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Establishing joint decisions in a dyad

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Abstract

This study analyzes joint decisions. Drawing on video-recorded planning meetings in a workplace context as data, and on conversation analysis as a method, I investigate what is needed for a proposal to get turned into a joint decision: how do people negotiate the outcome of the decision-making processes in terms of whether they indeed comprise new decisions and whether these decisions are really joint ones? This study identifies three essential components in arriving at *joint decisions* (access, agreement, commitment), and discusses two other possible outcomes of decision-making processes – *non-decisions*, and *unilateral decisions* – as being a direct result of the deployment of the same components. These observations help explain the exact mechanisms involved in approving and rejecting proposals in joint decision-making settings, as well as the ways in which people may negotiate their rights and obligations to participate in decision-making processes.

Keywords

access, acquiescence, agreement, commitment, conversation analysis, decision-making, indirectness, participation, proposals, workplace meetings

Introduction

Everyday life is full of joint decision-making such as where to go for a holiday, what to buy as a birthday present for a child, when to go for lunch, etc. Regardless of the topic of decision-making, for any joint decision to be reached, someone needs first to make a proposal about what could be done.[1] Two examples of proposals are provided below. Extract 1 is from an everyday conversation; Extract 2 is from a school management meeting.

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(1)(Davidson, 1984: 114)
Maybe we could  get tuhgether that night er something.
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(2)(Huisman, 2001: 73)
I've got another question uhm (.) <whether we:: may
consider> (.) to purchase a little uh copy machine
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In a proposal, a speaker, prototypically, names a course of action suggesting that this be realized (Houtkoop, 1987; Meier, 1997). Importantly, however, the actualization of the proposed future action is presented as contingent upon the recipient's (or recipients') approval. In other words, when making a proposal, a person suggests that at least one person other than the proposer him/herself has the right and obligation to be involved in the decision-making process (Charles et al., 1997). In this respect, to the extent to which proposals are seen as directives (Tykkyläinen and Laakso, 2009), they represent 'mild' attempts to determine future actions – in contrast to stronger attempts enacted through 'orders' and 'commands' (Searle, 1976: 11). Moreover, proposals differ from 'informings' and 'announcements' in which the speaker may refer to decisions that someone, for example, the speaker his/herself, has *already* made. Furthermore, proposals are different from what we might call 'suggestions' or 'advice' – actions in which the recipient has the ultimate responsibility to decide whether or not to acquiesce in the future action recommended by his co-participant (Sarangi and Clarke, 2002; Vehviläinen, 2003, 2009). In other words, when making proposals, people do not decide on the matters themselves, nor do they leave them for others to decide on. Instead, they invite others to approve what has been proposed and suggest that the decisions should be reached together.

Clearly, a proposal is not yet a joint decision but something needs to be done for the joint decision to emerge. This article focuses on the interactional procedures in accomplishing this shift. Sometimes the entire decision-making process consists of the sequence between a proposal and a joint decision. This is when someone makes a proposal 'out of the blue' and that proposal is then evaluated positively by others (Stasser and Stewart, 1992). However, such a sequence can also be merely the end part of a longer problem-solving process (Tallman et al., 1993).

The emergence of joint decisions has been a central topic in social psychological inquiry. Researchers have, for example, suggested different sequential models of group-decision development (Bales and Strodtbeck, 1951; Dewey, 1910; Fisher, 1970; Poole and Roth, 1989) and considered the social influences that people exert on each other during their decision-making processes (Brodbeck et al., 2007; Festinger, 1954; Hall, 1971; Janis, 1989; Stasser and Stewart, 1992; Tyler and Lind, 1992). However, less attention has been paid to the exact interactional mechanisms that people use to turn – or not turn – proposals into joint decisions. While some proposals get approved or rejected, this is not always the case. Especially in informal decision-making settings, many proposals never lead to a joint decision – neither to an approval, nor to an overt rejection.

It is this vulnerable aspect of the decision-making sequences that I attempt to address in this study. Drawing on video-recorded interactions in a setting in which two professionals in different fields discuss their joint future work tasks, I will investigate what is needed for joint decisions to become established in interaction. My data suggest that joint decisions emerge when the recipient:

- establishes *access* to the content of the proposal,
- expresses *agreement* with the proposer's views, and
- displays *commitment* to the proposed future action.

These three components play important roles when participants negotiate the outcome of decision-making sequences in terms of whether they comprise decisions or not and whether these decisions are actually joint ones or not. As I will demonstrate, there are three different outcomes of decision-making processes – 1) *joint decisions*, 2) *non-decisions*, and 3) *unilateral decisions* – each of which is a direct result of the deployment of these components.

Data and method

The data of this study are drawn from a dataset of 15 video-recorded planning meetings where pastors and cantors discuss their joint work tasks (10 h). The data were collected in seven congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland. Most of these meetings are dyads, with 15 different pastors and 10 different cantors. The data were transcribed according to the conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (Schegloff, 2007) and analyzed with conversation analysis – an inductive, data-driven approach to study how people perform mutually intelligible actions in the sequential unfolding of interaction (Heritage, 1984; Schegloff, 2007).

The decision-making in the planning meetings between the pastors and cantors resembles both the everyday decision-making in families and the more formal decision-making in organizational meetings. As in family interactions, there is neither a strict interactional agenda, nor a chairperson facilitating the emergence of decisions. But like organizational meetings, the participants generally expect some decision-making to take place. The participants' ways of dealing with the established decisions might also be more 'serious' than in typical family encounters: participants usually write down the decisions on their notepads immediately after each decision has been reached.[2] Notably, even if pastors and cantors have their distinct rights and responsibilities in certain domains of power and expertise (such as the cantor has in the domain of music), these are also negotiable in interaction – just like in families (Goodwin, 2006) and organizational meetings (Asmuss and Oshima, 2012). Thus, while the participants' institutional roles are sometimes reflected in the recurrent patterns of the present data, in this study, they are nonetheless not assigned an explanatory status in accounting for interaction (however, see Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2012).

