

Ahead of Print

Meta-semantic practices in social interaction

Definitions and specifications provided in response to *Was heißt X* ('what does X mean')

Arnulf Deppermann

Leibniz-Institute for the German Language, Mannheim |
University of Helsinki

In social interaction, different kinds of word-meaning can become problematic for participants. This study analyzes two meta-semantic practices, definitions and specifications, which are used in response to clarification requests in German implemented by the format *Was heißt X* ('What does X mean?'). In the data studied, definitions are used to convey generalizable lexical meanings of mostly technical terms. These terms are either unknown to requesters, or, in pedagogical contexts, requesters ask in order to check the addressee's knowledge. Specifications, in contrast, clarify aspects of local speaker meanings of ordinary expressions (e.g., reference, participants in an event, standards applied to scalar expressions). Both definitions and specifications are recipient-designed with respect to the (presumed) knowledge of the addressee and tailored to the topical and practical relevancies of the current interaction. Both practices attest to the flexibility and situatedness of speakers' semantic understandings and to the systematicity of using meta-semantic practices differentially for different kinds of semantic problems. Data are come from mundane and institutional interaction in German from the public corpus FOLK.

Keywords: Interactional Linguistics, semantics, definition, specification, repair-initiation

1. Introduction

In social interaction, the meaning of an expression can become problematic for participants in interaction in different ways. Problems usually occur if

- a. an expression and/or its meaning is unknown (Selting 1987, pp.103–120)
- b. its general meaning is known, but its precise local (often referential) meaning cannot be recovered or is ambiguous
(Selting 1987, pp.86–103; Egbert et al. 2009)
- c. its meaning is well understood, but the expression is taken to be inadequate for naming the referent or describing the state of affairs
(Norén & Linell 2007; Günthner 2015; De Stefani this issue).

Participants have routine practices for solving these problems. Corrections and substitutions of expressions are used when problem c. occurs (e.g., Rae 2008). In German, all three kinds of meaning problems can be flagged by the format *Was heißt X* ('what does X mean').¹ In this paper, I analyze meta-semantic practices designed to deal with the two other problems: Definitions are employed if an expression and/or its meaning is not known; and specifications are produced if the local meaning becomes problematic.

Extract 1 shows the production of a definition of X (*Bemessungsquelldruck*) in response to *Was heißt X*. The term X figures on a slide that WW presents together with his lecture.

Extract 1. *Bemessungsquelldruck* ('measurement source pressure')

(FOLK_E_00069_SE_01_T_01_c436)

- 01 WW: *h und diese (.) Abdichtungsbaue[r]ke sind, hh*]
And these waterproofing constructions are
- 02 HG: [was was heisst
beMES]Sungs (.) QUELL (.) druck;
What does measurement source pressure mean
- 03 (0.4)
- 04 HG: [(sagen sie) was so-]
Tell what shou-
- 05 WW: [bemessungsQUE]LLdruck- h*
Measurement source pressure
- 06 HG: was IS des;
What is this
- 07 WW: *h das is DER druck, h*
This is the pressure
- 08 (.) gegen DEN (.) *h das BAUwerk (.) *h beMESSen wird;
against which the construction is measured

Extract 2 shows how *Was heißt X* is responded to with a specification of X (*wenige*, line 01/05) by Y (*zwei*, line 06):

Extract 2. *wenige* ('few')

(FOLK_E_00030_SE_01_T01_c901)

- 01 AM: es kann nich sein dass die nur so WEnige:: (.)
ähm ((schnalzt)) so wenige AUFlistungen haben;“
It isn't possible that they have only so few listings

1. Equivalent formats in other languages exhibit this variation in use as well (for Italian *Che cosa vuol dire X*, see De Stefani this issue).

02 (0.6)
 03 PB: wie,
 how
 04 (3.0)
 05 PB: was HEISST nur wenige auf[(li-)]
 What does it mean so few listi-
 06 AM: [ja wir ham nur]
 zwei EINträge gefunden für die-
 well we only found two entries for them
 07 (0.4)

Prior research has not distinguished between definitions and specifications in response to *Was heißt X*, but has categorized both more grossly as “clarifications” (Günthner 2015). I will argue in this paper that participants distinguish between the two ways of explicating meanings. They concern different aspects of (local) meanings and are mostly occasioned by different kinds of expressions that become locally problematic. These facts provide us with insights into the different ways in which semantic meaning matters to participants in social interaction.

Section 2 reports on prior research on clarifications, which encompasses both definitions and specifications. In Section 3, I turn to requests for clarification implemented by *Was heißt X* (‘what does X mean’) as repair-initiations occasioning definitions and specifications. This section also includes a description of the data and methods used in this study. Section 4 analyzes definitions given in response to *Was heißt X*, while Section 5 zooms in on specifications. Section 6 discusses the differences between definitions and specifications and the different dimensions of semantics that they address.

2. Semantic work in interaction: Clarifications

In social interaction, participants continuously do semantic work of constraining, disambiguating and clarifying the meanings of the expressions that they are using. Semantic work in talk is mostly done *en passant*, e.g., by using co-occurrences constraining meanings (Sinclair 1991), selective responses dealing with only one among several possible meanings, contextual framings that select meanings (e.g., in narratives), gestures specifying references (Kendon 2004), etc. However, there are also moments in social interaction in which meanings are clarified by explicit means.

Clarifications are *meta-semantic practices* (Deppermann in press), which make parts of the (situated) meaning of expressions explicit. They can come in different shapes, e.g., by way of contrasting (Deppermann 2005; Bilmes 2019, 2020), defining (Deppermann 2016; Traverso & Gréco 2016), or specifying (Laakso & Sorjonen 2010; Pfeiffer 2015, pp. 66–72). Clarifications are always only

partial and never fully transparent: They assume other meanings to be taken for granted and shared by the interlocutors (Garfinkel 1967). Common ground in interaction in this way emerges reflexively, always presupposing already existing bits of common ground (Clark & Schaefer 1992; Deppermann & Schmidt 2021). This irremediable partial intransparency makes semantics a recalcitrant object of conversation analytic research: Semantic interpretation is never fully observable.

Requests for clarification are a subclass of restricted repair initiations using question words (Selting 1987, pp.89–104; Dingemanse et al. 2014, pp.333–338; see also Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018, pp.183–186, p.199 on requests for explanation). Requests for clarification can be responded to by definitions or specifications. They provide an environment in which semantic work in interaction becomes particularly manifest. Table 1 shows formats used for requests for clarification in German talk-in-interaction.

Table 1. Formats for requesting clarification in German in the Corpus FOLK (version 2.18 from 2022, 314h)

Format	N
<i>Was ist/sind X</i> ‘What is X’	337
<i>Was heißt X</i> ‘What does X mean’	275
<i>Was bedeutet X</i> ‘What does X mean’	37
<i>Was meinst du mit X</i> ‘What do you mean by X’	31
<i>Was verstehst du unter X</i> ‘What do you understand by X’	12

However, these formats are not only used for requesting clarification. In particular, *was ist/sind X* (‘what is/are X’) is overwhelmingly employed for eliciting an account concerning the nature or function of an object (*intentio recta*). Therefore, my study focuses on the format *was heißt X* (‘what does X mean’), which is most frequently used for requesting clarification of the meaning of an expression (*intentio obliqua*).

