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The Interaction Tool*

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For professionals such as doctors, teachers, or different kinds of counsellors, talking with their clients is a major part of their profession. Professionals and clients give and ask information until they reach a state of mutual knowledge or understanding. This paper argues that for this talk they use a tool, the machinery of social interaction, with characteristics that influence the outcomes of their talk. One characteristic is the normative organization of interaction through which the contribution of one participant puts restrictions on the range of possible follow-up contributions of another participant. This may cause client behavior that does not align with the institutional aims of the professional. A second trait is that interactants have no access to each other's cognitions such as intentions, interpretations, knowing, and understanding. Professionals should thus be aware that what clients say has a relatively loose relation with what they know and understand.

Keywords: language and social interaction, professional discourse, intersubjectivity, knowing and understanding normative organization

1. Introduction¹

There is a special tool I want to discuss that has its own rules of which we are often unaware and that we cannot easily influence. And we cannot do without this tool. We use it privately in our contacts with our partner, children, friends and relatives, but we also could not do our work without it. I am referring to the tool of social interaction and in my discussion I will deal in particular with two traits, (i) its

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normative organization and (ii) its treacherous indispensability for establishing common understanding and common knowledge.

2. The normative organization of social interaction

We start using the tool early in the morning. The alarm goes off, we wake up, and we say to our bed partner ‘good morning’. That sounds quite friendly, but by saying this we launched a system of social interaction that puts a moral obligation on our partners to return the ‘good morning’. In Conversation Analysis such a system is known as an ‘adjacency pair’ (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973; Schegloff, 2007). Adjacency pairs are two actions that belong together, of which one party does the first action and thereby puts a moral obligation on the addressee to perform the corresponding second action. One party says ‘hi’, the other should say ‘hi’ in return; one asks a question, the other should answer it; one says ‘good morning’ and the other should return the good morning. This does not mean that we intended to put these moral obligations on our partners — perhaps we simply wanted to wish a good morning — but these are precisely the rules of the tool. The tool we have started to use has no message for our intentions: one *cannot* perform a first action *without* obliging the addressee to do the corresponding second.

Figure 1. The normative organization of social interaction

The purpose of the research domain of language and social interaction is to describe the systematics of the use of language in interaction, such as these adjacency pairs. From a societal perspective, the systematics of social interaction are a tool that forms the basis of our ability to collaborate with others, and to gain with others a common understanding of ourselves, the others, the things we do and say,

and thereby of the world around us. From the somewhat more narrow perspective of linguistics, and within it the study of the use of language as a means of communication, the study of language and social interaction aims to find out how we give meaning to language. We ask the fundamental question how the system works, and we ask applied questions of the ways the system is used in professional interactions, and how these interactional practices can be improved.

Let me present a more empirical demonstration than the thought-up bed story. In my corpus of 20 hours of mundane telephone conversations, the call below is one of the shortest.

(1)

1 Bennie: jan raaimakers.(.)

jan raaimakers

2 je had gebeld.

you called

3 Jan: ja,=of je vanavond komt voetballen.

yeah,=will you come and play football tonight

4 (1.3)

5 Bennie: ↑zeven uur toch?

seven o'clock isn't it

6 (0.3)

7 Jan: >ja.<

yes

8 (0.9)

9 Bennie: ben'k wel bij.(.)

I'll be there alright

10 Jan: oke (.) zie 'k je straks.

okay (.) see you then

11 (.)

12 Bennie: ↑jo::

yep

13 Jan: ↓jo::

yep

14 (0.8)

15 Bennie: ju:<

Yea

For the moment, do not bother about all the different signs in this transcript. What is important right now is that we need to put the conversation to a written stand-still in order to be able to investigate it. That is why we transcribe it with various kinds of signs that indicate how it was pronounced.

In this telephone conversation you can see various examples of the adjacency pairs I just mentioned. They are not there because I selected this conversation to illustrate them, but because they are a fundamental building block of all our conversations. Let us look for example at the question and the answer in lines 5 and 7.