This article is based on a collection of 297 decision-making sequences which are initiated by one of the participants making a proposal. Most of these proposals are 'remote proposals' (Houtkoop, 1987) – that is, proposals to carry out actions sometime after the current interaction; they concern issues such as church hymns, choir songs, and their placement in the liturgy. Thus, unlike the situations in which people propose actions to be performed immediately in interaction (e.g. *let's start eating*) and the approval of that proposal can be demonstrated by acting as has been proposed (e.g, eating), the remote proposals require that the participants establish joint decisions through actions *other* than those that have been proposed (Lindström, 1999). This study is essentially about these 'other' actions.

The focus of this analysis is on the overall trajectories of decision-making sequences: what happens between proposals and their different outcomes? While the recognizability of some utterances as 'proposals' depends mainly upon their linguistic design, there might also be linkages between different ways in which an utterance is designed to be recognizable as a proposal and the different outcomes of proposal sequences. However, this issue could not be addressed within the scope of this article (however, see Stevanovic, submitted).

Approving a proposal: Joint decision

Joint decisions become established when the recipient approves the first speaker's proposal. Let us begin by considering these approving responses to determine their components.

The participants in Extract 3 are trying to find a suitable praise hymn for the next Sunday's mass. Previously, they have discussed several alternatives but decided not to select them. Thus, at the beginning of the fragment, they are still browsing their hymnals. The pastor's proposal for the praise hymn (l. 1) is initiated by the word *entäs*, 'what about', which implies a connection to the participants' earlier talk.

```
(3)(M5SHLT 17:07)
01 P:     ↑entäs tää  kolkytkolme.
           PRT   this thirty.three
          ↑what about this thirty-three.

02        (0.3) ((C turns the pages of her Hymnal to find the hymn.))

03        sitä   ↑vähä harvemmil   lauletaan.
          it-PAR little rarely-COMP sing-PASS
          people sing it more rarely.

04 C:     no  ↑mää katoin   ↑ihan tuota     samaa.
          PRT I    look-PST  PRT   that-PAR same-PAR
          oh ↑I was looking at ↑exactly the same one.

05 C:     joo.
          yea.

06 P:     °joo.°
          °yea.°

07 C:     no  ↑otetaan   [se.]
          PRT  take-PASS  it
              let's take [it.]

08 P:                    [(-)]

09 C:     jo[o.]
          ye[a.]

10 P:     [ko]konaan.
          [as] a whole.
```

```
11 C:    joo.
         yea.

12       (5.0) ((P and C are writing.))
```

In response to the pastor's proposal (l. 1), the cantor turns the pages of her hymnal to find the hymn in question (l. 2), that is, to see what the pastor's proposal is about. Then, perhaps in response to the fact that the cantor has, however, not yet responded, the pastor offers a short account for why this particular hymn would be a good choice (l. 3). This time, the cantor, who by now has found the hymn in her hymnal, responds immediately by asserting that she herself has been considering the same hymn (l. 4). The cantor's utterance is delivered with the prosodic features of 'heightened emotive involvement' (Selting, 1994). This enthusiastic prosody, combined with the lexical content of the utterance and the ensuing claim of acceptance with the particle *joo* 'yea' (l. 5), conveys the cantor's positive stance towards what has been proposed.

However, the decision regarding the hymn has still not yet been made. Therefore, the cantor subsequently suggests that the participants actually select the hymn proposed by the pastor (l. 7). Furthermore, the particle *no*, at the beginning of the cantor's turn, can be heard as indicating some kind of transition in the interaction (Raevaara, 1989). And indeed, now, after the participants have committed themselves to selecting the hymn (ll. 7–11), they also write down that decision (l. 12).

In Extract 4, the participants have previously agreed upon the final hymn of an upcoming church event: they would sing two last verses of a well-known spring hymn. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the fragment, the pastor proposes that they would also sing the first verse (l. 1). The pastor's proposal contains a finite verb in the passive form, which acts as a first-person plural in cases such as this. Thereby, it formulates the action, the act of taking, as a joint action. But, importantly, it is an interrogative, asking for the recipient's stance.

```
(4)(LKS 28:29)
01 P:    otetaanks (.) myös (.) ykköne,
         take-PASS-Q   also      one
         shall we take (.) also (.) the first verse,

02       (3.0) ((The cantor is browsing her Hymnal.))

03 C:    ♪taas kukka:si:lla: ku:[kku-u:la:t♪]
         ♪the hi:lls a:re fu:ll [of flo:wers♪]

04 P:                            [.thh se kyl   ] sopis
                                      it PRT      fit-COND
                            [.tch also that] first one

05       toi    ykkönenkis   siih[e,
         that   one-CLI      it-ILL
         would certainly fit  ther[e,

06 C:                             [↑o:tetaan sitten
                                    take-PASS PRT
                            [↑le:t's take (it) then
```

```
07        sit se saa tulee se kevätkim   mukaa. hha[h
          PRT it get come  it spring-CLI along
          then it gets also the spring will be included. hha[h

08 P:                                                      [nii.
                                                           [yea.
                                          (P and C are writing.))
```

In response to the pastor's proposal, the cantor looks up the hymn in her hymnal (l. 2) and starts to sing its first verse (l. 3). By singing, the cantor has not yet taken a stance on the pastor's idea – something that the pastor seems to pursue by repeating her proposal (ll. 4–5; Pomerantz, 1984b). While redoing her proposal, the pastor seems to orient to the cantor's potential reluctance with her idea: she uses the particle *kyllä*, 'certainly', which conveys an attempt to remove the recipient's doubts about the proposed idea (Hakulinen, 2001), as well as the clitic particle *–ki*, 'also', which implies that 'taking the first verse' is not the only possible course of action. Subsequently, through a turn that is formatted as a response to the pastor's proposal (*otetaanks*, 'shall we take' – *otetaan*, 'let's take'), the cantor gives her consent to the pastor's proposal (ll. 6–7). Nevertheless, the cantor's turn also contains an element of concession (note the particle *sitten*, 'then'), which suggests that the cantor has indeed harbored some reservations concerning the pastor's idea. However, the cantor also offers an account for why she has acquiesced in the proposed plan (l. 7). Thereafter, as the pastor displays her agreement with the cantor's account (l. 8), the participants write down the decision (l. 8).

In both of the extracts above, the participants establish joint decisions very quickly. This is the case even if the recipients display quite different stances towards the first speakers' proposals: in Extract 3, the recipient's stance is rather enthusiastic and, in Extract 4, it is somewhat reserved. However, several similar components exist in Extracts 3 and 4. These, I argue, are of crucial importance when participants establish joint decisions.

