

Evaluation of the ph.d. thesis submitted by Spencer Hazel, *Interactional competence in the institutional setting of the international university. Talk and embodied action as multimodal aggregates in institutional interaction.*

Supervisors:

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Evaluation committee:

- Professor Jürgen K. Streeck, University of Austin
- Associate Professor Trine Heinemann, SDU Sønderborg and University of Helsinki
- Professor Hartmut Haberland, Roskilde University (Chair)

Recommendation: The Evaluation committee recommends that Spencer Hazel's ph.d. thesis be accepted for the oral defense.

The Committee's recommendation is based on the following evaluation.

The thesis consists of iii+258 pages, divided into an *Introduction* (13 pages), a chapter *Theoretical and methodological approach* (39 pages), a chapter *Overview of the settings* (55 pages), a brief *Introduction to the articles* (2 pages), followed by five articles (three of which are co-authored): 1. *Moving into interaction: embodied practices for initiating interactions at a help desk counter* (with Kristian Mortensen, 36 pages), 2. *Embodying the institution – multimodal practices in developing interaction in study counselling meetings* (with Kristian Mortensen, 24 pages), 3. *Cultivating objects in interaction – visual motifs as meaning making practices in talk-in-interaction* (22 pages), 4. *Observing the paradox – on research participants doing-being-just-that* (26 pages), and 5. *Transcription linking software – integrating the ephemeral and the fixed* (with Janus Mortensen, 24 pages), and a brief section called *Closing remarks* (3 pages). Hereafter follow 5 appendices: Transcription conventions (1 page), the *CALPIU consent form and information sheet* (2 pages), English and Danish summaries (1 page each), a bibliography of 17 pages (the articles contain reference lists and the reference in them are not repeated in the bibliography), and finally co-authorship declarations (6 unnumbered pages in all).

The *Introduction* sets the frame for the thesis, by establishing that co-present interaction is embodied, i.e. relying not just on talk, but also on all other resources available to participants. Whilst this is not a new observation, the author introduces this in an interesting manner, by describing his experience of a one-man show by Dario Fo, then going on to discuss how the notion of embodied conduct as social interaction has been discussed as far back as the early 18th century. In particular, through these alternative references, the author establishes how for inter-lingua-cultural exchanges, the embodied nature of interaction is particularly relevant. Having introduced the general research questions that underlie the thesis as a whole, he goes on to discuss in more detail how especially this aspect of inter-lingual, non-native, second language etc. interactions has so far been largely ignored in previous research. The author

thus clearly establishes the motivation for and relevance of the thesis through this introduction.

Chapter 2, *Theoretical and methodological approach* is a comprehensive statement of the “interactionist” approach to (embodied) interaction analysis. In the first sections, the author introduces the background and motivation for using Conversation Analysis, as well as some of the basic concepts and principles of this approach, before discussing other relevant approaches that are also integrated in the thesis, while he in the remaining two sections describes data, method and procedures.

In Chapter 3, *Overview over the settings*, the author provides ethnographic data about the *locus* in which the recordings analyzed were produced, viz. the help desk and study guidance spaces of the International Office of a Danish university, including a description of the physical layout, the participants in the encounters (clients, staff, and student counsellors), the ‘architecture’ of an encounter taking place in these spaces, the language resources of the participants and a description of how they make use of them.

The first research article, *Moving into interaction: embodied practices for initiating interactions at a help desk counter*, provides a description of how soon-to-be co-participants coordinate gaze and embodied action to initiate or establish the grounds for an interaction. The aim is to account not only for the way the institution of the help desk is “talked into being”, but also how it is “embodied into being” (p. 140) through “systematic embodied conduct during the opening of interaction” (p. 113).

In the second article, *Embodying the institution – multimodal practices in developing interaction in study counselling meetings*, the author takes up an issue already briefly addressed in the previous article, the use of physical objects in organizing and accounting for emerging acts and sequences of institutional interaction, specifically “how material objects are drawn on as resources to demarcate between different activities” (p. 153) and how “non-normative”, “interactional affordances” are extracted from objects. The theme is pursued in the analysis of the uses and fetchings of writing implements as well as of performative acts of writing (“doing writing”).