(2)

- 5 Bennie: ↑zeven uur toch?
seven o'clock isn't it
 6 (0.3)
 7 Jan: >ja.<
Yes

We see Bennie ask a question that puts a moral obligation on Jan to supply an answer. The example does not show this obligation, but it does show how this moral order enables Jan to first pause 0.3 seconds before he answers the question. Following Bennie's question he not only has the obligation but also the right to answer: it is his turn. The question is so designed that it does not simply require 'an' answer. It is a yes/no-interrogative that invites an answer containing either a yes- or a no-element. Raymond (2003) has called this phenomenon 'type-conformity': the *form* (or the *design*) of the question (y/n-interrogative) puts normative restrictions on the *form* of possible answers (they should contain the words yes or no). Moreover, the question is so designed that it 'prefers' a yes-response over a no (Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013). This is called 'preference for agreement' (Pomerantz, 1984): the question has two alternative answers (yes and no) and the form of the question displays a preference for one alternative over the other. The question *zeven uur* ('seven o'clock') already prefers to be confirmed, but the added tag *toch* ('isn't it') makes this preference a degree stronger. The norms that Jan has to comply with are thus quite a bit more numerous and more specific than simply 'give an answer'.

3. Assigning meaning in social interaction

This example also shows that the meaning of linguistic utterances is brought about in part by its design. The words *zeven uur* in itself are not necessarily interpretable as a question, but with a rising intonation they would be. And when we then add the tag *toch*, we suddenly have a question that seeks confirmation (Englert, 2010). Intonation, lexical choice, and the combination of words are thus important means we use to assign meaning to utterances.

But we also see that the meaning of an utterance is not only determined by its design in terms of words and intonation. The position of the utterance in the

interaction also plays an important role. The clearest example is Jan's *ja* ('yes') in line 7. We all understand that this means 'yes, football starts at 7 o'clock', but we can only arrive at that interpretation because we know that *ja* follows line 5, which in turn follows line 3. This meaning is not contained in the word *ja* or in the way it is pronounced but is produced to a large extent by its position in relation to the question. And this is true not only for us who look at this interaction from the outside, but it is also the way in which the participants come to their interpretations. Jefferson (1978) calls this 'next positioning' with which she refers to the fact that we always interpret an utterance in the light of what precedes it. This phenomenon is even stronger when the preceding utterance is the first part of an adjacency pair as is the case for Jan's *ja*, which is preceded by a question. As we have seen, these 'first pair parts' (Schegloff, 2007) establish a context in which there is a strong set of normative expectations of what is to follow. Thus, whatever follows a first pair part — even a silence — is interpreted in the light of these expectations.

4. Understanding in interaction

A fundamental aspect of the study of language and social interaction is also that we want to know how participants come to share their interpretations. How do they come to agree on the activity they are doing and on the topic they are discussing? This is not unproblematic for two reasons. The first reason is that a speaker probably has certain thoughts and intentions he wishes to share, but those thought and intentions — those cognitions — are not observable for the hearer. And the second reason is that language, or any other semiotic system, is not a solution to the first problem. We have just seen with the example of *ja* that our words do not have fixed communicative meanings. Semiotic systems such as language do not offer us an unequivocal means to share our intentions with our addressees.

Perhaps Jan wants to know *whether* Bennie will come tonight, and perhaps he would *like* Bennie to come, but what is available to Bennie is the utterance of *je vanavond komt voetballen* ('will you come and play football tonight'), not Jan's mental wishes. And the problem repeats itself on the other side. When Bennie hears Jan's question, he will interpret it, but also this interpretation is not observable for the other. In short, how does Jan get to know how Bennie understood him, and how does Bennie get to know whether he understood Jan correctly? The answer will not come as a surprise: for this they use the tool of social interaction. Jan says 'will you come and play football tonight' and receives a response that shows him something of how the other has understood him and is then in a position to either accept or repair the understanding that was displayed in the response. In this case Bennie answers *daar ben'k wel bij* ('I'll be there alright'). With this

