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On the road: Communicating traffic

A B S T R A C T

How do people communicate in mobile settings of interaction? How does mobility affect the way we speak? How does mobility exert influence on the manner in which talk itself is consequential for how we move in space? Recently, questions of this sort have attracted increasing attention in the human and social sciences. This Special Issue contributes to the emerging body of studies on mobility and talk by inspecting an ordinary and ubiquitous phenomenon in which communication among mobile participants is paramount: participation in traffic. This editorial presents previous work on mobility in natural settings, as carried out by interactionally oriented researchers. It also shows how the investigation into traffic participation adds new perspectives to research on language and communication.

1. Introduction

> *Turn-taking is used for the ordering of moves in games, for allocating political office, for regulating traffic at intersections, for serving customers at business establishments, and for talking in interviews, meetings, debates, ceremonies, conversations etc.*
> (Sacks et al., 1974, 696)

Investigation into spoken language can look back on a long tradition of research, which has developed into variegated and well-grounded approaches. While the analysis of empirical data – i.e. recordings of talk – has become an established practice in many approaches, the corpora on which such research is based rarely consider mobile settings of interaction. In fact, we may well speak of a 'stationary bias' that characterizes the state-of-the-art of research on talk-in-interaction. Clearly, this observation does not aim to invalidate previous research. Rather, it reveals a blatantly underinvestigated dimension of human interaction – mobility – which is consequential for how speakers talk, crucially involving other dimensions of embodied conduct, such as gaze, gesture, the manipulation of objects, etc. Spatial reference, for instance, is a simple and transparent illustration of why mobility matters to speakers. Saying 'here' to a passenger while driving a car at high speed brings about other practical problems (for both speaker and recipient) than using the same deictic while sitting with friends at the pub.

Space has been a dominant dimension of linguistic research since the first contributions to the field. For more than two centuries, areal linguistics has been dealing with the spatial distribution of linguistic variation (see Auer and Schmidt, 2010 for an introduction). In this tradition, language evolution (e.g. of Indo-European languages; Bopp, 1816) was anchored in space: Schmidt's (1872) *wave theory* or Bartoli's (1925) *theory of areal norms* for language change are well known examples. At the same time, linguistic geography developed into a major field of dialectological research, with Georg Wenker's work on the *Deutscher Sprachatlas* (first maps in 1888) and Gilliéron and Edmont's (1902–1910) systematic work on the *Atlas linguistique de la France*. These studies are characterized by an 'absolute' view of space, conceptualized as a 'container' within which specific linguistic phenomena are observable (see Auer et al., 2013 for a discussion). In this line of research, language is shown to depend on social and geographical space, whereas how speakers use language to refer to space is not explored. Instead, this issue became a main area of interest of cognitive linguistics. In the second half of the 20th century, cognitively oriented linguists studied how speakers express spatial relations (Vater, 1991; Pütz and Dirven, 1996; Talmy, 2000), and how these grammaticize as prepositions (such as *over, on*, etc.; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987). Within more anthropologically minded approaches, researchers have described different *frames of reference* (Senft, 1997; Levinson, 2003; Haun et al., 2011) speakers mobilize when locating an object in space. Finally, researchers working on interaction have highlighted how speakers design *place formulations* (Schegloff, 1972) based on the ways participants are socially categorized, the place at which they are currently located, and the topic or activity at hand.

With the exception of some rare pioneering articles (such as Psathas, 1976), it is only recently that researchers have started considering mobility as a relevant dimension for the analysis of talk. It is especially with regard to openings of social encounters that the analysis of mobility – and more specifically of how participants position their bodies in space – has led to insightful findings. Kendon (1977) introduced the notion of *facing formation* to describe how participants orient themselves vis-à-vis each other when engaging in a face-to-face encounter. Subsequent work has shown how speakers construct their utterances in ways that are sensitive to, among other things, participants' movements in space (McIlvenny et al., 2009; De Stefani, 2013; Haddington et al., 2013).

