Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) **2:** 177–190, 1994.

Do Categories Have Politics?
The language/action perspective reconsidered

LUCY SUCHMAN
Xerox Palo Alto Research Center, U.S.A.

(Received 31 August 1993; in final form 6 September 1993)

Abstract. Drawing on writings within the CSCW community and on recent social theory, this paper proposes that the adoption of speech act theory as a foundation for system design carries with it an agenda of discipline and control over organization members' actions. I begin with a brief review of the language/action perspective introduced by Winograd, Flores and their colleagues, focusing in particular on the categorization of speakers' intent. I then turn to some observations on the politics of categorization and, with that framework as background, consider the attempt, through THE COORDINATOR, to implement a technological system for intention-accounting within organizations. Finally, I suggest the implications of the analysis presented in the paper for the politics of CSCW systems design.

Key words. Coordination technologies, organizational communications, speech act theory, systems design.

No idea is more provocative in controversies about technology and society than the notion that technical things have political qualities. At issue is the claim that machines, structures, and systems of modern material culture can be accurately judged not only for their contributions to efficiency and productivity . . . but also for the ways in which they can embody specific forms of power and authority.
Winner 1986, p. 19.

By teaching people an ontology of linguistic action, grounded in simple, universal distinctions such as those of requesting and promising, we find that they become more aware of these distinctions in their everyday work and life situations. They can simplify their dealings with others, reduce time and effort spent in conversations that do not result in action, and generally manage actions in a less panicked, confused atmosphere.
Flores *et al.* 1988, p. 158.

The world has always been in the middle of things, in unruly and practical conversation, full of action and structured by a startling array of actants and of networking and unequal collectives . . . The shape of my amodern history will have a different geometry, not of progress, but of permanent and multi-patterned interaction through which lives and worlds get built, human and unhuman.
Haraway 1991, p. 11.

1. Introduction

Since the inception of CSCW as an explicit research agenda in the early 1980's, a class of systems has been under development that attempt to structure computer-based message systems into tools for the coordination of social action. Some of these have been concerned with affording flexible support for a diverse and changing ensemble of communicative practices (for example COSMOS/Bower and Churcher 1988). Others have been aimed at using system design as a mechanism for the prescription of *a priori* forms of social behavior. Arguably the most

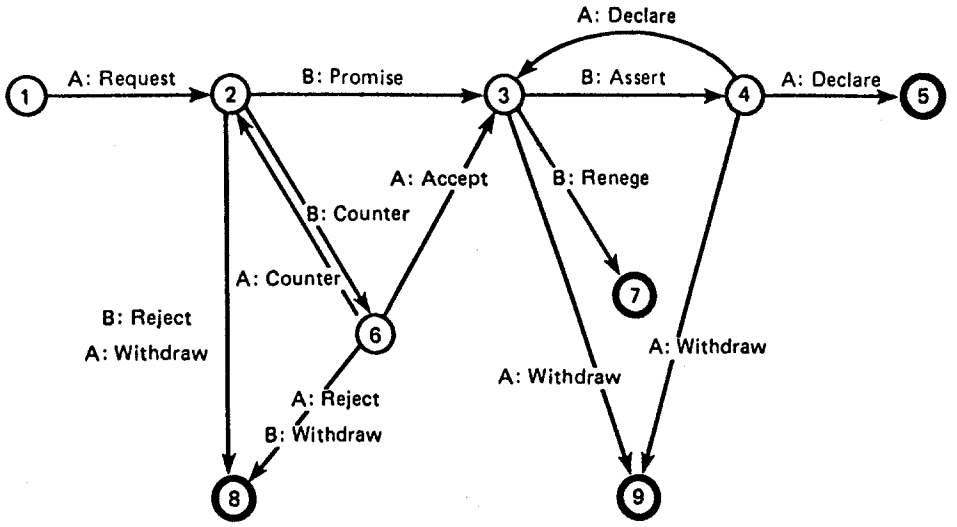

Fig.1. The basic conversation for action. (From Winograd and Flores, 1986, p. 65).

We can plot the basic course of a conversation in a simple diagram like that of Figure 5.1, in which each circle represents a possible state of the conversation and the lines represent speech acts (1986, p. 64, original emphasis).

This picture is central to Winograd and Flores' exposition and, so bears a closer look. In a paper titled "Pictures of Nothing? Visual Construals in Social Theory" (1990) Michael Lynch suggests that representations like that of "the basic conversation for action" as he puts it "both describe the operations of 'rationality' and display 'rationalistic commitments'." Such pictures, he explains:

> ... do not propose to resemble observable phenomena, nor do they present readers with puzzles to be worked out in a visible workspace. Instead, they mobilize formal elements to exhibit and authorize a certain 'impression of rationality' ...
>
> This impression of rationality is associated with at least the following formal elements: bounded labels, quasi-causal vectors, and spatial symmetries and equivalences ... The spatial separation between the labels contributes to a sense of their conceptual discrimination, and the coherent two-dimensional arrangement provides a unitary 'ground' for linking together the heterogeneous factors ... The labels are detached from the relative seamlessness and polysemy of discursive writing, taking on the appearance of stable concepts or even of names for things positioned in space ... The entire array of cells and vectors in the picture look somewhat like an electrical wiring diagram; a