

## Ambiguities in Action Ascription

# Ambiguities in Action Ascription

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In everyday interactions with one another, speakers not only *say* things but also *do* things like offer, complain, reject, and compliment. Through observation, it is possible to see that much of the time people unproblematically understand what others are doing. Research on conversation has further documented how speakers' word choice, prosody, grammar, and gesture all help others to recognize what actions they are performing. In this study, we rely on spontaneous naturally occurring conversational data where people have trouble making their actions understood to examine what leads to ambiguous actions, bringing together prior research and identifying recurrent types of ambiguity that hinge on different dimensions of social action. We then discuss the range of costs and benefits for social actors when actions are clear versus ambiguous. Finally, we offer a conceptual model of how, at a microlevel, action ascription is done. Actions in interaction are building blocks for social relations; at each turn, an action can strengthen or strain the bond between two individuals. Thus, a unified theory of action ascription at a microlevel is an essential component for broader theories of social action and of how social actions produce, maintain, and revise the social world.

## Introduction

We might think conversation is about the meaning of words, but really it is about action: what we *do* when we interact with others (Austin 1975). When we talk to others, we perform actions like offering help, complaining, complimenting, or refusing. These actions are building blocks for social relations, including relations of solidarity and hierarchy that are produced and revised in interaction (Collins 1981; Reed 2013; see also Bourdieu 1991). However,

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“action ascription”—how we understand what another is doing (e.g., Levinson 2013)—remains mysterious. We rarely encode actions in talk (e.g., “I criticize your choice of hat” or “I accuse you of taking my pen”). Depending on who is speaking to whom and when, “It’s raining” or “It’s eleven” can serve radically different purposes—offering an account for not going hiking, reporting good news, or complaining. Goffman (1981) observed that what seems like one sort of talk (an “assertion of fact” such as “You forgot.”) can be seen as another (“blame-giving”).

A Garfinkel breaching experiment highlights the action ascription puzzle: he asked students to treat others’ talk as uninterpretable, leading to exchanges like “I had a flat tire.”, “What do you mean you had a flat tire?” (Garfinkel 1967). Because we rely heavily on shared understanding in constructing social actions, when this normally effortless ability is thwarted, we become frustrated by such responses. Despite decades of research, we have no compelling theory of how we reliably ascribe social actions to talk. As Schegloff put it:

If we are to get clear on how the actions people do with talk “are” transparently what they “are,” we will have to make analytically explicit how they are constructed to be transparently that (or equivocally that, for that matter), and how they may therefore be recognizable as transparently that (or equivocally that) (Schegloff 1995, 196).

Our study contributes to the sociology of social action through an empirical analysis of ambiguity in action ascription. We examine spontaneous, naturally occurring social interaction where people have trouble making their actions understood. For example, someone presents something as good news but gets no reaction, or someone is understood as criticizing when they claim only to be making an observation.

Examining cases of trouble allows us to identify recurrent types of ambiguity in action ascription. Ambiguity can hinge on what action speakers are implementing (e.g., offering or requesting), whether they are doing multi-layered actions (e.g., observing and complaining), or whether the action is positively or negatively valenced (e.g., announcing good or bad news). We show that these three types of ambiguity in action ascription pose different challenges but also offer affordances for our relationships with others through alignment and affiliation. Alignment is crucial to the forward movement of interaction as actions combine to produce larger activities. All three types of ambiguity can lead to alignment problems, hampering social activity progress and completion. The three types of ambiguity can also have different consequences for affiliation, which is crucial to our social bonds. Reading complaints into what were intended as simple observations can generate conflict; mistaking offers for requests, or jokes for serious actions, can cast doubt on how well two individuals understand one another. Yet we also discuss how ambiguous actions can help *increase* affiliation by banking on another’s ability to see through the veil of ambiguity, or by obscuring face-threatening actions.

Identifying recurrent types of action ambiguity is a first step toward understanding how action ascription can run into problems. After this, we offer an account of its underlying causes in the words that we use, our bodily behavior, and the context in which an action occurs. We emphasize sequential context, which is essential to the architecture of interaction, but we also consider who participants are to one another, their activity roles, and their relative rights and obligations over certain domains of knowledge.

Our analysis builds up to a conceptual model where the constituent elements of behavior and context that can lead to action ambiguity are also those that support action understanding. We propose three pillars of action ascription: sequential context, dedicated design, and the presence of multiple indicators of action. Prior literature has separately documented numerous resources that play a role in action ascription. Yet there has been little effort to distill from a potentially endless list and to explain how resources fit together into a whole. Our model identifies and situates the pillars in the temporal frame of interaction, explaining their distinctive contribution as well as their interplay, thus introducing a unified account of action ascription. Ultimately, a theory of how actions are ascribed at a microlevel is an essential component for broader theories of social action and of how social actions produce, maintain, and revise the social world.

## Background

Ambiguity runs in the same circles as uncertainty, vagueness, and polysemy (Beckert 1996; Levine 1988). However, uncertainty primarily concerns actors' orientations toward the future; vagueness conveys a lack of precision in execution, which may or may not be a problem (Levine 1988); and while polysemy is a potential source of ambiguity, mere multiplicity of possible meanings does not entail ambiguity.

While ambiguity may be disruptive, actors also face pressures *for* ambiguity. Certain activities, such as humor, depend on hearers' capacities to move between alternative meaning constructions (Mulkay 1988). A substantial literature notes ambiguity's productivity in situations as diverse as implementing new legislation (Edelman 1992), political advancement (Padgett and Ansell 1993), and producing and disseminating intellectual innovation (Levine 1988; McMahan and Evans 2018). Also, actors sometimes heighten ambiguity to obscure their ultimate goals (Leifer 1988). This includes concealing corruption by treating bribes and other illicit exchanges as gifts (Rossman 2014).

Ambiguous social actions can also be used to coordinate divergent projects or deepen relationships between interactants (Tavory and Fine 2020). In situations of difference and disagreement, lack of clear definitions may facilitate ongoing interaction (Lainer-Vos 2012). For example, Patrick (2018) argues that polysemy in exchanges between service-providing panhandlers and repeat benefactors allows parties to sustain incompatible definitions of the encounter. In this study, we contribute to this line of research by attending to cross-cutting pressures

for and against ambiguity in the moment-by-moment flow of interaction, emphasizing its significance for the production of alignment and affiliation.

By examining how ambiguous actions emerge and are managed in everyday encounters, we also offer an interactional angle into certain long-standing issues in theories of agency, intersubjectivity, and social order (Joas 1996; Giddens 1984). As Wittgenstein noted, any rule of behavior can be applied in a variety of situations, and no actor is aware of all applications (Wittgenstein 1958). When encountering new situations, actors must extrapolate using previous implementations. Rule boundaries—normative or categorical—are un(der)specified, so that there is no single “correct” application (Heritage 1984; Martin 2001). Even the most routine actions involve elements of creativity, whether or not this is recognized by those involved (Dalton 2004; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Garfinkel 1967).