The third article, *Cultivating objects in interaction – visual motifs as meaning making practices in talk-in-interaction*, elaborates on the way in which physical objects are brought into the interaction at a study-guidance meeting; it is a very detailed, quite technical analysis of ways in which writing implements and a table-top are recruited as semiotic resources for the production of multimodal utterances in.

The fourth article, *Observing the paradox – on research participants doing-being-just-that*, is a very detailed case study of ways in which research participants respond to the presence of recording equipment and being involved as “subjects” in a research study. Building on previous work, the author discusses the problematic ideal of “uncontaminated” data, then goes on to propose that rather than treat the potential “contamination” as a problem, participants’ orientation to research equipment can be viewed and studied as a resource

Finally, in the fifth article, *Transcription linking software – integrating the ephemeral and the fixed*, “downsides” of using transcripts in analyzing social interaction and talk in interaction are discussed. Referring to video- and audio-recordings as “primary entextualizations”, transcripts are classified as “secondary entextualizations”. This motivates a plea for the use of software that link primary and secondary entextualizations, a strategy which has the additional advantage of allowing transcripts to be relatively simple, as the phenomena of interest (and others not so far considered relevant) are always accessible to the extent that they are captured in the recordings.

In general, the thesis is well written, and keeps the reader interested and engaged throughout the text, in spite of occasional lapses into being longwinded or repetitive: in chapter 2, for example, the point that new technological developments have led to new possibilities for social science research to focus on situated social action, for instance, is repeated at least four times. Also, there is an occasional tendency to use exaggerated vocabulary (one of the first, but not the only one, example is the “myriad” resources mentioned on p. 4, where “multiple” would have been quite enough). The author frequently includes evaluative (in fact, celebratory) terms such as “complex”, “highly systematic”, “highly sequentially organized”, “finely coordinated”, etc. in the analysis. While we agree with the author about the systematicity of these interactions and the design of actions in them, it is not clear what distinguishes “high systematicity” from “systematicity”. Furthermore, if already basic behaviors and coordinations are described as complex, this implies that processes of interaction initiation in truly complex encounters (for example, including larger numbers of participants or involving technologies) were to be called “extremely complex”, etc.

The author shows generally a very good grasp of the literature, follows sound scientific procedure, and provides throughout the thesis good analysis of the data. The thesis’ most important contribution lies in the way the author very carefully analyzes how gaze, posture, instrumental and manual action, as well as talk are coordinated with one another and between the parties. Although this is something many have suspected or assumed without further proof, the author actually *shows* the highly systematic, “artful” nature of the actions by which interaction participants achieve a state of focused interaction. The thesis stands out through the enlightening and the sometimes poetic ways in which the arguments are presented. Reading Spencer Hazel’s thesis is a thoroughly delightful experience.

If one wants to single out particularly successful sections of the thesis, one could refer to the last part of Chapter 2, which is one of the finest moments in this thesis, where the author describes data, method and procedures in a scope and depth that is not often seen in contemporary work. The thorough way in which the author goes through, step-by-step, the decisions made in collecting and working with data is both honest and detailed and thus something that many contemporaries could benefit from reading (and duplicating in their own studies).

Another particularly convincing part of the analysis worthy of being singled out is article 2, where a compelling case is made that such seemingly irrelevant phenomena as the way a pen is being held or a writing pad positioned are indeed core components of institutional interaction in so far as they constitute “participants’ online displays of understanding of their ongoing activity” (p. 150).

There are few, if any, misprints and only minor glitches with section numbering in the text (p. 104-106) and pagination in the Table of contents (Appendices).

A few more detailed comments may be in order. Regarding chapter 2, one could take issue with the author's particular kind of understanding of Conversation analysis: the concepts that are described as basic for CA rely heavily on an understanding of CA as doing a kind of "grammar" of interaction (turn-organization, turn-construction, preference etc) to the expense of the idea that CA is ultimately an analytic method with which to study social action. The author seems to rely exclusively on some of the "classical" old studies within CA to present this view, without taking into consideration subsequent research by others than Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (and maybe Heritage) that has contributed within CA to a more sociological, "social action" view on interaction, rather than the "language-focussed" one that the author presents.

