Formal Structures of Practical Tasks: A Resource for Action in the Social Life of Very Young Children

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Before children are able to speak, they encounter an interactionally organized social world (Goffman, 1964, 1983; Schegloff, 2006) – a world they must engage well before productive linguistic ability becomes an available interactional resource. Early-appearing forms of communicative action are carried out through visible body behavior, including gesture, gaze, body posture and the deployment of objects, as well as through non-verbal and proto-verbal vocalizations. These pre-verbal modes of conduct are the resources for composing orderly and recognizable actions in interaction with others. In addition to these body-behavioral and vocal resources for composing communicative action, young children also make use of the actions produced by other participants (both peers and adult Caregivers) as a context for the composition and placement of their own contributions.

This chapter explores the structure of that context – the activity context – and how that structure serves as an interactional resource for the actions of very young children. While there is no doubt that language is beginning to figure into how very young children understand and respond to others, in this chapter we focus on how the observable conduct of others – and in particular the formal sequential structure of that conduct – furnishes very young children with the interactional resources for participation in the social life of the species before their own language use has become the dominant mode for communicative action.²

In a series of investigations into the social life of 12 to 30 month-old children and their Caregivers in three infant-toddler daycare centers, we have begun to examine the complex structures of engagement very young children exhibit in interaction with peers.
and adult Caregivers. In our initial investigation (Lerner and Zimmerman, 2003), we showed that young children can exhibit an awareness that their actions are observable by others, and further we found that even at an early age, young children count on having their own conduct treated as actions in a recognizable course of actions – and that they can exploit this fundamental feature of social life in a variety of ways. In addition, Kidwell and Zimmerman (2006, 2007) demonstrate that very young children can use a nearby Caregiver’s actions for positioning their own actions targeted to another child (or an object): They can position their actions so as to be seen and attended to by the Caregiver or so as not to be seen or attended to by them. Furthermore, Kidwell (2005) has shown that young children can make use of two distinct gazing practices of their Caregivers (a passing glance or a fixed stare) as actions that differentially foreshadow subsequent Caregiver action.

In this chapter we continue our investigation of these structures of engagement by developing an analysis of the “activity context” for communicative action in interaction. We do so by examining an extended excerpt from a field recording made at an infant-toddler center in which an adult Caregiver is serving a meal to a young child, Charlene (15 mo), as two other children, Ryan (14 mo) and especially Laura (16 mo) attempt to join in. Our analysis centers on Laura’s moment-by-moment contingent treatment of the conduct of the adult Caregiver who is serving breakfast to Charlene. We describe the design and especially the placement of Laura’s actions – showing how her actions are at first placed to fit into the structure of the ongoing activity at the beginning of a “task-transition space” as each task in the meal service comes to possible completion, and then how later they are placed in a manner that moves away from this position. It is in the
precise placement of her actions and in its changing composition that her practical, situated grasp of the emergent sequential structure and trajectory of the ongoing mealtime activity is revealed. Our aim here is to describe the formal structures of practical tasks to which she is demonstrably oriented, as well as the methods she uses by reference to these structures of action. We will show how these structures of action and methods for producing action are employed repeatedly over a series of attempts by Laura to induce the Caregiver to include her in the ongoing activity – or to put it more plainly, to induce the Caregiver to give her some food to eat, too.\(^4\)

Our focus on the activities of very young children may appear to make studies of childhood development relevant to our study. However, from our perspective the main thrust of developmental studies has been to document and provide a temporal frame for the emergence of cognitive abilities. Research in this area routinely treats the interactional context as transparent, and merely a vehicle to expose mental processes (see e.g., Nelson, 1986). Wootton (2006) notes that Vygotskyan research is perhaps the most proximate tradition which features the examination of children’s interactional practices. However he goes on to state, “The primary interest of the Vygotskyans is how to account for some facet of the child’s psychological or linguistic development: for example, the emergence of higher mental functions in the case of Vygotsky (1986), language and speech act acquisition in the case of Bruner (1983), theory of mind in the case of Tomasello (1999).” (Wootton, 2006:196).