response he shows Jan that he understood ‘will you come and play football tonight’ not as a question (for information) but as a request to come. The particle *wel* (here tentatively translated as ‘alright’) shows Bennie’s belief that Jan wishes him to come tonight. He interprets Jan’s interrogative as a request that he should come. And if that is not what Jan meant with ‘will you come and play football tonight’ then now is the moment to intervene. He could have said for example: ‘well I actually wanted to see if you could skip tonight cause we have too many players’ but that is not what he does. He responds to Bennie with ‘okay (.) see you then’ and therewith the two have reached a common understanding of Jan’s utterance ‘will you come and play football tonight’. Bennie has shown Jan that he understands it as a request and Jan confirmed that interpretation by saying ‘okay’. In this way they have used three turns to reach a common understanding of the first turn (Schegloff, 1992):

1. Jan says something;
2. Bennie shows how he understands Jan;
3. Jan shows if he agrees with that understanding.

All this sheds an interesting light on common (or shared) understanding. What is common understanding? We could suppose that it means that two participants in a conversation give the same meaning to an utterance such as ‘will you come and play football tonight’; that the intention of the speaker coincides with the interpretation of the hearer. But we just concluded that speaker and hearer have no access to each other’s cognitive entities such as intentions or interpretations. If these two should coincide at all, they have no means to establish this.

Figure 2. Common understanding does not mean that cognitions overlap

For participants in interaction, common understanding does not mean that our knowledge or understanding actually overlap, but that we ‘do’ shared knowing or understanding. When Jan says ‘will you come and play football tonight’ and Bennie responds with ‘I’ll be there alright’ he *does* his understanding of Jan as a request, and when Jan returns with ‘okay see you then’ Jan *does* his agreement. Giving an answer and accepting it are observable means, ways of doing, with which we bring about mutual understanding. This not an invisible understanding in the mental domain such as for example Clark’s (1996) cognitive notion of ‘common ground’, but a common ground that is made mutually observable. I will call this observable common ground ‘intersubjectivity’, thereby following the sociological and phenomenological concept of intersubjectivity (Schutz, 1932/1967; Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 1992) which acknowledges that participants in social interaction cannot access each other’s intentions or interpretations and must therefore make understanding, knowing, and intersubjectivity observable for each other.

The strength and the limitation of the tool of social interaction is that on the one hand it enables us to share meaning, while on the other hand this remains a matter of doing meaning.

Figure 3. Common understanding is ‘done’ in social interaction

The only access a student has to the knowledge of the teacher is through social interaction. The only access a teacher has to the understanding of the student is again social interaction, also when this takes the form of a test. The only access an emergency call-taker has to the incident is through social interaction. The only access a financial expert has to the understanding of the client, and the client to the knowledge of the expert, is all through the tool of social interaction. This is not to deny the existence of cognition. Of course there can be many things that I know

as-a-form-of-cognition, that my co-participant in interaction knows as well, such as the time of day, the names of the presidents of the US and Russia, and many other things. But having the *same* knowledge is not *shared* knowledge. To share knowledge we have to make it shared. And as long as we cannot connect our heads with a line to copy-paste our cognitive files, the tool of social interaction is the only means we have to share knowledge and understanding. And it is crucial that we understand that this common understanding is then a matter of *doing* shared knowing and understanding, not a matter of *having*.

A student can understand something a teacher has explained, but in order to show that understanding to the teacher and thereby make it shared, the student must *do* understanding. And then we confront the flip-side of the tool. We can not only *have* understanding without *doing* it, we can also *do* understanding without *having* it. Let us look at this interaction between Patricia and her math teacher:

(3)

84 Leraar: nou snap je 't wel?
now you do understand?

85 Patricia: ja.=
yes

86 Leraar: =oke.
okay

The teacher has explained something twice to Patricia and after the second time he asks 'now you do understand?' and Patricia answer 'yes'. With this, Patricia *does* understanding. The teacher accepts this understanding with 'okay' and then goes on to a next student who has requested his help. We see in this interaction that the student does common understanding in a way that is treated by the teacher as sufficient to end the interaction. Does that mean that Patricia understands? No, not necessarily. We can *do* common understanding without *having* it, in the same way as we can *do* shared knowledge without *having* it.