First, in both cases, the recipients orient to whether they have *access* to the subject matter of the first speaker's proposal: they begin browsing their hymnals to determine what the proposal is about. In Extract 4, the cantor also starts singing the melody of the proposed hymn. As a result, in both cases, the recipients somehow implicate that whatever they will subsequently say will be based on the participants' common knowledge of the content of the first speakers' proposals.

Second, after the recipients, in both Extracts 3 and 4, have understood what the first speakers' proposals have entailed, they display their *agreement* with the first speakers' views.[3] In Extract 3, this agreement is partially attributable to the enthusiastic prosodic delivery of the recipient's response (l. 4) – something that certainly communicates the cantor's independent positive evaluation of the pastor's idea (Heritage and Raymond, 2005; Ogden, 2006). However, the lexical content of the turn also contributes implicitly to the same line of action: indeed, the cantor herself might have proposed the same hymn if the pastor had not managed to suggest it first. In Extract 4, then again, the same element of positive evaluation is apparent in the latter part of the cantor's response to the pastor's proposal (l. 7). By accounting for her ultimate choice to go along with the pastor's idea, the cantor makes it clear that, despite her reservations with the pastor's idea,

| PROPOSAL | → | ACCESS | → | AGREEMENT | → | COMMITMENT |

Figure 1. The way from a proposal to a joint decision.

she is not mechanically acquiescing in the proposed plan but has an independent reason for accepting it.

The third common element in both Extracts 3 and 4 is the recipients orienting to some future actions to be performed on the basis of the proposals and the recipients' displays of *commitment* to these actions. In both cases, such commitment is displayed in distinct turns at talk (Extract 3: l. 7; Extract 4: l. 6). Thereafter, as a final demonstration of the firm commitments by the participants, they write down the decisions.

In short, the recipients in Extracts 3 and 4 establish access to the subject matter of the proposal, express their agreement with the proposers' views, and display commitment to the proposed future actions. These three components of an approving response to a proposal can thus be seen as constitutive features of a joint decision. The additional fact that, in these cases, the decision-making sequences were brought to closure by the participants writing down the decisions can be seen as a further demonstration of the participants' commitment to the proposed future actions and/or as a practical consequence of the decisions having emerged: the participants need to remember them.

In some cases, as in Extracts 3 and 4, the decisions become established rather quickly. In other cases, this may take more time; each of the above-mentioned components can become a separate focus during the decision-making sequence. While these components do not always need to assume the same chronological order, beginning with access and ending with commitment (see Extract 4, in which the recipient displayed commitment to the proposed future action before she had expresses why the proposed idea would be good), these components will remain evident as being hierarchically ordered. This means that access is a precondition for agreement and agreement is a precondition for commitment (see Figure 1).

Abandoning the proposal: Non-decision

As has been mentioned, the approving responses to proposals, through which joint decisions become established, involve three distinct components: access, agreement, and commitment. Nonetheless, if a proposal is abandoned before these components have been completed, the proposal is rejected de facto. Thus, between 1) proposal and access, 2) access and agreement, and 3) agreement and commitment, there are junctures at which this may indeed happen.

Between proposal and access

In Extracts 3 and 4, access was an issue that the recipients oriented to as being necessary to address first. Sometimes the proposers may also try to provide the recipients with all

the needed information regarding the content of their proposals. However, as will be demonstrated in the following data extract, if the recipient does not publicly acknowledge his/her access to what the proposal is about, the participants cannot proceed in the process of turning the first speaker's proposal into a joint decision.

In Extract 5, the participants have previously discussed a hymn to be sung in the next Sunday's mass. At the beginning of the fragment, the cantor proposes a change in the role of the hymn in the mass: it could replace the thank prayer (ll. 1–2; note the rise in pitch at the beginning of the word *kiitosrukousvirsi*, 'a thank prayer hymn', as well as the clitic particle, *–ki* that can be used to connect the utterance to something that, in its context, is against the prevailing expectations (see Hakulinen et al., 2004).

```
(5)(M5SHLT 8:00)
01 C:    mitä     jos se oiski  kato
         what-PAR if  it be-CLI PRT
         what if  it would be see

02       ↑kiitosrukousvirsikiitosrukous,
         thank.prayer.hymn.thank.prayer
         a ↑thank prayer hymn thank prayer, ((C turns to gaze P.))

03       (1.3) ((C browses her Hymnal.))

04 C:    eiku hetkinem mites se oli,
         PRT  moment   how   it be-PST
         no but wait a minute how was it,

05       (1.6) ((C leans backwards and looks at P.))

06 C:    onks semmost     versioo     nyt
         is-Q that.kind.of version-PAR PRT
         is that kind of a version

07       enää    ees  käytössä.
         anymore even in.use
         even anymore in use.

08 P: -> ai  mikä,
         PRT what
         what,

09 C:    siis se että on se (0.4)
         PRT  it PRT  be it
         I mean that there's the (0.4)

10       virsikiitosrukous jotenki (.) yhdistetty
         Thank Prayer Hymn somehow (.) combined

11       siihen (1.0) loppuylistykseen.
         it-ILL       final.praise-ILL
         with that (1.0) Final Praise.

12 P: -> heh ₤em    mä  muista    enää₤,
             NEG-1 SG1 remember anymore
         heh ₤I don't remember anymore₤,
```

```
13 C:    £↑n£ii,
         £↑y£ea,

14       (0.5)

15 C:    niim mutta mum mielestä  ainakim
         yea  but    in my opinion at least

16       maijal oli joku tämmöne,
         Maija  had something like this,
```

At the beginning of this fragment, the participants are sitting side-by-side, looking at their hymnals. However, while making her proposal, the cantor turns her gaze to the pastor (l. 2) –something that works to increase the 'pressure' on the pastor to respond (Stivers and Rossano, 2010). Despite that, the cantor's proposal is met with silence (l. 3), and thereafter, the cantor displays doubt concerning her proposal (ll. 4–7). Her utterance in prefaced with *eiku*, 'no but', which implies that the speaker is about to abandon or at least to postpone her prior action (Laakso and Sorjonen, 2010). So, it seems that the cantor is searching for a warrant for what she has proposed. Then, instead of responding to the cantor's question (ll. 6–7), the pastor initiates a repair (l. 8), which, due to the nominative case of the question word *mikä*, 'what', targets a prior nominative case word, and the only such word in the cantor's prior talk is the one in line 2: the 'thank prayer hymn thank prayer'.[4] As a consequence, the pastor implicates that there has been a problematic element in the cantor's proposal – something that the pastor cannot access (l. 8).

