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Rejecting the validity of inferred attributions of incompetence in German talk-in-interaction

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with pragmatic inference from the perspective of Conversation Analysis. In particular, we examine a specific variety of inferences – the attribution of incompetence which Self constructs on the basis of Other's prior action, hearable as positioning Self as incompetent (e.g., instructions, offers of assistance, advice); this attribution of incompetence concerns Self's execution of some practical task. This inference is indexed in Self's response, which highlights Self's expertise, or competence concerning the task at hand. We focus on two recurrent types of such responses in our data: (i) accounting for competence through formulations of prior experience with carrying out a practical action and (ii) explicit claims of competence for accomplishing this action. We analyze the interactional environments in which these responses occur, the ways in which the two practices index Self's understanding of being positioned as incompetent and the interactional work they do. Finally, we discuss how through rejecting an inferred attribution of incompetence, Self implicitly seeks to restore their face and defend their autonomy as an agent, yet, without entering an explicit identity-negotiation. Findings rest on the analysis of 20 cases found in video-recordings of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction in German from the corpus FOLK.

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1. Introduction

Inference is the foundation of the realm of pragmatics, insofar as pragmatics is occupied with all kinds of meaning that are not coded but inferred (e.g., Ariel, 2010). Yet, when looking at data from social interaction, it is often difficult to assess precisely which inferences participants intend to communicate, draw from others' turns, and use for designing their own actions (Haugh, 2015, 2017; Elder, forthcoming). This paper approaches drawing inferences by a recipient as a phenomenon that is exhibited in the design of responsive turns. It focuses on a specific kind of inference from an interlocutor's prior turn that manifests itself in specific ways of responding to that turn. In particular, we deal with turns in which the recipient (Self) orients to the Other's prior turn¹ as conveying an inference of incompetence to them and rejects its validity. This is demonstrated in Extract (1) from a cooking interaction between Amelie (AME) and Christoph (CHR) and Extract (2) from a cooking interaction between Despina (DES) and her mother Penelope (PEN). In this paper, we will argue that in both cases, Self rejects the validity of the inference of incompetence through their response. However, in our two initial cases, this is done

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¹ In this paper, the participant who draws and rejects an inference from a prior turn is called *Self*, the producer of the prior turn is called *Other*.

through different practices: While in Extract (1) the inference is rejected through a claim of knowledge and reference to Self's own prior experience (l. 06 and 08), in Extract (2) Self formulates a claim of competence (l. 24):

Extract (1): FOLK_E_00332_SE_01_T_01_727_noodles

01	(8.7)		
02	AME	((laughs))	
03	CHR	(.) dann kurz ABtrocknen lassen? <i>then let (it) dry shortly</i>	→ Instruction/request
04	(0.6)		
05	AME	JAha, Yes	→ Agreement
06	(.) ich WEIS, <i>I know</i>		→ Claim of knowledge
07	(0.9)		
08	AME	hab schon mal nudeln geKOCHT. ((giggles, 1 sec)) <i>(I) have already cooked noodles before</i>	→ Reference to Self's own prior experiences

Extract (2): FOLK_E_00327_SE_01_T_01_c304_wine

19	(0.3)		
20	MOT	soll ICH n aufmachn; <i>do you want me to open it</i>	• Offer to open a wine bottle
21	(0.3)		
22	DAU	ach,=ich MACH des schon; <i>oh I'll take care of it</i>	• Rejection
23	MOT	((sniffs))	
24	DAU	wEin öffnen KANN ich. <i>opening wine is something I can do</i>	• Claim of competence

Methodologically and theoretically, our study contributes to research on cognitive and pragmatic phenomena from a conversation-analytic perspective (Section 2). Using data from mundane and institutional talk-in-interaction in German (Section 3), our paper is devoted to analyzing the anatomy of rejecting the validity of inferred attributions of incompetence by zooming in on two practices for rejection – accounting for competence through referring to one's own prior experience and claiming competence (Section 4). Their sequential and linguistic organization is summarized in Section 5. Section 6 discusses our findings with respect to two core issues of pragmatics, namely face and the relationship between inference and implicature.

2. The conversation-analytic approach to inferences

Inferences belong to the realm of cognitive processing. They include, e.g., implicatures (Grice, 1975) and explicatures (Carston, 2002), which are both understood as being communicated by the speaker. In Relevance Theory (e.g. Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Belligh and Willems, 2021) and Neo-Gricean Pragmatics (e.g. Huang, 2015), inferences are usually evidenced

through the analyst's intuitions (see [Elder, 2021](#) for a discussion) or from the use of psycholinguistic experimental methods (for an overview: [Zufferey et al., 2019](#): 143–209).

According to the traditional analysis of communication in pragmatics, which typically focuses on speaker's intentions, the phenomenon that we are interested in – the inference of the attribution of incompetence – would probably be conceptualized as an implicature of incompetence communicated by a speaker's utterance. Conversation Analysis (CA), however, is interested in observable actions and how they are understood by participants in naturally occurring interaction. Analytic notions have to be warranted by demonstrating that participants themselves orient to principles and practices captured by such notions (e.g. [Schegloff, 2005](#)). Because of these methodological tenets of CA, many researchers from CA (e.g., [Hopper, 2006](#)) and associated fields, most importantly Ethnomethodology (e.g., [Coulter, 1990](#)) and Discursive Psychology (e.g., [Edwards, 2006](#)), reject recourse to cognitive notions as an explanation for observable conduct. Therefore, 'inference' is not a concept that figures prominently in CA. Yet, it has been an ongoing debate whether and how cognitive notions, such as 'inference', may or even must figure in CA accounts of social action (see, e.g., [Te Molder and Potter, 2005](#); [Ehmer and Rosemeyer, 2018](#)). Some researchers from CA assign inferences a central role in social interaction: "inference features in the understanding of and response to all turns at talk" ([Drew, 2018](#): 241). If, indeed, inferences are an integral part of social practice, CA has to account for them ([Deppermann, 2012](#)). Attending to the workings of inferences will allow us to understand better how participants construct and understand meanings and how they become consequential for the organization of social (inter)action. Attending to inferences requires demonstrating how inferences are observably made relevant and dealt with in social interaction. In fact, inferences are warranted as an object of research in CA and make themselves visible in at least three different ways (see also [Deppermann, 2018](#)).