Certainly, the interactional domain rests upon a foundation provided by the evolved neural mechanisms of the human brain. Yet, the positing of cognitive abilities should surely conform to the actual requirements of the observable interaction order and
participation in it – e.g. the structurally afforded ability to recognize, project and contingently employ unfolding structures of action in interaction with others. Whatever cognitive capacities are found to underwrite the interaction order, the specification of the elements of this domain requires a close and systematic analysis of naturally occurring interaction addressed to the manifold contingences of everyday life, and the social-sequential structures that enable human interaction.

Very young children are the subjects of our investigation then, but our object of study is not their developing “mental life” but their participation in the preexisting orderly social life of the species. To paraphrase Goffman (1967), we do not investigate children and their moments, but rather moments and their children. As far as we can see, there is little in the literature that treats the details of toddler embodied conduct in interaction in a manner that maintains its situated ‘integrity’ (to use Schegloff’s (2005) term) and aims at describing the contextual resources that enable toddler participation at the level of its actual situated production on a case-by-case and moment-by-moment basis. But see Wootton (1994, 1997) for an important exception - and for work with young members of another social species that has some resonance with our investigation, see Byrne’s (2006) discussion of “behavior parsing.”

Bruner and his collaborators (Ratner and Bruner, 1978; Bruner and Sherwood, 1976) do examine interactional games (e.g. “appearance-disappearance” and “peek-a-boo”) played by adult caregivers with very young children. These games entail routines which involve repeated production of ordered phases that provide resources for the child to respond in appropriate ways and at appropriate moments in the unfolding game. But unlike playing a game with a child, the mealtime routine we examine was not designed to
engage Laura (the child we will focus on) in any way. Laura's appositely placed and
designed interventions are sequentially-specified attempted solutions to a commonplace
dilemma: How does she join an activity in which she is not a ratified participant (and in
which she is apparently not entitled to participate). This case thus affords a glimpse of
how conduct of a very young child exploits the orderliness of a mundane routine to press
her appeals, rather than participation in the routine course of an activity in which the
child is the star participant.

The Mealtime Setting and Routine

In this episode an adult Caregiver is serving breakfast to Charlene at a small, low table on
an enclosed porch, while Laura and Ryan (who apparently have already eaten breakfast)
look on. The table abuts a railing which is used as a “staging area” where the food and
other meal-related items have been placed out of reach and out of direct sight of the
children. (See Illustration 1a.) The Caregiver is stationed on her knees directly opposite
the railing and facing it, while Charlene (who is being served) comes to sit on the side of
the table to the Caregiver’s right, and Laura comes to sit on the side of the table to the
Caregiver’s left. Ryan wanders in and out of the scene, although much later in the
episode he does use Laura’s chair once she vacates it. (See Illustration 1b.)

Laura, although present at the table, is not (yet) a ratified participant in the meal
service which is designed on this occasion for a single recipient, Charlene. This poses the
ILLUSTRATION 1: FOOD STAGING AREA AND MEAL SERVICE TABLE

1a. The location of the food staging area on railing before the meal service begins.

1b. The arrangement of the children and Caregiver as the meal service begins.
interactional problem of how to join in an ongoing activity. As we shall see, Laura’s two-part solution couples precisely placed appeals with a kind of “anticipatory recipiency”; the former is launched as tasks come to completion, while the latter is returned to as each next task (e.g., bibbing, hand washing, being served food) is imminent. Accordingly, our analytic focus will be on the features of the activity context – i.e., the sequential structure of the meal service tasks – that Laura’s conduct is demonstrably oriented to as the Caregiver prepares Charlene for eating and serves up her food.

In this incident the meal service takes a routine, episodic form that furnishes Laura with repeated opportunities to indicate, pursue and even demand that she be given food (too). For the most part, the Caregiver retrieves items such as a bib, washcloth and food containers from a tray on the railing one by one, distributing each item before returning to the railing to retrieve the next one. This basic task structure of “retrieve, distribute, and return to retrieve a next item” provides Laura with opportunities to seek inclusion, and later to demonstrate her displeasure at not being included. As we shall see – and anticipating our detailed examination of these object-based manual tasks – Laura is oriented to both the trajectory of the meal service as it unfolds item by item, and at a finer level of granularity, to each item’s phase structure of “retrieve, distribute and return to retrieve a next item.”