Subsequently, the cantor offers information to help the pastor identify what the proposal is about (ll. 9–11). However, instead of identifying the matter in question, the pastor claims to have forgotten about it (l. 12). Thereby, she refers to the fact that she has been off duty for several months (note the word *enää*, 'anymore') – something that the participants have discussed earlier in the meeting. On the other hand, by producing her utterance with laughter and a smile, she indicates that her claim is not to be taken completely seriously. This is also reflected in the way the cantor receives the pastor's claim of forgetfulness (l. 13): while the particle *nii*, 'yea', implies that the cantor can understand why the pastor might not remember (Sorjonen, 2001), the cantor's way of producing the particle with a high pitch and a hint of a smile at the beginning of the token conveys her recognition of the lack of seriousness in the pastor's prior turn. Nonetheless, in her subsequent turns, the cantor implies that the pastor should actually remember the matter (ll. 15–16). Thus, she seems to have interpreted the pastor's turn in line 12 as an objection against what she said in lines 9–11: she presents evidence for what she said, while starting her turn with a preface that formulates the turn as a disagreement (*niim mutta*, 'yea but'). Subsequently, however, the cantor abandons her proposal (not shown in the transcript).

Hence, in Extract 5, the pastor's responsive actions contained two different indications that she lacked access to what the cantor's proposal was about: 1) a repair initiator (l. 8), which treated an element in the cantor's proposal as problematic, and 2) a somewhat non-serious claim of not remembering (l. 12), which marked the cantor's previous attempts to clarify her proposal as something not worthy of further consideration. Thereby, the participants' opportunities to engage in joint decision-making on the basis of the cantor's proposal were effectively blocked.

Between access and agreement

After access has been established, the recipient knows what is being talked about. But the next question is: what does the recipient think about the proposer's idea? Indeed, another critical juncture at which a proposal can be abandoned occurs immediately after the recipient has accessed the content of the proposal, but not yet displayed his/her agreement with the proposer's views.

In Extract 6, the participants are selecting hymns for the next Sunday's mass. Previously, the pastor has asked the cantor whether there would be hymns that would reflect the season of the year that the participants are living in, the summer. Then, the cantor makes a proposal of such a hymn and refers to it by singing its melody (l. 1).

```
(6)(M5SHLT 12:26)
01 C:    mites     tää  ♫taa daa daa daa daa dada daa daa♫
         how       this
         how about this ♫taa daa daa daa daa dada daa daa♫

02 P: -> onks  (.) mikäs ↑se on.
         be-Q      what  it is
         is it (.) what is it.

03       (0.3) ((P and C browse their Hymnals.))

04 C:    .dhh (0.4) siis   joku sävel >joku<
         .dhh (0.4) I mean some melody >some<

05       jotkut  sanat   mikäs siihen on, (0.6) .hh
         some-PL word-PL what  it-ILL be
         some    lyrics what are for it, (0.6) .hh

06       kuitenkis se:,   hhm (1.5) ootas nyt. hh
         anyway     tha:t, hhm  (1.5) wait  now. hh

07       (0.8) kiitäh herraa yö ja päivä.
         (0.8) Praise the Lord the night and the day.

08 P: -> nii   se on siellä, (0.3) luomistyöstä,
         right it is there,  (0.3) from the Creation,

09       (3.7) ((P and C are looking at their hymnals.))

10 P:    ninku ↑nää     menee sitten näihin
         PRT   this-PL go    PRT     this-PL-ILL
         like  ↑these then go to these

11       heti          ↓näihin (1.7) maan helle        uuvuttaa
         immediately to these (1.7) the swelter of the earth
         exhausts

((7 lines removed, during which the pastor complains about the
hymns of the section 'Seasons of the year'.))

19       (2.6)
```

```
20 C:    siis m_iks mä en  löydä sitä
         PRT  why   I  NEG find  it-PAR
         so    wh_y can't I find that

21       kiitä  herraa  yö      ja  päivä?
         Praise the Lord the night and the day?

22       (5.0)

23 C:    ai niin  se johtuu siit mää en  osaa _aakkosia,
         oh right it is because  I don't know the _alphabets,

24       (1.2)

25 C:    kii::tä.
         prai::se.

26       (3.0)

27 C:    se on neljäkuusYKS.
         it is four-six-one.

28       (16.0)

29 C:    .hh niin no: joo. (.) siis kyllähän nää    kaikki
             PRT  PRT PRT      PRT  PRT-CLI  this-PL all
         .hh well yea:.    (.) well certainly all of these
```

In response to the cantor's proposal, the pastor initiates a 'pre-second' insert expansion (Schegloff, 2007). In other words, she seeks to 'establish the resources necessary to implement the second pair part which is pending' (Schegloff, 2007: 106). The cantor's subsequent response (ll. 4–7) indeed helps the pastor recognize what the proposal is about: she identifies quite precisely the section of the hymnal in which the hymn can be found (l. 8). Yet, after a relatively long silence during which the participants are reading their hymnals (l. 9), the pastor changes the topic (ll. 10–11): she begins to complain about the hymns of the section 'Seasons of the year', hymns that she most probably has just been scrutinizing (note the demonstratives *nää*, 'these', and *näihin*, 'to these'), but does not make any reference to the hymn (from another section, 'Creation') proposed by the cantor. The pastor thus makes it clear that the previous sequence has been brought to a closure. Subsequently, the cantor makes several attempts to keep the previous sequence 'alive' (ll. 20–27), but the pastor does not return to the cantor's proposal. After a long silence (l. 28), the cantor finally admits that other hymns would also suit the present purpose (l. 29).

To conclude what occurred in Extract 6, the proposal was abandoned between access and agreement. The recipient dealt with the issue of access: she initiated a 'pre-second' insert expansion to obtain the information needed for her to be able to evaluate the subject matter of the first speaker's proposal, as it were, independently. Nonetheless, after that access was established and the recipient's display of agreement became due, the recipient changed the topic.

