what a person can be rightly held to account by others for having done.

Third, there is no social accountability – in the core sense of that term – without language. Praising or blaming someone for what they have done is only possible through a description or formulation of 'what they have done'. Such a description is always a *construal*, highlighting some aspects of their behaviour, and bracketing out others. And we emphasize that 'what someone has done' is often something they have

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[1] This does not mean that people of different cultures cannot have different metacognitive ideologies about intention ascription; clearly, they can (Duranti 2015).

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done using language (Austin 1962). So it is not just a fun fact that
language is the communication system that can be used to communicate
about itself. We constantly use language to talk about or otherwise point
to language, from clarifications (*Huh?*) to challenges (*Are you serious?!*)
to gossip ('*He-said-she-said*'). When language's definitive properties of
displacement (Hockett 1960) and shared intentionality (Tomasello et al.
2005) combine to focus reflexively on language itself, social account-
ability becomes possible.

In the enchronic flow of language use in interaction, every sign can be
read as a response to, and thus a sort of appraisal of, what came before it.
This creates in people a constant need to anticipate such responses and
to adjust to them pre-emptively in social interaction. In this way, social
action is shaped publicly by move and response within the context of
a tyranny of accountability.

We shall be considering not just action but actions, distinct acts as
moves in social interaction. Social actions are not achieved by one
person alone. A social action is consummated by two people together.
It is a relation between two people. To have acted socially, a person
must succeed in getting another person to come to an appropriate
understanding of what they wanted to do, and in turn, in getting that
other person to respond in an appropriate way. For an action to be
consummated, at least three things must happen: (1) Person A must
have made it possible for Person B to ascribe an action to A's
behaviour, (2) Person B must have responded in a way that showed
evidence of an ascription at some level, and (3) B's responsive move
must have been subsequently 'allowed through' (i.e., not contested)
and thus implicitly ratified.

In this book we focus on actions as carried out by individual moves,
and carried off by dyads enacting social relationships, but just as
important are the distributed contextual ecologies in which action
emerges (Goodwin 2000), as well as the higher-level motivations
and goals, the overarching 'projects' as they are sometimes called
(Levinson 2012), which subsume move-level actions as means to
ends. We often need to know people's global goals before we can
properly interpret their local actions, as, for instance, if somebody
asks *Where does she live now?* – our response may be significantly

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different depending on whether we think the speaker is asking this because they want a general update on the person's life, or because they want their address in order to send them a postcard. We usually have robust intuitions as to what others are trying to do. And we are neither reticent nor unskilled in exercising those intuitions.

While we speak of actions in the plural, we want to be very clear that actions are not selected from an inventory or vocabulary. Actions are not like words. They are more like sentences. Actions are built and achieved in the moment. They are often unique. Interpreting another's behaviour as an action essentially means figuring out how to respond to it appropriately, and this does not mean identifying 'which action it is' from a list. Actions are not necessarily labelled or 'identified' at any level whatsoever. We argue that they are constituted emergently by relations between moves in the enchronic progression of social interaction. That said, given the constantly recurring need to pursue certain social goals over and over again in social life (e.g., getting people to pass you things, or to repeat what they just said), many actions emerge in similar ways, time after time. This means that it is sometimes methodologically convenient to speak of actions of certain kinds – 'request', 'promise', 'compliment', 'complaint' – suggesting a list or inventory of actions. But while such a usage is often methodologically convenient, this does not mean it is theoretically justified to think of action as a matter of selecting from a pre-existing list.

A final preliminary point is that the question of social action must be viewed as an anthropological question; one that investigates issues of diversity and universality within our species. We shall see that while there is diversity in the domain of social action, it is not unconstrained. There are constraints that account for why we have the commonalities we have across cultures and language communities. These come from basic semiotic properties of language, basic structural properties of conversation, and basic features of human sociality. We will be exploring these properties throughout the book.

