

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 intersubjective 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

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.

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.

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

01 EDN: .t.hhhhhhhhhhh well honey li:sten ah'll thhalk with yeh:: uh:
 02 wil[git tih] ge[ther::[e]
 03 MAR: [.hhhhh] [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, h
 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: [.hhhh[OH ; 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].

22 MAR: [.hhh[we] ll n[oi:'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] =

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.

People can be seen to respond to different layers of action-meaning at the same time in their responses (e.g., making an assertion, thereby making an assessment, thereby disagreeing, thereby rejecting an identity-claim of the interlocutor). The multi-layering of ‘action units’ is also related to the temporality of actions (Deppermann 2015): every action potentially has a retrospective meaning (interpreting prior actions), a prospective aspect (projecting next actions), and a meaning in and of itself. Consequently, ascription can focus, possibly selectively, on one or more of these three temporal facets of any ‘action unit’.

1.3 Approaches to Action Ascription

Recent research on action formation has demonstrated the central role played by social action formats in action formation and recognition (Couper-Kuhlen 2014; Fox 2007; Thompson, Fox & Couper-Kuhlen 2015). However, as those working on social action formats acknowledge, the meaning of actions is not straightforwardly coded in these formats, but is positionally sensitive to prior context, and is even sometimes equivocal. Actions often cannot simply be recognized from talk or conduct, and participants have to figure out and negotiate which action(s) some stretch of behavior has been implementing. Inference is thus central to action ascription, especially as not every action comes with a straightforward social action format. However, it is one thing to assert that action ascription is critically dependent on inferences made by participants (and inferences about those inferences made by analysts). It is another thing to provide a systematic account of the account-able grounds for making those inferences. As action ascription has become the focus of attention over the past decade a number of different approaches to it have emerged. In this section, we briefly review three of the most important ones: the “assemblages approach” (Schegloff 1996, 1997, 2006; see also Garfinkel & Sacks 1970), the “inferential approach” (Levinson 2013, 2017), and the “semiotic approach” (Enfield & Sidnell 2017a, 2017b; Sidnell 2017; Sidnell & Enfield 2014).

The “assemblages approach” to action ascription builds on the ethnomethodological notion of practices (or procedures or methods) by which members make sense of their world (Garfinkel 1967; Garfinkel & Sacks 1970). A practice is a recurrent assemblage of particular features of the composition (both linguistic and non-linguistic) and the position (within a TCU, turn, sequence, and overall structural organization) of an element of conduct destined to accomplish a certain action (Heritage 2010; Schegloff 1996, 2007). While this might seem to privilege action formation, on an ethnomethodological view, “the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organised everyday affairs are identical with members’ procedures for making those settings ‘account-able’” (Garfinkel 1967: 1). In other words, elements of

conduct are intelligible (i.e. recognizable, understandable) as implementing actions on the basis of the practices by which they are implemented, and actions are thus “done as assemblages of practices” (Garfinkel & Sacks 1970: 340). The view that defined practices can be mapped to particular actions is termed the “praxions approach” and attributed to Schegloff by Enfield (2013: 100; see also Enfield & Sidnell 2017a: 105–6; Sidnell & Enfield 2014: 430). However, there are reasons to resist the seemingly seductive idea that practices determine actions, and that action ascription is therefore simply a matter of recognizing these practices (Schegloff 1997: 539).

