Introduction

1 Action Ascription in Social Interaction

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1.1 Introduction: Action and Action Ascription

There is a long-standing tradition of theorizing 'action' in philosophy and linguistic pragmatics. Speech act theory claims that individual actions are instantiations of abstract types of speech acts, which are seen as conventional, "institutional" facts (Searle 1969). Their production and understanding is said to rely on rules, importantly including illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs), which index the kind of speech act an utterance is held to implement (Searle & Vanderveken 1985). Gricean pragmatics (Grice 1989), neo-Gricean pragmatics (Levinson 2006), and relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson 1995), however, point out that such rules are not able to properly account for indirect speech acts. They instead insist on the primary role of intentions and inferential processes in understanding speech acts (see also Brandom 1994, 2014). These approaches, however, lack empirical foundations for the most part. Among other problems, the issues of segmentation, identification, and interpretation of actions in context have not yet been settled to a satisfying degree in the context of those traditional approaches in the philosophy of language and linguistic pragmatics (Drew & Couper-Kuhlen 2014a; Levinson 2013). Indeed, Levinson (2017) has recently argued that

> despite the fact that speech acts are clearly central to an understanding of language use, they have been largely off the linguistics agenda since the 1980s . . . research on speech acts boomed for a little over a decade (in the 1970s and 1980s) and then went out of fashion without the most fundamental issues being resolved at all. (2017: 199–200)

Conversation analysis offers, in contrast, an alternative approach, which has continued to develop since the late 1960s, by studying actions in the broader sequential environments in which they are invariably situated. Actions here are conceived of as sequentially positioned and contextually sensitive (Sacks 1992; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974; Schegloff 2007). Conversation analysis has an extensive tradition of research into the way actions are responsive to prior talk, showing the subtle nature of the relationships between first and second actions (e.g., Raymond 2003; Thompson, Fox & Couper-Kuhlen 2015).

Responses have been shown to be major constituents for understanding actions in context. In a seminal paper, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) argued that "it is a systematic consequence of the turn-taking organization of conversation that it obliges its participants to display to each other, in a turn's talk, their understanding of other turns' talk" (1974: 728). For instance, they claimed:

> when A addresses a first pair-part such as a 'question' or a 'complaint' to B, we have noted, A selects B as next speaker, and selects for B that he next perform a second part for the 'adjacency pair' A has started, i.e. an 'answer' or an 'apology' (among other possibilities) respectively. B, in so doing, not only performs that utterance-type, but thereby displays (in the first place to his co-participants) his understanding of the prior turn's talk as a first part, as a 'question' or 'complaint'. (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974: 728)

The observation that a participant's understanding of a prior turn can be inferred from their response to it by analysts gave rise to what has become known as the 'next-turn proof procedure':

> while understandings of other turns' talk are displayed to co-participants, they are available as well to professional analysts, who are thereby afforded a proof criterion (and a search procedure) for the analysis of what a turn's talk is occupied with. Since it is the parties' understandings of prior turns' talk that is relevant to their construction of next turns, it is their understandings that are wanted for analysis. The display of those understandings in the talk of subsequent turns affords both a resource for the analysis of prior turns and a proof procedure for professional analyses of prior turns – resources intrinsic to the data themselves. (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974: 729)

Response has thus been formulated as critical to the analysis of social action from the very beginnings of the field. Yet, the response in the next turn, i.e. in second position to the action at issue, may not display an action ascription that is sufficient for all practical purposes. One reason is that there may be many different and even competing possible action ascriptions that can be inferred from the response (we will deal with this issue of implicit versus explicit action ascriptions and possible ambiguities below). A second, more fundamental point concerning the social reality of action ascription is that the next turn can only convey the *recipient's understanding* of the prior action, but does not yet provide an analytical warrant for an *intersubjective action ascription*. Intersubjectivity can only be taken to be accomplished sequentially if the producer of the original, first-positioned action produces a turn in third position that confirms the action ascription that the recipient's turn in second position has indexed or formulated (Arundale 1999; Deppermann 2015; Schegloff 1991; Sidnell 2014). Without a third-turn confirmation, the inter-subjective status of the action ascription in second position remains unsettled, and so the actual understandings of the participants may remain unreconciled