Now, one might ask whose task it actually is, after the pastor's acknowledgement of the cantor's information as satisfactory (l. 8), to initiate the return to the 'main business', the joint decision-making? According to the rules of sequential relevance, the matter seems to be rather straightforward: since it is the cantor who made the proposal, a first pair-part, it is the pastor who should produce a second pair-part: an approval of the proposal. However, as Jefferson (1972: 324) has noted, in a conversation, the 'job that includes doing returns' is normally assigned to a 'volunteer', that is, to the participant who cares the most about for the previous line of action. Thus, in Extract 6, the mere fact that the pastor did *not* make such a return might have foreshadowed her disagreement with the cantor's idea. And then, perhaps sensitive to exactly these implications of the pastor's (lack of) conduct, the cantor also refrained from resuming her previous line of action.

Between agreement and commitment

Participants may have established common access to what the proposal is about. They may have established agreement with each other's views concerning the proposed idea. But is that enough? It is one matter to praise the positive qualities of some item, but a different matter to commit oneself to some action on the basis of these positive qualities. This commitment is frequently conveyed in a turn that is separate from the agreement. And, between agreement and commitment, lies yet another critical juncture at which proposals can be abandoned.

In Extract 7, the participants are selecting hymns for the mass that they will celebrate during their visit to a Finnish congregation in Germany and they are looking for a suitable opening hymn for it. At the beginning of the fragment, the cantor makes an assertion about the 'fineness' of a certain hymn (ll. 1–2), which, in this activity framework, can be heard as a proposal (Levinson, 1992).

```
(7)(MT 22:17)
01 C:     jeesus kuuler ruk#ouksetkin
          HymnTitle-CLI
          also Jesus hear my #prayer

02        on hieno#, (0.5) #tämmönen#,
          be fine            this.kind.of
          is fine#, (0.5) #this kind of#,

03        (0.7)

04 P:     th  miten se menee se melodia.
              how  it go    it melody
          tch how does the melody go.

05        (0.8)

06 C:     ♪tii:::di: ♪  (.)♪tu:du:du:du:dyy::dyymm♪

07        (0.6) ♪tii:::du:di:di:di:di:

08        dii[::::♪                    ]
```

```
 09 P:         [no  se on ihan tunnet]tu  joo.
                PRT it be PRT  well-known PRT
               [that's  pretty well-k]nown yea.

 10           (2.4) ((C browses her hymnal in order to find the hymn.))

 11 P:        mut ei  kuitenkaal liian usein.
              but NEG however    too   often
              but it hasn't still been sung

 12           (0.9) ((C finds the hymn.))

 13 C:        ♬dyy[:::::::dy:]dy:y♬

 14 P:            [veisattu. ]
                   sing-PPPC
                  [too often.]

 15 C:        tiedätkö    tän,
              do you  know this, ((C shows the hymn from her hymnal to P.))

 16           (2.0) ((P leans forward to see the hymn.))

 17 C:        tää  on muuten      m::uutem  <↑maasalon##>
              this be by.the.way by.the.way ComposerName-GEN
              by the way by the way this is of Maasalo

 18           et  siinä  mieles    on hieno et  suom#alaine#
              PRT it-ESS sense-INE be great PRT Finnish
              so in that sense it's fine that it is Finnish

((8 lines removed, during which C refers to the Finnishness of
the hymn as one of its major positive qualities.))

 27 C:        ois    jot#ain? tämmöst         kotimaistakin#,
              be-COND something this.kind.of-PAR domestic-PAR-CLI
              there would be som#ething this kind of domestic#,

 28 P:        tota::, ehhh niin. (.) toi  on tulluv virsikirjaav
              erm::,  nhhh yeah. (.) that has come   into the hymnal

 29           vasta kaheksan kuus mut se kuulostaa
              only  in eighty-six but it sounds
```

As in Extract 6, likewise in this case, the pastor invites the cantor to assist in establishing access to the content of the proposal (l. 4). After the cantor has offered her assistance (ll. 6–8), the pastor claims recognition of the hymn and assesses it in positive terms: first, he asserts that the hymn is well-known (l. 9) and, after a pause, when the cantor browses her hymnal to find the hymn in question (l. 10), he adds that the hymn is not too worn-out (ll. 11, 14). Thereby, the pastor completes the component of agreement – that is, he implies that the hymn is certainly worth being proposed. (Indeed, the pastor sees the hymn as satisfying two of the most commonly used criteria that the participants in my data use when they select hymns.) Then, after having located the hymn in her hymnal (l. 12), the cantor shows it to the pastor (l. 15).

Even if the pastor has acknowledged the positive qualities of the hymn, he has still not suggested that anything be done on the basis of these assessments. Subsequently, the cantor refers to the Finnishness of the hymn as one of its major redeeming qualities (ll. 17–27). However, instead of steering the interaction towards a joint decision, the pastor inquires about the origins of the hymn, which is followed by the cantor initiating a new topic (not shown in the transcript). Thus, despite the seemingly positive terms in which the pastor evaluates the hymn proposed by the cantor, likewise in this case, the proposal does not lead to a decision.

As has been demonstrated in Extracts 5–7, proposal sequences involve several junctures that offer the recipients an opportunity to steer the course of interaction in the direction of 'non-decisions' (Lukes, 2005: 634–635). At each of these junctures, the participants orient to the normative expectation that it is primarily the task of the *recipient* to forward the sequence into the direction of a decision. In this way the proposers may stay assured that the emerging decisions (inasmuch as they indeed emerge) are genuinely joint ones – that is, the proposers have not imposed their plans on the recipients. Even if this means that the proposals may be abandoned, this is, however, the price that the proposers need to pay if they do not want to make their decisions alone.

However, in Extracts 5–7, there is a further reason for the recipients to abandon the first speakers' proposals: the recipients' first responses to the proposals were questions – attempts to obtain information needed to respond to the proposals.[5] Thus, by doing these actions, which were thoroughly 'legitimate' in this particular sequential context, the recipients began to move away from needing to respond. Whether or not this manner of acting was strategic is something that cannot be judged on the basis of my data. However, what my data *do* show is that these kinds of moves make it possible for the recipients to abandon the first speakers' proposals without them becoming accountable for doing that.