The title of this book echoes that of Gilbert Ryle's 1949 classic, *The Concept of Mind*, in which he delivers a devastating critique of Cartesian dualism and the presuppositions about mental life upon which it is based. Central to his argument is the proposal that the

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'official doctrine' about the mind rests on a host of category errors that have the effect of sustaining the illusion of mental processes, distinct from intelligent acts, that are animated by a ghost in the machine. The implication of Ryle's argument is that philosophical ideas about the mind and mental states as the shadowy causes of conduct involve an unwarranted prioritizing of the theoretical over the practical: 'knowing how' is always treated as derivative of a more fundamental 'knowing that'. But of course the master chef does not work from recipes, and the speaker of a language does not require a dictionary or compendium (mental or otherwise) of grammatical rules (see Tanney 2009). Practical skills, such as cooking a meal or speaking a language, draw upon savoir-faire. Ryle proposed that an 'intellectualist legend' imputes a base of propositional knowledge to all intelligent behaviour and in so doing leads to problems of mind–body dualism and infinite regress. Moreover, within such a conceptual framework, the analyst is led to ask otherwise absurd questions such as what inner events or happenings 'mental predicates' (e.g., 'think', 'believe', 'understand') might refer to.

In many ways, our arguments about action run exactly parallel to Ryle's arguments about mind. We suggest that philosophers and others have created a spurious (though both convenient and intuitive) category of things called actions that are distinct from, and causally related to, the specific practices of conduct and modes of inference through which these 'actions' are realized in interaction. Guided mostly by the metalinguistic vocabulary of ordinary language, scholars in various traditions have argued or assumed that it should be possible to arrive at a list or inventory of possible action types, and that if a person wants to accomplish one or other of them, they merely need to provide adequate cues as to which one of these possible actions they mean to be doing. In our view this is a wrongheaded notion of action. As we will see in the following chapters, this supposes an ontology of actions akin to the phonemes that constitute the phonological inventory of a language.

On our view, by contrast, an action need not be nameable at all. When an action is named, this is always a construal or, in the sense of Anscombe (1957, 1979), a description of behaviour that is realized in

and through (folk or academic) practices of linguistic formulation. But interaction does not require descriptive construal of others' moves, and participants are perfectly able to carry on without, for the most part, recourse to action formulations. Rather than deciding *what* a bit of behaviour was, what people must decide is how to respond to it, drawing on the affordances of others' behaviour, and the available inferences as to what those others are doing. Such doings are seldom tokens of types.

At base, the idea of action seems simple. Action is controlled behaviour that is carried out as means to ends and that can be interpreted as having reasons: for example, picking up a glass to drink from it because you're thirsty, turning a door handle to open it because you want to go outside, lighting a cigarette to smoke it, waving to someone across the room, asking someone the time (Anscombe 1957; Davidson 1963, 1978). As the sociologist Alfred Schutz defined it, action is 'spontaneous activity oriented toward the future' (Schutz 1967:57). Schutz then defined *rational* action as 'action with known intermediate goals' (Schutz 1967:61). This sounds simple, but how do we know whether a given action is controlled and ends-directed? How do we know its reasons?

An important resource we have here is to be found in the responses that an action elicits, or can be expected to elicit. This is why the interpreter or addressee has a privileged role in the notion of communicative action being developed in this book. It is why conversation analysts advise us to look at interpreters' responses to moves in inter-action if we want evidence for what those moves mean (Schegloff and Sacks 1973:299; Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974:728–9). It is why we are advised to look at a move and ask 'Why that now?': not just because we can, but because it is a question that participants in interaction are asking themselves.

All action is potentially communicative and, where the situation allows for observation by others, is designed with an eye to how it will be understood by others (see Sacks 1995 on observability; see also Kidwell and Zimmerman 2006; Kidwell 2011). Thus, a child who fears she may be held accountable for another child's distress may hammer a pretend block with extra, visible concentration to obscure the fact that

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just minutes before she used the same toy to hit the crying child on the head (Kidwell 2011). A person standing at a corner, waiting to cross the street may organize her body to convey this intention to whoever may be looking. Another person waiting at the same corner for a friend will organize her body in a quite different way, in part to defeat the inference that she means to cross the street.