(Coulter 1983). The third turn is, therefore, a key sequential occasion for restoring intersubjectivity (e.g., Heritage 1984; Schegloff 1992; Seuren 2018), in particular, through repair, in cases where the producer of the original turn finds they have not been 'correctly' understood (Schegloff 1992). Of course, it can turn out even later than in third position that participants' understandings have been at odds, thus calling for efforts to secure understandings which are sufficiently shared (e.g., Deppermann 2018). An intersubjectively shared and socially valid action ascription thus is warranted neither by the agent's intention nor by the recipient's response, but rather is the outcome of an interactional process of mutual displays, and possibly negotiation, of participants' understandings of prior actions. The three-position sequential architecture of intersubjectivity (Heritage 1984) thus systematically affords action ascription as "a temporally extended work-in-progress that is managed through the serial interlocking of actions in a process of successive confirmation and specification" (Clayman & Heritage 2014: 57). Of course, in the course of this emergent interactional process, action ascriptions may also be revised, left open, or even become an object of enduring dissent.

However, while the claim that how a prior action is understood by participants can be inferred from the way in which it is responded to and possibly negotiated afterwards is critical to the analysis of action, it does not on its own provide sufficient grounds for a comprehensive theory of action. It leaves open, for instance, the question of how participants recognize actions in the first place, a point which Schegloff (2007) framed as the 'action formation' problem:

> how are the resources of the language, the body, the environment of the interaction, and the position *in* the interaction fashioned into conformations designed to be, and to be recognized by recipients as, particular actions – actions like requesting, inviting, granting, complaining, agreeing, telling, noticing, rejecting, and so on – in a class of unknown size? (Schegloff 2007: xiv)

It was subsequently observed by Stivers and Rossano (2010b) that the design and recognition of actions also involves the "action ascription" problem:

> despite a heavy emphasis on action within the CA literature, we still lack a theory of action ascription. The bread and butter of CA has been identifying practices for varying the social-relational aspects of actions; however, we know relatively little about how people design and recognize the actions themselves in the first instance. (Stivers & Rossano 2010b: 53–4)

Recent research in conversation analysis and interactional linguistics has considerably broadened our knowledge of the role of linguistic formats and turn design in action formation (under the heading 'social action formats', see Section 1.3) and the interactional organization of various kinds of

actions, with requests and related actions being a major focus of such research (Drew & Couper-Kuhlen 2014b; Kendrick & Drew 2016; Rossi 2015; Sorjonen, Raevaara & Couper-Kuhlen 2017; Zinken 2016). There has also been a growing body of work on the role of epistemics (Heritage 2012a, 2012b) and deontics (Stevanovic & Peräkylä 2012, 2014) in action formation and response (Thompson, Fox & Couper-Kuhlen 2015). Yet despite the insights this growing body of work has offered, an elaborate conversation-analytic concept of 'action' has not yet emerged, and the relationship between the position of an action (i.e. the relevance of sequential organization, Schegloff 1984), its composition (i.e. the relevance of linguistic turn design, Couper-Kuhlen 2014), and other contextual features for the situated understanding of actions has remained the subject of dispute. A key point of departure for clarifying this is arguably the notion of action ascription (Levinson 2013).

Action ascription can be understood from two broad perspectives. On one view, it refers to the ways in which actions constitute categories by which members make sense of their world, and forms a key foundation for holding others (morally) accountable for their conduct (Jayyusi 1991). On another view, it refers to the ways in which we accountably respond to the actions of others, thereby accomplishing sequential versions of meaningful social experience (Sacks 1985). According to the latter view, the response of participants to prior actions relies on some form of action ascription, which is indexed by the design of the response, although the ascription is more or less implicit, and can be rather indeterminate at times. In short, action ascription can be understood as a matter of categorization of prior actions or responding in ways that are sequentially fitted to prior actions, or both. On both views, however, action ascription involves attributing action(s) to (just) prior conduct. Where these views differ is the extent to which this attribution is assumed to be explicit or tacit, whether or not action ascription is understood to be primarily inferential in nature or a social action in its own right, and whether action ascription is necessary for response generation or not. These views do not necessarily exclude each other; they can also be seen as descriptions of different ways in which action ascription can play a role and become manifest in social interaction.