3. Uses of and responses to *Was heißt X* (‘What does X mean’) in German talk-in-interaction

Was heißt X is a repair-initiator. Günthner (2015) distinguishes two uses of it: *requesting clarification* and problematizing the use of the expression X. In the first use, the format is mostly used for other-initiated self-repair; the producer has a lower epistemic status than their addressee. Clarifications, i.e., the repair proper,

as will be shown in this paper, can be implemented in this context by definitions or by specifications (see also Selting 1987, pp. 86–124 on repair-initiation and repair concerning semantic problems in German). More rarely, *Was heißt X* can also be employed to project a clarification of X in the same turn. The other use is to *problematize the use of the expression X*. In these cases, the speaker claims a high epistemic status (see for English Schegloff 1997, pp. 520–524; Raymond & Sidnell 2019; for Swedish *x-och-x²* Norén & Linell 2007; Linell & Lindström 2016; for Italian De Stefani this issue). Problematization can be implemented as an initiation of same-turn self-correction, or as other-repair initiation, serving as a (pre-)disagreement and projecting a correction or substitution of the problematic item X.³ Günthner (2015) mentions differences between the two uses of *Was heißt X* concerning delay of turn-production, position of focal accent, and intonation.⁴

The study reported here is based on 119 instances of *Was heißt X* from video-recordings and telephone conversations from the public corpus FOLK version 2.18 (2022) (accessible via <https://dgd.ids-mannheim.de>; Reineke et al. 2023).⁵ All data extracts were submitted to close sequential analysis according to the principles of CA (Robinson et al. 2024) and IL (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018). They were coded for sequential organization and type of response to *Was heißt X*. Transcripts follow the conventions of GAT₂ (Selting et al. 2011) with additional multimodal annotation according to Mondada (2018). In my data, I found five different kinds of responses to *Was heißt X*: corrections, specifications, definitions, statement of consequences, and translations of X. These five response-types occur within different sequential environments (see Table 2).

Most frequently, *Was heißt X* is responded to by a *correction* (substitution) of X ($n = 50/119$). The correction Y indexes that X is treated as *inadequate*, e.g., too extreme (weak or strong) or wrong. Corrections occur mainly as self-initiated self-repairs ($n = 28/50$) and other-repairs ($n = 18/50$). Extract 3 is an example of

2. *X och x* (lit. ‘x and x’) could best be translated as “what does X mean?” if being used to address that X does not apply in its prototypical or expected sense in the local context.

3. The distinction between the use of *Was heißt X* for problematizing X vs. for requesting a clarification of X is not always straightforward (see also below, Extracts 10 and 11). Therefore, the match between these uses and correcting vs. clarifying responses is not deterministic, either.

4. I did not find uniform prosodic differences between the two uses. While the problematizing use always exhibits a final falling contour, all sorts of final contours occur with clarifying uses in my data. – For the English repair-initiation format *what do you mean*, Sidnell and Raymond (2019) identify a clarification vs. a pre-disagreement/challenge use as well. They are, however, linked to using the format only vs. using the format + repeating X. There is no such formal difference for the uses of *Was heißt X*.

5. All data are fully anonymized and authorized for scientific research and publication by written informed consent from all participants recorded.

Table 2. Sequential environments of responses to *Was heißt X*

<i>Response Y</i>	<i>Relation to X</i>						
	Self-initiated self-repair	Other-initiated self-repair	Other-initiated other-repair	Known-answer questions	Request for information	Other	
Correction	28	4	18	0	0	0	50
Specification	8	26	2	0	0	1	37
Definition	0	12	0	4	0	0	16
Consequence	2	0	1	4	1	0	8
Translation	0	1	0	0	5	2	8
<i>Total</i>	38	43	21	8	6	3	119

self-initiated self-repair built with *Was heißt X* leading to a correction. In a physiotherapy session, the client (CL) performs a stretching exercise. As the therapist (TH) asks about his right arm (line 01), he answers that it feels stretched (line 06), but then initiates a self-correction saying *was heißt ZIEhe*; ('what does stretch mean', line 07) and replaces the problematic expression *ziehe* by *da spür ich genug DRUCK*, ('I feel enough pressure there', line 08). The self-correction is not occasioned by any (nonverbal) action of the therapist.

Extract 3. ziehen ('stretch')⁶ (FOLK_E_00360_SE_01_T_01_DF_01_c552)

01 TH: un was will der RECHte arm jetzt?
And what does the right arm want now?
02 CL: ((lipsmack)) *hhh
03 (1.8)
04 TH: gu:t;
good
05 (2.2)
06 CL: *h das χZIEHTχ_s jetzt;=
It stretches now
07 =was heißt χZIEheχ;=
what does stretch mean?
08 =yda spür ich genug DRUCKγ,
I feel enough pressure there
09 (0.3) VORne an de finger.
At the fingertips
10 (0.2)
11 TH: hmhm-
Uhum

6. In the transcripts, the original expression X and the repair Y are marked by indices.

Corrections are predominantly produced in response to the problematizing use (Günthner 2015) of *Was heißt X*.

The main body of this paper (Sections 4 and 5) will focus on specifications ($n=37$) and definitions ($n=16$). Together, they yield 53 instances of clarifying responses. They are thus as frequent as corrections in the data studied.

In addition, I found two uses not discussed by Günthner (2015). *Was heißt X* can also be used to initiate the *explanation of consequences* (cf. Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018, pp.183–186) that X implies ($n=8$).⁷ In Extract 4, a driving instructor (IN) asks the trainee driver (TD) a known-answer question:

Extract 4. Vorwegweiser ‘advance direction sign’

(FOLK_E_00172_SE_01_T_01_DF_01_c967)

- 01 IN: du musst die KUPPlung wegnehm.
You have to remove the clutch
 02 (.) du musst den WAgen öfters laufen lassen,=
You must let go the car more often
 03 =siehst du den χ VORwegweiser? χ
Do you see the advance direction sign?
 04 TD: (0.5) ja,
yes
 05 (0.3)
 06 IN: was HEISST χ das χ ?
What does this mean?
 07 TD: *h γ is SPURwechsel; γ
(it) is change of lanes
 08 IN: ja.
yes

The answer to the question in line 06 does not concern the semantic meaning of the advance sign (line 03), but the practical consequences that it entails for the driver who wants to go into a certain direction.

Another use of *Was heißt X* is to ask for the *translation* of a foreign language term ($n=8$). Before Extract 5, daughter (DA) read aloud an English recipe. Mother (MO) in response asks:

Extract 5. Smooth

(FOLK_E_00331_SE_01_T_03_DF_01_c207)

- 01 MO: was heißt denn χ SMOOTH χ ;
What does <<English>smooth> mean?
 02 (0.7)
 03 DA: γ WEI:CH. γ
Soft

‘Translation’ and ‘consequence’ differ from all other uses in terms of their sequential organization. Whereas the other three uses overwhelmingly occur in the

7. Sometimes, the more specific format *Was heißt X für A* (‘what does X mean for A’) is used, making clear that a domain of relevance A for which X matters is at issue.

context of repair-sequences, these two uses mostly implement requests for information or known-answer questions (see Table 2).

In the following Sections (4 and 5), we focus on clarifying responses elicited by *Was heißt X*, i.e., as other-initiated self-repairs ($n=38$), including 12 instances of *definitions* (Section 4)⁸ and 26 instances of *specification* (Section 5) of *X*. They address two quite different semantic problems: If the clarification amounts to a definition (Section 4), the generalizable lexical meaning of *X* is at issue. If the clarification amounts to a specification (Section 5), the locally relevant meaning that the speaker means to communicate by *X* is at issue.

4. Definitions

The classical definition of ‘definition’ holds that it consists of a statement of necessary and sufficient conditions (Aristotle 1938[4th century b.c.]) that capture the meaning of the definiendum. This requirement was specified further by St. Thomas Aquinas (1947[1265]: liber I, quaestio 3, articulo 5): “definitio est ex genere et differentia” [‘definition is (composed of) a genus (to which the definiendum belongs) and (specific) differences’], which can be taken to be the most common understanding of ‘definition’ today still. The Philosophy of Language of the 20th century has criticized the view that context-free and unambiguous definitions of terms are possible, e.g., by highlighting that many categories are structured by family resemblances (Wittgenstein 1953 [1950], paragraphs 66–67) and by showing that indexicality, context-dependency, and vagueness are irremediable properties of natural language (Bar-Hillel 1954; Garfinkel 1967; Barwise & Perry 1983). These considerations have led to proposals either to abandon the notion of ‘definition’ altogether or to study the ways in which definitions are actually given.⁹ Definitions necessarily often rather resemble descriptions or explanations of properties of the objects, concepts, etc., to be defined (see also Fasel Lauzon 2014), because the distinction between linguistic and encyclopedic knowledge is fuzzy (Fillmore 1985). This insight is captured by the notion ‘*définition naturelle*’ (Martin 1990).

