

Negotiation of Epistemic Territories and Collaborative Learning in Workplace Interactions: The Case of Requests for Assistance

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Abstract: Vocational learning processes within interaction are poorly documented in the scientific literature. Difficulties lie in the need to identify “observables” that provide access to the interactional ingredients of learning processes as well as to the dynamic transformation of practices. In line with research work that focuses on epistemic asymmetries within interaction, we propose here to examine situations where novice professionals encounter difficulties and thus call upon their colleagues, more or less experienced, to ask for help. Building upon research work on the critical concept of “epistemic territories” as it has been developed within Conversational Analysis, we will highlight how request sequences for assistance project upcoming possible instructional activity. We are therefore interested in informal vocational learning situations that take place independently of a curriculum, and in the interactional processes that constitute them.

A conversation-analytic approach of epistemics

We are interested in work situations where novice professionals encounter difficulties and thus call upon their colleagues to ask for help. We are therefore interested in informal vocational learning situations and in the interactional processes that constitute them. But how can a conversation-analytic approach usefully document learning processes in the workplace?

At a methodological level, the purpose of a conversation analytical approach (Mondada, 2013) is to provide insights into the organization of human interactional practices. These practices carry different pragmatic meaning that can be grasped through the analysis of verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Interactional analysis aims to group these practices, compare them and identify, for a given context, what brings them together and what opposes them. By identifying social functions of professional practices, conversation analysis reveals patterns of actions, namely, interactional strategies mobilized by participants in a work situation for all practical purposes. These patterns of actions then represent situated responses to practical problems that participants encounter moment after moment within the interaction. It is worth noting here that the interest in studying language practices leads to the need for audiovisual recordings and their fine-grained transcription.

Research work of the sociologist John Heritage on “epistemic territories” has particularly caught our attention (Heritage, 2012). The concept of “epistemic territories” refers to the set of theoretical and practical knowledge implemented within participants action: *“epistemic territories embrace what is known, how it is known, and persons' rights and responsibilities to know it”* (2012, p. 5-6).

Beyond the sequential and temporal organization of the interaction, Heritage’s work raises the knowledge issue as an interactional resource. He shows that any situated action is always based on the belief in a shared knowledge. Shared knowledge primarily concerns the different grammatically possible and socially acceptable ways of producing statements with unambiguous pragmatic value, depending on the speaker's knowledge about the status and knowledge of the other person. Thus, the same idea will not be expressed in the same way depending on whether you are addressing a colleague or a friend, someone who is an expert in the field or someone who knows nothing about what a particular idea or action implies and so on. Shared knowledge is not considered as an abstract cognitive process but it is analysed through the choices that are made and actions initiated by participants within an ongoing activity. Heritage's work has shown that shared knowledge is salient within interaction when tensions or discrepancies are observed between what is expected and what participants effectively achieve. Tensions are observed through the ways participants will either thematize a particular issue or treat it within interaction by reorganizing their activity by means of, among other things, reformulations, and sequences of explanations or evaluations.

Several key distinctions in Heritage’s recent work provide analytical tools that allow us to address the issue of interactional workplace learning processes. He distinguishes the “epistemic status” (linked to the socio-professional category of the participant) from the “epistemic stance more knowledgeable K+ versus less knowledgeable K-” (linked to the roles actually embodied by the professional within the interaction). The distinction between epistemic stance and epistemic status is important since, in action, one does not always coincide with the other. In other words, someone who has the status of expert does not always act or is not always identified as an expert (Mondada, 2013).

Data

Data were collected in an insurance call centre in France over five days, for a total of thirty hours of video recordings. We filmed two teleprospectors with two cameras and a call recorder. The team is quite heterogeneous in terms of professional experience within this service. This is particularly interesting for our study, since it abounds with moments when teleoperators encounter "new" situations that are more or less problematic and for which they call upon the expertise of their team leader or colleagues.

Analysis

The collection of excerpts on which we have worked documents requests for assistance when teleoperators face practical problems where they do not know how to answer a customer's question or encounter difficulties in applying a specific technical procedure. Systematically, these requests to co-workers are formulated "by turning off the microphone", which prevents the client from hearing the exchanges between professionals. Requests for assistance are the subject of several studies in the field of conversational analysis (Kendrick and Drew, 2016). In our study, we examine sequences of requests for assistance in the light of the participants' epistemic territories within interaction. We focus our attention on moments when a teleoperator presents an inadequacy in terms of professional knowledge with regard to the customer on the phone. We show that in the context of human service professions, this type of problem and its resolution can be problematic. In the following excerpt LOU is the teleoperator, YAN the manager and TEO the customer (shortened excerpt). TEO makes an appointment following LOU's call. He asks to send him confirmation through a text message but LOU does not know if this is possible. She turns off the microphone and questions her manager Yan (see Table 1).

Table 1: Transcript and analysis

| Transcript | Analysis |
|---|--|
| 9 LOU can we send an sms confirmation? | Question |
| 10 YAN uh no | Answer |
| 11 LOU do we send a letter\= | Relaunch, looking for another way to confirm |
| 12 YAN =he is online? | Request for clarification |
| 13 LOU yeah | Answer |
| 14 YAN he just notes uh the appointment | Solution |
| 15 LOU he just notes? we send nothing? | Confirmation request |
| 16 YAN no we send nothing | Answer |

What we find in our data is not simply about imitating or reproducing the different steps of a task. Indeed, a common conceptualization of the work and adherence to its organizing principles are necessary to transform LOU's K- stance to a K+. However, in a work situation, this conceptualization rarely involves traditional means of training such as anticipation, explanation, description, and so on. Our study shows how professionals make their actions visible and intelligible to their colleagues within disruptive moments.

Conclusion

The analysis of participants relative epistemic positions (greater knowledge K+) versus (lesser knowledge K-) over the course of the interaction, as well as of the participation framework that they configure, aim to document interactional traces of implementing professional practices of others and deepen thus our understanding of the learning processes in work situations as they occur in interactions between more or less experienced professionals (Koschman, 2013).

References

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