In the social sciences, mobility has emerged as an important feature of interaction in public. However, it is only at the beginning of the current century that social scientists have observed a *mobility turn* (Urry, 2007), arisen from the observation that although mobility is a pervasive feature of human life, it had been addressed only marginally by previous research (Cresswell, 2006). Yet early studies on mobility are well known: in particular, both Goffman (1971) and Ryave and Schenkein (1974) study how people *walk* in public space. Goffman (1971) developed the notion of *vehicular units* to refer to 'shell[s] of some kind controlled […] by a human pilot or navigator' (p. 6), and as examples he mentions e.g. submarines, open cars and pedestrians. Following the previous studies on the flow of pedestrians, Lee and Watson (1992) have focused on how pedestrians monitor each other's spatial trajectories, and Mondada (2002) on how members categorize each other in public spaces. Similarly, 'walking and talking', as well as other forms of movement in *mobile formations* (McIlvenny et al., 2014, 105), have been identified and studied by ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts as ordinary social activities. Goffman (1963, 177) observes, for instance, that speakers engaging in interaction may build up an *involvement shield*, which protects them from access by third parties. But '[t]he involvement shield provided by a conversation is somewhat portable, because the participants can together move about a room and take their talk with them'. Such research has stimulated later studies on 'walking and talking' (Relieu, 1999; Watson, 2005; Broth and Lundström, 2013; Broth and Mondada, 2013; Mondada, 2017), 'running and talking' (Collinson, 2006), 'driving and talking' (Laurier, 2005; Haddington, 2010; see Section 2), and 'talking in the cockpit' (Nevile, 2004, 2007) – not to mention the studies by authors who have analyzed data stemming from a 'walk and talk' activity, however without specifically focusing on the interactants' mobility (e.g. Psathas, 1992). The mobility of blind pedestrians has been studied by Relieu (1994) and Due and Bierring Lange (2018). Recently, research has also focused on the use of technological resources – such as geographical maps on smartphones – for orienting in space (Laurier et al., 2015; Licoppe, 2016).

This Special Issue extends prior research on mobile settings of interaction based on the methodological background of ethnomethodology and multimodal conversation analysis. It proposes a set of empirically grounded analyses of interactions taking place in mobile environments and among different types of road users (pedestrians, cyclists, car drivers, etc.).

2. Traffic interaction

As outlined above, mobile settings of interaction have attracted researchers working with conversation analytic methods (Haddington et al., 2013). Mondada (2012) and Goodwin and Goodwin (2012) have described the *habitable car* (Laurier et al., 2005) as a setting in which multiple courses of action take place. How navigation is formulated and negotiated in ordinary driving has been a central aspect of research (Haddington and Keisanen, 2009; Haddington, 2010, 2012; 2013; Laurier et al., 2012). Driving lessons have only recently been approached as a research topic: De Stefani and Gazin (2014) describe recurrent instructional sequences occurring in driving lessons and distinguish between navigational instructions and car control instructions. Deppermann (2015) discusses recipient design and intersubjectivity in relation to the intelligibility of instructions. Focusing on a broader range of mobile activities (driving, cycling, flying), Levin et al. (2017) analyze how corrections of mobile actions are subsequently 'unpacked' by the instructor, and Rauniomaa et al. (2018) describe how mobile tasks (related to driving, flying and skiing) are parsed into their constitutive sub-actions. Practices of coordination in traffic (beyond rule-based behavior) have been studied by Juhlin (2010) and Liberman (2013), whereas McIlvenny (2014) analyzes interaction between cyclists participating in traffic as a *mobile with* (Jensen, 2010).

Participants engaging in road traffic implement a variety of communicative practices. At least two participation frameworks are manifestly at work: a) interaction taking place between members of a *mobile with*, i.e. individuals jointly engaged in navigation (e.g. a pair of pedestrians, driver and passenger, etc.); and b) interaction between different road users. Participants in traffic have to coordinate these two different participation frameworks in response to constantly evolving, contingent traffic situations. This question has been only scarcely addressed in previous research (but see Deppermann, 2015; Broth et al., 2018). Since participants have to coordinate their actions in different yet interrelated domains, this Special Issue focuses on the following questions:

a) How do individuals who are engaged in joint mobility coordinate their actions? Joint mobility is multi-activity: individuals participating in traffic as *vehicular units* or as part of *mobile withs* coordinate talk-in-interaction with their navigational behavior (see Haddington, 2010; McIlvenny, 2014). For instance, they jointly negotiate navigational issues (Haddington and Keisanen, 2009; Haddington, 2010, 2012, 2013; Laurier et al., 2012) in addition to engaging in topical talk about everyday issues (Mondada, 2012). In other settings, such as driving lessons, participants devote a large part of their in-car interaction to the formulation and execution of instructions (De Stefani and Gazin, 2014; De Stefani, 2018; Deppermann, 2015, 2018;