In everyday interaction, definitions are also conveyed by nonverbal means, as in ostensive definitions (Augustine 1992[400], book 1, ch. 8; Traverso & Ravazollo 2016) that make use of pointing and naming (Ninio & Bruner 1978), or by using iconic gestures or enactments (Beliah 2013; Deppermann 2016). An important

8. We have also included another four cases of known-answer questions asking for definitions.

9. Major varieties of definitions are stipulative, essential/descriptive, explicative, and prescriptive/normative definitions (Robinson 1950; Sambre 2005).

property that accounts for the indexicality of definitions in interaction is recipient-design: Definitions are always partial (Schmale 2016), they presuppose common ground and assumptions about the recipient's knowledge, and they are adapted to the practical purposes they serve (Deppermann 2016, in press; Helmer 2020), which are often rhetorical and argumentative in nature (Deppermann 2000; De Stefani & Sambre 2016; Doury & Micheli 2016; Deppermann & De Stefani 2019). Sometimes, the classical semantic distinction between a definition (what does expression 'X' mean?), the description of a referent (which properties does referent/denotatum 'X' have?) and speaker meaning (what does the speaker mean by using 'X' here and now?) is fluid and indistinguishable (Deppermann 2000). In this paper, I will specifically address the distinction between definitions and specifications of speaker meaning.

In my data, expressions that are clarified by a definition are overwhelmingly technical terms ($n=13/16$). As could be expected, this happens often in pedagogical institutional contexts (classroom interaction and driving lessons), if expressions that are (presumably) new to learners are introduced or when learners' knowledge is checked (see Extract 12). However, definitions are also produced in ordinary settings in cases of non-understanding.

We start with the example in our data that comes closest to the common understanding of 'definition' according to St. Thomas (1947 [1265]). In Extract 6, two students are preparing their exams. CS tells RG about the topic of her exam in philosophy (existentialism). She contrasts atheistic with theistic philosophers.

Extract 6. theistisch ('theistic') FOLK_E_00392_SE_01_T_02_DF_01_c145

- 01 CS: ich ha[b ja ex]istentialismus als THEma und es gab ja
 (0.6) so: (.) des warn ja so: zwei parTEIen;=
*y'know I have existentialism as a subject and y'know
 there were (0.6) kinda y'know there were kinda two parties*
- 02 RG: [stimmt;]
that's right
- 03 =die EIen warn halt (0.7) ähm (.) χTHEistischχ und
 die andern Atheistisch;=
some were just (0.7) erm theistic and the others atheistic
- 04 und camus und sartre warn ja Atheistisch;
and Camus and Sartre y'know were atheistic
- 05 (0.6)
- 06 RG: [hmm,= was heißt χthe]ISTischχ;
uhum what does theistic mean
- 07 CS: [<p>ich glaub (.) irgendwie SO;>]
I guess something like that
- 08 (1.4)
- 09 CS: also ydAss sie halt (0.9) an (.) gOtt geGLAUBT hamy,=
so that they just believed in God
- 10 =also zum BEispiel K[IERK]egaard;
so for example Kierkegaard
- 11 RG: [WOW;]
- 12 (0.8)

RG's clarification request *was heißt THEistisch?* ('what does theistic mean, line 06) indicates a semantic problem (Selting 1987, pp.86–124) with CS's use of *THEistisch* in line 03. CS responds with *dass sie halt an gOtt geGLAUBT ham* ('that they believed in God', line 09), which corresponds to the definitional format of providing a category together with a property that specifically defines the term. The definition is meant to define the term *theistic* in a generalizable manner. However, the definition is formulated with reference to the topic under discussion, taking a pre-cursor of existentialism, the philosopher Kierkegaard, as an example (line 10) and not as a context-free definition of the term per se. It includes the reference 'they' concerning philosophers they talk about. The relevance of the term is elucidated further by relating it to their ideological positions.

The definition in Extract 6 is anchored in the current discourse topic. In my data, definitions mostly mention only properties of the definienda that are practically relevant for the participants. In Extract 7, the two students we know already from Extract 6 are discussing the official regulation stating the conditions under which a candidate may postpone their final exam. The regulation says that s/he needs a 'doctor's certificate or certificate from a public health officer' (*ärztliches oder amtsärztliches zeugnis*, line 04–05). CS reads aloud the conditions for postponing the exam (lines 01–06), and explains how one must proceed to apply for the referral (lines omitted). In line 22, RG uses the *Was heißt X* format to initiate repair of line 05: *was heißt_n AMTS (.) ärzt (.) liches zEUgnis* ('what does public health officer's certificate mean').

Extract 7. *Amtsärztliches zeugnis* ('Certificate from a public health officer')

(FOLK_E_00392_SE_01_T_01_DF_01_c1282)

- 01 CS: *h das PRÜfungsamt kann für die beURteilung der prüfungsUNfähigkeit;
the examination office may require tan assessment of the capability to take an exam
- 02 *h und gegEbenfalls die genehmigung eines rÜcktritts von der PRÜfung;
and eventually to allow for withdrawing from the exam
- 03 (0.8) oder einer unterBRECHung der prüfung;
or to suspend an exam
- 04 *h aus gesundheitlichen gründen ein ZEITnah erstelltes ÄRZTliches
for health reasons a recent doctor's certificate
- 05 *h oder χAMTSärztliches zeugnisχ verlangen das VERbalisiert, *h
or a certificate from a public health officer that explicitly
- 06 (0.9) die Nötigen medizinisch:en (.) befUnd (.) TATSachen enthält.=
contains the necessary medical results
- ((CS tells about procedure for applying for a referral))
- 20 CS: also das gibt_s dann ONline runterzuladen.
so then you can download this online
- 21 (0.8)
- 22 RG: [oKA]Y;=was heißt_n χAMTS (.) ärzt (.) liches zEUgnisχ-
okay what does PRT public health officer's certificate mean
- 23 CS: [und]
and
- 24 (0.9)

- 25 CS: NEE NEE;=also: ich glaub des reicht einfach
wenn du n0rma1 zum ARZT gehst,
no no well I guess it is simply enough
if you just see the doctor
- 26 (1.0)
- 27 CS: [_χAMTSarzt_χ;
public health officer
- 28 RG: [HMhm;]
29 (0.9)
- 30 CS: wär=-_γSIN ja die ärzte da musst ICH jetzt hin
für die referendariatsanmeldung weisch?
would be y'know are the doctors I had to see now
for the notification of my school internship, you know?
- 31 (.) also DIE die halt
so those who y'know
- 32 (1.3)
- 33 RG: ah,=die die s[o TEUer sin?]
oh those who are so expensive
- 34 CS: [ja; (.)
 yes
- 35 also AMTS]ärzte halt;=
 so y'know public health officers
- 36 RG: =<<●>ja geNAU,> ((chuckles))
 yes exactly
- 37 RG: [HAH,]
- 38 CA: [also] DIE die dich halt DURCHchecken und dann sagen
ja okay kann in den SCHULDienst und
kann verbeAmtet werden,_γ
so those who perform a check-up with you and then say
yes okay may serve as a school teacher and
may become a civil servant
- 39 (0.6)
- 40 CA: aha-
I see

The repair-initiation *was heißt_n AMTS (.) ärzt (.) liches zEUgnis?* highlights the repairable by prosodic segmentation of the compound adjective; the focal accent indexes the problematic semantic element, the first part of the determinative compound adjective (Eichinger 2000, pp.115–127). The prosodic design indexes that the expression is problematic (Deppermann 2016; Svennevig 2018) and not only its local meaning. In this case, it is a technical term denoting an institutional role. CS responds that a doctor's certificate will be sufficient (line 25), rejecting RG's possible assumption that a certificate from a public health officer would be needed. With this response, CG does not provide the clarification that RG asked for, but treats the practical issue 'what kind of certificate is needed?' as primary. The semantic problem is addressed only after having implicitly discarded its practical relevance. In her explanation, CS only deals with the adjective *amt-särztlich* (but not with the noun *Zeugnis*) by first referring to when she needed to see a public health officer (line 30), thereby locating the practical relevance of the referent in their shared lifeworld as future teachers. RG receipts the news (*ah,*

line 33; Golato & Betz 2008) and, as a candidate understanding, names a property of the referent ('expensive'), thereby demonstrating recognition of a practical relevance associated with the category (Sacks & Schegloff 1979; Sacks 1992, pp.140–141). In response, RG defines the term further by stating the public health officers' task in the process of becoming tenured as a civil servant (which is one of their main professional duties, lines 35/38).