Moreover, as Levinson (2000) has observed, there is an inherent limitation in our language production system such that the meaning of nearly everything we say is underspecified by the words we use. As such, in the flow of interaction, we make decisions about what has just transpired and how to respond without complete clarity. In this study, we focus on moments where our ability to do this runs into difficulties. These moments provide a window into the underlying machinery that supports our analyses of what others are doing. These decisions are high stakes: successful action ascription can make the difference between strengthening and straining a relationship, playing a crucial role in the production of solidarity, conflict, and authority (Collins 1981; Reed 2013).

Despite rampant underspecification and polysemy in our everyday lives, we commonly have no difficulty responding to the ongoing flow of actions in everyday conversation. To explain this, practice theorists have drawn our attention to implicit motives and embodied techniques, emphasizing our reliance on semiautomatic habits acquired over extended periods (Bourdieu 2010; Lizardo et al. 2016; Vaisey 2009). We add to these models an explanation of *how* we understand others’ actions—how we ascribe action to turns in social interaction. This is important because of the creative ways we perform actions. A request, for instance, can be made with “Give me X” or “Can you give me X” or, more subtly, “I have no X”, just to name a few. By treating action ascription as an interactional accomplishment, we open this black box and identify the processes that we use to make sense of each other.

Enfield and Sidnell’s (2017) conceptualization of action offers a practice-centered perspective grounded in analyses of social interaction. They argue that speakers select appropriate next moves to prior actions, using heuristics that have worked before. Rather than treating actions as discrete objects that interactants must recognize and label, Enfield and Sidnell contend that any action emerges out of the components of behavior that make up a move and the context in which that move occurs.

We answer Enfield and Sidnell’s call to examine action ascription in terms of constellations of behavioral and contextual features. We show that the presence or absence of certain features, as well as consistency or inconsistency among features, has consequences for the relative clarity or ambiguity of action. We

then offer an account of action ascription in terms of constituent elements of actions.

Our focus on ambiguity approaches action ascription obliquely. It is hard to determine how something works when we only see it functioning unproblematically, but when trouble arises, we can diagnose the problem and uncover how the system works. In some cases, ambiguity is detected and addressed readily, as when an action's producer adds clarification within a turn, or when respondents initiate repair in the next turn (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977). In other cases, ambiguity is exposed later, after respondents demonstrate an incorrect understanding: producers of the action may then initiate repair in "third position" (Schegloff 1992, 1301), temporarily halting the conversation's progress to clarify their original aim. Trouble may arise even later when interactants initiate repair after acting on what they thought was a shared understanding (Schegloff 1992, 1320). While repairs address a variety of problems of speaking, hearing, and understanding, late repair (in third position and fourth position) often addresses problems of action ascription (Sidnell 2017).

Conversation analytic research has identified features of context and design that interactants use in the action ascription process: the action's position in conversation (Robinson 2013; Schegloff 2007), the grammatical and prosodic design of a turn (Thompson, Fox, and Couper-Kuhlen 2015), the unique effect of synergy between talk and the body (Rossi and Zinken 2016), and the importance of knowledge context (Heritage 2012).<sup>1</sup> However, this research has not yet assembled these into a unified theory of action ascription (Levinson 2013). In this study, we step toward this goal by looking at ascription through the lens of ambiguity. Through examining cases of slippage in the action ascription machinery, we shed light on some of the underlying mechanisms that allow it to run smoothly. This also provides a principled way to identify ambiguity, by reference to interactants' orientations to it.

## Data and Methods

Our investigation taps into conversational repairs, failures to respond, elaborations, and pursuits of response as indicators of action ambiguity. We use conversation analysis (CA) (Sidnell and Stivers 2013), an approach that grounds the analysis of action in the sequential, forward-feeding development of interaction. As actions unfold in time, their sequential development exposes understandings that interactants themselves give, which analysts can use as internal evidence for the import and consequences of social behavior (Sacks 1992; Schegloff 1995; Schegloff 2005). CA relies on close, repeated analysis of audio/video recordings of spontaneous naturally occurring social interaction—in our case, conversations in English and Italian.

Our interest in ambiguity is at the level of social action. The words we use in conversation underspecify the action we are performing through those

words (Levinson 2000). Also, every unit of talk (turn-constructive unit or TCU) may perform one or more actions (Schegloff 2007, 4). Most actions are unproblematically produced, understood, and responded to. When the trains run on time, it can be difficult to figure out how it happens. Sometimes, however, a turn can be understood in two different ways, and this ambiguity becomes exposed. For instance, an inquiry such as “What are you doing this weekend?” could be a request for information or a preliminary to an invitation or request. We look particularly at cases in which these ambiguities become a problem for participants.

In line with CA methods, the first author generated our initial collection by reviewing nine hours of a corpus of recorded English data, identifying all instances where participants indicated at least two ways in which an action could be understood. Specifically, after a speaker produces an action, (a) the original speaker revises that action to disambiguate it, usually after some hesitation by the recipient (e.g., “I mean I’m not criticizing”); (b) the action recipient interprets it in a way that the speaker treats as incorrect (e.g., “No, I was just asking”), or, less commonly, a recipient might query which of two interpretations was intended (“Are you asking or telling me?”). If any of these indications of action ambiguity were present, the case was included in the collection. The second author added cases from his Italian corpus and publicly available English data (e.g., Ex 8 and 9) in a more targeted search for additional cases. The first and second authors stopped collecting cases when saturation was reached, no longer generating new analytic insights.<sup>2</sup>

Next, we took this broad collection and excluded misunderstandings rooted not in *action* but in *reference*, or *terms* (e.g., “I’m not criticizing” has the action at issue, whereas “I don’t mean Mary” has the referent at issue). We also excluded cases where, following some indication of trouble responding to an action, the issue is treated as primarily one of affiliation (adopting the same stance, for instance positive/negative/funny/sad, as their interlocutor). The recipient of a joke may not laugh, not because she does not get that it is a joke, but because she does not think it is funny. This yielded a more focused collection.

Our final collection comprises 49 cases in which at least one participant orients to an action as ambiguous. All authors reviewed these cases inductively looking for similarities and differences across the collection to generate main types of ambiguity. The first two authors worked together initially to code the collection. Then the third author independently coded all cases. In coding cases into types of ambiguity (category-, layer-, and valence-based), we reached 94% agreement and resolved remaining discrepancies ( $n = 3$ ) through discussion. In what follows, we distinguish between these three types of action ambiguity. We then discuss affordances of action ambiguity in terms of social relations in interaction. Finally, we present our findings of what accounts for action ambiguity across the collection, ending with a conceptual model of action ascription.