Perhaps this particular understanding of CA as focusing on language and "turns-at-talk" by the author (both in Chapter 2 and throughout the thesis) is the motivating factor behind the emphasis on the "lack of research" on embodied action within CA. The author is not alone in stressing this "lack of research", though.

On the other hand, additional philosophical approaches – beyond CA – could be considered highly relevant to the enterprise outlined in Chapter 2, notably G.H. Mead's work, Merleau-Ponty, and some of Heidegger; but this moves the scope of investigation outside the frame of CA and delving into these sources is not necessarily needed for this dissertation.

As to the criticism, formulated in article 5, of a tendency among researchers towards reification of transcripts, one could ask if this any longer true (or has been for the last ten years at least) for research within CA (the relevance of this criticism for other interaction research, e.g. ELF studies, notwithstanding). The authors claim that from their experience, an overwhelming majority of researchers continue to rely on separate software tools. How far does their experience in fact go? Some people even do not transcribe at all until they have to re-present an example in a written paper (a practice that could probably also be discussed for its methodological consequences), i.e. they manage without secondary entextualizations.

Two points which we in particular think could be important for further discussion are the following:

1. On page 5, the third Research Question for the thesis is formulated, viz. "In the multilingual and multicultural and multilingual setting of the International University, how might interactional competence be characterized given the setting?" We feel that the thesis provides important material relevant for an answer to this question, and that especially the introduction provides a fresh perspective and good rationale for considering embodiment in inter-lingual, non-native encounters, but that this is not much addressed in the thesis as a whole as a focus of analysis. The same goes for the relevance of the institutional setting. The institutional setting is, of course, important because the work has been done within the framework of CALPIU and in particular CALPIU's "Field of Practice 4", viz. "Student-administrative staff interactions". But we note for instance that in chapter 2, the resources

employed by the participants are of an everyday nature and also in the articles it could have been pointed out more specifically in which way the institutional character of university encounters is indeed special. Most of the embodied actions described in article 1, e.g., are generic features of the initiation of focused interaction and can be observed in non-institutional interaction as well. To spell this out: In the section on *institutional interaction* (2.7), there is no discussion that participants in such interaction, especially when they are novices to it, always rely on their competences as *everyday* interactants. Institutional interactions are in large measure not simply *different* or *constrained* forms of interaction (e.g. by following different turn-taking rules), but rather are “talked into being” by means of ordinary (everyday) interactional competences and procedures, which, in the institutional context, are interpreted differently and thus have different consequences, as in the related field of classroom interaction: Teachers ask questions and students give answers, and only the teacher’s response to the answer “transforms” these sequences into something other than ordinary question-answer pairs.

2. In many parts of the thesis, the author or authors focus on their ability to illustrate the complexity of multimodal interaction and do not to the same degree highlight the newness of their own contribution over and above this – as if the complexity issue were the new or most interesting thing. But to us it appears as at least equally important that the changing patterns of university internationalisation have created new types of interlingual interactions, especially in *lingua franca* scenarios (there have been students from abroad for a long time, but international offices and their helpdesks are institutional innovations). It should be pointed out more clearly what contribution the thesis makes to the study of these interlingual encounters in the emerging institution of the International University.

Some critical remarks in detail notwithstanding, the Evaluation Committee’s unanimous recommendation is that Spencer Hazel’s ph.d. thesis be accepted for the oral defense.

Austin, Helsinki and Roskilde, January 7, 2013

Jürgen K. Streeck

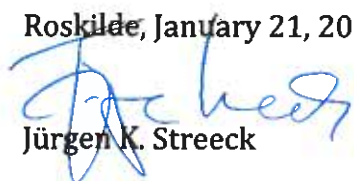
Trine Heinemann

Hartmut Haberland (Chair)

This preliminary assessment was signed on January 7, 2013 by Hartmut Haberland on behalf of the committee.

Spencer Hazel has today, on January 21, 2013, delivered a clear and fully satisfactory presentation of the main issues of his thesis, responded professionally to the questions from the committee, and demonstrated excellent control of his material. On the background of this, the committee unanimously recommend that the Academic Council of Roskilde University grant Spencer Hazel the ph.d. degree.

Roskilde, January 21, 2013


Jürgen K. Streeck


Trine Heinemann


Hartmut Haberland (Chair)