The aim of this volume is to further our understanding of action ascription and to better elucidate the role it might play in an empirically grounded theory of action in social interaction. It takes close scrutiny of situated action ascription in turns that are responsive to prior turns (frequently but not always in second position) in their sequential and multimodal contexts as its point of departure for studying action from the participants' point of view. The aim is to enable us to move forward in addressing complex questions around how linguistic practice, bodily conduct, rules/conventions, inferential

reasoning, and indexical interpretation enter into the interpretation of situated action.

We begin this introductory chapter by moving in Section 1.2 to frame action ascription as a members' concern and to consider the issues that doing so raises. We next move, in Section 1.3, to briefly summarize the different approaches to action ascription that have developed in the field, and some key points of theoretical contention that have emerged. This is followed, in Section 1.4, by an overview of the key constituents and resources of action ascription that have been identified in conversation-analytic research, before going on in Section 1.5 to discuss how action ascription can itself be considered a form of social action. We conclude in Section 1.6 with an overview of the remaining chapters in this volume.

1.2 Action Ascription as a Members' Concern

What counts as social action is a much more complex question than might first appear. A naive view of interaction might hold that it can be readily parsed into discrete sequences of actions, such as 'questions' (and 'answers'), 'complaints' (and 'apologies'), 'requests' (and 'offers'), 'invitations (and 'acceptances' or 'refusals'), and so on. In reality things are somewhat more complex. For a start, these kinds of action categories are far too gross to capture the kinds of things that concern participants themselves. They are also inherently normative categories and so defeasible (that is, their applicability can be contested by participants). Yet to conclude that action ascription is not of practical importance would be to ignore empirical evidence that participants themselves are concerned with action ascription, not just in the sense of explicitly holding others accountable for particular actions as discussed by Jayyusi (1991), and more recently by Sidnell (2017), but arguably in a more fundamental sense of figuring out just what it is the other party is doing and how to respond. This process of figuring out may not be readily describable by participants, but it arguably lies at the heart of what drives social interaction.

Consider the following two extracts from a telephone call between two friends. The first comes from earlier in the conversation when Edna has 'invited' Margy and her mother up to Cocos "someday" for lunch. It turns out Edna intends to pay for the lunch, a 'proposal' that Margy rejects with a 'counter-proposal' that they split the bill (see Drew 1984: 149; cf. Clayman & Heritage 2014: 61–2; Couper-Kuhlen 2014: 626; Kendrick & Drew 2014: 105).

Excerpt 1.1 NB:VII: 1:46

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01 EDN:  wul why don't we: uh-m: why don't i take you'n mo:m
02       up there tuh: coco's. someday fer lu:nch.
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03        we'll go, bkuzz up there tu[h,
04 MAR:                              [k goo:d.
05 EDN:   ha:h?
06 MAR:   that's a good deal. .hh-.hh=
07 EDN:   =eh i'll take you bo:th[up
08 MAR:                                  [no:::: wil all go dutch.=
09         =b't[let's do that.]
10 EDN:        [n o  : we wo:n']t.
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The matter remains unresolved as they then move on to talk about other things.

Later in the call, in response to a pre-closing, Margy launches a more specific 'proposal' that they go up to Coco's for lunch next week when her mother comes down. Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff (1977: 27–69) develop a finely nuanced analysis of this 'offence-remedial' sequence, which is instructive with respect to how far we might take the analysis of action. Our point here, however, is rather more simple. In advocating why they should go to Coco's for lunch, Edna proffers a three-part list (Jefferson 1990), which includes claiming Coco's is "fun" (line 7), "pretty" (line 9), and "cheap" (line 12). It is the latter that appears to subsequently occasion the extended 'offence-remedial' sequence in which Edna repeatedly claims she "didn't mean that" (lines 19, 21, 29, 38; also lines 34–5)