**Table 1. Summary of Ambiguity Types**

Ambiguity type	Problem	Example	Ambiguity
Category-based	A turn could perform either of two different actions.	“Do you know who is going to that meeting?”	Request for information versus preliminary to announcement
Layer-based	A turn could be <i>just</i> performing a basic action (e.g., of requesting information or announcing), or it could also be doing something additional, usually face threatening (e.g., criticizing, challenging).	“Where <u>are</u> you?”	Request for information on where the person is at the moment versus an additional complaint about why the person is not where the speaker expected
Valence-based	An action (e.g., announcement or assessment) could be heard as positive or negative; good or bad; funny or sad.	“I got a B on my Econ final.”	Announcement of good versus bad news

## Analysis

### *Types of ambiguity*

We identified three types of ambiguity in action ascription: category-based, layer-based, and valence-based ambiguity (summarized in [table 1](#)). This accounted for all instances in the collection, although there may be other types of action ambiguity that we did not observe (e.g., in particular, institutional settings such as courtrooms, business meetings, etc.).

Ambiguity in *category-based* cases can be understood as between discrete alternative actions. Is the speaker offering or requesting? Asking or announcing? In contrast, *layer-based* ambiguity hinges on whether or not one action is additionally a vehicle for another action. Any action is subject to these two types of ambiguities. *Valence-based* ambiguity involves a subset of actions that are understandable as positive or negative, good or bad, funny or sad (e.g., announcements and assessments). In such cases, even when interactants are clear about the general type of action being performed (e.g., announcing news), there may be ambiguity about a critical feature of that action—whether it signals something good or bad, or something funny or sad—posing an affiliation problem for the respondent (e.g., co-celebrate or co-complain) that translates into an action ascription problem. We discuss each ambiguity type in turn.

### Category-of-action-based ambiguity

The most common type of ambiguity involves a TCU that can be understood as two (or occasionally more) mutually exclusive actions. For instance, in (1) two housemates (Tara and Lianne) and a guest (Lynn) are having dinner together. Lynn has been cleaning up after dinner and offers “Does anybody want these last two tortellini?”. Tara treats Lynn as offering by declining (line 4). Lianne’s action suggests an alternative solution “We have a little tupperwa(h)re,” but notice the “(h)” indicating a bit of laughter infused in the word *tupperware*. This introduces the possibility that she is teasing.

(1) BD (see Sidnell and Stivers 2013 for transcription conventions)

- 1 LYN: Does anybody want these last two  
 2 tortellini?  
 3 LIA: that [’s so much time,  
 4 TAR: [N::o thank you.  
 5 LIA: We have a little tupperwa(h)re,  
 6 (0.6)  
 7 LYN: There’s two tortellini.  
 8 LIA: I’m joking. ha[haha]  
 9 TAR: [heh h]eh hahaha .hhh hahaha

Lynn responds by pushing back against what she has understood as a genuine proposal by Lianne, asserting the obvious: “There’s two tortellini.” In response, Lianne claims that Lynn’s understanding of her proposal as genuine is incorrect: “I’m joking.” and laughs, triggering Tara to join in. Lianne’s ability to retroactively claim that her action was misunderstood is a deniability loophole that action ambiguity introduces.

Embodied actions are also sometimes ambiguous. In (2), housemates Judy, Gio, and Lance are preparing dinner. Lance has been explaining that their back gate came open. In the middle of this telling, Judy, facing in Lance’s general direction, as seen in the image from line 1, begins chuckling, working to secure Lance’s attention to what she is doing, instead of attending to his telling. But what action is Judy performing?

Earlier, she came over to the raw beef that Lance was shaping into hamburger patties and nibbled bits of it. A bit later in the interaction, Judy got confused about which glass was hers, and which was Lance’s. Both the beef and the glasses are still on the counter. She says nothing, but Lance (back to the camera, head angled toward Judy) initially understands her action as possibly a pre-request for more meat and, instead of continuing his telling, requests confirmation that this is what she is doing (line 4). Judy disconfirms with “£N^o = hh” (line 5) during which one can hear smiling in her voice (indicated with £) and a high pitch peak (^). Her turn ends in laughter (*hh*). Lance then puts forward a revised understanding of Judy’s action as a request for information about which glass is hers. He answers her implied question (line 6). In accepting his response in third position (and then picking up her glass, line 7), Judy shows that this understanding of her action is correct. In lines 8, 9, and 11, both



Figure 1. Taken from Extract 2, line 1.



participants orient to Judy's losing track of her glass twice in a matter of minutes as problematic behavior. In line 11, Lance mocks her as acting like she has already had too much to drink, even though it's unlikely that she has since this is their first glass together (figure 1).

(2) HM

- 1 JUD: ((puts hands on hips; gazes at something on counter and laughs))  
 2 LAN: What's wrong.  
 3 JUD: hn hn [hn hn  
 4 LAN: [Are you lookin' at thuh raw meat again,  
 5 JUD: £N^o=hh=  
 6 LAN: =This is mine.  
 7 JUD: O(h)ka(h)y. [Huh huh [(picks up glass))  
 8 LAN: [what's [wrong with you?  
 9 JUD: hh I'm so(hh)rry.  
 10 (0.2)  
 11 LAN: So I'm (thinkin'=you're=drinkin'=amaahue)  
 12 JUD: huh huh

In sum, each instance of category-ambiguity involves two distinct actions that a given move could perform. Judy's move cannot indicate both that she wants

more meat and that she needs help determining whose glass is whose. Similarly, Lianne in (1) cannot make both a genuine and a nonserious proposal simultaneously. In each case, ambiguity is indicated by actors' orientations to two incompatible possibilities.

### Layer-of-action-based ambiguity

A second type of ambiguity concerns whether an action should be understood as single-layered or multilayered. Unlike category-ambiguity, this type involves actions that are not mutually exclusive. Certain TCUs perform multiple actions simultaneously. "Tellings" such as announcements and noticings are sometimes "vehicle[s] for other actions" (Rossi 2018; Schegloff 2007, 74). Also, consider the actions that can be performed through a request for information: offers (e.g., "Would you like help with that?"), accusations (e.g., "Did you throw away my t-shirt?"), or complaints (e.g., "Was that the worst game you've ever seen?"), among others.

In (3), we see a request for information ("Where are you?", line 1) treated as possibly multilayered, though the questioner denies this interpretation. The example is taken from the beginning of a cell phone conversation.

- (3) CP ((underlining indicates higher amplitude))
- 1 MIS: [Where are you?  
 2           (0.3)  
 3 JOH: Where am I?  
 4 MIS: yuh.  
 5           (1.0)  
 6 JOH: [I'm dri:ving- ]  
 7 MIS: [I'm just curiou]s  
 8 JOH: Huh?  
 9 MIS: I'm j(h)ust cu(h)rio(h)us.  
 10 JOH: I am dri:ving up something ca:llled (0.9) Post  
       Joanne Roa:d.