In 2012 a Dutch member of parliament gave a notorious interview in which he claimed knowledge of the non-existing 'street terrorist' Jael Jablabla. Without the MP knowing this, the interview was part of a radio show that confronted celebrities with non-existent news items to see how they would respond: bluff or disclaim knowledge.

(4)

- 1 IR: De Haagse straatterrorist Jael Jablabla komt vervroegd vrij
The street terrorist from the Hague, Jael Jablabla will be released prematurely
- 2 door een vormfout van het OM.
following a formal error of the prosecution.

- 3 Dan zijn we toch de weg met z'n allen kwijt.
Then we seem to have lost it altogether
- 4 Jael moet toch gewoon terug die cel in?
Shouldn't Jael simply go back into his cell?
- 5 IE: 'T is zeker iets wat Jeroen Dijsselbloem, onze vice-fractievoorzitter
This is certainly something that Jeroen Dijsselbloem, our vice-chair
- 6 die heeft al over gesproken
he talked about this already
- 7 en die zal dit in de gaten blijven houden
and he will keep an eye on this
- 8 IR: Wat zei Jeroen Dijsselbloem d'r over toen die d'r over gesproken heeft?
What did Jeroen Dijsselbloem say when he talked about it?
- 9 IE: Daar gaan we geen uitspraken momenteel over doen. En ik denk dat-
We are not going to make any statements on this for the moment. And I think that-
- 10 IR: Maar is dat nog een PvdA geheim wat er met Jael Jablabla moet
 gebeuren?
But is it still a party secret what should be done with Jael Jablabla?
- 11 IE: Nee maar voor dat alles duidelijk is geformuleerd dan gaan we-
No but before everything is clearly formulated we don't-
- 12 is gewoon de code dat je dat niet naar buiten brengt
the code is not to go public on this
- 13 IR: Maar ik hoor u praten en ik denk: d'r zit iets achter
But I hear you talking and I'm thinking: there is something behind this
- 14 u vindt daar iets van die Jael Jablabla
you have an opinion on Jael Jablabla
- 15 en u wilt het mij nu niet vertellen
and you don't want to tell me now
- 16 IE: En daarom juist zeg ik: het gaat om-
And that is precisely why I'm saying: it's about-
- 17 datgene wat ik weet ga ik in ieder geval niet met u delen
what I know about it I am not going to share with you
- 18 IR: Nee, maar u weet meer over Jael dan ik?
No, but you know more about Jael than I do?
- 19 IE: Ik weet-
I know-
- 20 Ik weet in ieder geval meer over Jael dan u. Ja
In any case I know more about Jael than you. Yes.

In this interview, the MP *does* shared knowledge and to an extent also not-shared knowledge that he cannot *have* because Jablabla does not exist. Apart from this

being funny, the gist of the matter is this: we can only share knowledge and understanding by doing it, but that means that we can also share knowledge and understanding that we do not have. We can see that professional interactants are alert to this phenomenon, such as this financial expert who explains to a client the options for house loans.

(5)

- 1 Expert: en als je meer belasting betaalt
and when you pay more taxes
- 2 dan krijg je dus meer ↑terug.
then you get back more
- 3 Client: °oh°
oh
- 4 Expert: >snap je dat?<
do you understand that?
- 5 Client: °ja°
yes

The expert does not accept the client's doing understanding in line 3, and checks once more if they have common understanding. Of course, also line 5 is a form of doing understanding, but what we see is that participants in interaction may be aware of the difference between *having* and *doing* understanding.

5. Professional interaction

Meanwhile we have entered the domain of professional interaction. The teachers, the emergency call operators, and the financial experts are all examples of professionals who work with the tool of social interaction, but who for the most part are only slightly aware of what this means for their work. Take this example of knowledge sharing: one day the Utrecht emergency call-center receives this call.