The “inferential approach” to action ascription developed by Levinson (2013, 2017) locates action ascription at the intersection of cognition-for-interaction and sequentially ordered interaction. On this view, action ascription involves parsing linguistic, gaze, and prosodic features of the design of the prior turn, features of the interactional context, including epistemic (a)symmetry, sequential position, and the attribution of projects and tiered action plans (Levinson 2013: 127, 2017: 208–11). Most of these features are now widely accepted as important resources for action ascription, a point which we will move to discuss in further detail in the following section. What distinguishes Levinson’s approach to action ascription from the “assemblages approach,” then, is the emphasis he places on the need for participants to rapidly merge different sources of information through both bottom-up and top-down inferential processes. Levinson argues the former are likely probabilistic (i.e. Bayesian) forms of inference, as it has been repeatedly demonstrated that linguistic formats cannot be reliably mapped to actions, although he points out that this may be, in part, a function of the fact that “where multiple forms are available, they may each carry subtly different presuppositions about background conditions” (Levinson 2017: 209). Top-down inferential processes rely on abductive reasoning and other forms of practical reasoning, of which the classic question in conversation-analytic research, “Why that now?” (Schegloff & Sacks 1973: 299), is an instance.¹ Pomerantz (2017) argues this means that “recognizing an action is fundamentally indexical, that is, its meaning is dependent on the context in which it occurs” (2017: 74). Levinson (2013, 2017) takes this further, however, in proposing that action ascription also involves inferences about the “the likely goal structure or plans of the speaker . . . the inference schema we use to understand any sequence of actions” (Levinson 2017: 211). However, while such schema can indeed be convincingly applied to action sequences post facto, and underlying plans of speakers seemingly reconstructed, it remains to be seen the extent to which these putative inferential schema are drawn upon *in situ* when participants do

¹ Schegloff (1998) subsequently claimed that “why that now” is fundamentally indexical with respect to both the referent of the ‘that’ and the ‘now’.

not have access to what comes next (Drew 2011). Indeed, Levinson (2017) cautions that there is still as yet “no complete model of how these various kinds of information come together in action attribution” (2017: 214).

The “semiotic approach” to action ascription has been developed by Enfield and Sidnell (2017a, 2017b; see also Sidnell & Enfield 2014; Sidnell 2017). They draw an important distinction between *responding* to an action and *describing* an action. Similar to the other two approaches to action ascription, Enfield and Sidnell (2017a, 2017b) argue that participants draw on combinations of features of the composition and position of prior moves, which on a semiotic view constitute “signs,” in responding to a prior action. They also echo Levinson (2013, 2017) in arguing that “action is subject to multiple possible descriptions simultaneously” (Enfield & Sidnell 2017b: 523), as well as Schegloff (2006) in arguing that because of the inherent temporality of composition and position, “action is [also] subject to multiple, successive interpretations or understandings or drafts” (Enfield & Sidnell 2017b: 523). Where they differ is in the central importance they place on inferences about the speaker’s goals that are motivated by combinations of “signs” in guiding participants in how to respond appropriately to prior moves (Enfield & Sidnell 2017b: 517), and in their assumption that participants build “a token understanding of what a person is doing by what they are saying” (2017b: 524). They argue that understanding action does not require typing or categorizing prior conduct by participants, but consists entirely in responding appropriately to that prior move. Sidnell (2017) argues, however, that there is still a place for ascribing action types with respect to their accountability. He claims action types are fundamental to assigning responsibility for action through explicit attributions of actions, and contestation of those attributions by members. Enfield and Sidnell (2017b) go on to conclude that

an interactant is able to produce an appropriate response to another’s move in interaction by building a token understanding of what a person is doing by what they are saying, based on features of the move’s design and positioning . . . there is no analytical need to propose that interactants categorize actions by binning token moves as this or that action type. (Enfield & Sidnell 2017b: 524)

The “semiotic approach” treats types of actions as useful heuristics for analysts, but argues that for members there are only situated tokens. However, as they earlier pointed out, “any account of social action presupposes an ontology of action whether this is made explicit or not” (Sidnell & Enfield 2014: 423). They advocate an ontology of action that consists of highly generalized categories of action. One example of a generalized ontology of action is that of Tomasello (2008), who proposes a three-way distinction between “requesting: to secure another’s help for meeting your own goals,” “helping: to provide help for meeting another’s goals,” and “sharing: for meeting common goals,

and for the cohesion of social relationships” grounded in phylogeny (Enfield & Sidnell 2017b: 528). An alternative is Searle’s (1969) four-way distinction between assertives (corresponding to *beliefs*), directives (corresponding to *desires*), commissives (corresponding to *intentions*), and expressives (corresponding to *feelings*), which is grounded in a theory of intentionality (i.e. directed mental acts/processes). In advocating such an ontology, they relegate technical categories of action developed in CA to the status of “convenient heuristics” that play “a useful role in analysis, and in scholarly communication” but do not in themselves “provide a general account for action in interaction” (Enfield & Sidnell 2017b: 529).