Although the participants do not reveal their precise understandings of what additional action "Where are you?" might be performing, each orients to the question as potentially layered. After Misty's question, John hesitates. He initiates repair with a final-rising full repeat of the question ("Where am I?"), a practice for treating an action as problematic (Robinson and Kevoe-Feldman 2010). After Misty confirms with "yuh." (line 4), there is another silence (line 5), suggesting John's ongoing difficulty addressing Misty's question. However, the problem is neither with hearing nor understanding. Rather, it is how John should deal with what else Misty might have been doing beyond asking where he is. If John was supposed to have been somewhere else, this turn could be heard as a complaint or an accusation of wrongdoing. As John begins to answer ("I'm dri:ving-", line 6), Misty offers an account for her question ("I'm just curious"), showing that she recognizes her turn might be interpreted as a possible complaint or as having some other layer of action. With "just" she claims to have only intended her action to be understood at the *prima facie* level.

In (4), Robert has arrived home. His housemates are in the kitchen preparing dinner. Judy holds up a bowl of fries they have prepared and emphatically announces “<F:resh french fries.>” (the less than/greater than symbols indicate slow talk) (line 1). This announcement is a vehicle for an offer of fries, as shown by the fact that she follows up on it with a directive, “You are going to eat the:se;” (line 4) and by adding a reason (line 5), which makes explicit that she designed her offer to ensure Robert’s compliance, as he is generally against junk food. Our focus is on Robert’s response and its relation to the expansion of Judy’s offer/directive.

(4) HM

- 1 JUD: [<F:resh french fries.>  
 2 [((showing them to ROB))  
 3 ROB: [C<sub>0</sub>^o:l.  
 4 JUD: [You are going to eat the:se;  
 5 B[ecause they’re fr:esh;  
 6 ROB: [Right o:n.  
 7 JUD: [so- ] [((puts fries back))  
 8 ROB: [I’ll] eat’em=[I’ll eat’em=I’ll eat’em.  
 9 LAN: Hamburger, would you like a hamburger?

Robert’s first response (line 3) treats Judy’s “<F:resh french fries.>” as a news announcement by providing an assessment (“C<sub>0</sub>^o:l.”), but this does not clearly accept or address the *offer* layer of Judy’s action. As Judy expands, Robert produces another, stronger assessment (“Right o:n.”, line 6). Although assessments can be vehicles for accepting/rejecting courses of action (Fasulo and Monzoni 2009), Judy does not treat Robert’s “Right o:n.” as sufficient. Upon hearing it, she does not abandon her pursuit (line 5) and continues to hold the fries, even though this is Robert’s second positive assessment. This exposes his assessments as a potentially equivocal response to the offer. While conveying appreciation and possibly a favorable disposition, his assessments neither explicitly accept nor commit to eating anything.

Robert also orients to the layered nature of his responsive action. In line 8, he provides a third response in the form of a “multiple saying” (Stivers 2004), “I’ll eat’em=I’ll eat’em=ll eat’em.” Through this practice, he acquiesces to Judy’s pursuit of response while also communicating that it is unwarranted. In so doing, he claims that his previous assessments should have been understood as sufficient. At the end of the first of these clauses, Judy puts the fries away suggesting that she now has an unequivocal response. Overall, this negotiation shows that Robert’s assessments became an issue that needed solving, providing evidence for their ambiguity.

In (1) and (2), participants oriented to two distinct analyses of an action (proposal or tease, prerequisite for an object or request for information), addressing the ambiguity as an either-or problem. In (3) and (4), by contrast, there is no ambiguity about Misty’s request for information, or Robert’s positive assessment of the fries. Rather, the issue is what *else* these actions are vehicles for. The basic and additional actions are not mutually exclusive, as in categorical cases, but layered.

### ***Valence-based ambiguity***

A third arena where ambiguity surfaces is action valence. One reason that action interpretation matters is that affiliative or disaffiliative uptake to announcements, assessments, and other valenced actions depends on whether the action should be understood as positive or negative; funny or sad. News announcements, for instance, generally invite uptake of the news (e.g., treating the announcement *as* news with “Oh” (Heritage 1984; Schegloff 1995)), but affiliative uptake necessarily addresses whether it is good, bad, funny, or sad. An affiliative position should match the teller’s valence to show agreement. An interactant who misfires on an announcement or assessment’s valence offers a response that is disaffiliative.

In (5), Justin asks Nick how his brother did in a race.<sup>3</sup> The question makes relevant an answer that is evaluative like “Great!” or “Not well.” Instead, Nick’s answer is objective (line 11). The ambiguity lies in whether his answer amounts to good or bad news. Justin, having requested this information, now faces initiating repair or gambling on the news’ valence.

(5) FG

- 1 JUS: So what happened up a:t Santa Anita.  
 2 (0.8)/(talking by people outside of room)  
 3 NIC: It was grea<sup>a</sup>t.  
 4 (0.2)/(Nick looking at Justin and nodding;  
 5 Justin gazing back)  
 6 JUS: °Yeah?,°  
 7 NIC: [Yeah. Fun:, ((deep nods))/(0.2) Fun:: [thing.  
 8 [((eyebrow flash)) [((eyebrow flash))  
 9 JUS: [How’d your bro<sup>o</sup>ther do in thuh: (.) race;  
 10 NIC: [Leaning back with head resting on wall gazing  
 at Justin)  
 11 NIC: He: got se<sup>e</sup>ventieth out of seven hundr’d,  
 12 (0.2)  
 13 JUS: Did he cra:sh?,  
 14 NIC: No. [(0.5) I think that’s actually pretty goo:d  
 fer (.)  
 15 OTH: [HEY TO:GAs. ((from outside room))  
 16 JUS: Yeah,  
 17 NIC: First ti:me.  
 18 TEX: Hey ...

Justin hears Nick’s answer as indicating a bad performance and solicits an account (line 13). Nick treats this as misplaced, disconfirming with a quick “No.” and then correcting Justin’s presupposition that seventieth out of seven hundred constitutes a poor performance (lines 14/17).

Neither Nick nor Justin orients to this as an issue of true affiliation but rather one of misunderstanding the valence of Nick’s assessment. For instance, Nick uses “actually” as he goes on to explicitly evaluate his brother’s performance

as “pretty good,” which clarifies rather than defends his position. In response, Justin agrees (line 16).

In another case (6), ambiguity is revealed through the original speaker’s pursuits of response, indicating a problem with affiliation. Whereas alignment is the optimal forward movement of a course of action, affiliation is adopting a matched stance toward a given position, person, or event. Sean and Dan are discussing celebrity and former professional basketball player Dennis Rodman who had a house near where they are socializing. Dan began this stretch by asking Sean if he had seen Rodman. Sean first explains that Rodman sold his place that had been near them but then recounts his family’s experiences in the past with Rodman. Sean’s telling covers a series of times that they saw Rodman including while riding their bikes, while he was playing football with his buddies, and what we see as the third encounter (starting in line 1): Rodman entering a nearby restaurant with his “entourage;”.