(6)

- 1 CT: ambulancedienst.
ambulance service
- 2 C: hallo goeiemiddag >u spreekt met< Karin Overtoom,=
hallo good afternoon this is Karin Overtoom speaking
- 3 =ik e:::hm >ben aan het werk bij Nieuw Dalenburg,<
=I u:::hm >am at work at Nieuw Dalenburg,<
- 4 in Meppel, (.)
in Meppel,

- 5 CT: ja,
 yes,
- 6 C: maar der is e:h iemand niet helemaal lekker geworden.
 but someone has started to feel not quite well
- 7 >dus ik wilde vragen< of dat u een
 >*so I wanted to ask< if you*
- 8 ambulance kon e::h (0.5) >sturen voor mij.<
 could send an ambulance for me
- 9 CT: (.) en dat is op de: Jan van Zwollestraat?
 (.) and that is Jan van Zwolle street?
- 10 C: ja klopt. ja.
 yes correct. ye:s.
- 11 CT: op nummer zes?
 number 6?

I will not go into the details of this call but I want to invite you to follow my line of thought. Caller (C) Karin Overtoom — as the transcriber has called her — calls the emergency number 112, says that someone is feeling unwell, and next makes a request to send an ambulance. On the basis of this information, and on the basis of information the caller will give in response to the call-taker's (CT) questions, the call-taker will decide whether or not an ambulance will be sent, and whether or not that will be with flashing light and siren. But it is crucial that we realize that this decision is not taken on the basis of the incident, but on the basis of what the caller says about the incident. Indeed, the call-taker has no access to the incident so that cannot play a role in his decision. If the call-taker decides that this is not a fake call from a bored after-school student, then the caller must have done something that can be interpreted as 'genuineness' (Heritage & Clayman, 2010). Compare for example this extract where the call-taker subtly doubts the genuineness:

(7)

- 1 C: e::h ja goedemiddag een (eh een eh) e::h ik rijd op de
 U::h yes good afternoon a (uh a uh) u::h I'm driving on the
- 2 A2 richting e::h Utrecht
 A 2 direction u::h Utrecht
- 3 bij Vinkeveen is een andere kant op >richting Amsterdam<
 near Vinkeveen is another way >direction Amsterdam<
 een auto in het water
 a car in the water
 ((7 turns omitted))
- 12 CT: oké prima en u dacht daar een auto in het water te zien
 okay fine and you thought you saw a car in the water

- 13 C: ja ik weet wel zeker
yes I'm quite certain

The caller makes a report about a car in the water at the other side of the highway and the call-taker treats this in line 12 as insufficiently genuine: 'you thought you saw'. Again, this phrase 'does' doubt in an observable manner and is treated as doubt by the caller, but as with understanding and knowing there is no telling whether it coincides with 'cognitive' doubt on the part of the call-taker or whether the callers observable certainty (13: 'yes I'm quite certain') reflects cognitive certainty. When a call-taker dispatches emergency assistance, then this happens on the basis of talk, not on the basis of an incident or the mental states of the caller.

6. Questions and preference

The information the call-taker gets is in part dependent on the questions he asks and on the way he asks these questions. In research we carried out for the national Dutch emergency call centre we found that their opening question 'who do you want to talk to?' made it insufficiently clear to callers that they were supposed to choose between police, fire-brigade, and ambulance. The new question 'do you want police, fire-brigade, or ambulance?' performed much better in this respect (Koole & Verberg, submitted). With this new question design we made use of the normative system in which this latter question type provides answerers with the normative obligation to choose one of the provided answer options. In response to the question 'coffee or tea?' it is normatively easier to choose one of the two offered options than for example hot chocolate.

But this normative system can turn against us as we saw in the earlier example of Patricia.