Displaying acquiescence: Unilateral decision

As has been discussed previously, the basic mechanism for reaching non-decisions is abandoning the proposal before all the components of access, agreement, and commitment are completed. In such instances, the proposals are rejected de facto – without the recipients needing to go 'on record' for that rejection. Now, let us turn to a mechanism that is responsible for the emergence of unilateral decisions as an outcome of proposal sequences. This mechanism is likewise based on deploying the components of access, agreement, and commitment: a unilateral decision is achieved by the recipient bypassing either access or agreement (or both) while acquiescing in the first speaker's plan.

Bypassing access

Let us consider an instance in which the recipient bypasses the component of access while still leading the interaction towards a decision. In Extract 8, the participants are about to start their meeting that concerns preparations for the following Sunday's mass. Previously, the pastor has merely noticed the theme of that day. At the beginning of the fragment, the cantor initiates talk about the opening music of the mass: he reports what a

choir leader called Simo has proposed (ll. 4–7; *Simo sano et hän vois*, 'Simo said that he could', l. 4; *hän itte esitti et*, 'he himself suggested that', l. 5). Even if the cantor thereby takes a slight distance from the content of the proposal, the mere fact that the cantor reports Simo's views indicates that he himself is not rejecting them. Instead, he uses them as support for his own, more specific, idea about the choir song replacing the organ prelude altogether (ll. 8–11, 13).[6] The cantor's proposal (ll. 8–11) starts with a 'zero-person construction' (*ottas*, 'one could take', l. 8), in which the one who should perform the proposed action is not being mentioned (the place of the agent phrase is marked with 0 in the gloss line). Thereby, the cantor invites the pastor to identify with the proposed action (Laitinen, 2006).

```
(8)(HM1 O:11)
01 C:    no   täs  on          tuota täs  on          nää
         well here there are erm   here there are these

02       tuota noin ni niin, (0.3) ## tota:, (0.8) siin o
         erm,                (0.3) ## erm:,  (0.8) it is there

03       heti: se kuj jumalampalvelus alkaa,    (0.7) niin niin
         as soon as the Divine Service begins, (0.7) so erm

04       tämä:, (0.6) #ää# ainakin  tää  simo sano et    hän
         vois
         this:, (0.6) #er# at least this Simo said that he
         could

05       sitte johtamaan sitä kuoroo nii hän itte   esitti
         et
         then  lead      that choir  so  he  himself suggested
         that

06       eiks     tää  suomeni armas   vois laulaa alkuun,
         couldn't this My dear Finland be sung     at the
         beginning,

07       .hhhh sillai että (.) ottas   huomioon            sitte,
         .hhhh so     that (.) we would take into consideration then,

08       hh ottas      täst     vaikka vaikka alkusoitoks ni,
            0 take-COND from.here PRT    PRT    prelude-TRA PRT
         hh we could take from here say say as a prelude,

09       (0.3) nii:n tää:n   soiton      tilalle   niin ni
               PRT   this-GEN playing-GEN place-ALL PRT  PRT
         (0.3) like instead of playing

10       kaks <säkeistöö> vaan että suomeni       maa
         two  verse-PAR    PRT  PRT  Finland-POSS-1 country
         just two <verses> like My dear Finland

11       taikka, .hhhhh ja  sitten tämä äitini kallis.
         or,     .hhhhh and then   this My dear mother
```

```
   12 P:    joo,=
            yea,=

   13 C:    =siihen niin sit tulis     alkuvirsi.
             it-ILL PRT  PRT come-COND opening.hymn
            =there so then there would be the opening hymn.

   14 P:    ↑joo.
            ↑yea.

   15 C:    et [tällai    tällai,  ]
            so [like this like this,]

   16 P:       [niin tää  olis    ] ninku
                PRT   this be-COND   PRT
            [so       this would be ] like

   17       alkumusiikkina    olis    tää,=
            openin.music-ESS be-COND this
            as the opening music this,=

   18 C:    joo.
            yea.

   19       (0.3)

   20 P:    .thh [s:uo- (.)] laulu    suomeni maa.
            .thh [My de- (.)] the song My dear Finland. ((P is
            writing.))

   21 C:          [et tuota, ]
                  [so erm,   ]

   22 C:    nii. (0.4) .mhhh
            yea. (0.4) .mhhh

   23       (0.7)

   24 C:    tiedäksä    mikä tää  on tämä: (.) tämä
            do you know what this is thi:s (.) this
```

The pastor responds to the cantor's proposal with two *joo*, 'yea', particles (ll. 12, 14). The latter is spoken with a strong emphasis, which suggests the pastor's increased agency in terms of her evaluating independently whether the cantor's idea is good (Stevanovic, 2012). Thereby, the pastor's response conveys the component of agreement, which again can be heard as foreshadowing commitment (Sorjonen, 2001). Subsequently, however, instead of committing herself to the proposed future action, the pastor expresses her concern about the exact content of the proposed plan by offering a candidate understanding of it (ll. 16–17; Lilja, 2010). After the cantor has confirmed this (l. 18) the pastor writes down the decision (l. 20).

However, the cantor still does not treat the sequence as closed but instead asks the pastor if she is actually familiar with the song in question (l. 24). And indeed, the pastor has not previously considered that specific choir song, neither in terms of recognizing it,

nor in terms of asking about it. She has only thought of the placement of that song in the mass (ll. 16–17) and noted its title (l. 20). It is only after a long interlude, during which the cantor has explained to the pastor the origins of that song, that the sequence is brought to closure (not shown in the transcript).

Thus, in Extract 8, the pastor acquiesced in the cantor's proposal without having thoroughly considered what the proposal was about. In response to that, the cantor pursued a more adequate response from the pastor; he encouraged the pastor to address the 'missing' component of approval: access. Without that access, the component of agreement had no real basis. Arguably, through this conduct, the cantor sought to construct the decision in question as a thoroughly joint one.