- a) Participants overtly formulate inferences that they have drawn from others' actions (e.g., [Heritage and Watson, 1979](#); [Deppermann, 2011, 2018](#));
- b) Participants produce actions in a way that makes certain inferences available (e.g., [Drew, 1984, 1992](#));
- c) Participants presuppose or index inferences from others' actions through their responses to these actions (e.g., [Heritage and Sefi, 1992](#); [Walker et al., 2011](#); [Drew, 2018](#); [Deppermann, 2018](#)).

In our paper, we will deal with the third way in which inferences become visible in social interaction. Participants do not (only) respond to the literal meaning of a prior turn, but their response (additionally) builds on *inferences* drawn from the partner's turn – which is a requirement for action ascription² in most cases. This can amount to responding to the partner's intentions or their larger agenda ([Fox and Heinemann, 2019](#); [Gubina, 2022](#): ch. 9); responses can also (implicitly) reject or avoid accepting presuppositions and implications of prior turns ([Stivers and Hayashi, 2010](#); [Walker et al., 2011](#); [Pomerantz, 2017](#); [Drew, 2018, 2022](#); [Raymond, 2017, 2019](#); [Stivers, 2022](#): 147–178). The relationship between inferences and the response to the turn that gave rise to these inferences is reflexive. On the one hand, the response can only be understood as an adequate and systematic response by reference to these inferences, but not by reference to the literal meaning of the prior turn as such. On the other hand, the inferences only become graspable as a conversational reality for the participants through the ways in which they are (again often only implicitly!) displayed in the response to Other's action.

3. Data and methods

Our paper rests on 20 cases of rejections of Self's inference of incompetence from Other's prior action. All extracts come from German video-recorded face-to-face interactions from the corpus FOLK ([Schmidt, 2016](#)), hosted at the Leibniz-Institute for the German Language. FOLK (version 2.18, 2022) comprises 314 h of fully transcribed audio- and video-recordings of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction in German and is publicly accessible via <dgd.ids-mannheim.de>. All the cases from our collection have been subjected to detailed sequential and multimodal analysis according to the standards of Multimodal Conversation Analysis ([Sidnell and Stivers, 2012](#); [Mondada, 2018](#)). Data have been transcribed using the GAT2-conventions ([Selting et al., 2011](#)) and conventions for annotating multimodal conduct by [Mondada \(2018\)](#).

4. Rejecting the validity of the attribution of incompetence

In this paper, we will zoom in on the management of inferences in social interaction by investigating cases like Excerpts (1) and (2). In such cases, Other intervenes with Self's project by giving (corrective) instructions of what to do next, advice, warnings, etc. We analyze cases in which Self infers from such actions that Other positions Self as being unknowledgeable, incompetent and therefore unable to carry out their current project without support. We show how Self rejects this inferred assumption and claims autonomy for their own line of action in their response to Other's prior turn.

² While action ascription rests on inferencing, inferences play a role in many other processes of meaning constitution in social interaction (e.g., irony, metaphor, reference, positioning etc.).

While incompetence may be due to a lack of knowledge, in contrast to research on epistemics in Conversation Analysis (e.g., Heritage, 2012), the rejected incompetence in our cases does not concern *declarative* knowledge about some fact, but rather *procedural* knowledge about how to implement a certain action.³ In this sense, the rejection concerns the validity of the attribution of a lack of practical skills rather than a lack of propositional knowledge (see also Goodwin, 2017: 348–362). Competence itself matters in interaction not only as a prerequisite for actions, but also as a socially valued facet of personal identity or face (Goffman, 1955; Sifianou and Tzanne, 2021; specifically on competence as an aspect of face: Lim and Bowers, 1991). This becomes most evident, when, as in our cases, speakers do not only perform an action, but also claim competence for this very action when it has been doubted. Actions that position the addressee as incompetent are consequently face-threatening for the addressee (Brown and Levinson, 1987; specifically on threatening the claim to competence: Baiocchi-Wagner, 2011), which is likely to cause interpersonal trouble and therefore will usually be avoided or denied.

In our data, Self's rejection of the validity of the attribution of incompetence is implemented by two kinds of responses to Other's prior action.

- Rejecting the validity of the attribution of incompetence by accounting for competence (Section 4.1),
- Rejecting the validity of the attribution of incompetence by formulating explicit claims of competence (Section 4.2).