Excerpt 1.2 NB:VII: 7:09

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01 EDN:      .t.hhhhhhhhhhh well honey li:sten ah'll thhalk with yeh:: uh:
02          wil[git tih] ge[ther::[e]
03 MAR:           [.hhhhhh]   [eH e  y[w] 'l edna maybe next week el-e-you:ll
04             li:ke e:lss she's a lotta fun. she's comin down, .t.h-.h-.h
05             yihknow,.h-.h and uh m- why don't we all do that. w'l go up
06          en eat et coco's? er will go someplace e:lse.=
07 EDN:     =oh vco[co's is FUN UP] THERE ON THE HILL=
08 MAR:            [(oh figgy neh) ]
09 EDN:     ='n yuh look do[wn  it's so p] retty,
10 MAR:                    [y:::: ye:ah.]
11          yeah. let's do it.
12 EDN: -> AN IT'S chea:p, hu
13 MAR:     yehh[hahh]
14 EDN:     [hihh] #h:::::(h)i'm O::n ah:.ehhh=
15          =I'M ON [RETI[:RE[MENT.] .hhh
16 MAR:             [.hhh[hey[w'l y] :yer not takin' us edna=
17          =b't i[: thin[k'd be f u  n [tih go:.]
18 EDN:           [.hhhhh[O H :  DON'T  [be s::uh] hh=
19      -> =u-i[: did] 'n mean that ruh-ah::=.
20 MAR:         [n  o- ]
21 EDN: -> =i:hh didn't m:mean[that[et].
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22 MAR:                          [.hhh[we] ll n[o i:'m no:t-] gon] na invite=
23 EDN:                                    [a : : : : :] ll.]
24 MAR:    =all'v us:: up there en'n then i-have you pay the bi:ll.hhh
25         i[: j's] think id be f:fundee a[ll have all] of us go:.=
26 EDN:     [ehhh!]                        [°(       )]
27 MAR:    =en i want elss tuh seeyuh.hh[hh
28 EDN:                                  [.hhh=
29      -> =oh[:  h o n e y   i]  didn'] mean that=
30 MAR:       [(yihknow I mean)] she's-]
31 EDN:    =[et a-] ah::::::::ll.]
32 MAR:    =[she's] j's the kind'v] a person thet yihknow it dezn't
33         make any di[ffrence  (  )
34 EDN: ->            [BUD SAYS IT SURE SOUNDED LIKE I MEANT IT=
35      -> =B'T[I DIDN'T,]
36 MAR:     [U:A::hhhh] haahhaah[haa]
37 EDN:     [i d] on't have a di:ner's-.hh=
38      -> =no-u-honey i: r:rilly didn'mean[ tha:[t but BU] D'n[ i] =
39 MAR:                                    [ .hh-[ I : : :]    [oo] =
40 EDN:    =ATE UP THERE the other night it ws:: really good foo:d
41         very reas'na[ ble.]
42 MAR:    [(h) i] - edna you know i dih-y[ouknow] =
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The question, then, is what did Edna *do* by saying "AN IT'S chea:p, hu" in line 12, such that it can cause this evident consternation? While a detailed analysis of this lies beyond the scope of this introductory chapter, the data extract nicely illustrates the way in which account-ability as intelligibility and accountability as responsibility (Robinson 2016) are intertwined. In short, what Edna is holding herself accountable for through these repeated denials is that her claim that Coco's is "cheap" is hearable – that is, account-able – as a reason for why she prefers it over another place, *presuming that she will be paying for that lunch*. This inference makes account-able a range of other inferences, the exact nature of which were perhaps best known to those participants. However, they are clearly treated as undesirable by Edna. In any case, the point is made well enough, we think, that ascribing action(s) is evidently a member's concern.

A turn to action ascription thus means adopting a members' perspective. Indeed, the aim of this volume is to focus on understandings of 'action' from a participants' point of view, and to ask how this impinges on the scientific understanding of action to arrive at an empirically warranted conceptualization of 'action' from the members' point of view, as attested by their conversational behavior. This leads us to consider the following issues: How do members themselves conceive of actions and how do they ascribe actions to behavior? Which interpretive constituents enter into ascriptions of actions? How is action ascription displayed in social interaction and how is it consequential to the interactional process?

In attempting to address such questions in the course of this volume, it is important to bear in mind a number of key parameters relating to action ascription for members. These include the scope of 'action', granularity in their description, and the inevitable multifunctionality of 'action' (cf. Sidnell 2017: 326).

(a) *The scope of action ascription*. Social actions must be addressed to particular others (see already Weber [1968/1922], who claimed that actions are addressed to others and oriented to them in their trajectory, i.e. they are responsive). Actions in CA are generally taken to be the "main business" of a turn (Levinson 2013: 107). On some accounts this is whatever is (taken as) intended as the purpose/goal of that turn by the speaker, and distinguished from "collateral effects" (Sidnell & Enfield 2014: 426), such as referring, positioning and identity claims, indexing relationships and roles, epistemic claims, and emotion displays, which are not classically regarded as actions. On other accounts, advocated, for instance, by Schegloff (1996: 165), the main or primary action is "what the response must deal with in order to count as an adequate next turn" (Levinson 2013: 107; cf. Rossi 2018: 379). Levinson (2013) draws a further distinction between "primary actions" and "secondary actions." The latter include display of expertise, emotions, "off-record actions," and the like, which may well be "intended," but "do not change the nature of the sequential action type now due" (2013: 107).