At the same time, all communication is action. No form of communication involves the mere passing of information. When a voice comes over the loudspeaker in an airport informing passengers that the plane is now ready to board, the airline is alerting those persons who are waiting, perhaps allaying fears that the flight might be further delayed or encouraging them to ready themselves for boarding. Expressions such as *I'm just telling you how it sounds* and *I'm just saying* are scattered across recordings of English conversation (and presumably roughly similar expressions are found in the conversational recordings of other languages), but it is in fact impossible for an utterance to merely inform without at the same time also accomplishing other actions beyond 'just saying'.

A radical rethinking of the relationship between language and action is needed. While language does make possible a direct formulation of the actions that speakers mean to perform ('She requested some leaf' and so on), the truth is that linguistic formulation is, ultimately, incidental to whatever action might actually be performed. Language is one means by which speakers can provide evidence to others of what it is they mean to do. Importantly, the evidence it provides is never definitive. Even on the telephone, where the medium of communication seems to be reduced to the linguistic channel, the utterance is accompanied by non-linguistic forms of information which provide evidence to a recipient/hearer about what it is a speaker is doing with each move. And even where the linguistic formulation seems to point in a direct way to the action being attempted, things frequently (indeed, we would suggest, inevitably) turn out to be more complicated. Someone who says *I'll bet it's a dream* is likely not offering to make a wager, just as someone who says *Do you want me to come and get her?* is probably not just asking a question about what the recipient wants.

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There are three things we have to keep in mind when we think about action. For any piece of behaviour that might constitute an action, here are the three things that matter: (1) the composition of the behaviour, (2) the context of the behaviour, and (3) the position of the behaviour in a communicative sequence. Composition, context, and position. We introduce what we mean by these three things in Chapter 1, and the ideas are explicated further through the book.

There is a thread that runs through these three things, drawing them together, at all points. That thread is social accountability. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of social accountability to what we are trying to say in this book. As sociologists including Garfinkel, Goffman, and Sacks have shown, people's knowledge that they are potentially accountable for any move they make is what leads them to 'act normal' – i.e. to act in such a way as to avoid appearing abnormal and thereby avoid generating inferences about what that departure from the normal might mean. Accountability is what defines the normatively appropriate selection of semiotic resources in composing behaviour for action, the normatively appropriate positioning of that behaviour in sequences of interaction, and our subprehension (or 'anticipation', conscious or not) of how our behaviour will be responded to, and, potentially, described and evaluated.

There is a tyranny of accountability in human social life. It provides us with the coordinates for seeing meaning in others' behaviour, for planning our own behaviour in anticipation of how others will see it, and thus for the design and interpretation of every next move in the progression of social life.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge with gratitude our enormous debt to the many colleagues, students, and friends who have taught us so much about the concept of action.

Abbreviations

1SG	first person singular pronoun
1SG.BARE	first person singular pronoun, bare
1SG.POL	first person singular pronoun, polite
2SG.POL	second person singular pronoun, polite
2PL.BARE	second person plural pronoun, bare
3SG	third person singular pronoun
3SG.BARE	third person singular pronoun, bare
3SG.POL	third person singular pronoun, polite
3PL.BARE	third person plural pronoun, bare
ADE	adessive case
CLF	classifier
CLI	clitic
COP	copula
CT.FAMIL	class term, familiar
DEM.ACROSS	demonstrative, across
DEM.DIST	demonstrative, distal
DEM.EXT	demonstrative, external
DEM.NONPROX	demonstrative, non-proximal
DEM.PROX	demonstrative, proximal
DEM.UP	demonstrative, uphill/upstream
eB	elder brother
ESS	essive case
FAC.INFORM	factive marker, informing
FAC.PRF	factive marker, perfect
HES	hesitation marker