As a telling, Sean’s account of Rodman is designed to elicit uptake at story completion (alignment) that matches Sean’s stance toward the events (affiliation) (Stivers 2008). Dan, however, only acknowledges the telling (“Yeah.”). Sean expands, spelling out “entourage” (line 4), but this elicits only a similar acknowledgement (line 5). This imperils affiliation with this telling. The issue is whether Sean is disparaging Rodman’s entourage or treating it as humorous—a valence ambiguity issue that Sean addresses as he pursues Dan’s response (Pomerantz 1984).

(6) PC

- 1 SEA: .h Or we’d be at Sharkey’s here ‘n he (.) o- he’d  
 2 walk into Sharky’s with (his entourage);=  
 3 DAN: =Yeah.=  
 4 SEA: =Four or five gu:ys; Four or five chicks;=  
 5 DAN: =Yeah.  
 6 (0.6)  
 7 SEA: Always white chicks with ‘m.  
 8 (0.2)  
 9 DAN: Yeah.=  
 10 SEA: =Funny.  
 11 (0.3)  
 12 DAN: £Yeah.

At line 6, Dan still has not responded to Sean, who pursues uptake with further specification about the entourage: that *white chicks* are always *with him*. Sean’s mention of the entourage’s race appears designed to make his own stance clearer. Rodman is African American, so presumably Sean is working to draw a contrast. However, Dan sticks with his noncommittal acknowledgement “Yeah.” (line 9). Finally, Sean explicitly indicates his stance with “Funny.” (line 10), treating Dan’s lack of uptake as rooted in a valence problem. He pursues appreciation of his story by invoking how to respond affiliatively. Dan modestly complies by smiling (£, line 12), which is the right direction for affiliation, although his response is yet another “Yeah.”

Sean orients to ambiguity by pursuing a valenced response multiple times. Dan was not apparently having trouble purely due to ambiguity in the way that Justin had in (5). Based on his subsequent uptake, Dan may have understood what would count as affiliation but may not have wanted to affiliate with Sean's position. However, that is not Sean's interpretation.

Valence cases do not involve ambiguity about discrete categories of action (e.g., question or announcement), or about the multilayered nature of an action (e.g., question  $\pm$  complaint) but rather about speakers' stances (e.g., positive versus negative). Valence is thus a third basis for ambiguity in action ascription. When actions are misunderstood in terms of valence, this can lead to responses that are at odds with the speaker's stance and thus disaffiliative.

Each of the three types of ambiguity is relevant to alignment and affiliation. Alignment is always an issue in category-based ambiguity, as in the case of responding to a proposal rather than a joke (1). This disrupts progressivity in cases where repair is necessary. But category-based ambiguity is often also costly to affiliation because not knowing what action to ascribe means not knowing what constitutes affiliation. In (1), Lynn's rejection is not only disaligning but also disaffiliative to Lianne's joke. Layer-based ambiguity is similarly costly because second actions are typically complaints, challenges, or other face-threatening actions. Treating someone as having implemented such actions is itself potentially disaffiliative if he or she did not intend a face-threatening action. On the other hand, ignoring complaints can also be problematic. The alignment issue is derivative because, again, of the disruption to progressivity to either enforce an understanding of the second layer of action or dismiss the second layer as unintended. Finally, valence-based ambiguity is primarily an affiliation problem.

### ***Affordances of ambiguity***

We have shown that action ambiguity causes problems for conversation's progress and for affiliation. We might therefore be tempted to think that interactants would do everything possible to avoid ambiguity, even dragging out turns to ensure clear actions. However, as with other domains of interaction such as person reference (Sacks and Schegloff 1979), speakers are rarely prepared to accept the cost of additional units of talk to avoid a slim chance of trouble. Moreover, social interaction sometimes creates counter pressures *for* ambiguity.

One affordance of ambiguous actions is deniability (see also Sidnell 2017). For instance, if I fish for information by describing what I know of an event about which you know more (e.g., "Your line's been busy"), I invite you to explain without directly inquiring (Pomerantz 1980). In the previous sections, we saw two cases where speakers denied actions. In (1), Lianne denies a serious understanding of her proposal and claims to have been joking; in (3), Misty denies that her question is doing more than requesting information by asserting that she is "just curious." Often, deniable actions are face-threatening (e.g., criticisms, accusations, complaints).

A related affordance is that reduced directness can help interactants “save face”—people’s public self-image (Goffman 1967)—just as norms of politeness reduce threats to face (Brown and Levinson 1987). In (4), for instance, Rob’s ambiguous assessments allow him to remain uncommitted to eating French fries without rejecting his housemates’ efforts.

Another affordance is ambiguity’s role in securing and maintaining affiliation (Tavory and Fine 2020). First consider what happens when speakers make reference to third parties (e.g., “Damien”, “My son”, “The birthday boy”). Speakers naturally want to achieve recognition of the person about whom they are talking (Sacks and Schegloff 1979). This would push speakers to avoid ambiguity. However, when ambiguity might offer benefits, such as helping to secure the granting of a request, it becomes a resource. For instance, Nicole asks her mother to take her son Damien to a swimming pool by referring to her son as “the birthday boy.” Grandma may be more likely to grant her daughter’s request to take “the birthday boy” to the pool than to take “Damien” (Stivers 2007).

Ambiguity in action ascription can represent a speaker’s gamble to *increase* affiliation. The risk is that failure to achieve mutual understanding can *reduce* affiliation. In (5), where fraternity friends discuss the race, had Justin recognized the news as positive, he would have shown particularly clear affiliation with Nick precisely because he understood the import of being in the top 10% of finishers, without valence being stated explicitly. Nick’s gamble, however, is unsuccessful.

### **Accounting for ambiguity**

Whether ambiguity leads to relational costs or benefits, there are a set of features that are common across ambiguous actions. First, they are usually found in positions where sequential context offers little support for action ascription. Second, they typically lack dedicated turn formats. Third, the design of ambiguous actions offers few discrete lexical, grammatical, prosodic, or embodied indicators of the action in progress or contains indicators that are potentially inconsistent. These represent three pillars of action ascription with sequential context being the first and primary constraint.

### **Sequential context**

The sequential environments in which interactants encounter actions shape action ascription. Imagine meeting a friend for lunch and spotting her as you walk toward the restaurant. Knowing that you are beginning an encounter prepares you to understand her first action as a greeting. Sequential context is particularly critical for understanding turns that can perform multiple actions. Turns like “Yeah,” “Uh huh,” or “Okay” can be used in first positions to *request* confirmation or in responsive positions to *confirm*. Thus, whether we consider first versus second position or openings versus closings in a conversation, sequential context assists with action ascription.