4.1. Rejecting the validity of the attribution of incompetence by accounting for competence

We start our analysis with Extract (3), which we have already seen in the Introduction. It comes from a couple cooking pasta together. We join the action when Amelie (AME), having cooked the noodles, has poured water out of the pot into the sink. Christoph (CHR) formulates the next step in the joint project by requesting *dann kurz abtrocknen lassen* ('then let (them) dry quickly'; l. 03). In lines 05–08, she first agrees with Christoph and then says that she knows it as she already cooked noodles before:

Extract (3): FOLK_E_00332_SE_01_T_01_727_noodles

01 (8.7)

02 AME ((laughs))

03 CHR (.) dann kurz ABtrocknen lassen?
then let (them) dry quickly

04 (0.6)

05 AME JAha,
Yes

06 (.) ich WEIß,
I know

07 (0.9)

08 AME hab schon mal nudeln geKOCHT. ((giggles, 1 sec))
(I) have already cooked noodles before

09 (2.1)

By claiming competence (*ich weiß*, 'I know', l. 06; Mikesell et al., 2017; Zeschel, 2017), and referring to her existing experience in the task at hand, i.e. asserting that she has already cooked noodles before (l. 08), Amelie orients to Christoph's request as implying that she does not know how to cook noodles properly. Thus, with her response, she pushes back against Christoph

³ See, e.g., Anderson (1976: 26–113) on the distinction between propositional (or declarative) knowledge (know-that) and procedural knowledge (know-how).

positioning her as being unknowledgeable and having to instruct her. Nevertheless, her response confirms the validity of Christoph's request as a normative step to be taken when cooking noodles. Amelie does not disagree with Christoph about the correct procedure, but rather rejects the validity of the inference that she is incompetent at the matter at hand.

Thus, in Extract (3), we have seen how Self rejects the inferred attribution of not knowing how to perform the procedure correctly and how she pushes back against the necessity to be instructed on the matter. However, she nevertheless accepts the validity of the proposition of the instruction with a response token *ja* ('yes'), which is why her response can be seen at least as partially aligning with Christoph's action.

Participants can reject the implied attribution of incompetence by referring to their prior experiences with the task at hand not only after instructions, but also after advice. This happens recurrently in learning contexts, in which Self is in the role of the learner. In Extract (4) from a driving lesson, the instructor (INS) states that the trainee driver (TRD) failed to position the car correctly in a parking lot (l. 01–02). She explains to him the correct procedure again (with the aid of a schema, l. 05) and recommends that he use his own sense (l. 07) and monitor the process (l. 10), instead of mechanically sticking to the landmarks of the procedure (l. 08–12).

Extract (4): FOLK_E_00415_SE_01_T_02_c137-161_parking

01 INS guck ma;=
now look

02 =du stehst ja schon fast ↑QUER drin-
you are parked almost diagonally

03 (1.3)

04 INS °h (gib) her,=
(give) me

05 =ich ZEIG dir das mit dem kArton noch mal.
I show you this with the cardboard again

06 (1.9)

07 INS °h vielleicht solltest es eventuell auch so n bisschen dein geFÜHL
mit einfließen lassen.=JA?
perhaps you should maybe feed in it your sense a bit as well, right?

08 al[so ne]t nur jetzt stAtisch nach diesen PUNKten gehen,
so don't only follow mechanically the landmarks

09 TRD [ja;]
Yes

10 INS sondern auch so n bisschen selber GÜcken-
but check a bit yourself as well

11 WEIL das sind ja alles nur
because y'know these are all only

12 °h das sollen ja nur !HIL!fen sein;=ne?
They are only supposed to be aids, right?

13 TRD weil das GLAUB ich nämlich.=
because I believe this for sure

14 =weil wenn ich nämlich (.) da EINGeparkt hab,=
because when I was parking there

15 =immer so wie ICH das gemacht hab==
the way I always did it

- 16 =dann hat_s auch immer relativ geKLAPPT;
then it always worked quite good
- 17 TRD %aber <<p>wenn ich %jetzt %> [auf die punkte konzen]trier,
°hh
but if I now concentrate on the landmarks
ins %.....%touches TRD's arm%
- 18 INS [guck ma noch (jetz/kurz)-]
now look still (shortly)
- 19 INS so,
like this
- ((explains parking procedure by reference to schema, 12 seconds omitted))
- 20 INS °h aber wenn du das ANnaster da HINKriegst besser,=
but if you manage to get it done better in a different way
- 21 =dann mach das Anders;=martin
then do it differently, Martin
- 22 <<len>WEI:L> (.) letztendlich is das WURSCHT,=
because it doesn't matter in the end
- 23 =wie du da DRINstehst. (.)
how you are positioned
- 24 äh net wie du DRINstehst,
erm not how you are positioned
- 25 [sondern wie du das] MACHST;
but how you achieve it
- 26 TRD [wie ich REINKomm.]
how I get into it
- 27 INS °h WICHTig is dann nur das erGEBnis;
It's only the result that counts
- 28 (.) [ja?]
right?
- 29 TRD [okay.]
okay
- 30 (0.8)

The trainee driver confirms the instructor's advice (l. 13), highlighting his independent epistemic access to the content of the advice (*weil das glaub ich nämlich*, 'because I believe this for sure', l. 13) and showing that the advice is no news to him. He accounts for his competence by declaring his prior experience, which is in line with the instructor's advice. In particular, he states that whenever he followed his own routine in earlier attempts, he managed to park the car correctly (l. 14–16). His claim of prior experience is designed with the extreme case formulation *immer* ('always'), which further legitimizes his claim (Pomerantz, 1986). The instructor's advice, responding to the prior failed attempt, is taken up by the trainee as indexing her assumption that he is still not competent for the practical task, against which he argues by reference to his past accomplishments. As the student starts to problematize the orientation to landmarks himself (l. 17), the instructor

interrupts and starts to explain the procedure once again (l. 18–19). Thus, she insists on implementing her projected plan of action (cf. l. 05). In doing so, she also insists on the role-relationship between expert and novice and his need for learning, which the student's claim to competence might be seen to reject. However, after her instruction, she concedes that the student may follow his own routine (l. 20–21), thus realigning with his claim to competence. She accounts for her concession by reference to the criterion that only the final result of the parking procedure counts (l. 22–27). The seemingly contradicting actions of the instructor seem to be designed to establish a balance between insisting on the more general role relationship of instructor (expert) and student (novice) with the associated gradient of knowledge (Heritage, 2012) and deontic rights of guiding the interaction on the one hand, and the recognition of the trainee driver's already existing competence for the task at hand.