List of Abbreviations

ILL	illative case
IMP.GO	imperative, go and do it
IMP.SOFT	imperative, soft
IMP.UNIMP	imperative, action unimpeded
INTJ	interjection
IRR	irrealis
LOC	locative
M.BARE	male title, bare
MeZ	mother's older sister
NEG	negation
PRED	predicative marker
PAR	partitive case
PRT	particle
PRF	perfect
QPLR	polar question marker
QPLR.PRESM	polar question marker, truth presumed
QPLR.INFER	polar question marker, proposition inferred
TLNK	topic linker
TPC	topic
TPC.DIST	topic, distal

Transcription Conventions

[Separate left square brackets, one above the other on two successive lines with utterances by different speakers, indicate a point of overlap onset, whether at the start of an utterance or later.

]   Separate right square brackets, one above the other on two successive lines with utterances by different speakers, indicate a point at which two overlapping utterances both end or where one ends while the other continues, or simultaneous moments in overlaps which continue.

=   Equal signs ordinarily come in pairs, one at the end of a line, and another at the start of the next line or one shortly thereafter. They are used to indicate two things:

(1) If the two lines connected by the equal signs are by the same speaker, then there was a single, continuous utterance with no break or pause, which was broken up in order to accommodate the placement of overlapping talk.

(2) If the lines connected by two equal signs are by different speakers, then the second followed the first with no discernible silence between them, or was 'latched' to it.

(1.0)   Numbers in parentheses indicate silence, represented in tenths of a second; what is given here in the left margin

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Transcription Conventions

	indicates 1.0 seconds of silence. Silences may be marked either within an utterance or between utterances.
(.)	A dot in parentheses indicates a 'micropause', hearable, but not readily measurable without instrumentation; ordinarily less than 0.2 of a second.
. ? ,	Punctuation marks are not used grammatically, but to indicate intonation. The period indicates a falling, or final, intonation contour, not necessarily the end of a sentence. Similarly, a question mark indicates rising intonation, not necessarily a question, and a comma indicates 'continuing' intonation, not necessarily a clause boundary.
:	Colons are used to indicate the prolongation or stretching of the sound just preceding them. The more colons, the longer the stretching.
-	A hyphen after a word or part of a word indicates a cut-off or self-interruption, often done with a glottal or dental stop.
word	Underlining is used to indicate some form of stress or emphasis, by either increased loudness or higher pitch. The more underlining, the greater the emphasis.
WOrd	Especially loud talk may be indicated by upper case; again, the louder, the more letters in upper case. In extreme cases, upper case may be underlined.
°	The degree sign indicates that the talk following it is markedly quiet or soft.
°word°	When there are two degree signs, the talk between them is markedly softer than the talk around them.
_:	Combinations of underlining and colons are used to indicate intonation contours: If the letter(s) preceding a colon is (are) underlined, then there is an 'inflected' falling intonation contour on the vowel (you can hear the pitch turn downward).

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:	If a colon is itself underlined, then there is an inflected rising intonation contour.
↓↑	The up and down arrows mark sharper rises or falls in pitch than would be indicated by combinations of colons and underlining, or they may mark a whole shift, or resetting, of the pitch register at which the talk is being produced.
> <	The combination of 'more than' and 'less than' symbols indicates that the talk between them is compressed or rushed.
< >	Used in the reverse order, they can indicate that a stretch of talk is markedly slowed or drawn out. The 'less than' symbol by itself indicates that the immediately following talk is 'jump-started', i.e. sounds like it starts with a rush.
hh	Hearable aspiration is shown where it occurs in the talk by the letter *h* – the more *h*'s, the more aspiration. The aspiration may represent breathing, laughter, etc. If it occurs inside the boundaries of a word, it may be enclosed in parentheses in order to set it apart from the sounds of the word.
.hh	If the aspiration is an inhalation, it is shown with a dot before it (usually a raised dot) or a raised degree symbol.
( )	Empty parentheses indicate that something is being said, but no hearing (or, in some cases, speaker identification) can be achieved.

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