Actions for members, however, can go beyond what is traditionally understood in scientific accounts of action, as notions such as 'intention' or 'purpose' vary in their scope just as much as the notion of action itself (Duranti 2015; Gibbs 1999; Haugh & Jaszczolt 2012). For members, then, action ascription is fundamentally tied to the issue of the segmentation of the flow of acting into discrete actions (see Schütz 1976). This raises the question of which stretch of behavior members are responding to and treating as 'a single action' (cf. Szczepek-Reed & Raymond 2013). These units may well be different from the prototypical actions discussed in the literature: people may respond selectively to prior talk and respond to units much larger than basic actions, for example, when responding to a multi-unit turn.

(b) *The granularity of action ascription.* Action ascription means categorizing some stretch of behavior as something, that is, it is always aspectual. This categorization is overwhelmingly done tacitly – we don't normally talk about what it is we are doing – but invariably presupposes some kind of ontology of action (Sidnell & Enfield 2014). The nature of this ontology of action is complex in the case of social interaction, as there is considerable variation in action labels across different languages (e.g., Duranti 1988; Hakulinen & Sorjonen 2012; Rosaldo 1982), and among researchers (i.e. scientific use) and participants (i.e. everyday use) (Levinson 2013; Pillet-Shore 2021;

Schegloff 2007), so establishing a definitive typology seems an impossible task. The elusiveness of any such typology is due, however, to an even more fundamental issue for members, namely that categories and descriptions can vary in their degree of granularity (Schegloff 1988, 2000), or what Sacks (1963) earlier referred to as the "etcetera problem." The very same utterance can thus be described in a multitude of different ways. *Can you pass the salt?*, for instance, can be glossed as 'A wants me to do something', 'A has requested me to do something', 'A has requested me in an unobtrusive way to do something', and so on. What is important to note here is that for members, action ascription does not just mean ascribing a type, but ascribing who (in which role, etc.) has done what (object of the action) to whom under what conditions (circumstances, with regard to expectations) in which ways (politeness, emotional tone, recipient design, etc.). As Clayman and Heritage (2014) note, for instance, in relation to the ascription of 'requests', 'offers', and 'invitations', "action formulations can be *compacted*, glossing over the details of what will transpire and thereby obscuring any service-related characteristics and the benefactive configuration they would implicate; or they can be *expanded*, with benefactive details specified, elaborated, and thus foregrounded" (2014: 61, original emphasis). In other words, action ascription always means a situated interpretation of a prior turn concerning (some of) its (potential) indexical facets. The level of granularity which is characteristic of action types generally used in the literature, such as commands, requests, and instructions, may not, of course, matter to members in particular circumstances. Instead, what is required by those members may indeed only be a coarser attribution (e.g., a deontic expectation). As Enfield and Sidnell (2017a, 2017b) argue, one does not need to be able to describe a prior action in order to be able to respond to it. However, at other times much more fine-grained distinctions can matter, many of which have not yet been captured by action types and labels discussed in the literature (Schegloff 1996). Yet while ascriptions of action can vary in their degree of granularity, the interactional reality of action types for response generation, and thus for members, is strongly supported by observable regularities and expectancies concerning sequential organization (Kendrick et al. 2020; Kevoe-Feldman & Robinson 2012; Schegloff 2007; Thompson, Fox & Couper-Kuhlen 2015).

(c) *The multifunctionality of 'action'*. The multi-layering and equivocality of actions is a pervasive feature of them in social interaction, a point noted some decades ago in linguistic pragmatics (Levinson 1981; Thomas 1995), although it has only been the subject of concerted conversation-analytic studies in recent years (e.g., Rossi 2018). However, while a single 'action unit' can give rise to multiple actions (Levinson 2013), and even to some degree of equivocality with respect to how one responds to that utterance, turn, etc. (e.g., Drew 2018), this is not to say that action ascription does not matter for response generation.