The ways in which the clarification request 'What does public health officer's certificate mean' is treated shows that the definition is recipient-designed and restricted to properties that are practically relevant for the participants' life-world concerns: the costs of a visit, the officers' involvement in their own courses of action, and their own liabilities. Although it is clearly a transferable, generalizable definition that holds beyond the current interactional context, it provides neither a definition of the institutional position nor of the requirements of fulfilling the position, nor does it purport to make a comprehensive statement about the duties of the category incumbents.

The action-relevance of definitions mirrors the action-relevance of the terms to be defined. In other words, definitions spell out in which ways the denotata of the definienda matter to projects pursued by the participants. Whereas in Extracts 6 and 7, individual projects of the interlocutors are concerned, in Extract 8 a joint project (friends arranging a date on the phone) is at issue. Here, an expression from organizational jargon (*verfüger*, 'disposer') becomes problematic. HS produces a pre-proposal, asking MK if he will be available on Halloween. MK works as an emergency officer and often has to work on public holidays like the day after Halloween (All Saints).

Extract 8. *Verfüger* ('disposer') (FOLK_E_00398_SE_01_T_01_DF_01_c611)

- 01 HS: <<all>w was ich dich noch FRAGEN wollte;=
what I still wanted to ask you
- 02 hast du jetzt an halloween FREI?>
are you now available on Halloween
- 03 (1.4)
- 04 MK: was?
what?
- 05 (1.0)
- 06 HS: ob du an halloween jetzt FREI hast;
whether you are now available on Halloween
- 07 (1.7)
- 08 MK: ((clears throat)) χ ich hab bis JETZT (.) ähm (0.3)
I still now have erm
- mh.; (0.7)((lipsmack)) EINDREIßIGSTEN nen verFÜGER χ .
uh (0.7) thirty-first a disposer
- 09 (1.2)
- 10 MK: ((lipsmack))
- 11 (0.9)
- 12 HS: was HEIßT χ des χ ?
what does χ that χ mean?
- 13 (1.1)

- 14 HS: γ_1 dass du DA [(.) in der NÄ]he sein γ_1
that you then (have to be) in the proximity
- 15 MK: [des HEIßT]
that means
- 16 (0.9)
- 17 MK: mh_JA;= γ_2 dass ich innerhalb von ner STUNde (.)
uhm well that I must work within one hour
 wenn sich jemand KRANKmeldet Arbeiten muss γ_2 ;
if somebody reports sick
- 18 (0.8)
- 19 HS: ach so oKAY; h°
oh okay

When HS asks if MK is available on Halloween (lines 02–06), MK answers that he has a *verFÜger* (‘disposer’) on that day (lines 08–9). MK’s delayed¹⁰ transformative answer (Stivers & Hayashi 2010; Stivers 2022, pp.147–178) states an obstacle against a positive answer. HS targets the meaning of *verFÜger* with the *Was heißt X*-format (line 12), in this case not by a word repeat, but pronominally, because the repairable is the whole preceding turn. After a delay, HS produces a candidate answer herself (line 14; Pomerantz 1988), which expresses a candidate understanding (Antaki 2012) by means of a *dass*-clause (Günthner 2014).¹¹ HS displays that she has understood that *verFÜger* refers to a reason why MK’s availability is restricted: He must be within close reach of his department. HS confirms, but adds a more detailed definition: He has to be at work within one hour if a colleague falls ill (lines 17). The definitional property here is formulated by a predication to the speaker himself, not an abstract predication to a class (of staff). The term *verFÜger* and its definition is directly relevant for the future joint projects of the participants, i.e., for deciding on the timing of their date.

5. Specification

In contrast to definitions, specifications do not convey lexical or general, context-free meanings of X. Rather, the specification Y is to communicate more precisely the relevant local meaning that the speaker intends to impart here and now (for just this recipient). Specification can be implemented by repair (Laakso & Sorjonen 2010; Pfeiffer 2015, pp.66–72), but also by additions, e.g., by turn-expansions (Auer 1996) or increments (Schegloff 2016). Specification is not a correction, because the repairable X, the expression to be specified, is not treated as

10. Because of transmission delays, turns are frequently delayed in this phone-call and therefore cannot easily be interpreted as indexing dispreferredness.

11. This clause states a consequence arising from the fact that MK has a *verFÜger*. Yet, this consequence explicates the notional meaning of the term itself in a situated, deictic way.

invalid or wrong, but as not sufficiently precise for the current purposes. Semantically, the specification Y is less vague, less abstract, more concrete and more fine-grained than X, i.e., it exhibits more semantic properties. According to Pfeiffer (2015, pp. 68–71), highly frequent and basic-level terms are often specified. They may be used as first categorizations, because they are easily accessible, while the specification requires more cognitive effort; “designedly underspecified” expressions (Gubina & Betz 2021, pp. 382–383) can, however, also be produced in order to get a ticket for a more elaborate account (see also Schenkein 1978). Whereas definitions in my data always concern terms that require specific professional, organizational, or cultural knowledge, specifications, in contrast, concern common vernacular terms with medium or low granularity that are taken to be too abstract or too imprecise for the purposes of the current interaction. Specification is a practice to clarify meanings, if the more general X is insufficient and a more fine-grained categorization is needed in order to convey the locally intended meaning. Insufficiency can, e.g., concern the identification of intended referents, unspecified elements in a frame, the precise degree to which some predicate applies, concrete events and actions that are meant by a more abstract expression, etc. (see below). Specifications, therefore, are a practice that is designed to make speaker meanings (Grice 1957) explicit, whereas definitions concern more generalizable lexical meanings.

A most straightforward variety of specification concerns the clarification of *pronominal deictic local, temporal, or personal references* ($n=7/37$). In Extract 9 from a theoretical driving lesson, the student RR claims that he once drove a car without a driving license. The instructor HM asks whether RR did this ‘in our area’ (*hier*; (.) *bei UNS*;, line 11–12). RR first disconfirms (line 14), but then asks for clarification of this deictic spatial reference by asking *was heißt hier bei UNS*- (line 16). The specification repair is delivered still in overlap by HM: ‘in Germany’ (line 18).

Extract 9. *hier bei uns* (‘here in our area’)

(FOLK_E_00351_SE_01_T_01_DF_01_c109)

- 01 RR: isch bin mit_m auto MIT kennzeichen gefahren;
I drove with a car with a license plate
02 (0.2)
03 HM: ohne FÜHrerschein;
without a driving license
04 (0.2)
05 RR: ja,
yes
06 (1.0)
07 HM: ‘hh
08 (0.5)
09 RR: ja?
yes
10 (0.4)

- 11 HM: χhier;
here
- 12 (.) [bei UNS;χ=oder was?]
in our area or what
- 13 AJ: [((small laugh))]
- 14 RR: (0.3) mh NEIN;
erm no
- 15 (0.2)
- 16 RR: [also wa] was heißt χhier bei UN[Sχ-]
well wha what does here in our area mean
- 17 EK: [((laughs))]
- 18 HM: [γi]n DEUTSCHland.γ
in Germany
- 19 RR: ja,
yes
- 20 (1.0)
- 21 HM: aHA,=und des erZÄHLST du jetzt hier ha <<●>> so FREI> (.) WILLig,
oh and you now tell that here so voluntarily

The clarification request concerns the local reference that HM intends to convey by ‘here in our area.’ The problem arises, because the repairable is a (local) deictic expression, which is notoriously vague (cf. Klein 1978), thus belonging to a category of expressions that are often in need of specification. It could refer to the country, the city, or the neighborhood at least.