While in Extracts (3) and (4) references to prior experiences with the task at hand (even if not explicitly) support the validity of what Other said before, Self can also refer to their own prior experiences to *disagree* with what was said or implied by Other before. This is the case in Extract (5) from a make-up training. The trainer (TRA) asks the participants to bring along products for face-care to the next training session, because make-up looks better after face-care (l. 03). In line 05, she produces another account for her request, i.e., most of the participants have dry skin. This account is addressed to 'most participants' as not having treated their faces with care products before the make-up training.

Extract (5): FOLK_E_00436_SE_01_T_01_DF_01_c38_dry_skin

01 TRA °h also BRINGT eure pfl:gesachen mit weil,
so bring your care products along because

02 (0.4)

03 TRA äh ein MAKE up sieht immer BESser aus wenn man_es (.)
gesicht vorher pflegt.
erm a make-up always looks better if you treat your face before

04 (0.3)

05 TRA weil (0.4) ihr mit öh? die meisten von hier ihr habt trockene HAUT.
because you with erm most of you here you have dry skin

06 (.) hab isch geSEHen.
I've seen that

07 [°h und desw]
and theref

08 PA1 [aber ich PFLE]ge (0.2) ECHT,
but I really care

09 (0.2)

10 PA1 (.) also meine is (.) IS einfach trocken.
so mine is is simply dry

11 PA1 *(.) da kann ich machen wat ich* WILL,
it's hopeless

tra *nods 5 times-----*

- 12 (0.3)
- 13 TRA oKA[Y.]
okay
- 14 PA1 [da]s ist EINFach wenn ich stress hab oder irgend[was
((inaudible, 1.2s))]
that's simply when am stressed or anything
- 15 TRA [was isch
] eusch empFEHlen kann ist der PRImeR von (.)
marc JACobs.
What I can recommend you is the primer by Marc Jacobs
- ((16 lines omitted))
- 32 TRA den kann isch eusch (.) für TROCKene haut empf[eh,]
I can recommend you that one for dry skin
- 33 XFE [hm_HM;]
- 34 TRA AUCh äh normale haut (au,)
For normal skin as well
- 35 *aber für trocken (.) EXtra;=
but for dry in particular
tra *points and gazes at PA1--->
- 36 =der ist* SEHR* gut,
that one is really good
tra -->*,,,,,,*
- 37 °h bringt bitte eure PFLEgeprodukte mit;
please bring your care products along

In response, one of the participants (PA1) rejects the implicature of the trainer's request (that the participants fail to apply proper skin care) by reference to her own experience (l. 10–14). After highlighting that she uses skin care products (emphasized with the intensifier *echt* ('really'; l. 10; Ørsnes, 2022)), PA1 claims that she has tried remediating the problem of her dry skin by all sorts of means, but nothing has helped (*da kann ic h machen wat ich will*, lit. "I can do anything I want", l. 11). She thus not only rejects the trainer's request (which implies an advice), but she also rebuts the possible inference to being an incompetent novice whose skin is dry because she does not know that she is supposed to apply skin care, which can be inferred from the request. Additionally, she rejects the use of skin care being a pre-condition for the skin not to be dry and orients to the trainer's prior actions as problematic and criticism-implicative. With her response in lines 08–14, PA1 positions herself as an experienced expert on the matter, who has systematically tried to find a solution for the problem the trainer mentions, of which she is well aware. During the participant's turn, the trainer nods and acknowledges PA1's claim by *okay*. (l. 18). However, she interrupts the participant's following account concerning the causes of her dry skin by recommending a specific face-care product (l. 15–36). The trainer underscores that this product is particularly apt for dry skin, addressing this expansion of her recommendation specifically at PA1 by gazing and pointing at her (l. 34–35). In this way, the trainer reasserts the expert-novice asymmetry, her claim to superior knowledge and the validity of her request to use face-care, which had been rejected by PA1.

In other cases, Self asserts their competence by explicating knowledge necessary for accomplishing a specific task at hand and thus indexes an action-to-be-instructed as unnecessary. This occurs in Extract (6) from the same driving lesson as Extract (4). The instructor (INS) remarks that they have not yet talked about the wiper (l. 01), which projects an instructional sequence. During and after the instructor's turn, the trainee driver (TRD) operates the indicator (l. 01 and 03). The instructor implicitly requires stopping this competing involvement by producing a vocative, thus claiming the student's full attention (Wootton, 1981).

Extract (6): FOLK_E_00415_SE_01_T_02_DF_01_c1025_wiper

01 INS den *schei*benwischer ham ma au noch net DURCHgespro[chen ge,]
We haven't yet treated the wiper either, right?
trd *sets indicator*

02 TRD [(mhmh;)]

03 (0.8)*(0.5)*
trd *sets indicator*

04 INS martin
TRD's name

05 TRD (0.3) ja: das (.) is aber Eigentlich (.) wenn ma RUNterdrückt dann
(.) geht er einmal.
yes but this is actually if one pushes down then it moves once

06 und dann kann ma den auf auf interVALL sch[alten und so;]
and then one can set it on on interval and so on

07 INS [(n tscha:),]

08 [das] muss ich dir aber das erKLÄR ich dir aber noch.
I must you but- I'll explain this to you still though

09 TRD [((inaudible 0.5 Sec.))]

10 INS °h[h]

11 TRD [(okay;)]
okay

12 (0.9)

The trainee driver in response starts to explain the handling of the screen wipers himself by describing two modes of operation (l. 05–06), demonstrating that he already has the knowledge that the instructor has started to teach. In this way, he performatively rejects the need for the instruction and thus as well the validity of the attribution of not yet being competent, which is the prerequisite for the instruction. The trainee driver demonstrates his competence, showing that he is less of a novice than the instructor takes him to be. The instructor, however, interrupts his explanation, announcing now more explicitly that she will explain the wipers to him (l. 07–08). With her third-positioned action, the instructor insists on her action plan and on the associated role-related relationship of expert and novice. By disaffiliating the trainee driver's demonstration of competence, she also disaffiliates with his competing identity-claim.