Bypassing agreement

Finally, let us turn to a case in which the recipient bypasses the component of agreement while displaying commitment to the proposed future action. The participants in Extract 9 have previously stated that the mass that they are preparing should not last more than one hour. So, the cantor makes a proposal as to how they could shorten the mass: they could leave out the closing hymn (ll. 1–2). As in Extract 8, this proposal also contains a zero-person construction (*heivais*, l. 2).

```
(9)(HTM 8:41)
01 C:   kun kirkkokuoro  nyt on ↑mukana, (1.5) niin,
        PRT church.choir now is along           PRT
        since the church choir is there, (1.5) so

02      hh (0.3) miten jos heivais          ton     loppuvirren.
                 how   if  0 drop.off-COND that-GEN
        closing.hymn-GEN
        hh (0.3) how about dropping off that closing hymn.

03      (2.7) ((C looks at P; P looks at the hymn list on a
        computer screen.))

04 P:   nii.
        yea.

05      (1.3) ((C turns to look at the same computer screen.))

06 C:   sit siit   tulee kyl pitkä et  jos:,(0.3)  kirkkokuoro
        PRT it-PAR come  PRT long   PRT if          church.choir
        then it will certainly get long if:, (0.3) the church
        choir

07      alottaa,    (0.2) sit  on           virsi,  .hh (0.2)
        sitten
        will start, (0.2) then there'll be a hymn, .hh (0.2)
        then

08      loppuvirsi      (.) kirkkokuoro      lopettaa.=
        the Closing Hymn (.) the church choir ends.=
```

```
09  P:    =mm-m.

10  C:    nii sit sekiv ve̱ny°ttää sitä   juttua,°
          PRT PRT it-CLI stretch  it-PAR thing-PAR
          so then it will also leng°hten the whole thing,°

11  P:    nii (.) niin,
          yea (.) yea,

12        (0.6)

13  P: -> no ↑jä̱tetääl  loppuvirsi        po[is, ]
          PRT leave-PASS closing-hymn     away
          then let's leave the closing hymn o[ut, ]

14  C:                                    [oisk]o    se,
                                           be-COND-Q it
                                          [woul]d it be okay,

15  P: -> otetaan siihen,   (0.3) vaan tä[ä (---)                  ]
          take-PASS it-ILL        PRT  this
          let's take there, (0.3) this th[en (---)                 ]

16  C:                                   [mää mietij    just sit]ä,
                                          I   wonder-PST PRT  it-PAR
          ((P deletes the hymn.))        [I was just wondering,  ]

((11 lines removed, during which the cantor talks about the impli-
cations that this decision has on the choir songs of the mass.))

28  C:    ja  sitte toi  rukous olet    keskellämme.
          and then  that prayer you are within us.

29        (1.0)
```

The pastor's initial response to the cantor's proposal is the particle *nii*, 'yea' (l. 4), which treats the proposed course of action as a possible course of action (Sorjonen, 2001). Thereafter, perhaps in reaction to the lengthy silences preceding (l. 3) and following (l. 5) the pastor's response, the cantor offers an account for her proposal (ll. 6–8). The pastor responds to the account first with a minimal response (l. 9), then with the particle *nii*, 'yea' (l. 11), and finally with a relatively determined display of commitment to the proposed future action (l. 13). Nonetheless, given the *no*, 'well', preface in the pastor's display of commitment, this can be heard as some kind of concession (see Raevaara, 1989). Subsequently, the cantor indeed requests the pastor's confirmation (l. 14), displaying thereby that the pastor's response has been somehow lacking. In response to the cantor's request for confirmation, the pastor makes another display of commitment to future action (l. 15) and subsequently consolidates that decision by deleting the hymn from the list of hymns that she apparently has on her computer (l. 16).[7]

At this point one might expect that the sequence would be brought to a closure. However, the pastor has not yet made it explicit whether or not she herself considers the cantor's idea as good – that is, she has not completed the component of agreement. And indeed, the cantor does not treat the sequence as closed: she moves on to talk about the

implications that this decision has on the choir songs in the mass (ll. 16–28; ll. 17–27 not included in the transcript) and then, after specifying her original plan, she asserts that her plan is a possible course of action (l. 30) – something that certainly could be responded to by a positive evaluation of it.

```
28 C:    ja  sitte toi  rukous olet    keskellämme.
         and then  that prayer you are within us.

29       (1.0)

30 C:    se vois    käydä nii.
         it can-COND go-INF PRT
         it could be like that. ((P writes on the computer.))

31       (1.6) ((P leans back in her chair.))

32 P:    [joo, ]
         [yea, ]

33 C:    [°(--)] se vois    olla   nii.°
                 it can-COND be-INF PRT
         [°(--)] it could be so.°

34       (3.0) ((P and C are looking at the hymn list on the
         computer screen.))

35 C:    sit se ei  ainakaav venyis      sillai?   sitte,
         PRT it NEG at.least stretch-COND like.that then
         then at least it would not be lengthened like that,

36       (2.6) ((P and C are looking at the hymn list on the
         computer screen.))

37 P: -> nii et  siihen tulis
         PRT PRT it-ILL come-COND
         so that there would be
```

The cantor's assertion regarding her proposed course of action as being possible (l. 30) is met with silence (l. 31). Thus, at the same time as the pastor produces her response token *joo*, 'yea' (l. 32), the cantor replicates the same assertion, albeit in a softer voice (l. 33). The second assertion is, however, followed by an even longer silence (l. 33). In response, the cantor once again accounts for her proposal (l. 34). This turn, at the latest, makes relevant the recipient's acknowledgement of the proposed plan as somehow good. Nevertheless, the pastor does not respond to the cantor's utterance in that way. Instead, after yet another lengthy pause (l. 36), she offers a candidate understanding of the proposed plan. Her utterance is prefaced with the particle complex *nii et*, 'so that', which marks it as an interpretation of the participants' prior talk and checks its correctness (Lilja, 2020; Sorjonen, 2001) without adding to it any evaluative element of one's own. In this way, the pastor indicates that the cantor's plan is something that she is supposed to understand, not to evaluate – that is, the question is about something that is primarily the cantor's decision.

This section has presented a discussion of two instances in which the recipients did not fully participate in the decision-making initiated by their co-participants. However, instead of stating explicitly their willingness to stay out of the decision-making, the recipients constructed the emerging decisions as unilateral decisions of the first speakers. This was accomplished by acquiescing in the first speaker's plan without having full access to the content of the proposal (Extract 8) or without evaluating the content of the proposal (Extract 9). In these cases, the proposers tried to smooth out the asymmetries of the situation by inviting talk about the missing component of approval.