One challenge facing all accounts of action ascription is how to accommodate actions to which there is not a clear response. Stivers and Rossano (2010a) have argued that some actions, such as assessments or noticings, do not always receive clear uptake (although cf. Schegloff [2010] for a counteranalysis). They go on to suggest that this has implications for accounts of action ascription that rely on “the responsive turn in action analysis” (Stivers & Rossano 2010b: 54), and ask that if there is no uptake, “how are we to ascertain what action the speaker designed or what action the recipient understood him/her to be implementing?” (2010b: 54). However, while responsive turns are critical to analyzing action ascription as a form of social action, there are other resources by which members ascribe actions in a more general sense. It is to a consideration of the constituents of and resources for action ascription that we now turn.

1.4 Constituents and Resources of Action Ascription

What resources do members draw on in order to ascribe actions? Of course, the most obvious source is action formation. Yet, it is still up for debate to what degree features of turn design determine action ascription (Couper-Kuhlen 2014). Social action formats are conventional ways of delivering an action (Fox 2007). Still, they are themselves context-dependent, and so action ascriptions based on formats are invariably defeasible. In addition, turns at talk often do not draw on definite social action formats, or they may be designed to be ambiguous or equivocal as to which action(s) are being implemented (Drew 2018). The question is thus: How and when are the action implications of a turn open to dispute, negotiation, misunderstanding, or being overridden by other sources of meaning? An answer to this question includes identifying which interpretive resources enter into action ascription by participants, and how these relate to the composition of an action and its position within an interactional sequence. Resources which have to be considered include:

- (1) syntactic and prosodic format of turns (Couper-Kuhlen 2014; Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018; Thompson, Fox & Couper-Kuhlen 2015);

- (2) multimodal aspects of action formation other than linguistic turn design (Goodwin 2000, 2013, 2017; Holler, Kendrick & Levinson 2018; Hömke, Holler and Levinson 2018; Mondada 2014);
- (3) the sequential position of the turn, including within TCUs, turns, and sequences (Schegloff 1984, 1995, 1996, 2007);
- (4) the larger interaction type and joint projects therein (Clark 1996; Goodwin 2000, 2017; Levinson 2013; Linell 1998; Schegloff 2007);
- (5) participants' identities and associated epistemic (Heritage 2012a, 2012b) and deontic (Stevanovic & Peräkylä 2012, 2014) (a)symmetries;
- (6) elements of preference organization and (dis)preferred formats (Clift 2016; Pillet-Shore 2016, 2021);
- (7) cognitive ascriptions (Deppermann 2012), including the attribution of (culture-specific) concepts of intentionality and what it means to be an actor (Duranti 1988, 2015); and
- (8) attributions of accountability (Haugh 2013; Robinson 2016).

The contributions in this volume ask how participants index these (and potentially still other) aspects as being relevant for action ascription, when they matter, and how they are related to each other (in potentially disputed ways). These considerations will be related to properties of the turn-to-be-understood (e.g., vagueness, indirectness), to situated interactional concerns (e.g., dealing with sensitive matters, strategic interaction, specifics of activity type, genre, identities, and participation framework), and to the larger interactional projects which a turn may serve and which themselves may be negotiated through action ascription.