We will show that each task (bibbing, washing up, serving a food item) is constituted by a formal task structure that include a recognizable task completion and thus furnishes an opportunity for intervention as each task is ending and a next is commencing. Of particular interest to us are the ways in which these task transitions figure into how Laura first produces what may be termed sequence-prospective actions
when inclusion in the meal activity is still a nascent possibility, and later, *sequence-retrospective* actions when it becomes apparent that this possibility is about to be, or has already been, foreclosed. We demonstrate that her orientation to the sequential structure of the individual tasks entailed in serving a meal to Charlene furnishes Laura with repeated opportunities to seek inclusion in the meal service, and later to register displeasure that she has not been included. Describing the positioning of Laura’s interventions will allow us to locate the episodic and formal phase structure of the Caregiver’s actions as a resource for action – i.e. as an oriented-to, sequentially structured constituent of the interaction order.

**Setting the Stage**

To briefly set the stage for the analysis, we begin by noting that the Caregiver has called Charlene to the table (“(Come) Charlene. Come ’n sit down on the chair.”), but that all three children (Charlene, Ryan and Laura) come to the table. Laura, who is nearest, sits down on an available chair first, then Ryan arrives, but is physically barred by the Caregiver from sitting in the seat designated for Charlene. (As she does this, the Caregiver states, “I’m saving it for Charlene. She’s going to have breakfast here Ryan.”) Finally, Charlene arrives and is seated at the table. At this point, Ryan begins to wander off crying and the Caregiver (while attending to Charlene) indicates that the meal service is exclusively for Charlene when she states, “You two will have snack in a little while. You already had a big breakfast.” Here the Caregiver, by addressing not only Ryan (who is crying and has been stopped from sitting down) but also Laura (who is sitting quietly by the table), shows that she understands Laura’s presence as constituting a nascent move
to participate in the meal service. Being seated at the table is also an action resource for these children, i.e., it is something to do as the first step in getting food to eat, and in being accomplished, displays the child’s interest in and readiness for eating. In this case, although Ryan has been barred from the table, Laura has, in fact, successfully taken the first step in preparing to eat by seating herself by the table – albeit on a chair that is not (yet) facing the table.

Before turning to Laura’s interventions (which will occupy the remainder of this report), it is worth pointing out the way Ryan responds to the Caregiver’s actions. When he has been blocked from sitting down and told the meal service is not for him, he does not pursue participation as Laura does, but begins to cry and wanders off. Here we see a contrasting course of action to the one we will show Laura taking. He accepts the Caregiver’s response as settling the matter (for him) – as an adequate and at least for now sequence-ending rejection of his attempt to participate in the meal service. Rather than pursue his attempt to be included, he simply displays his displeasure at being excluded and exits. He thereby ratifies that exclusion by evaluating the Caregiver’s response, rather than pursuing an alternate response from her. On the other hand, as the meal service begins Laura has been allowed to remain seated by the table, and to do so when Ryan has been physically barred from a chair at the table. As we shall see, Laura eventually comes to take a stance similar to Ryan’s, but not until a series of additional attempts are made to build on her initial success to become a ratified diner.
Serving Charlene

In the following sections of this report we describe the sequential structure of the meal service, how that structure furnishes repeated and distinct opportunities for participation by the not-yet-ratified diner, Laura, to claim entitlement to, prompt participation in and eventually display her displeasure with the ongoing meal service for Charlene.

First Retrieval: The Bib – And Laura’s First Appeal

In this section, we describe how Laura produces actions that make relevant her status as a would-be participant in the meal service as another child, Charlene is being readied to eat. At this point, the meal service is just beginning and thus the opportunity for Laura to be readied as a participant is still a possibility built into the structure of the sequence (the Caregiver’s earlier statement, “You two will have snack in a little while. You already had a big breakfast.” notwithstanding).