Another kind of expression that is prone to specification are *scalar expressions* ($n=13/37$; Horn 2001, ch.4; Bilmes 2019). In particular, gradable antonyms (Lyons 1977, p.279), such as *high vs. low*, *fast vs. slow*, *good vs. bad*, *healthy vs. ill*, etc. become subject to specification, because they are fairly abstract and their meaning is relative to some contextually defined standard (Löbner 2013, p.45) – which can be opaque and may be defined in different and sometimes competing ways.

In Extract 10, the meaning of a scalar expression, *schnell* (‘fast’), is treated as needing specification. Two sisters are redecorating a room. The younger sister (TZ) complains that she is not as fast as her older sister (PZ) in painting (line 01). They negotiate what *schnell* means in this context.

Extract 10. schnell (‘fast’) (FOLK_E_00217_SE_01_T_03_DF_01_c193)

- 01 TZ: ((moans)) (.)
ich bin gar nicht so χSCHNELLχ wie du du bist *h
I am not at all as fast as you you are
- 02 PZ: was heißt χSCHNELLχ.
What does fast mean
- 03 TZ: γdu MACHST (.) *<<all>TZUzut->=*
You do ((onomatopoeitic vocalization))
three fast strokes
- 04 =und ich mach; * (0.5) *γ
And I do
one slow stroke
- 05 PZ: aber du hast die GROßE SCHWEre rolle
un ich hab ne kleine LEICHte rolle;=
but you have the big heavy roll

- and I have a small light roll
 06 des doch en UNterschied;
 This is a difference though
 07 TZ: h° nein. h°
 no
 08 PZ: ja un wenn de nich is oKAY; (.)
 Well and if you don't it's okay
 09 TZ: aber dann kann ich SCHNELL (.) mehr ANmalen;
 But then I can quickly paint more
 10 (0.6)
 11 PZ: na JA,=von der FLÄCHE machst du DEUTlich mehr als ich,
 well in terms of the area you achieve clearly more than me

TZ is complaining (Schegloff 2005) that she is not (working) as fast as PZ. The adjective *schnell* ('fast') inhabits one extreme of a scale (Bilmes 2019), but it has no absolute meaning (Lyons 1977). Its meaning depends on the ontological properties of the referent to which *schnell* is attributed as a modifier or predicate (see Pustejovsky 1995). Moreover, *schnell* is relative to standards, expectations, (local) alternatives, etc. Does TZ mean to refer to the speed of work completion, the speed of strokes, their number within a specified time, the size of the painted area within a given amount of time, etc.? PZ's repair-initiation *was heißt SCHNELL*. ('What does fast mean', line 02) is taken up by TZ by specifying her intended local meaning of *schnell*. She does this by a vocalization and an embodied demonstration, which iconically enacts the fast pace of PZ's paint strokes (see Keevallik 2014 on vocalizations demonstrating speed and rhythm). She contrasts (Deppermann 2005; Bilmes 2020) them with the demonstration of her own slower speed of painting by a syntactic frame that is completed with the body (Olsher 2004; Keevallik 2013, 2015; see also Keevallik 2010 on bodily contrasting). In lines 05–06, PZ rejects the relevance of TZ's complaint from line 01 by referring to the fact that her paint roll is smaller than TZ's. This rejection retrospectively may index that her previous repair-initiation *was heißt SCHNELL*. (line 02) did not ask for a specification of the intended meaning of *schnell*, but was meant to challenge or (pre-)disagree with the relevance of TZ's complaint. This is supported by PZ's claim in line 11 that TZ covers a larger area with her roll than PZ does with hers.

The repair-initiation *was heißt SCHNELL*. is understood by TZ as a request for specifying her intended local meaning, while PZ uses it to take issue with the inadequacy of TZ's self-deprecatory complaint. We can see here how the semantic repair-initiation provides a systematic basis for challenging the adequacy of the expression (see already Schegloff 1997, p. 505, pp. 522–524): In treating it as being in need of semantic specification, the adequacy of its use can be seen to be questioned at the same time. This can imply that no specification will be sufficient to restore the acceptability of using the expression on this occasion. In this way, semantic repair concerning the intelligibility of a repairable shades into pragmatic

problems of the acceptability of the repairable (cf. Couper-Kuhlen & Selting 2018, pp. 142–144; De Stefani this issue).

This ambiguity of action ascription (request for specification vs. problematization/(pre-)disagreement) concerning the *Was heißt X*-turn is also operative in Extract 11. In this case, the specification concerns a scenario evoked by a verb. A couple is talking about their upcoming marriage ceremony. The future husband CT announces that some of his friends, who are not invited to the ceremony, plan to ‘come around’ (*vorBEIkommen*, line 01).

Extract 11. *vorbeikommen* (‘come around’)

(FOLK_E_00332_SE_01_T_01_DF_01_c154)

- 01 CT: die: wolln alle χ_1 vorBEIkomm χ_1 ,(.)IN de[n]
they all want to come around in the
- 02 AC: [in die]KIRche;
in the church
- 03 CT: (0.3) in die KIRsche und (1.0) Oder in
in the church and or in
- 04 AC: (0.3) **was heißt χ_1 vorBEIkomm χ_1 .**
what does come around mean
- 05 CT: (0.4) γ_1 ZUschaun; γ_1
watch
- 06 AC: (1.3) mja, (.) [okay,]
myes okay
- 07 CT: [oder χ_2 in den] schlosspark χ_2
or in the castle park
- 08 AC: (0.4) **was heißt χ_2 vorBEIkomm χ_2 .**
what does come around in the castle park mean
- 09 CT: (0.5) ja- (.) γ_2 wie die loCation aussieht;
well how the location looks like
- 10 (0.6)% (0.4)%
 ac %frowns%
- 11 CT: vorBEIlaufen auf nicht dra
walk by on not
- 12 =äh nicht als beSücher oder so;=
erm not as visitors or so
- 13 =äh: von der HOCHzeit;=
erm of the wedding reception
- 14 =sondern als besucher vom schlosspark γ_2 .
but as visitors of the castle park
- 15 (3.2)
- 16 AC: ja und dann kÖmmen_se einfach zur loCation;
well and then they just come to the location
- 17 (1.6)
- 18 CT: Oder zur KIRche;
or to the church
- 19 (0.2) wahrscheinlich eher zur KIRche; (.)
probably rather to the church
- 20 AC: des fänd ich (0.3) !BE!sser. ((lipsmack))
this I would like better
- 21 CT: kAnn ich ja noch ma SCHREIben;
I can just write this once again

In line 02, the future wife AC competitively completes CT's announcement by specifying 'in the church' as the location where 'they' will come around, implicitly ruling out that 'they' attend the wedding reception (like invitees). AC then initiates repair on her fiancé's announcement by asking *was heißt vorBEIKommen*. ('what does come around mean', line 04). CT provides a specification of the activity ('watch', line 05) and adds another location ('in the castle park', line 07). However, AC takes CT's specification of his intended meaning as insufficient and produces another repair-initiation that incorporates CT's place specification: *was heißt vorBEIKommen im schlosspark*. ('what does come around in the castle park mean', line 08). CT now adds several further specifications: 'they' plan to inspect what the location looks like, to walk around, not as visitors of the reception, but as visitors of the park (lines 09–14). CT specifies his friends' planned activities and their status concerning the reception via membership categorization (Sacks 1972). He uses negation ('not as visitors of the wedding reception') in a recipient-designed way (Deppermann 2014; Deppermann & De Stefani 2019), ruling out an option that the recipient would take to be relevant and could understand to have been meant by the speaker. CT thus shows his sensitivity to an interpretation of 'come around' that seems to be unwanted by AC, as could be inferred from her repair-initiations (lines 04, 08), delays (lines 05, 10) and frowning (line 10; Kaukomaa et al. 2014), all indexing pre-disagreement concerning this option. In the further course of the negotiation, AC's resistance against the plans of CT's friends comes increasingly to the interactional surface: She challenges the plan by a repeat to which the modal particle *einfach* (line 16, 'simply'; Thurmair 1989, pp. 128–133) is added, indexing that the plan is inadequate, and finally states her preferences concerning CT's friends' participation (line 20). In response, CT increasingly backs down from the original plan (lines 18–21).