A major issue which is yet to be adequately addressed is the role of cognition in action ascription. The ascription of intentions, strategies, plans, and projects has been argued to be crucial for action ascription (Levinson 2013, 2017). Indeed, there is an increasing body of work that demonstrates the role cognitive processing plays in action ascription (e.g., Bögels, Kendrick & Levinson 2020; Gisladdottir, Bögels & Levinson 2018; Gisladdottir, Chwilla & Levinson 2015). Actions can be understood as being instrumental or metonymically related to higher-order goals or projects, indexing larger beliefs, and purposes (Brandom 1994, 2014; Clark 1996; Gibbs 1999; Levinson 1981, 2013, 2017). However, the overt ascription of cognitive states to interpret actions is rare; explicit intention-ascription sometimes happens, but this is tied to specific pragmatic problems and uses (Edwards 2008; Haugh 2008, 2013). Moreover, while the goal-directedness of social behavior is certainly a major constituent of action ascription (Enfield & Sidnell 2017a, 2017b; Levinson 2013, 2017), not all instances of action ascription can be readily reduced to particular goals. Indeed, reference to goals alone may only be sufficient for very basic actions, such as object transfer. In most cases, many other factors

enter into action ascription: how something was done, by whom to whom, with which emotional stance, attending (or not) to which side conditions, and how the action affects the ascriber (emotionally, morally, regarding their social position, in front of others, and so on).

The relative importance of cognitive factors, such as goals and intentions (Enfield & Sidnell 2017a, 2017b; Levinson 2013, 2017), on the one hand, and social factors, such as relevance rules and normative structures (Haugh 2013; Robinson 2016), on the other hand, for action ascription is also an important issue needing further careful debate. The normative accountability of action is calculated with respect to situated expectations about appropriate and rational behavior that are immanent to the moral order of interaction (Haugh 2013, 2017). This can converge with intention ascriptions (e.g., in the case of attributions of rational action), but does not necessarily need or imply them. Expectations of social accountability concerning which kind of action is due in an interactional environment and the relationship between them and the actual behavior like fulfillment, marked contrast, exaggerated compliance, ironicization, role distance, and so on may lead to ascriptions based on convention and accountability, which do not have to rely on the attribution of intentions. On the contrary, if action ascription were entirely normative, the issue of action ascription could be subsumed under action formation, because the latter would entail the first, reducing action ascription to being simply a matter of action recognition. However, action ascriptions can be calibrated and modulated through reference to the actor's intentions and their knowledge, their biographies, motives, preferences, and so on (as earlier noted by Garfinkel 1967). The inherent reflexivity of action by virtue of recipient design also means that the accountability of action crucially includes a consideration of how a turn can be heard given the presence of just these recipients, their knowledge, their normative expectations, and personal preferences. This becomes particularly clear if turns are addressed to multiple recipients (Clark & Carlson 1982; Deppermann 2014; Hindmarsh & Pilnick 2002; Mondada 2014). Accountability, of course, can be negotiated and disputed, because construals of action are flexible, albeit to varying degrees (Haugh 2008, 2013). Rhetorical skills can matter here too, because the degree of flexibility in ascribing accountable conduct is directly related to inferential work and the ways in which a participant is able to account for it verbally.

Since action ascription for the most part is not simply a matter of the recognition or decoding of fully conventional, context-free interpretations of prior actions, inference is an important, inevitable part of action ascription. Inference is necessary in order to relate behavior to both the immediately prior and the global context, taking into account both its composition and its position in an action sequence. Scholars in discursive psychology have eschewed discussion of inferences and other cognitive operations

(e.g., Antaki 2004; Edwards 2006; Potter & Edwards 2013). Yet, the fact remains that inferences are implicitly made and used in action analysis (Deppermann 2012), and are inevitable for even the most basic understandings of reference, coherence, and action in sequences of interaction (Deppermann 2018) – a tradition that goes back to the earliest work in CA (e.g., Sacks' [1992] lectures on the “inference-making machine”). CA scholars arguably need to be more explicit about what inferences enter into their analyses of action and from what sources such inferences are derived (Deppermann 2012; Pomerantz 2017).