Gazin, 2015; Broth et al., 2017, 2018; De Stefani and Gazin, 2019, Deppermann, 2019; Broth et al., 2019). In general, a practical problem for road users consists in deciding whether and at what moment a specific navigational action is relevant and necessary – in a constantly evolving traffic situation – and how this action can be collaboratively achieved (Deppermann et al., 2018; Deppermann, 2019; Liberman, 2019; McIlvenny, 2019; Merlino and Mondada, 2019).

b) How do road users coordinate their actions and trajectories in traffic? Road users have to coordinate their actions in order to navigate through traffic in a safe and fluent manner (Liberman, 2019). However, opportunities for coordination and the range of available semiotic means may be severely restricted (Deppermann, 2019; Laurier, 2019). Moreover, participants have to react, plan and project their actions within short temporal intervals. In order to coordinate their respective actions, traffic participants can use different semiotic means (gestures, headlight flashing, horn honking, etc.; see von Savigny, 1980; Haddington and Rauniomaa, 2014; Broth et al., 2018; De Stefani and Gazin, 2019; Laurier, 2019), but they also rely on formal (traffic code) and informal rules (Juhlin, 2010), prior experience, (semiotic) affordances of the road (traffic signs, layout of the street, etc.), and the observable actions of other traffic participants (Deppermann, 2019). Action coordination builds on expectations about the actions of others (Broth, Cromdal and Levin, 2019).

c) How do road users coordinate their engagement in multiple participation frameworks and how do they identify and categorize other vehicular units? Accomplishing a navigational action (e.g. crossing a road as a pedestrian, performing a turn at a junction, etc.) requires road users to carry out a set of ordered actions and to coordinate these actions with the conduct of other road users. For instance, research on in-car interaction has shown that passengers participate in the driving behavior technically carried out by the driver (Haddington and Rauniomaa, 2014): they comment on, assess and explain others' as well as their own actions, discuss the applicability of and the situated interpretation of traffic laws, anticipate future actions of others, decide on their own actions based on perceptions and interpretations of traffic events and spatial configurations, etc. (De Stefani and Gazin, 2019; McIlvenny, 2019). Moreover, passengers locally categorize other road users as, e.g., vulnerable, 'dangerous' drivers, or drivers who do not respect the traffic code (see Katz, 1999).

While they accomplish the complex coordination tasks described above, participants use talk as well as embodied resources and technological artifacts to solve the practical problem of safely navigating through space.

3. Gains from the study of traffic for understanding language, communication and interaction

Traffic constitutes a unique environment in which participants simultaneously have to deal with different participation frameworks that are constantly rearranged due to the road users' movement through space. Issues of multi-activity, materiality, temporality and sensitivity to space and movement are pervasive in this setting, both among road users and between members of a *mobile with*. These issues have become major topics in research on language and interaction in recent years (Haddington et al., 2013; Haddington et al., 2014; McIlvenny et al., 2014; Deppermann and Günthner, 2015). They are omnirelevant in the coordination of multiple courses of action in traffic. Traffic represents a fertile setting for analyzing the ways linguistic resources are adapted to, and constitute, the ever-changing spatial, temporal, mobile, topical and pragmatic relevancies of a social setting that counts among the most important ones in contemporary societies, but that has to date largely been neglected by scholars in language and communication.

a) *Language* is a fundamental resource that members use to participate in traffic-related activities, such as topical talk, organizing their traffic behavior, commenting on other road users' actions, finding the way, instructing, etc. Different languages provide different linguistic resources for accomplishing these activities. In this Special Issue, we have collected contributions based on data in five languages (English, French, German, Italian and Swedish), thereby providing the possibility to identify both language-specific and action-specific practices. For instance, different grammatical formats are used to produce distinct driving instructions (Deppermann, 2018; De Stefani, 2018; Mondada, 2018). However, participants engaged in traffic rely not only on talk but also on other resources, such as gaze and gesture (Laurier, 2019; McIlvenny, 2019; Merlino and Mondada, 2019). Starting with the pioneering work by Goodwin (1979, 1980, 2017), research on *multimodality* in interaction has now become a core approach among studies on language-in-interaction (Deppermann, 2013; Deppermann and Streeck, 2018; Mondada, 2018). Work on the ways participants coordinate linguistic resources with multimodal ones, and adapt the grammatical shape of turns-at-talk to co-occurring traffic-related phenomena, thus importantly adds to our knowledge about embodied interaction.