In (7), when Silvio asks Aldo for confirmation that he has poured enough soda into a carafe (*bom?* “alright?”), the prosodic rise on *bom?* (marked by? in line 2) helps him to be heard as questioning rather than asserting adequacy. When

the same token is used in lines 4 and then 5, an important part of how *Bom* does confirming in line 4 but closes the sequence in line 5 (Schegloff 2007) is who says it at what point in this sequence.

(7) MasoPome\_2048678  
 1 (1.2) ((Silvio pours soda into carafe))  
 2 SIL: Bom? ((stops pouring))  
**Alright?**  
 3 (0.4)  
 4 ALD: ↑Bom\_.  
**Alright**  
 5 SIL: ↓Bom. ((releases bottle)).  
**Alright**  
 6 (.)

Conversely, (8) shows how ambiguity can arise when sequential context fails to provide clarity about an action. TV host Stephen Colbert is interviewing guest, South African comedian and *The Daily Show* host, Trevor Noah.

(8) 2019-02-14  
 1 COL: Thirty-nine percent of: of: of respondents in a  
 poll:  
 2 just said .hh they think it would be okay to  
 wear:  
 3 black face .h (.) in >uh< Halloween costume.  
 4 NOA: [These respondents are white people.  
 5 [(mutual gaze no smile))  
 6 COL: [Uh:: (0.5) i-i=They didn't say in the poll.  
 They=  
 7 [(audience laughing))  
 8 COL: =just said [thirty-nine  
 9 NOA: [No no I'm telling you. These  
 10 [respondents are fwhite people. fYea(h)h.  
 11 COL: [Oh=oh=oh I see. ((eyebrows up, leaning forward,  
 12 begins laughing))

Colbert reports the results of a poll as part of a lead into a new topic. As both the interviewer and the participant who just reported the poll results, Colbert is the knowledgeable speaker when Noah says, “These respondents are fwhite people.” The ambiguity of Noah’s turn is between asking a question versus asserting the race of the respondents. In contrast to (7), the sequential context of Noah’s turn does not disambiguate these two possibilities. Colbert treats Noah’s turn as a question with his nonanswer response (lines 6/8). However, in line 9, Noah corrects Colbert for misunderstanding his action (Schegloff 1992). It appears that Noah’s mixed-race status was being traded on to leverage authority to claim that only white respondents could hold this opinion.

Sequential context can thus support a recipient’s understanding of an action or complicate its recognition. In other examples, the lack of sequential expectations about an action following the opening of conversation (3) or a turn that launches



Figure 2. In overlap of “without” in line 3.



Figure 3. Taken from the (0.9) silence in line 4.



a new course of action (2) can thus be viewed as a vulnerability, though this may also become a resource to be exploited.

Sequential position is always present when a turn begins. Moreover, previous research suggests that context takes precedence over turn design in shaping actions (Heritage 2012). This is further supported by cases with discrepancies between the two. When turn design fits with sequential context—“a greeting item in a greeting place” (Sacks 1992, 93)—then both aspects support ascribing “greeting” as the action, but if turn design runs counter to sequential context, this can be problematic. In (9), during a 2020 Democratic primary debate, the interviewer posed a question about whether candidates would decriminalize crossing the US border without documents. Candidates were to raise their hands to affirm (lines 1–3), implying that not raising represented a negative answer. Figure 2 shows candidates raising their hands. Joe Biden used a different hand gesture articulated with the lower arm only and a raised index finger (figures 3 and 4). This is commonly understood as a dedicated design requesting permission to speak. Biden then tries to get the floor vocally (“N- a-”, line 9). Moments later,

**Figure 4. In overlap with “we” in line 5.**



the interviewer reveals the ambiguity: “Mr. Vice President\_ (0.6) I don’t know if you: raised your ha:nd or: were just asking. (0.8) To speak.”.

(9) 2020-06-27\_Democratic\_Debate

1 INT: I- If you’d be so kind ↑raise your ha:nd if you think.

2 it- (.) should be a <civil offense> rather than a crime

3 to cross the border .hh without documentation.

4 (0.3) (0.9)

5 INT: Can we keep the hands up so we could see them\_

6 (1.1)

7 INT: U:h\_

8 (0.3)

9 BID: N- a-=

10 BUT: =( (click) )>An’ [let’s remember that’s not just a=

11 OTH: [I-

12 BUT: =theoretical exercise. That criminalization?

((50 seconds not shown))

13 INT: Mister Vice President\_

14 (0.6) ((audience cheering))

15 INT: I don’t know if you: raised your ha:nd

16 or: were jus[t asking.

17 BID: [( (nods) )

18 (0.8)

19 INT: To speak.

20 (0.4)

21 BID: Look . . .

The sequential context created by the interviewer’s question (lines 1–3) strongly sets up the action of answering. Without this, the interviewer would rely on the gesture’s dedicated design as a request to speak. Instead, the interviewer presents the context-shaped interpretation first (“I don’t know if you: raised

your ha:nd”), suggesting an understanding of this as the likely interpretation with the request as an alternative (“or: were just asking. (0.8) To speak.”) This provides further support for the claim that sequential context functions as a primary constraint for action ascription.

The primary role of sequential context poses a dilemma for action ascription when sequential context does not strongly project an action. In these cases, more weight rests on action design, whether dedicated or not. When ambiguity may be useful, the lack of sequential projection can be exploited to obscure the clarity of an action.

### Dedicated action design

Some actions can be implemented through many designs—offers, requests for information, criticisms. Others—greetings, answers to summonses, or preclosings—draw from a small set of options. In some cases, turn designs are virtually dedicated to particular actions. For instance, “Can I ask you a question?” is consistently understood as requesting space to ask something that will take multiple TCUs (Schegloff 1980). Similarly, preannouncements commonly rely on “Guess what!” (Schegloff 2007; Terasaki 2004). These turn designs do not perform other actions, are rarely ambiguous, and did not appear in our data.

In contrast, when actions lack dedicated turn designs or rely on formulations used for multiple actions, action ambiguity is more common. For instance, preannouncements rely on both *Guess what!* and *Did you hear/Do you know X* formats. The latter type is also used to solicit information, making it more susceptible to ambiguity. For instance, a mother’s question to her son, “Do you know who’s going to that meeting?” was first treated as a preannouncement to which the boy offered a go-ahead when in fact it was a question (Schegloff 1988, 59). This susceptibility can be an affordance or a liability.

Return to (4) where Judy presents the fries to Robert. He initially responds with assessments “Co<sup>^</sup>o:l.” and “Right o:n.”. These are potentially ambiguous in terms of the actions they perform, specifically whether they commit to eating the fries or merely assess them. In contrast, “I’ll eat’em” is unambiguous. Even though the assessments are repeated, only the shift to a clear design disambiguates Robert’s action. On the other hand, in (9), Biden relies on a dedicated design, but this conflicts with the action that sequential context projects, creating confusion.