1.5 Action Ascription as Social Action

Responding to an action is itself a form of social action (Drew 2011). Action ascription is not simply a cognitive process, which is a prerequisite for response generation, but is itself an action with its own distinct features of interactional design and use. The observability of action ascription ranges from more tacit forms to overt formats of action ascription that are explicitly formulated as such, as in some kinds of formulations or candidate understandings. Certain kinds of responses systematically construe prior talk as having been implementing a certain action by presupposing a kind of action as a condition under which the response makes sense (e.g., by construing a prior turn as advice-seeking through responding with advice). Such implicit practices may themselves be conventional or highly indexical. The uses of action ascription itself matter to participants, including the different kinds of actions which are implemented through action ascriptions (e.g., confirmation checks, reproaches), and their importance for the interactional business at hand. This pragmatic perspective on action ascription as being itself a form of social action, which, reflexively, is also an object of temporal, interactional negotiation, means attending to its consequences in interaction: How are ascriptions taken up by the producer of the action in first position, and how are they instrumental to paving the way for future action sequences to unfold? Action ascription often reveals itself not by a single next-positioned action, but an extended process of interactional negotiation, in which ascriptions are enriched, repaired, or stabilized. In fact, action ascription may even be argued to work reciprocally, as Goffman (1976), for instance, has argued with reference to the definition of first pair parts (FPP) and second pair parts (SPP). Goffman (1976) points out that you only know what an SPP does (e.g., that it is an answer) if you know what came before (e.g., a question), but the nature of that very FPP is only defined by the response to it – it could as well have been regarded as a rhetorical question, an announcement, a reproach, and so on, if a different kind of response had occurred. The study of action ascription as itself being a form of action offers yet another window on the utility of concepts of

‘action’ from a members’ point of view, drawing out how “successive actions interlock to function as ways of validating, adjusting or invalidating the actions to which they respond in the conversational flow” (Clayman & Heritage 2014: 56; see also Schegloff 1995).

1.6 Overview of the Volume

This volume aims to complement recent research in action formation, which deals with the production side of actions, by focusing on the reception side. Focusing on turns that are responsive to prior turns – often but not always in second position – as a common point of departure, the volume shows how, in addition to the turn design of actions, the work of recipients is crucial to an intersubjective understanding of actions. The contributions elucidate contexts and kinds of conversational behaviors which make additional interpretive efforts critical for the accomplishment of intersubjective action. Complementing prior work on action formation, the action ascription approach is a second major constituent for building a comprehensive theory of conversational action in context. The contributions in this volume consider three main aspects of action ascription:

- How do participants conceive of ‘actions’? This question concerns the units that are treated as the basis for action ascription, the varying degrees of granularity in understandings of an action, the various aspects taken to be relevant for its interpretation, and the ways in which participants deal with actions that are multilayered or equivocal.
- Which resources do participants draw on to ascribe an action to another party’s behavior? These include the various linguistic, bodily, inferential, sequential, and broader contextual resources that participants draw upon in action ascription.
- Which (implicit and explicit) practices of action ascription do participants use, and how are these responded to in turn? This builds on Drew’s (2011) fundamental insight that action ascription is itself an action, as recipients can shape the current action-in-progress through the ways in which they construe it in next (or subsequent) turns.

While all the chapters in this volume touch upon all three of these questions, the book itself is organized into three parts: Part I, Constituents of Action Ascription; Part II, Practices of Action Ascription; and Part III, Revisiting Action Ascription.

Part I deals with the underlying constituents of action ascription, describing the discursive and sequential resources participants use in ascribing an action.

In Chapter 2, Robert B. Arundale, building on his Conjoint Co-constituting Model of Communicating (Arundale 2010, 2020), makes a case for the need

for an understanding of action ascription in interaction grounded in a temporal order that is intertwined with but distinct from the sequential order. A key claim made in this chapter is that action ascription is necessarily tied to interleaving three-position sequences through which speaker's and recipient's provisional action ascriptions become operative.

Paul Drew, who has been one of the leading figures in conversation analysis for decades, follows, in Chapter 3, with a detailed, highly nuanced account of what he calls the micro-politics of action, building on his claim that action ascription is itself a form of social action. He astutely describes how participants work to avoid or disguise particular action ascriptions, and argues this is due to the different 'values' that may be attached to different actions.