In Extracts (3)–(6), we have seen that accounting for competence can be done through either referring to Self's prior experience or through explicating or demonstrating knowledge necessary for accomplishing a task. When Self refers to their prior experience, they can reject an inferred attribution of incompetence, while nevertheless either (partially) aligning with the Other's prior action (Extracts 3 and 4) or challenging it (Extracts 5 and 6). In Extracts (3) and (4), Self first produces an aligning response (token), but then expands their turn by a statement claiming explicitly competence for the task in question. While in both cases speakers accept the validity of the prior action, they do so in a dispreferred design: Formulating prior experience accounts for claiming competence in accomplishing the task and orients to the Other's prior action either as doubting or even denying Self's competence. The formulation of the account, thus, allows Other to realize that Self has inferred from the Other's prior turn that Other doubts Self's competence. In Extract (5), Self's reference to prior, first-hand experience with her skin pushes back against both the inferred attribution of incompetence and the other presuppositions of Other's request. In Extract (6), Self proves his competence in accomplishing a task by demonstrating knowledge through explaining how the task is accomplished and, in doing so, marking the Other's instruction as unnecessary.

4.2. Rejecting the validity of the attribution of incompetence by explicitly claiming competence

In Section 4.1, we analyzed how Self can account for their competence in accomplishing a task at hand. In this Section we deal with responding by a mere claim to competence. Explicit claims of competence occur in our data when rejecting Other's actions that can be understood to threaten Self's autonomy and to position Self as incompetent. Rejecting an action that infringes on Self's autonomy can be done in various ways, e.g., by claiming incompetence or unavailability for a mandated action (Heritage, 1988). In particular, advice can be rejected by indexing that it is unnecessary (Heritage and Sefi, 1992), or by accounting for why it is inadequate or not feasible (Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson, 2022). In our data, Self rejects offers,

proposals, requests, instructions, recommendations, etc. and accounts for the rejection by claiming competence for carrying out the appropriate action independently without help or guidance. Other's prior action is thereby treated as unnecessary or even unwanted (Elder and Haugh, 2023).

A straightforward claim to competence can be seen in Extract (7) from an interaction between mother Penelope (PEN) and her daughter Despina (DES), who are preparing a meal together in the mother's house. Despina searches the drawers in the kitchen for a cork screw (l. 01–02) and asks Penelope if they do not have a *special öffner* (“special opener”), meaning a bottle-opener with a lever (l. 03, 12). Penelope disconfirms Despina's negatively formatted request for confirmation, but adds that she doesn't know where the object is (l. 16). In response, Despina declares that she will manage to open the bottle nevertheless (l. 18). Although the sequence has been closed, Penelope now offers to take on Despina's task and open the bottle herself (l. 20).

Extract (7): FOLK_E_00327_SE_01_T_01_c304_wine

```

01      +(11.7)+
      des  +searches drawer+

02  DES  +ihr habt ja nur SOLche.=ne,=
      You only have this kind, right
      des  +takes cork screw out of drawer and shows it to mother-->

03  DES  =ihr habt NICH so en special öffner.=Oder?
      You don't have this kinda special opener, or?

04      (0.8)

05  PEN  WARte,=
      Wait

06  PEN  =*ich GUCke?
      I'll check
      pen  *turns around and looks at cork screw-->>

07      (1.1)+ &(0.2)
      des  -->+
      des  &gazes at mother-->

08  PEN  zu dem WEIN?=
      for the wine

09  PEN  =+wah;
      ((sound object))
      des  +iconic gesture of uncorking a bottle-->

10      (0.5)

11  PEN  ((sniffs))

12  DES  zum hEbeln habt ihr ja NICHTS,=ge?+
      You don't have anything for levering, right
      des  -->+

13      (0.4)

14  PEN  hh°

15      (1.5)

16  PEN  %doch.=aber ich wEiB jetzt &nich wo der IS,%
      We do but I don't know at the moment where it is
      pen  %shakes head-----%
      des  ----->&

```

- 17 (0.3)
- 18 DES ja eGAL.=des geht SCHON.
Well it doesn't matter, it will work anyway
- 19 (0.3)
- 20 PEN soll ICH n aufmachn;
Do you want me to open it
- 21 (0.3)
- 22 DES ach,=ich MACH des schon;
Oh I'll take care of it
- 23 PEN ((sniffs))
- 24 DES **wEin öffnen KANN ich.**
Opening wine is something I can do
- 25 PEN ha ha ha,=und wein TRINKn.
((laughs)) and wine drinking
- 26 DES ja,
Yes
- 27 (4.2)

Despina rejects Penelope's offer by claiming her general competence for the task *wein öffnen KANN ich*. ('opening wine is something that I can do', l. 24). From Despina's earlier question if a special opener was available (l. 03), Penelope seems to have inferred that Despina might have difficulties with opening the bottle with the available cork screw. The design of Despina's turn in line 24 is built to reject both the inference of her incompetence and Penelope's offer by claiming competence explicitly (see Gubina, 2022: ch. 9 on the use of the modal verb format *ich kann X*, 'I can X'). The focal accent on the modal verb *KANN* ('can') is a *verum focus* (Höhle, 1992; Lohnstein, 2015; Raymond, 2017) that highlights the truth of her claim to competence and implicitly contrasts it with the assumption that she was not competent, which it reflexively makes relevant as an inference from mother's offer in line 20. While the unmarked word order is using the infinite phrase after the finite verb, the topicalization of the infinite main verb phrase (*wein öffnen*, 'wine opening') in pre-verbal syntactic position contextualizes a contrast with the prior turn of her interlocutor (Zifonun et al., 1997: 1622–1624). In other words, the marked word order indexes a contrast to Despina's incompetence concerning other cooking-related tasks, which had become evident in the interaction so far.