With Charlene seated, the Caregiver extends her own arms and body upward toward the staging area on the railing to retrieve the first item (the bib). Both Laura and Charlene, watch as the Caregiver settles back down on her knees and brings the folded bib into what can be termed a “setup position.” This position, directly in front of the Caregiver’s body at chest-level, is used to operate on most items. Laura looks on as the Caregiver unfolds and drapes the bib over Charlene. (See Illustration 2a.) Just as the Caregiver begins to fasten the bib – that is, just as the bibbing task is reaching its possible completion - Laura launches her first overt appeal.
ILLUSTRATION 2: FIRST APPEAL

2a. Laura watches Charlene receive her bib.

2b. Laura points and gazes at the food staging area.

2c. Laura repositions her arm and splays her fingers in a reach gesture toward the food staging area as she gazes at the site of Caregiver’s action.

2d. Laura looks down at her chest.
Laura’s appeal has two phases. First, with the Caregiver engaged in fastening the bib behind Charlene’s neck (and thus with her gaze directed away from Laura) Laura raises her left hand in a point toward the railing with her head arched back, gazing in the direction of the point.⁹ (See Illustration 2b.) The upward trajectory of her hand gesture is accompanied through its full trajectory by a squeal (“AEHH:::”). At this point her hand, head and body are all oriented upward and her gaze, aligned with her point, is directed to the top of the railing – that is, to the staging area where the meal service items are kept. Second, once her gesture reaches its apex, she begins to shift her gaze away from the railing and back towards the site of the bibbing activity. At the same time, Laura also swings her pointing hand farther in the direction of the railing. Thus, her gaze-directional and gesture-directional shifts diverge – briefly going in opposite directions. Then, as she gazes toward the site of the Caregiver’s action, Laura splays her fingers into what has been termed a “non-effortful reach” (Bruner, Roy and Ratner, 1982), while at the same time voicing the possible protoword “BAeh? baeh!” (See Illustration 2c.) In this way, Laura’s appeal moves from a configuration of a vocal alert, pointing hand (that indicates what she wants) and gaze occupied solely with the target of her appeal, to a configuration of reaching hand (that embodies an attempt to get it) plus gaze and vocalization directed to her recipient. This adjustment to her action both upgrades the appeal and pursues uptake of it by her Caregiver. Although the original gesture’s onset is accompanied by a squeal that could summon the gaze of the Caregiver and is pursued with a more complex vocalization, the Caregiver displays no visible response to Laura’s appeal.¹⁰
Laura withdraws her raised hand just as the Caregiver moves upward for the retrieval of a next item from the porch railing. The Caregiver’s upward trajectory reveals a fully bibbed Charlene to Laura’s gaze. Laura then looks down at her own chest - at the place where bibs are placed. (See Illustration 2d.) This is evidence that, for Laura, a participant-in-waiting, inclusion in the mealtime should involve (or should have involved) her receiving a bib. She then looks back up toward Charlene, and after following Charlene’s already upward gaze, both children track the lowering of the next item (a washcloth) by the Caregiver to the (chest-level) setup position.

What can be made of this sequence of actions? Laura positions her actions by reference to the ongoing task (bibbing Charlene). It is just as the Caregiver is about to finish fastening the bib that Laura initiates her appeal. In a sense her analysis of the Caregiver’s action-so-far, as approaching the end of the task, anticipates its termination. She does not appeal for what Charlene has, but for items of her own. This moment between the Caregiver’s successive involvements with Charlene constitutes a “task transition space” that furnishes Laura with an opportunity to press the Caregiver to include her in the meal service. Laura’s appeal is an attempt to be included: 1. positionally (just before the Caregiver’s next mealtime task begins); 2. body-behaviorally (through a point and a reach, and through gaze); 3. vocally (through a summoning squeal and possibly a locally intelligible proto-word associated with the meal); and 4. ecologically (indicating a place, and thereby the meal-relevant items that belong to that place). In summary, Laura’s intervention is positioned by reference to completion of the prior task, while composed by reference to the projected next task.
Second Retrieval: The Washcloth – And Laura’s Second Appeal

In her second attempt, Laura composes her appeal from its beginning in a way that is specifically oriented to gaining – and confirming – the recipiency of the Caregiver for her actions. Having tracked the movement of the next item, a washcloth, from the railing to the chest-level setup position in front of the Caregiver, Laura watches as she unfolds it and offers it to Charlene with both hands. How Charlene handles the washcloth seems to figure into Laura’s next actions.