The meaning of the action-word *vorbeikommen* ('come around') is specified by detailing the scenario it refers to. Specification concerns the kinds of actions to be performed by the uninvited participants, the relationship of their actions to the festivity, membership categories and associated rights that agents will claim by carrying out the actions, and the normative preferences of the addressee. The negotiation of the local meaning of *vorbeikommen* only terminates when the friends' future participation in the wedding is determined in a way that is acceptable for AC.

Extract 11 attests to the malleability of the meaning of an expression by its adaptation in the light of anticipated and factual recipients' responses. This negotiation of meaning gives evidence of the close interpretive relationship of using *Was heißt X* for requesting meaning specification of X vs. problematizing X. *Was heißt X* here is taken up as, and retrospectively confirmed as, being a pre-disagreement. The format is thus used for a double-barrelled action: Indexing a

problem of meaning foreshadows (or implies) a problem of acceptability of the state of affairs talked about or of the adequacy of the expression X used (cf. De Stefani this issue).

In rare cases, it may be ambiguous whether a specification or a definition is expected as a response to a request for clarification. In Extract 12 from a German literature lesson, this problem arises with respect to a teacher's request used as a known-answer question about short stories: *WA:S bedeutet kurz in dem fall;* ('what does short mean in this case', line 05).

Extract 12. kurz ('short') (FOLK_E_00121_SE_01_T_01_DF_01_c500)

- 01 TE: erst mal eine ganz blöde frage (.)
die aber da immer kommt
*Let's start with a very silly question
which however always comes*
- 02 wie χ_1 kurz χ_1 darf eine kurzgeschichte sein
How short may a short story be
- 03 so? (.) mal (.) An die (.) *h (0.6) VORdere gruppe;
Alright now to the group in front
- 04 (1.9)
- 05 TE: **WA:S bedeutet χ_1 kurz χ_1 in dem fall;**
What does short mean in this case
- 06 (.) ayla
- 07 AK: ((clears throat)) also γ_1 die (.) geSCHICHte muss jetzt
nich kurz im UMFang sein,
well the story does not have to be short in length
- 08 (0.4)
- 09 AK: sie kann also (.) RUHig etwas (.) länger sein; (.)
It may well be a bit longer
- 10 also MEHrere seiten umfassen.
I mean contain several pages
- 11 *hh χ_2 KURZ ist in dem fall nur die (.) hAndlung γ_1/χ_2 ;
It is only the plot that is short in this case
- 12 (1.4)
- 13 TE: Aha;
I see
- 14 (1.0)
- 15 TE: SO.
alright
- 16 (0.9)
- 17 TE: was HEISST χ_2 das;
What does this mean
- 18 BB: GEHT_s (noch)
- 19 TE: **die hAndlung ist KURZ. χ_2**
The plot is short
- 20 (2.7)
- 21 TE: in WELchem sInn;
In which sense
- 22 (.) (dass_we_s) noch en bisschen geNAUer-
(That we) a bit more precisely still.
- 23 (.) des is nämlich jetzt geNAU das
(.) was die kurzgeschichten AUSmachen?
*This is now exactly
what characterizes the short stories.*

- 24 (.) °hh und vielleicht grad (.) EINFach mal zur (.) äh
 (.) LÄNGeren erzählung abgesetzt,
 *And maybe just simply in contrast to the erm
 longer narrative*
- 25 und vor allem natürlich zum roMAN.
 and above all of course in contrast to the novel
- 26 (1.7)
- 27 TE: auch WENN die kurzgeschichte im extremfall zwanzig seiten hat.
 Even if the short story has 20 pages in extreme cases
- 28 (.) das sind die LÄNGsten die man noch so bezeichnet,
 These are the longest ones that are still called this way
- 29 (0.8)
- 30 TE: was ist IMmer
 What is always
- 31 (1.3)
- 32 TE: hm?
 uh
- 33 (0.3)
- 34 TE: die andern dürfen sich ruhig EINSchalten?
 The others may well intervene
- 35 (.) hans
- 36 HM: (0.3) ja (.) die KURZgeschichte hat eigentlich immer
 (.) einen offenen beGINN,
 *Well the short story actually always has
 an open beginning*
- 37 °h un ein offenes ENDe;
 And an open end
- 38 TE: JAwoill;
 exactly

The pupil Ayla (AK) responds by a specification, contrasting the length of the story vs. the plot (lines 07–11). *Was heißt X* is used in this case for producing a second follow-up question: The teacher displays that the response was insufficient by producing another request for clarification (*was HEIßT das; die handlung ist KURZ*. ‘what does that mean, the plot is short’, lines 17/19). Thus, as in Extracts 10 and 11, the request for specification of X implies the problematization of X. The teacher adds that he aims for what is characteristic of short stories (*was die kurzgeschichten AUSmachen*, line 23), thus making clear that he is after a definition – which is finally provided by another pupil HM in lines 36–37.

In Extract 12, thus, the clarification request *Was bedeutet X* (which is equivalent to *Was heißt X*) is responded to by a specification. Yet, the producer of the question makes clear in third position that a definition was expected. This difference in action ascription is linked to the difference between a mundane understanding of the expression X (*kurz*, ‘short’) and its meaning as (part of) a technical term (*Kurzgeschichte*, ‘short story’). Such ambiguities between the need for a definition vs. a specification arise rarely, probably because technical terms mostly are not homonymous with vernacular terms, as in this case.

6. Conclusions

This paper has studied definitions and specifications of meaning as practices that participants use when meaning becomes problematic in social interaction. The starting point of Grice's seminal treatise (Grice 1957) was the distinction between different sorts of phenomena that are vernacularly called "meaning". I have shown that different kinds of meaning matter for participants indeed, as is evidenced by the two different practices for responding to requests for clarification (see Table 3). When a *definition* is given, the *general, lexical, speaker-independent meaning of an expression* is at issue. These are transferable meanings, which are projected to be relevant and remembered beyond the specific moment of use. This is most obvious if new *technical terms* and their meanings are introduced to novices as learnables. Definitions in interaction sometimes make use of canonical formats of definition, but other formats are used as well, often in combination: Examples, narratives, synonyms, lists of class members, *if-then* scenarios, pointing, or bodily demonstration. Definitions are mostly partial and not strictly generalizable: They are anchored in the local context of topic, referents and action, formulated with respect to participants' (joint) projects and relevancies and the activity under way; they take into account what can be taken to be in common ground (see also Helmer 2020). In other words: Although definitions purport to give a generalizable explication of a lexical term's meaning, they do so in a recipient-designed and locally sensitive way (see also Deppermann & De Stefani 2019).

In contrast to definitions, *specifications* rather attend to the Gricean dimension of meaning_{n-n'}, i.e., *local meanings that the speaker intends to convey* and be recognized as intended here and now for just this recipient by using an expression (see Grice 1989, pp. 86–137). These meanings do not have to be generalizable and reusable; they are ephemeral and follow a criterion of unique adequacy, being produced for just this communicative moment. Specifications are a practice that deals with indexicality: Participants endow general, symbolic expressions with a situated meaning that is enabled, but not by any means determined by, the expression to be specified. Rather, specifications accommodate the local contingencies of the interactional situation and the particulars of the subject matter of the talk in order to fit participants' goals and relevancies currently in operation. These contingencies determine the ways in which a problematic expression X is specified concerning, e.g., the level of granularity of categorization (Rosch 1975, 1978; Schegloff 2000), participants of an event (Pustejovsky 1995; Goldberg 1995) and criteria and frames of reference for interpreting scalar expressions (Lyons 1977; Bilmes 2019).