Penelope responds with a subversive recipient increment (Bolden et al., 2019), which syntactically builds on the partner's turn-construction unit (TCU),⁴ ironizing her action by teasing (Drew, 1987). In addition to its entertaining quality, in stating an activity ('drinking wine') that does not require any specific competence, she aligns with Despina's implicit avowal to be a person who has only limited cooking competencies.

Explicit claims of competence also occur in rejections of assistance provided through other actions than offers. In Extract (8) from a family car-ride, instructions and warnings get a rejection. The passenger Lisa (LIS) has spotted a free parking lot (l. 01–02), which the driver Mariola (MAR) turns to (l. 03), however, asking if she is allowed to use it (l. 05). After her confirmation (l. 06), the passenger instructs the driver to reverse the car (*und jetzt zurück*, 'and now back', l. 08). She then reminds the driver to stay cool (*ganz ruhig*, 'stay cool', l. 13) and produces a problem-implicative factual declarative (Rossi, 2018), drawing the driver's attention to the fact that there is an exit (l. 13).

⁴ TCU is "the smallest interactionally relevant complete linguistic unit, in a given context, that is constructed with syntactic and prosodic resources within their semantic, pragmatic, activity-type-specific, and sequential conversational context" (Selting, 2000:477).

Extract (8): FOLK_E_00291_SE_01_T_02_c1281-1308_parking

01 LIS dann KÖNN wir jetzt hier parken;
So now we can park here

02 =Hier,
Here

03 *(0.4)
mar *turns right to free parking lot--->

04 LIS hm;

05 MAR (.) KA KANN ich hier,
ca can I here

06 LIS (.) ja,
Yes

07 (0.5)

08 LIS [und jetzt zuRÜCK,]
and now back

09 ZUS [hm WO::W;]

10 (0.5)

11 BAR hmHM,
Uhum

12 ZUS <<p>W*[%A:HNsinn;>] [SU*shi bar-]*
amazing sushi bar
mar *stops-----*,,,,,,,*
mar %changes gears--->

13 LIS [ganz RUhig hier] is ne [AUSfahrt,]
stay cool here is an exit

14 ZUS °h [%SUshi;]
sushi
mar --->%

15 MAR [du musst mir jet]z %NICHT sagen wie ich einparken
[<<p>soll=>
you don't have to tell me how I should park
mar %turns steering wheel right--->

16 MAR =<<all>also EIN>parken KANN ich;]
so parking is something that I can do

17 LIS [nein;=
no

18 =ich hab dir nur gesagt das%]s
hier ne AUSfahrt is;
I've only told you that here is an exit
mar --->%

- 19 LIS [=*des is aber (nicht)]
 but this is (not)
 mar *looks back and drives backwards--->>
- 20 ZUS [na;=siehst du sie kann EIN]park;
 well you see she can park
- 21 BAR j[a,]
 yes
- 22 ZUS [EIN]parken die konnt_s NIE;
 parking she could never do it
- 23 (0.3)
- 24 LIS ZU weit.
 too far
- 25 (1.7)
- 26 LIS ((small laugh))
- 27 (0.7)
- 28 LIS ich hab dir nur gesagt dass hier ne AUS (0.3) fährt is;
 I've only told you that here is an exit

In line 15, the driver rejects the passenger's entitlement to give her instructions on how to park the car. She adds an explicit claim to competence concerning the activity of parking the car (l. 16). The driver does not respond to the passenger's prior turn as an informing, but as part of a series of inappropriate instructions from which she infers that the passenger has treated her as being unable to park a car. The *kann ich*-TCU claims that the passenger's instructions concerning parking are unnecessary, because the driver claims sufficient competence for parking the car as the basis for executing the procedure autonomously without help.

This claim of competence is also highlighted by the design of her TCU (Gubina, 2022: ch. 9). First, it is formatted with the marked word order [(OBJ) V_{INF} *kann ich*] ('*EINparken kann ich*'). As in Extract (7), the topicalization of the infinite main verb allows the driver to claim competence in this particular task (i.e. parking the car), *without* claiming an overall competence to drive. Second, the activity for which competence is claimed is further supported by putting a contrastive accent on the main verb (*EINparken*). Third, the focal accent is assigned to the modal verb *kann* ('can'): This *verum focus* highlights the truth of the proposition, thus underscoring her claim to competence. It highlights that her claim rejects the [K-]-position, whose attribution she has inferred from the passenger's prior turns. The driver thus accuses the passenger of acting improperly by infringing on her autonomy and violating her face as a competent participant.

In response, the passenger defends herself against the driver's rejection of her actions, claiming that she only mentioned the exit as a simple informing (l. 18 and 28). This third-position repair (Schegloff, 1992) explicitly rejects the driver's inference that the passenger attributed incompetence to the driver, and thus disclaims the inference as not communicated by herself (cf. Hewitt and Stokes, 1975).