When actions rely on dedicated or finite designs, action ascription is facilitated. Designs used for several different actions help narrow down the action but remain susceptible to ambiguity (e.g., descriptive statements “We have a little tupperwa(h)re”; “He got seventieth out of seven hundred.”; assessments “Co<sup>^</sup>o:l.”; and content questions “Where are you?”).

### Multiple design indicators of action

As mentioned earlier, all aspects of turn design may convey action—word choice, grammar, prosody, and embodied conduct. Yet, all aspects of design also perform other functions. In (4), Robert’s agreement to eat French fries relies on the

multiple saying of “I’ll eat ‘em” that conveys both agreement to Judy’s directive and also that her pressure was unnecessary (Stivers 2004). We propose that turns with multiple indicators of action are less susceptible to ambiguity than those with fewer or inconsistent indicators.

In (5), where Nick’s responsive assessment about his brother’s race is ambiguous, he reports: “He got seventieth out of seven hundred.” Because Nick previously assessed the weekend as “Great” and “Fun” (lines 3, 7), sequential context suggests that a subsequent assessment about a particular weekend event will be positive. However, a weekend could be fun without his brother’s success in his first race. Nick’s assessment has few indicators of valence. “Seventieth” is objectively not a front runner, but out of seven hundred is in the top 10 percent, making it possibly good, particularly since adding the “out of” phrase suggests a positive tilt. Yet, the verb “got” fails to frame this as an achievement. There are no other valence indicators in Nick’s prosody or facial expression. Indeed, as he produces the turn, Nick holds the same posture as during Justin’s question. He sits on a futon with his head back, his eyes toward Justin. His languid posture lacks enthusiasm and is inconsistent with positive valence. In contrast, earlier in the interaction, Nick responds to Justin’s initial inquiry (line 1) with a clearly positive assessment (“It was grea<sup>^</sup>t.”, line 3) produced with a wider pitch movement (^) and accompanied by nodding, both of which contribute to conveying his positive stance. In other cases, actions where valence is clear early in the turn, because of laugh or smile tokens or other indications of stance, are less likely to be misunderstood.

Ambiguous actions usually have few or inconsistent action indicators. In (2), the ambiguous action is embodied: Judy stands looking at the counter and chuckling with hands on her hips. Her behavior conveys amusement and possibly wanting something, but it hardly helps to narrow down the action. It does not even specify an unequivocal focus of attention (the meat versus the glass). Also, the hands on her hips potentially conflict with a request for information as they could suggest a complaint. Lance picks up on this with “What’s wrong.” (line 2) but is left to figure out the subject and import of Judy’s trouble through trial and error.

Taken together, unambiguous actions tend to have sequential contexts that project or constrain those actions and designs that rely on dedicated formats and that include multiple and consistent indicators, whether in terms of word choice, grammar, prosody, or embodied conduct.

## Discussion

### Summary

Our empirical focus has been on situations where people’s actions are not clearly understood, exposing problems of action ambiguity whether by design or accident. We identified three types of action ambiguity that posed different puzzles for interactants: what speakers are doing (category-based ambiguity); whether

speakers are doing multiple actions across layers (layer-based ambiguity); and how speakers' actions are valenced (valence-based ambiguity).

Ambiguous actions have benefits: they can afford deniability, help us maintain face, and increase affiliation if interactants are able to understand one another despite the ambiguity. But ambiguous actions also carry costs: they can lead to alignment problems between prior and subsequent actions, hinder interactional progressivity, and imperil affiliation.

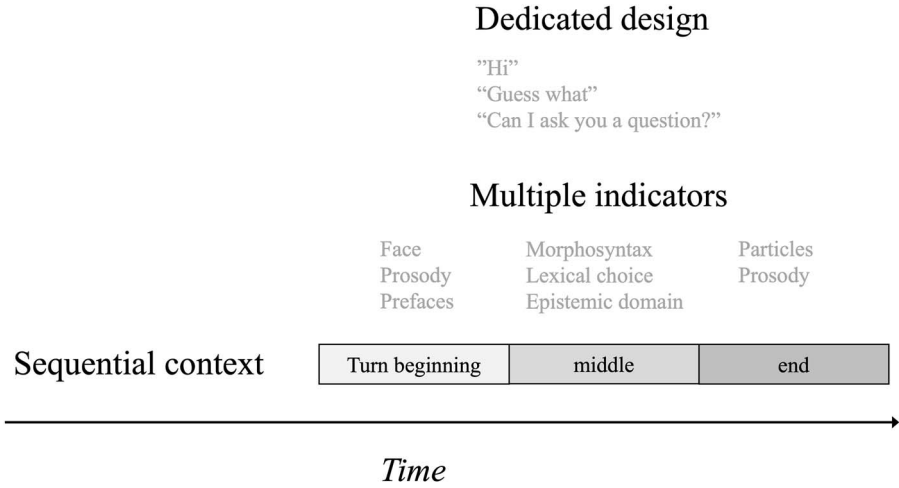
Sequential context, dedicated designs, and multiple indicators are resources for action transparency and therefore, we argue, constitute three pillars for action ascription. Additional contextual features may condition the overall proneness of an encounter to ambiguity. For instance, both prior interactions and the prospect of future contact may shape actors' interpretations of a situation (Patrick 2018). Similarly, the "moodiness" of a situation heightens the salience of certain actions at the expense of others (Silver 2011). However, we expect these features to operate diffusely within interactions and to be less critical to turns' legibility than sequential context, dedicated designs, and multiple indicators. In what follows, we discuss the distinctive contribution and interplay of these three pillars in our conceptual model of the action ascription process, proposing a unified account of how interactants ascribe actions.

### ***Toward a theory of action ascription***

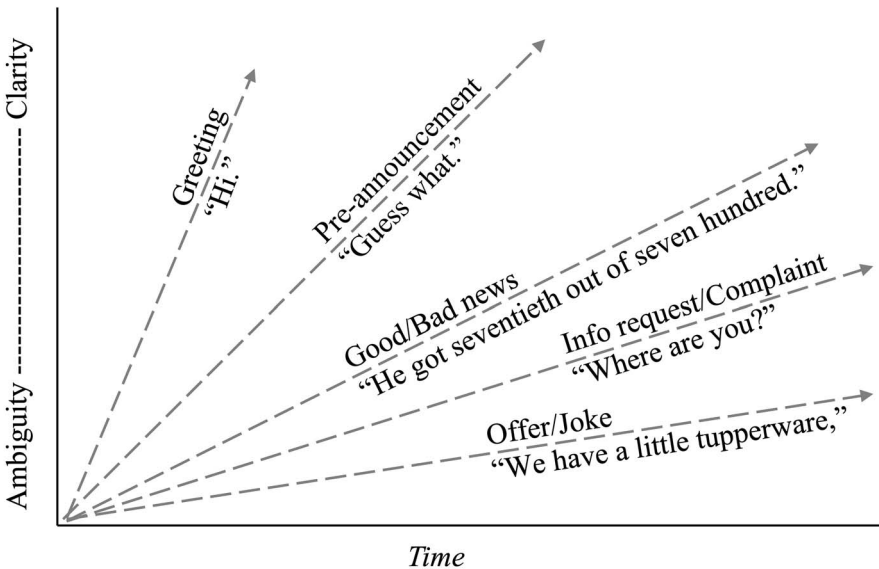
Our conceptual model of action ascription is represented in two figures. Figure 5 brings together the three pillars: sequential context, dedicated design, and multiple indicators. Key to the model is *time*. In any interaction, the first thing we must draw on is sequential context: where are we in the interaction? Are we at the outset, at the end, following a request for help, after an initiation of repair on the request for help? We argue that sequentiality and temporality are central not only to action production (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) but also to the process of interpreting others' actions.