After using the washcloth, Charlene drops the it with a kind of flourish: she raises her hands above the washcloth with palms down, while gazing down at it. (See Illustration 3a.) She then holds this position – hands stationed above the discarded washcloth, looking down at it for a moment (about 0.4 sec) – until the Caregiver reaches for the washcloth and pushes it to the edge of the table that abuts the railing. For Laura (and the Caregiver), Charlene’s release of the washcloth and the spreading of her hands seem to be a decisive display of completion. Virtually simultaneously, as the Caregiver begins reaching toward the washcloth, Laura begins to raise her left hand, while turning her gaze toward the Caregiver’s face (which is not obscured as it was at the beginning of the first appeal). As Laura’s hand is raised, her directly upward pointing gesture swings not toward the staging area on the railing, but toward the Caregiver, positioning her gesture within the Caregiver’s line of sight. (See Illustration 3b.) Then, as the Caregiver begins to move forward and up toward the railing to retrieve the next item, Laura adjusts her upward pointing gesture by moving her hand up and towards the porch rail. As she adjusts her point with the Caregiver’s movement, Laura also produces another vocal appeal, thereby adding an audible element to her appeal. In other words, she shifts the
ILLUSTRATION 3: SECOND APPEAL

3a. Charlene spreads both hands, dropping her washcloth with a flourish.

3b. Laura points toward the food staging area and produces a vocalization while gazing at Caregiver.

3c. Laura and Charlene watch next retrieval.
position of her point and adds a vocalization to it as the Caregiver moves toward the railing without having acknowledged her appeal. Having had no response to the first appeal, the second appeal seems designed specifically for this purpose. That is, the second appeal is composed from its outset to be seen by the Caregiver, even at the expense of not actually pointing in the direction of the items on the railing she is apparently seeking. Moreover, Laura begins this point, not by gazing at the railing as she did at the beginning of the first appeal, but by immediately gazing towards the Caregiver’s face.

Laura’s actions here still constitutes an “optimistic” intervention, one designed prospectively to appeal to the Caregiver (for meal service). Similar to her first intervention, this intervention is placed at completion of Charlene’s washing-up and it is aimed at what happens next – i.e. it is aimed at eliciting what should happen next and the Caregiver treats it in just this way. Here, as the Caregiver rises to retrieve the next item, (and as Laura lowers her point) she states, “This is for Charlene, Laura.” Laura continues to look upwards toward the site of the Caregiver’s action on the railing, as does Charlene. Thus, having completed her intervention, Laura returns to a ‘wait and see’ position, continuing to look upwards toward the site of action on the railing. In so doing, Laura assumes the embodied stance of a possible beneficiary waiting for the next item in just the same manner as Charlene does. (See Illustration 3c.)

To summarize, first, there is an observable completion to the washing-up activity as Charlene shows she is done, and then both Laura and the Caregiver simultaneously treat the task as complete. Laura uses this opportunity to produce a next appeal to be
included in the meal service. Importantly, this is not done in competition with the Caregiver’s attention to Charlene, but is fitted to activity completion (here washing up). Her intervention is prospective in that it prompts a next action in the ongoing course of action. And after producing the appeal, Laura then returns to what we might term “anticipatory recipiency” – that is, to a ‘wait and see’ stance toward the unfolding action. Finally, the Caregiver treats Laura’s actions as a plea for food by making explicit that the next item will be for Charlene alone.