Extract (9) is more complex, as the claim to competence is more indirectly related to the turn it responds to. The excerpt comes from an interaction between Charlene (CHA) baking cupcakes and her mother Rahel (RAH), who observes her and chats with her. Witnessing Charlene's procedure of separating eggs, Rahel criticizes it and starts to explain the correct procedure (l. 01, 03, 04–05). Charlene interrupts her incipient instruction with the challenge *kannst du BACKen?* ('can you bake', l. 06). The challenge is designed to reject mother's entitlement for her instruction by reference to a missing precondition, namely, the competence to bake, and thereby causes her to abandon the instruction (see also Deppermann and Gubina, 2021). Rahel quickly confirms (l. 07) and Charlene justifies her deviant procedure (l. 9, 11, 13, 15, 17). In line 18, however, Rahel produces a second response to Charlene's challenge from line 06.

Extract (9): FOLK_E_00331_SE_01_T_02_DF_01_c112_eggs

- 01 RAH des macht man ANders.
this is done differently
- 02 CHA (.) is doch total eGAL.
(it) does not PTCL matter at all
- 03 RAH WEISST du wie man des MACHT.
do you now how it's done
- 04 °h man macht die GANZ AUF;=
you open them completely
- 05 RAH [=und und SCHÜTtet es] dann so;
and and then pour it like that
- 06 CHA [<<h> kannst du BACKen?>>]
can you bake
- 07 RAH (0.31) j[a,]
yes
- 08 CHA [j]a,
yes
- 09 CHA (.) aber wenn ich des versUche dies (.)
but if I try that to
- 10 (0.28)
- 11 CHA äh [gAnz zu Öffnen?]
erm open this completely
- 12 RAH [dann hast DU EIerschale]n da drin.=ja,
then you will have egg shells in there yes
- 13 CHA weißte was ich dann MAChe,
you know what I do then
- 14 RAH hm?
- 15 CHA +((imitates sound of breaking eggs))+
cha +iconic gesture-----+
- 16 RAH ERNST<<h>haft>?
seriously
- 17 CHA ja (.) aber das is [ganz EIGenartig.]
yes but it is very strange
- 18 RAH [doch.=EIer t]rennen KANN ich.
PTCL separating eggs (is what) I can do
- 19 (1.0)
- 20 CHA interessANT. h°
Interesting
- 21 (0.4)
- 22 CHA <<pp> oh>;
oh
- 23 RAH ich hab früher AUCH immer gebacken,
I used to bake in the past

Rahel produces a disconfirming particle (*doch*, l. 18), which does not respond to the immediately preceding turn, but ties back to the challenge (l. 06; Gubina, 2021). This responsive relationship of her turn becomes only obvious by her turn-continuation, in which she claims competence for separating eggs. Rahel's disconfirmation does not imply the claim to cooking or baking skills in general. Instead, with her disconfirmation, Rahel orients to Charlene's challenge as contesting Rahel's entitlement to instruct the correct procedure of separating eggs. In explicitly claiming competence for separating eggs, Rahel delivers grounds for her entitlement to instruct Charlene on how to do this. As in Extracts (7) and (8), the claim to competence is produced with a topicalized infinite verbal phrase (*Eier trennen*; 'separate eggs', l. 18) and the focal accent on the modal verb *kann* ('can'), which both index a contrast to Charlene's attribution of incompetence to her.

In this section, we have analyzed a recurrent practice by virtue of which participants explicitly claim competence: [(OBJ) V_{INF} *kann ich*] (see Gubina, 2022: ch. 9; cf. Sacks, 1992:II:140–141 on claiming vs. demonstrating understanding). In our data it is used when Other has intervened in Self's course of action and positions Self as lacking competence to accomplish their action successfully. With the response format [(OBJ) V_{INF} *kann ich*], Self positions themselves as having enough competence to accomplish a particular task or action, without claiming general competence for the larger activity. We have also shown that the practice is used for marking the Other's prior action as inappropriate, or unnecessary (Extracts 7–8), or to push back against possible implications of it (Extract 9).

5. Summary

We have studied the occurrence of claims to competence in response to Other's actions to which Self orients as implying that Other treats Self as unable to deal with some practical task by their own means or knowledge. In contrast to prior research, we have shown that such actions not only include advice (ex. 4; Heritage and Sefi, 1992; Shaw and Hepburn, 2013; Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson, 2022) or offers (ex. 2/7; Haugh, 2017a,b; Lindström and Fox, 2023), but also (announcements of) instructions (Extracts 1/3, 6), requests and accounts (Extract 5), informings about action-relevant states of affairs (Extract 8), and challenges (Extract 9). All these actions have in common that they position the addressee as not being able to accomplish the task without external help or guidance. Thus, the addressee is positioned as having less knowledge and competence with respect to the task at hand. In producing such actions, Others create an epistemic asymmetry, intrude into the addressee's project and infringe upon their autonomy in carrying out (next) local actions. The actions may be produced in response to some trouble that the addressee observably has had, or they may be produced preemptively. The claim to competence can then be produced as sole response, or in addition to a confirmation or rejection of the prior action. In any case, it rejects an inference from the prior turn that Self is not competent to deal properly with the task in question and claims autonomy for their own projects.

We have shown two practices that are used for claiming competence in our data.

- Accounting for competence, which can be accomplished through Self's reportings of their own prior actions, which Self presents as evidence that Self has dealt with the task successfully in the past, or through explanations of the procedure of how the task is accomplished. In such cases, Self positions Other as unknowing concerning Self's prior experience. The attribution of incompetence is thus treated as an *epistemic* problem. Self claims epistemic authority for their own experiences and orients to them as remedying the epistemic imbalance (Heritage, 2012) as a tool for pushing back against the attribution of incompetence.
- Explicit claims of competence (Gubina, 2022: ch. 9) are used in environments in which the general competence of Self (like in cooking or driving a car) has been put into question by Other in the prior interaction. In particular, the format [(OBJ) V_{INF} *kann ich*], topicalizing the verbal phrase before the finite modal verb and putting the focal accent on the modal verb *kann* ("can"), underscores Self's claim to competence and accomplishes the implicit rejection of the competing attribution. It is used to express the claim to having enough competence for accomplishing the task at hand by their own *without* claiming general competence for the larger activity.