Chapter 4, by Michael Haugh, a proponent of an approach to pragmatics grounded in conversation analysis, discusses two interrelated implications of a treatment of action ascription as accountable social action for our understanding of the role of inference in action ascription. The first is that the underlying procedural infrastructure of social action is necessarily premised on three basic positions, not two, for displaying inferences about action ascription. The second is that an analysis of action ascription as social action provides an analytical window into practical reasoning by participants and the inferences that are made procedurally available, as well as suppressed or avoided, in the course of ascribing action.

Lorenza Mondada, one of the most prominent researchers on multimodal interaction worldwide, considers in Chapter 5 how multimodal conduct, that is, bodily aspects of action formation, and the overall structure of an interaction type together with the sequential position of an action account for the ascription of actions, as well as drawing attention to the way in which action ascription lies on a continuum from more explicit or overt through to more implicit or tacit. Collectively, the contributions in Part I elucidate what enters into a vernacular understanding of 'action': the constituents, their interrelations, and how they are put to use in order to arrive at situated action ascriptions.

Part II focuses on different practices of action ascription, ranging from environments in which action ascription is accomplished more explicitly through to more tacit forms of action ascription and the interactional consequences of these different action ascription practices.

The first two chapters in this section focus on overt action ascription. In Chapter 6, Arnulf Deppermann, another key proponent of an approach to pragmatics grounded in conversation analysis who has been working on the role of cognition in displaying understanding in interaction, and Julia Kaiser describe how explicit ascriptions of intentions are used to not only clarify but also criticize the action in a prior turn with an eye to its import for future cooperation.

Henrike Helmer, who did her PhD on the understanding of implicit topics in interaction, deals with the ascription of strategic action and the exposure of

(alleged) “real” intentions in political conflict talk in Chapter 7. These first two chapters demonstrate not only that overt or explicit action ascription figures importantly in the understanding of actions, but that explicitly invoking intention(ality) and other cognitive processes in interaction is itself a powerful means for construing social action in warranting or denying the accountability of participants for those actions.

The focus then shifts to action ascription practices that are more implicit or indexical, but are nevertheless systematically used to ascribe a certain action to another participant’s prior talk. Elizabeth Couper-Kuhlen and Sandra A. Thompson, both leading protagonists of interactional linguistics, examine in Chapter 8 how prior talk is implicitly portrayed as advice-seeking in terms of format and sequence, and how advice-giving turns are responded to.

Takeshi Hiramoto and Makoto Hayashi, who are leading researchers on conversational interaction in Japanese, focus in Chapter 9 on the role that the deontic status of an actor within a local network of relationships has for the ascription of action(s) in indirect talk.

In Chapter 10, Yaxin Wu and Guodong Yu, who are experts on conversation in Mandarin Chinese, discuss a turn-constructive format of answering which indexes that the question being answered is considered to be inapposite. They demonstrate that a particular linguistic format is here specialized to address aspects of the accountability of others’ actions.

In Chapter 11, Tom Koole, who has done important research on understanding in interaction, and Lotte van Burgsteden discuss action ascription in the case of thanking in emergency calls. They show that thanking can portray the caller’s action either as requesting a service or as offering help. Their work shows how action ascriptions can extend beyond single actions to larger stretches of discursive action.

Part III of this volume presents two critical perspectives on action ascription. In Chapter 12, N. J. Enfield and Jack Sidnell, two leading protagonists of conversation analysis in linguistic anthropology, distinguish between action ascription as response and action ascription as describing, and argue that the ‘binning’ approach to social action conflates the two.

Finally, in Chapter 13, John Heritage, another central figure in conversation analysis for more than four decades, masterfully overviews what we have learned to date, and highlights some of the outstanding questions that remain in our attempts to unravel action ascription.

In sum, the chapters in this volume are some of the first to systematically address the receptive side of action – action ascription – and thus the interactional processes by which actions are negotiated and defined as interactional realities for participants in various forms of interaction. We hope the volume will thus be seen as making a useful contribution to current debates about social action in the fields of conversation analysis and pragmatics.

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