b) *Communication* is of primordial importance in traffic. The smooth flow of traffic is based on, among other things, the correct interpretation of textual and semiotic objects and features (e.g. signposts), as well as the spatial infrastructure. For instance, the configuration of the road 'instructs' (in the sense of Garfinkel, 2002) road users how to move through space. Road signs provide traffic participants with instructions and information relevant to their navigational behavior. Traffic participants' resources are both provided for (e.g. the body, indicators, lights, horns) and restricted by the technical, spatial and temporal properties of communication between different means of transport, such as cars (which Goffman, 1963 described as *portable shields*, whereas they are *iron cages* for Urry, 2004), bicycles, wheelchairs, etc. The use of communicative resources is sensitive to features such as visibility, speed and proximity. All these resources are designed to be unambiguous, yet traffic participants need to make sense of them, and may treat them as problematic and in need of negotiation – e.g.

because they are unable to apply information provided by a road sign to the current traffic situation, or, in driving lessons, because the formulation of a rule is not adapted to the student driver's level of competence and experience (Deppermann, 2015). Equally, road users have to learn and decide how to make their own actions projectable and comprehensible in a situated way (e.g. a pedestrian raising a hand may display his project to cross a road), so that other road users can coordinate their actions with them (Broth et al., 2019; Deppermann, 2019; McIlvenny, 2019; Merlino and Mondada, 2019). Hence, by examining the communicative practices and the potential of road signs, traffic rules, spatial configurations and semiotic resources used by participants in actual traffic situations, we contribute new knowledge about the meaning potentials (Linell, 2009) and limits of these semiotic resources and the situated requirements and contingencies imposing on their use.

c) *Interaction* involves anticipating and responding to others' conduct, thereby enabling both simultaneous and sequential action coordination. As the quotation from Sacks et al.'s (1974) seminal paper at the beginning of this editorial shows, the authors address a broad range of situations in which sequential turn-taking is at stake. In the decades following its publication, scholars have focused extensively on *conversations* as a locus in which interactional practices and the constitution of social order are observable – hence the label *conversation analysis* for the approach. By analyzing interactions that take place between road users – who have highly restricted possibilities to talk to each other – this Special Issue also sheds light on the resources other than talk that traffic participants deploy when coordinating their conduct with each other. Just like the 'floor' in conversation, in many cases road space is a scarce, insufficient resource for the organization of turn-taking. Hence, road users employ further resources to coordinate with each other who goes first (Deppermann, 2019; Laurier, 2019; Liberman, 2019; McIlvenny, 2019). By focusing on how participants coordinate interaction between road users with interaction within the *mobile with*, the articles in this Special Issue contribute to the study of participation frameworks of interaction and their interrelationships (De Stefani and Gazin, 2019). In addition, this issue is closely linked with phenomena of multi-activity arising from simultaneous involvements in multiple and co-occurring courses of (inter)action (Haddington et al., 2014, Haddington, this issue).

4. Conclusion

Humans may participate in traffic in many different ways – not only as pedestrians, but also as individuals piloting a car, a wheelchair, a mobility scooter, a bicycle, etc. They have to cope with both the affordances and restrictions provided by their (technologically equipped) *shell* (Goffman, 1971) serving them as a locomotion device. And they have to communicate with other traffic participants – who may belong to the same or different kinds of *vehicular units* – in order to accomplish mobility in a safe and effortless manner. Safe coordination in mobility is an interactional achievement, and as such a phenomenon in which the use of language and other communicative resources has a fundamentally social purpose. As Vinkhuyzen and Cefkin (2016) have shown concerning autonomously driving cars, a major problem is their flagrant incapacity to take into account the social dimension of traffic. This Special Issue confirms that sociality and also civility are of cardinal importance for making traffic work. In so doing, it presents traffic as an exemplary phenomenon for analyzing the complexity of human communication.

Die Sprache beruht auf dem Verkehr der Menschen untereinander.
Wegener (1885, 182)

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Elwys De Stefani *
KU Leuven, Belgium

Mathias Broth
Linköping University, Sweden

Arnulf Deppermann
Institut für Deutsche Sprache, Mannheim, Germany

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: elwys.destefani@kuleuven.be