The basic sequential pattern thus is.

- (1) *Other*: action that intrudes into Self's ongoing project;
- (2) *Self*: [aligning response/rejection +] account for or claim to competence for the task, which reflexively makes available that Other has been taken to attribute incompetence to Self for the targeted action

In our data, we found only one case in which Other rejects the claim that they intended to communicate the inference of incompetence (see ex. 8; Hewitt and Stokes, 1975), thus sanitizing the first action from the implication of a face-threat and trying to repair the problem of an identity-misalignment (see below). However, this happens only after a harsh, emotionally loaded rejection of incompetence has been produced. In the other cases, Other either does not respond to Self's rejection of the inference (Extract 3), accepts the rejection (Extracts 4, 9), makes fun of it (Extract 7), or insists on their first action (Extracts 5, 6), thus implicitly rejecting Self's claim of competence or at least its situated relevance. Most of these responses do not align with Self's shift to identity and face as focal interactional concerns. Reflexively, not aligning with the shift can be seen to index that Other insists on treating their actions as concerning only issues of local action coordination that do not put into

question Self's face and identity. The exceptions in our data are interactions in which the recipient has the official role of a learner (Extracts 4, 5, 6). In these cases, instructor's third-positioned turns clearly display that the recipient is treated as somebody with restricted competences, who is in need of learning.

6. Conclusion

In our data, Self never states explicitly that they have made an inference regarding an attribution of incompetence. Rather the claim of competence itself implicitly builds on, and thus reflexively indexes, this inference, because the claim presupposes that competence could have been or indeed has been called into question. Methodologically, the inference of the attribution of incompetence is needed to answer the question *why that now?* (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973), i.e., to account for why Self does not just simply produce an affiliative or rejecting action, but adds a claim of competence to these actions. This becomes especially clear when *verum focus* is used in the design of the response turn, thus highlighting the factualness of the competence that is claimed and implicitly rejecting the claim to the contrary.

Self usually does not show whether the inference of incompetence is taken to be *intended* by Other (see also Haugh, 2017a,b). In other words, it is mostly not clear whether the recipient takes the inference to be communicated in a Gricean sense, i.e., as a particularized conversational implicature (Grice, 1975), or if Self infers an attitude towards Self that Other rather has "given off", but not given (Goffman, 1959:2), i.e., intentionally communicated (see also Terkourafi, 2021 on relationships between inference and implicature). This indeterminacy (see Haugh, 2015, ch. 3, 2017) suggests that for participants in interaction, intentionality does not necessarily matter. Rather it may precisely be a property of inferred actions that they are often rather read off from performance characteristics of actions (e.g., presuppositions, lexical choice, prosody, phonetics, etc.) and can be considered as given off. Therefore, they are not treated as being straightforwardly publicly accountable (see Haugh, 2013, 2022; Elder and Haugh, 2018; Elder, 2021 on speaker's meaning, commitment and accountability).

The inference of an attribution of incompetence can arise solely from the first action. However, it can also be facilitated by evidence from Other's prior conduct. Thus, the inference does not have to be tied solely to the design of Other's prior turn, but can rest on repeated experiences of having been positioned by Other as being in need of guidance with respect to some sort of activity. Sometimes the longer interactional history may be cueing the inference, such as in the family car-ride (Extract 8), where the passenger has repeatedly criticized and instructed the driver. In such cases, it is probable that Self treats the inference of incompetence as an implicature, that is, as an assumption which is definitely entertained and intentionally communicated by Other. The effect of repeated experience can lead to Self's generalized expectation of being treated as incompetent by Other, manifesting itself in claims of competence in response to (seemingly?) innocent actions by Other, such as informings, which do not manifestly establish a conditional relevance for actions from Self. However, methodologically, it is very difficult in most cases to decide whether Self treats the attribution of incompetence as intentionally conveyed or rather as an assumption (or even attitude) that can be inferred from Other's behavior. In any case, there is no evidence that the attribution of the inference of incompetence as being intended by Other is Self's default interpretation in response to instructions, advice, proposals, and similar deontic actions in isolation.

By claiming competence, the topic of the talk is shifted from a local action or more general practices (in the case of instructions) to Self's identity and face. Self treats Other's action as a face-threat (Brown and Levinson, 1987), both in terms of Self's socially valued competence (positive face) and Self's license for autonomous action (negative face). Instead of claiming that certain actions per se establish a face-threat, as is usual in politeness theory, responses like the claim to competence instead show when and in which ways face is treated as being threatened by the participants themselves (see Haugh, 2015). The responsive claim to competence thus highlights a misalignment between Self's claimed self-image and Other's inferred alternative image of Self, which Self takes to be in need of repair. Compared to a mere rejection of Other's action, the claim to competence upgrades the degree of disaffiliation, and, if the prior turn is affiliated with, it introduces a second identity layer as being interactionally relevant, on which Self disaffiliates with Other. Interestingly, however, in our data, Other does not align with this shift to topicalizing competence and identity in their third-positioned turns. Rather, Other continues the prior action sequence without addressing issues of face and identity overtly, thus avoiding treating the interactional sequence as being sensitive. However, in particular in instructional settings, Others take care to reassert the original response expectation and thus the performative asymmetry between expert (instructor) and novice (learner/responder).

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Alexandra Gubina: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.
Arnulf Deppermann: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data availability

Data are publicly accessible via the data.base dgd.ids-mannheim.de after registration for scientific use only.

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