Laura’s first two appeals occurred at the completion of a meal service task; the integrity of the tasks themselves (bibbing and hand washing) were respected. So far her appeals have been confined to the transition space, launching the intervention as the task was completed and terminating it as the Caregiver moved to retrieve a next item from the staging area on the railing. Then during the retrieval phase in which a next item is brought to the table, Laura’s conduct parallels Charlene’s, i.e., the actions of the would-be and ratified meal participants converge in a demeanor of anticipatory recipiency. This could be said to constitute Laura’s optimistic period – that she will, perhaps, find herself included in the meal service as the next item arrives.

**Third Retrieval: Charlene’s Dish – But No Appeal**

In turn, the Caregiver’s use of the bib and the washcloth consisted of several steps: first the item was retrieved and then it was deployed. Moreover, that deployment terminated with a recognizable completion (e.g. fastening the bib or discarding the washcloth), after which a return for a next item was immediately produced. The transition from task completion to return for next item constituted an oriented-to task-transition space for
Laura’s interventions – interventions that did not disrupt the task at hand because Laura placed them precisely at the completion of one task and before the retrieval of an item for a next task of the meal service. In this section we present evidence that accounts for the absence of an appeal by Laura in terms of the absence of a structurally-provided opportunity to intervene.

Here we suggest that the retrieval and use of the next item in the meal service (a dish) is composed in a manner that does not furnish an opportunity for intervention. This adds evidence that complements our claim that recognizable completion of a task is consequential for intervention. The dish retrieval is unique among the retrieval sequences in that there is not really a distinct ‘distribution phase’: the retrieval is all that is involved before returning for a next item (food to put into the dish’s compartments). Minimally, the dish must be placed in front of Charlene, but this entails a minimal adjustment to the retrieval itself. Moreover, in this instance there is a ‘rush-through’ to the next retrieval thereby all but precluding an intervention by Laura.12

The placement of the dish follows a 'retrieval, distribution and return for next item' trajectory that does not occasion an appeal - or even a move to begin an appeal. In this case the Caregiver first retrieves the dish from the railing with her left hand, but as she brings it down she shifts to a two-handed grasp about halfway to the table. (See Illustration 4a.) She next brings the dish to the table with both hands. Then, just as the dish touches the table, the Caregiver releases her left hand and then rather quickly reaches up, thus beginning the return for a next item. (See Illustration 4b.) Note that Laura, as well as Charlene, have tracked the dish retrieval visually, first looking up at the end of the washcloth sequence and then following the trajectory of the dish with their
ILLAUSTRATION 4: NO PLACE FOR AN APPEAL

4a. Caregiver lowers dish with both hands.

4b. As Caregiver finishes placing the dish with her right hand, she quickly raises her left hand to begin the next retrieval.
gaze. However, before Laura has an opportunity to intervene – as she did at the completion of the bibbing and wash-up tasks – the Caregiver quickly moves to retrieve the next item. Laura does look up to where the Caregiver’s left hand is going, but the hand is virtually at the railing before Laura begins looking up. Moreover, the placement of the dish is carried out in a manner that obscures the completion of the dish retrieval task as a discreet course of action: The Caregiver does not return to her knee sitting position, no operation is performed on the dish other than its placement, and the return for next item (by her left hand) is begun before the dish placement is completed by her right hand and the left hand’s return seems hurried. Thus, the transition from one task to the next is obscured (because the return for a next item is begun before the completion of the distribution of the dish) as well as rushed through. There is no opportunity to launch an appeal and no appeal is launched.

**The Transition from Appeal to the Expression of Displeasure**

In this section we examine how Laura’s actions, previously fitted prospectively to the ongoing meal service, now begin to assume a more aggrieved and retrospective character, changing eventually into an unrestrained expression of displeasure as the Caregiver finishes serving food to Charlene. As we will see, Laura changes both the composition and the placement of her interventions.