There are times, however, where sequential context may not sufficiently narrow the range of possible actions. For example, in turns launching new courses of action (2), following openings of conversation (3), or in interstitial positions between sequences (8), sequential context may offer insufficient cues. Turn design is the second pillar of action ascription. Although there is no single order to aspects of turn design, some resources cluster early in a TCU: dedicated designs such as "Hi", "Guess what!", "You know who I saw?", or "Bye" tend to be short and recognizable early. Features of facial expression such as eyebrow movements can also be early indicators of action, signaling an affiliative or disaffiliative action (Kaukoma, Peräkylä, and Ruusuvoori 2014; Rossi 2020). Certain prosodic features that can signal action such as pitch onset also occur early (Couper-Kuhlen 2001; Sicoli et al. 2015). Prefaces can help with action ascription too. For instance, "Well" may indicate dispreferred actions in responsive positions (Heritage 2015). Word choice and grammar can also indicate action (Couper-Kuhlen 2014), but many formats become recognizable only once the turn is underway. Also, recipients need to hear at least some portion

**Figure 5. Conceptualizing action ascription.**



**Figure 6. Trajectories of Action Ascription.**



of the turn to determine if its content is primarily in his or her epistemic domain or the speaker's (Heritage 2012). Finally, many particles that have been shown to make a difference for action come at the turn's end (Enfield, Brown, and De Ruiter 2012), such as tag-question particles (e.g., "Right?" in English, *Hè?* in Dutch). Likewise, action distinctions indicated by prosodic features such as

pitch accents and final intonation become available only at or toward the end of the turn (Couper-Kuhlen 2020).

As TCUs progress, indicators of action—grammar, lexical choice, and epistemic domain—accumulate. This is the third pillar. Where multiple indicators support the same action ascription, they reduce ambiguity. Think of requests done as “I was wondering if you could do X for me.” The action is not apparent at the outset but becomes clear by the time a response is due. In our cases of ambiguity, however, participants progress through turns, and by the end, their various resources have either muddied the waters (e.g., the seventieth out of seven hundred result in the race, or Noah’s equivocal assertion while gazing at Colbert with no smile) or there are simply too few indicators (e.g., Judy standing with her hands on her hips gazing toward the counter).

In figure 6, we represent possible trajectories of the action ascription process with dashed arrowed lines over time. Relative to figure 5, here we add ambiguity-clarity as a scalar dimension on the *y*-axis. To help visualize the ascription process, all trajectories start at maximal ambiguity before a turn is initiated. As soon as turns begin, sequential context becomes relevant, and the trajectory of action ascription begins as well. With a turn like “Hi,” occurring at a conversation’s opening, when greetings are expected, the action becomes clear quickly, as reflected in the steepness of the line. Turns like “Guess what?” occur in less clear sequential contexts, but they feature a dedicated design that is recognizable early; hence, the trajectory is relatively steep here too. Gentler slopes indicate that action ascription takes longer and that actions are more prone to ambiguity. Some trajectories also end at a lower point, suggesting more ambiguity. While the route to clarity can be shorter or longer, over the course of a TCU (or multiple TCUs), ambiguity may diminish through additional design resources. Where ambiguity remains, as in cases we showed, these resources are either in conflict or insufficiently compounded to generate clear action analyses.

## Conclusion

Research on social interaction has offered insight into different resources that people rely on for action ascription. However, these resources have not yet been assembled into a unified explanatory account. Our proposed pillars cut across the resources documented in the literature. Sequential context includes adjacency pair organization, overall structural organization, and other sources of expectation and projection prior to the beginning of a turn. Dedicated design, which relies heavily on language, is typically given a central place in the language sciences. However, few actions have dedicated designs. Our third pillar emphasizes multiple indicators both in terms of cumulation and consistency. Our model aligns with compositional approaches including Enfield and Sidnell’s proposal that actions emerge out of many pieces of behavior and context. We

contribute by emphasizing the importance and distinctive contributions of each component.

Our findings add to the sociology of ambiguity and introduce action ascription into theories of social action. Previous studies of ambiguity have left underspecified what makes particular actions or cultural objects subject to multiple interpretations (McMahan and Evans 2018). This has made it difficult to compare results and to specify the conditions in which ambiguity impedes or facilitates action. By typologizing ambiguities and conceptualizing their etiologies and consequences, we offer greater clarity on ambiguity. While we have focused on ambiguities in action ascription, future research should develop similar typologies for artifacts or written materials. In time, it may become possible to model when and how speakers encounter action ambiguity as well as the extent to which this varies depending on the intimacy of relationships and other sociodemographic aspects of the interactants.

Dominant approaches to social action have privileged individual agency, practices, and dispositions. While personal habitus and cognitive processes are part of what each of us brings to any social exchange, the arena where actions move the flow of social life forward, with their causes and consequences, strengthening or straining relationships, is the arena of interaction, an arena that is shaped by its own norms and pressures. Situating the analysis of social action in interaction thus enables us to see how individual agency and dispositions are put into practice and mediated under the interaction order (Goffman 1983).

Our investigation contributes two additional significant elements to the existing theories of social action. First, we bring to the fore the moment-by-moment process of action ascription. This encourages practice theorists to consider the relationship between collective rules and the production and interpretation of singular, situated actions. Second, by closely investigating concrete and observable particulars of action in interaction, we offer an empirically grounded model of how actions are naturally produced and interpreted for incorporation into social theory.

## About the authors

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## Notes

1. Prosody refers to features of speech sound that produce meaning beyond the level of words, including how words are grouped into utterances.
2. The advantage of working on English and Italian conversation corpora is that they involve diverse interactional contexts (hair salons to housemates cooking) and participants (college students and retirees in a residential living center). We combined the two datasets after ascertaining that they looked analytically similar. Speakers of all languages likely face problems of action ambiguity, but future researchers will need to assess commonalities and variations.
3. It is likely a bicycle race since there were seven hundred people involved and it was possible to “crash,” but nothing said is definitive.

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