Otherwise, in these instances, the recipients were active in offering candidate understandings of the proposed plans. This seems to be a practice that is well suited to the recipients who avoid drawing attention to the fact that their approving responses to the first speakers' proposals are wanting.

Bypassing of the components of access and agreement is possible due to the three components of approval having a hierarchical organization. Since access is a precondition for agreement and agreement a precondition for commitment, this also means that, inversely, commitment presupposes agreement, and agreement presupposes access. However, to warrant the jointness of the decision, the proposers sometimes need to check whether these presuppositions are actually valid.

Conclusions

This study has analyzed three different outcomes of proposals: *joint decisions, non-decisions* and *unilateral decisions*. Joint decisions become established when recipients approve the first speakers' proposals. However, as actions, such approving responses are somewhat complex: in order to establish a joint decision, the recipient needs to 1) establish *access* to the subject matter of the proposal, 2) express his/her *agreement* with the proposer's views, and 3) display *commitment to* the proposed future action. These three components of approval become constitutive features of a joint decision. If a proposal is abandoned before these components have been completed, the outcome of the proposal is a non-decision. Consequently, if the recipient bypasses either the access or the agreement (or both) while yet displaying acquiescence in the proposer's plan, the outcome of the proposal is a unilateral decision.

The above-described model foregrounds the recipient's actions as essential constituents of joint decisions. Nevertheless, this does not mean to imply that the proposers' actions would play a lesser role in the emergence of decisions. Certainly, if the recipient's response is wanting, the proposer may always choose to pursue a more adequate response from the recipient (see Extract 4, ll. 4–5). However, to ascertain the jointness of the emerging decision – that is, to avoid the impression that the proposer is merely forcing his/her views on the recipient – the participants themselves seem to orient to the normative expectation that it is primarily the task of the recipient to forward the decision-making sequence.

The present analysis contributes to the understanding of 'indirectness' (see Brown and Levinson, 1987; Walker et al., 2011) in the context of joint decision-making. In line with the classic findings by Pomerantz (1984a) concerning the preference organization, Houtkoop (1987) has shown how the rejection of a proposal is often delayed while

acceptance occurs immediately. Indeed, she regarded the postponing of a response to a proposal as the basic mechanism of rejecting a proposal (Houtkoop, 1987). In this article, I have described this mechanism in more detail, as the recipient's lack of initiating a further step in the joint decision-making sequence after s/he has actively addressed one or more such steps. Instead of going 'on the record' with the rejection of a proposal, the recipient may choose between several benevolent ways of conduct: s/he may:

- 'try' to gain access to the content of the proposal without succeeding in it,
- treat the successful establishment of access as the main point of the interaction, or
- emphasize his/her agreement with the proposers' views without yet displaying commitment to future action.

From this point of view, the essential question with proposals does not concern whether they will be approved or rejected but, rather, whether they will be approved or *not* approved. Clearly, a 'non-approval' as an outcome is more symmetrical than a 'rejection'. As demonstrated in this article, 'non-approval' is not only a result of the recipient's (lack of) actions, but it is also a result of the first speaker's *refusal* to pursue the same proposal anymore.

This analysis has underlined the fact that the 'jointness' of every joint decision-making process is a condition that needs to be constructed constantly, each time anew and furthermore, it must be actively maintained in the sequential unfolding of interaction during the whole decision-making process. This requires extensive interactional work by the recipients and self-control by the proposers, who might have much at stake in what they suggest. However, as has been demonstrated in this study, people seem to care about the intimacy and togetherness associated with genuinely joint decisions.

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Notes

1. In his classic study on problem-solving behavior in small groups, Bales (1950) mentioned the category of 'gives suggestion' as one of the central 'task-related' behaviors that plays an important role in arriving at a joint decision.
2. At the end of the meeting, participants rarely review their decisions.
3. By 'agreement,' I refer to the recipient's positive evaluation of the subject matter of the first speaker's proposal (e.g. a hymn), not to any joint commitment to action (cf. they *agreed* on going home). Even if the proposer him/herself might not have expressed his/her own positive evaluations explicitly, the mere fact that s/he has already made a proposal in itself implies that what has been proposed is somehow worth proposing.
4. This mouthful word represents some kind of a combination of a prayer of thanks and a hymn of praise.
5. Even if questions can sometimes be understood as attempts to challenge the co-participant's views (Koshik, 2003; Steensig and Drew, 2008), this is not necessarily the case here.
6. The idea of having the opening hymn directly after the choir song, without an organ prelude in between, has not been mentioned with reference to Simo; it is the cantor's own idea. (Indeed,

it would have been unlikely for a visiting choir leader to express an opinion about such a matter.) This increase in the cantor's agency is reflected in his use of the mitigating device *vaikka*, 'say' (l. 8) to mark the proposed idea as one of several possible ideas – something that was not 'needed' when the cantor was merely reporting Simo's ideas.

7. The pastor moves her mouse and then presses a key in the upright corner of her keyboard.

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Appendix A: Transcription conventions

. pitch fall
? pitch rise
, level pitch
↑↓ marked pitch movement
underlining emphasis
- truncation
[ ] overlap
= latching of turns
(0.5) pause (length in tenths of a second)
(.) micropause
: lengthening of a sound
hhh audible out-breath
.hhh audible in-breath
(h) within-speech aspiration, usually indicating laughter
£ smiley voice quality
creaky voice quality
° whisper
♫humming or singing
@ other change in voice quality
tch, krhm vocal noises
<word> slow speech rate
>word< fast speech rate

Appendix B: Glossing abbreviations

PL plural
1, 2 person
0 zero person
GEN genetive
PAR partitive
ESS essive
TRA translative
INE inessive
ELA elative
ILL illative
ADE adessive
ABL ablative

ALL allative
ACC accusative
COMP comparative
INF infinitive
COND conditional
IMP imperative
CLI clitic
Q question clitic
NEG negation
PASS passive
PST past tense
PPC past participle
PPPC passive past participle
POSS possessive suffix
Singular, third person, nominative, active and *present tense* are forms that have been considered unmarked. These have not been glossed.

Author biography

Melisa Stevanovic is a sociologist working in the Centre of Excellence in Intersubjectivity in the University of Helsinki. Her research focuses on the specific ways in which people negotiate the deontic, epistemic and emotional dimensions of their mutual relationships.