Table 3. Properties of definitions vs. specifications produced in response to *Was heißt X*

	Definitions	Specifications
Semantic problem	Lexico-semantic meaning	Local, contextual meaning, often referential meaning
Semantic dimension	Generalizable meaning Notional meaning	Speaker-meaning Intended meaning
Sequential context	Other-initiated self-repair Known-answer questions in pedagogical settings	Other-initiated self-repair Self-initiated self-repair
Relationship to other practices	∅	Ambiguous with indexing inadequacy, may serve as pre-disagreement (double-barrelled action)
Lexical domain	Technical terms	Gradual terms on a scale; missing frame elements; vague/abstract expression; deixis
Epistemics	Term is unknown to speaker or recipient's knowledge of term is checked (in pedagogical settings)	General meaning of expression is shared, local meaning is insufficiently clear

Both definitions and specifications are *recipient-designed*: They build on recipients' (presumed) knowledge and common ground, they are tailored to participants' life-world relevancies and practical purposes of the ongoing activity, i.e., they are *constrained by the practical and information-related requirements* that expression *X* is to fulfill in the current context. Clarifications of meaning are sometimes negotiated, which also means that they are adapted and revised in the light of recipients' (factual and anticipated) responses. The needs for the contents and amount of definition and specification and the ways in which they are produced and negotiated depend on participants' individual relevancies (evaluative standards, interests, goals), their knowledge (what is already known vs. missing information), and contextual requirements of the current activity (e.g., possible competing referents, standards of task performance).

While this paper is on members' meta-semantic practices, it also suggests an upshot concerning an *interactional linguistic view of the lexicon*. Definitions, and *a fortiori*, specifications use, flesh out, and sometimes even create the opened possibilities of interpreting vague, abstract and polysemous expressions with respect to concrete actions, events, and states of affairs. These situated interpretations do not have to be conceptualized as *meaning potentials* that are inherent in the abstract expressions as parts of the (mental) lexicon themselves (contrary to Norén & Linell 2007). Indeed, this would amount to a non-empirical

reification of meaning potentials: Whenever some expression X is interpreted as meaning Y, then Y is a meaning potential of X. Such a view amounts to a naturalistic fallacy (Moore 1903): It would have to stipulate that every local interpretation Y that is given to X has already existed *a priori* as a meaning potential of X and therefore belongs to its lexical properties. This view is, however, implausible, given the enormous flexibility and ultimate unpredictability of meaning assignment and the fact that received expressions can be successfully and meaningfully applied to novel kinds of objects, scenarios, experiences, abstract entities, etc. (see also Helmer this issue). Therefore, an alternative view of meaning potentials seems to be in order: Speakers have both the possibility and the means to creatively interpret expressions and associate them with denotata. This extension of meaning can be only ephemeral, situated; it may also serve as a model for future uses, which finally may become part of the transferrable, lexical meanings of the term.

Funding

This study was supported by the Helsinki University Humanities Programme (WBS7400111). This article was made Open Access under a CC BY 4.0 license through payment of an APC by or on behalf of the author.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Alexandra Gubina, Margret Selting, Elwys De Stefani and the anonymous reviewers of *Interactional Linguistics* for valuable comments on prior versions of this paper.

A first version of this paper was presented at the 17th International Pragmatics Conference (Winterthur, June 28, 2021).











References

- doi Antaki, C. (2012). Affiliative and disaffiliative candidate understandings. *Discourse Studies*, 14 (5), 531–547.
- Aristotle (1938 [4th century b.c.]). *Categories: on interpretation: prior analytics*. (H. P. Cooke, Ed. & H. Tredennick, Transl.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- doi Auer, P. (1996). On the prosody and syntax of turn-continuations. In E. Couper-Kuhlen & M. Selting (Eds.), *Prosody in conversation* (pp. 57–100). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Augustine (1992 [400]). *Confessions*, a text and commentary by James J. O'Donnell. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- doi Bar-Hillel, Y. (1954). Indexical expressions. *Mind*, 63, 359–379.
- Barwise, J., & Perry, J. (1983). *Situations and attitudes*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- doi Belhiah, H. (2013). Using the hand to choreograph instruction: on the functional role of gesture in definition talk. *The Modern Language Journal*, 97(2), 417–434.

- [doi](#) Bilmes, J. (2019). Regrading as a conversational practice. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 150, 80–91.
- [doi](#) Bilmes, J. (2020). The discussion of abortion in US political debates: a study in occasioned semantics. *Discourse Studies*, 22(3), 291–318.
- Clark, H.H., & Schaefer, E.F. (1992). Contributing to discourse. In H.H. Clark (Ed.), *Arenas of language use* (pp. 144–197). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Couper-Kuhlen, E., & Selting, M. (2018). *Interactional linguistics: studying language in social interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Stefani, E. (this issue). Displaying a negative stance by questioning meaning: The Italian format *Che cosa vuol dire X?* ('what does X mean?').
- [doi](#) De Stefani, E., & Sambre, P. (2016). L'exhibition et la négociation du savoir dans les pratiques définitoires: l'interaction autour du syndrome de fatigue chronique dans un groupe d'entraide. *Langages*, 204, 27–42.
- [doi](#) Deppermann, A. (2000). Semantic shifts in argumentative processes: a step beyond the 'fallacy of equivocation'. *Argumentation*, 14 (1), 17–30.
- [doi](#) Deppermann, A. (2005). Conversational interpretation of lexical items and conversational contrasting. In: A. Hakulinen & M. Selting (Eds.), *Syntax and lexis in conversation* (pp. 289–317). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- [doi](#) Deppermann, A. (2014). "Don't get me wrong": Recipient design by reactive and anticipatory uses of negation to constrain an action's interpretation. In S. Günthner, W. Imo, & J. Bücker (Eds.), *Grammar and dialogism* (pp. 15–51). Berlin: de Gruyter.
- [doi](#) Deppermann, A. (2016). La définition comme action multimodale pour des enjeux pratiques: Définir pour instruire à l'auto-école. *Langages*, 204(4), 83–101.
- Deppermann, Arnulf. (in press). "What do you understand by X": semantics in Interactional Linguistics. In M. Selting & D. Barth-Weingarten (Eds.), *New perspectives in interactional linguistic research*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- [doi](#) Deppermann, A., & De Stefani, E. (2019). Defining in talk-in-interaction: recipient-design through negative definitional components. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 140, 140–155.
- [doi](#) Deppermann, A., & Schmidt, A. (2021). How Shared Meanings and Uses Emerge Over an Interactional History: Wabi Sabi in a Series of Theater Rehearsals. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 54(2), 203–224.
- [doi](#) Dingemanse, M., Blythe, J., & Dirksmeyer, T. (2014). Formats for other-initiation of repair across languages: an exercise in pragmatic typology. *Studies in Language*, 38, 5–43.
- [doi](#) Doury, M., & Micheli, R. (2016). Enjeux argumentatifs de la définition: l'exemple des débats sur l'ouverture du mariage aux couples de même sexe. *Langages*, 204, 121–138.
- [doi](#) Egbert, M., Golato, A., & Robinson, J. (2009). Repairing reference. In J. Sidnell (Ed.), *Conversation Analysis: comparative perspectives* (pp. 104–132). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eichinger, L. (2000). *Deutsche Wortbildung*. Tübingen: Narr.
- [doi](#) Fasel Lauzon, V. (2014). *Comprendre et apprendre dans l'interaction: les séquences d'explication en classe de français langue seconde*. Bern: Lang.
- Fillmore, C.J. (1985). Frames and the semantics of understanding. *Quaderni di Semantica* 6(2), 222–254.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. New York: Prentice-Hall.