- (3)
 84 Leraar: nou snap je 't wel?
 now you do understand?
 85 Patricia: ja.=
 yes
 86 Leraar: =oke.
 okay

The teacher's question 'now you do understand?' has a number of characteristics that produce a strong preference for a yes-answer: a positively phrased interrogative (you do? vs. you don't?) embodies a preference for confirmation, but in this question this is reinforced by the temporal adverb 'now' that refers to the fact

that this is the second time the teacher has explained this, and by the particle *wel* (translated in English as ‘do’) that creates a contrast with not-understanding. Thus, the fact that Patricia supplies the preferred answer perhaps says more about her social interaction competence than about her understanding of the math assignment.

And we saw the same phenomenon in the financial expert encounter.

(5)

- 1 Expert: en als je meer belasting betaalt
and when you pay more taxes
- 2 dan krijg je dus meer ↑terug.
then you get back more
- 3 Client: °oh°
oh
- 4 Expert: >snap je dat?<
do you understand that?
- 5 Client: °ja°
yes

Also here, the positively phrased question ‘do you understand that?’ prefers a yes-answer, and here this preference is reinforced by the circumstance that the client has just claimed understanding in line 3 which increases the normative pressure to not contradict this a few seconds later. But also here, the issue is whether the financial adviser should be happy with the normative characteristics of the tool he uses to do his job, because this ‘yes’ *does* understanding, but what does this tell him about the understanding the client *has*?

Yet, we also see that professional interactants make good use of this normativity. Take for example the questions that were used in the interview with the member of parliament:

- *‘I’m thinking: there is something behind this you have an opinion on Jael Jablabla’*
- *‘and you don’t want to tell me now’*
- *‘you know more about Jael than I do?’*

These declarative questions have a strong preference for confirmation and the interviewer makes use of this preference to bring the interviewee to claim knowledge he does not possess. And also in other contexts we see professional interactants use this preference, such as teachers who point their students to mistakes with questions such as ‘is this really a verb?’. We do not need to know the referent of ‘this’ to know that it is *not* a verb. This is a result of the preference for a no-answer that this question embodies. Indeed, the teacher does not use it as a real question, but as a way to point the student to a mistake (Koole, 2010; 2012).

7. Conclusion

When we engage in social interaction, privately or professionally, we use a tool that has some special traits. One trait we have seen is the normative character of the relation between speech actions, or phrased from a slightly different perspective, the phenomenon that the interactional contribution of one participant puts restrictions on the range of possible follow-up contributions of another participant. A second trait is that participant cognitions such as intentions, interpretations, knowing, and understanding, have a relatively loose relation with the meanings that are brought about in interaction. We can have understanding without doing understanding, and we can do understanding without having it.

This set of empirical and theoretical observations gives rise to a large number of fundamental and applied research questions. A fundamental question is how thin or thick the thread of intersubjectivity can or should be for participants in interaction. As we saw in the telephone call example, in a next turn we show our interlocutors' aspects of how we understood them and the empirical question is how little or much evidence of understanding participants in interaction need to proceed their interactional projects. A second fundamental question concerns the systematic differences between different tokens of understanding such as 'hm', *ja* (yes), or head nods. Research so far has shown that we use such tokens to distinguish between having understood smaller or larger chunks of talk (Koole, 2010), between having *understood* and *agreeing* (Stivers, 2008), or between having understood what is being talked about and what is said about it (Mondada, 2011), but so far for no language have these different linguistic and embodied tokens been systematically compared in their use and meaning. From an applied perspective there is a multitude of contexts where participants engage in social interaction to establish understanding in work of vital importance. One such a context is education, but there are many more professional occasions where information or advice is offered through the tool of social interaction. A context where the adjective 'vital' should often be taken literally is health care where social interaction is used to transfer patients from the ambulance to the hospital personnel, or in the intensive care section from one shift of doctors and nurses to a next. Even in an age where information is digitally stored and available, social interaction remains to be a primary tool in health care for collegial information sharing. These contexts much require research of the ways in which mutual understanding is achieved and can be optimized. Professional interactants should be aware that their talk enters them in an interactional process with systematics that has its own constraints while at the same time it has the affordance of enabling interpersonal collaboration and intersubjectivity.

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