- doi Golato, A., & Betz, E. (2008). German ‘ach’ and ‘achso’ in repair uptake: Resources to sustain or remove epistemic asymmetry. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft*, 27, 7–37.
- Goldberg, A. (1995). *Constructions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- doi Grice, H. P. (1957). Meaning. *Philosophical Review* 66(3), 377–388.
- Grice, H. P. (1989). *Studies in the ways of words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- doi Gubina, A., & Betz, E. (2021). What do newsmark-type responses invite? The response space after German *echt*. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 54(4), 374–396.
- doi Günthner, S. (2014). The dynamics of *dass*-constructions in everyday German interactions – a dialogical perspective. In S. Günthner, W. Imo, & J. Bückler Jörg (Eds.), *Grammar and dialogism*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 179–206.
- Günthner, S. (2015). Grammatische Konstruktionen im Kontext sequenzieller Praktiken – ‘was heißt x’-Konstruktionen im gesprochenen Deutsch. In J. Bückler, S. Günthner, & W. Imo (Eds.), *Konstruktionsgrammatik V: Konstruktionen im Spannungsfeld von sequenziellen Mustern, kommunikativen Gattungen und Textsorten* (pp. 187–218). Tübingen: Stauffenburg.
- doi Helmer, H. (2020). How do speakers define the meaning of expressions? The case of German *x heißt y* (“x means y”). *Discourse Processes*, 57(3), 278–299.
- Horn, L. R. (2001). *A natural history of negation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- doi Kaukomaa, T., Peräkylä, A., & Ruusuvoori, J. (2014). Foreshadowing a problem: turn-opening frowns in conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 71, 132–147.
- doi Keevallik, L. (2010). Bodily quoting in dance correction. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 43(4), 410–426.
- doi Keevallik, L. (2013). The interdependence of bodily demonstrations and clausal syntax. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 46(1), 1–21.
- doi Keevallik, L. (2014). Turn organization and bodily-vocal demonstrations. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 65, 103–120.
- doi Keevallik, L. (2015). Coordinating the temporalities of talk and dance. In A. Deppermann & S. Günthner (Eds.), *Temporality in interaction* (pp. 309–336). Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Kendon, A. (2004). *Gesture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Klein, W. (1978). Wo ist hier? Präliminarien zu einer Untersuchung der lokalen Deixis. *Linguistische Berichte*, 58, 18–40.
- doi Laakso, M., & Sorjonen, M. L. (2010). Cut-off or particle: devices for initiating self-repair in conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 42(4), 1151–1172.
- doi Linell, P., & Lindström, J. (2016). Partial intersubjectivity and sufficient understandings for current practical purposes: on a specialized practice in Swedish conversation. *Nordic Journal of Linguistics*, 39(2), 113–133.
- Löbner, S. (2003). *Understanding semantics*. London: Routledge.
- Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics* (Vol. 1). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Martin, R. (1990). La définition « naturelle ». In J. Chaurand & F. Mazière (Eds.), *La définition* (pp. 86–95). Paris: Larousse.
- doi Mondada, L. (2018). Multiple temporalities of language and body in interaction: challenges for transcribing multimodality. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 51(1), 85–106.
- Moore, G. E. (1903). *Principia ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


- doi Ninio, A., & Bruner, J.S. (1978). The achievement and antecedents of labelling. *Journal of Child Language*, 5(1), 1–15.
- Norén, K., & Linell, P. (2007). Meaning potentials and the interaction between lexis and grammar. *Pragmatics*, 17(3), 387–416.
- Olsher, D. (2004). Talk and gesture: The embodied completion of sequential actions in spoken interaction. In R. Gardner & J. Wagner (Eds.), *Second language conversations* (pp. 221–245). London: Continuum.
- doi Pfeiffer, M. (2015). *Selbstreparaturen im Deutschen*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- doi Pomerantz, A. (1988). Offering a candidate answer: an information seeking strategy. *Communication Monographs*, 55(4), 360–373.
- Pustejovsky, J. (1995). *The generative lexicon*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- doi Rae, J. (2008). Lexical substitution as a therapeutic resource. In A. Peräkylä, C. Antaki, S. Vehviläinen, & I. Leudar (Eds.), *Conversation Analysis and psychotherapy* (pp. 62–79). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- doi Raymond, G., & Sidnell, J. (2019). Interaction at the boundaries of a world known in common: initiating repair with “What Do You Mean?”. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 52(2), 177–192.
- doi Reineke, S., Deppermann, A., & Schmidt, T. (2023). Das Forschungs- und Lehrkorpus für Gesprochenes Deutsch (FOLK): Zum Nutzen eines großen annotierten Korpus gesprochener Sprache für interaktionslinguistische Fragestellungen. In A. Deppermann, C. Fandrych, M. Kupietz, & T. Schmidt (Eds.), *Korpora in der germanistischen Sprachwissenschaft: Jahrbuch des Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache 2022* (pp. 71–102). Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Robinson, J., Clift, R., Kendrick, K.H., & Raymond, C.W. (Eds.) (2024). *The Cambridge handbook of methods in Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robinson, R. (1950). *The definition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sambre, P. (2005). *Emergence et conceptualisation de la définition en langue naturelle*. Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit. <https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/midi/publications/phd-paul>
- doi Rosch, E. (1975). Cognitive representations of semantic categories. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 104(3), 192–233.
- Rosch, E. (1978). Principles of categorization. In E. Rosch & B.B. Lloyd (Eds.), *Cognition and categorization* (pp. 27–48). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Sacks, H. (1972). On the analyzability of stories by children. In J.J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: the Ethnography of Communication* (pp. 325–345). New York: Rinehart & Winston.
- Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on conversation*. Volume 1. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sacks, H., & Schegloff, E.A. (1979). Two preferences in the organization of reference to persons in conversation and their interaction. In G. Psathas (Ed.), *Everyday language: studies in Ethnomethodology* (pp. 15–21). New York: Irvington.
- doi Schegloff, E.A. (1997). Practices and actions: boundary cases of other-initiated repair. *Discourse Processes*, 23(3), 499–545.
- doi Schegloff, E.A. (2000). On granularity. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 715–720.
- doi Schegloff, E.A. (2005). On complainability. *Social Problems*, 52(4), 449–476.

-  Schegloff, E.A. (2016). Increments. In J.D. Robinson (Ed.), *Accountability in social interaction* (pp. 239–263). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
-  Schenkein, J. (1978). Identity negotiations in conversation. In J. Schenkein (Ed.), *Studies in the organization of conversational interaction* (pp. 57–78). New York: Academic Press.
-  Schmale, G. (2016). La définition-en-interaction: la définition du sens comme accomplissement interactif. *Langages*, 204, 67–82.
-  Selting, M. (1987). *Verständigungsprobleme: Eine empirische Analyse am Beispiel der Bürger-Verwaltungs-Kommunikation*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Selting, M., Auer, P., Barth-Weingarten, D., Bergmann, J., Bergmann, P., Birkner, K. et al. (2011). A system for transcribing talk-in-interaction: GAT 2. Translated and adapted for English by E. Couper-Kuhlen and D. Barth-Weingarten. *Gesprächsforschung / Discourse and Conversation Analysis* 12, 1–51.
- Sinclair, J. (1991). *Corpus, concordance, collocation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- St. Thomas Aquinas. (1947[1265]). *The summa theologica*. New York: Benziger.
-  Stivers, T. (2022). *The book of answers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
-  Stivers, T., & Hayashi, M. (2010). Transformative answers: one way to resist a question's constraints. *Language in Society*, 39(1), 1–25.
-  Svennevig, J. (2018). Decomposing turns to enhance understanding by L2 speakers. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 51(4), 398–416.
-  Thurmair, M. (1989). *Modalpartikeln und ihre Kombinationen*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
-  Traverso, V., & Greco, L. (2016). L'activité de définition dans l'interaction: Objets, ressources, formats. *Langages*, 204, 5–26.
-  Traverso, V., & Ravazzolo, E. (2016). Définitions ostensives co-construites: le cas de la visite guidée. *Langages*, 204, 43–66.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953 [1950]). *Philosophical investigations* (translated by G. E. M. Anscombe). Oxford: Blackwell.

Address for correspondence

Arnulf Deppermann
 Leibniz-Institute for the German Language
 PF 101621
 68016 Mannheim
 Germany

deppermann@ids-mannheim.de

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7575-8236>

Publication history

Date received: 7 January 2023

Date accepted: 22 November 2023

Published online: 9 January 2024