**Fourth Retrieval: A Food Container – and An Extended Appeal**
As the next task in the meal service, the Caregiver retrieves and opens a plastic container and spoons most of its contents into one of the three compartments of Charlene’s dish. This takes over 10 seconds to complete and Laura quietly watches the distribution. Laura follows with her gaze as the Caregiver draws the container and lid back up to the setup position and replaces the lid. (See Illustration 5a.) Just as the Caregiver closes the lid on the container, Laura’s left hand reaches up, fingers initially splayed and then forming into a point as the lid of the container is firmly closed with an audible snap. The point is in the direction of the railing, while Laura’s gaze moves from the container in the setup position to the Caregiver’s face. As she raises her hand, and while looking directly at the Caregiver, Laura produces a three-pulse stuttered call (“uh- uh- uh-”). (See Illustration 5b.) Then as the Caregiver once again reaches toward the railing (using a two-handed return in which she transfers the just-closed container from her left hand to her right hand, so that both hands are raised to the railing), Laura once again withdraws her pointing gesture. As the Caregiver moves upward and as Laura withdraws her gesture, she also shifts her gaze from tracking the Caregiver’s movement to the staging area on the railing. (See Illustration 5c.) Up to this point, what she has done during this task-transition space parallels her prior attempts, albeit with perhaps a somewhat more distressed vocal appeal.¹³

Now things begin to change. While continuing to gaze toward the staging area Laura begins a second four-pulse stuttered call (“uh- uh- uh- uh-”) just as the container is placed back on the tray – here for the first time producing elements of an appeal not early in the transition space (as in the first two interventions), but at the point the task transition space is about to close (with the possible retrieval of a next item). As the Caregiver
ILLUSTRATION 5: AN EXTENDED APPEAL

5a. Caregiver begins to place lid on food container as Laura watches.

5b. As the lid is closed, Laura points to the food staging area and produces a stutter cry while continuing to gaze at Caregiver.

5c. As caregiver returns the food jar to the food staging area, Laura retracts her gesture and looks upward.

5d. Laura does not track the next retrieval but abruptly shifts her gaze to Charlene before producing a next cry burst.
continues with some preparation at the railing, this stutter call then segues into a three-pulse burst of what might be characterized as nascent crying (“uhHUH- huh- huh-“). It is here, for the first time, that Laura does not return fully to anticipatory recipiency while the Caregiver retrieves a next item from the staging area. By contrast, note that Charlene does continue with anticipatory recipiency by again gazing upwards to the site of action and then tracking the in-tandem retrieval of the next two items. Laura does not track this retrieval, but abruptly shifts her gaze from the railing to Charlene before producing a next cry burst. (See Illustration 5d.)

Because the Caregiver engages in some form of preparation at the staging area, rather than immediately bringing down a next item, the transition space between completion of the previous task and the retrieval of the next item is prolonged, and Laura’s vocalization is extended into that space as well. 14 It is during this continued preparation that Laura’s vocalizations (now produced without an accompanying point or reach gesture) begin to take the shape of a complaint cry, thus adding elements of a sequence-retrospective stance – and thus beginning a transition from actions that constitute a practical hope for inclusion to those that express displeasure at not being included. 15

Fifth Retrieval: A Second Food Container – And Laura’s Expression of Displeasure

As the meal service continues, Laura’s conduct (in the way it is positioned and composed) begins to take on features of a grievance. When the Caregiver returns from the railing, she places a partially filled glass of milk before Charlene with her right hand,
while at almost the same moment bringing down a baby food jar to the setup position with her left hand. Rather than tracking the retrieval of the items as with the Caregiver’s previous retrievals, Laura abruptly drops her gaze to Charlene just as the Caregiver begins to lower her arms from the railing. (Note again that Charlene does track the retrieval of the items as before.) Then, before the Caregiver sets the milk down next to Charlene’s dish, Laura produces another cry burst (“\textquote{hu hu:h.”}) while gazing, not at the Caregiver, but directly at Charlene. This short cry is not positioned by reference to the progressive realization of the ‘retrieve-distribution-return’ sequence, but rather is an expression of displeasure – of having been left out – that continues on from her own prior burst of crying. It is positioned after her own prior vocalization, rather than fitted to the ongoing task structure. We see here the continuing emergence of a more retrospective orientation to the course of action – with Laura now producing a negative affective expression aimed at her exclusion.

When the milk is placed in front of Charlene, both Laura and Charlene gaze at it and both then turn their gaze to the opening of the baby food jar. Laura then continues gazing at the jar as it is moved into place to empty its contents into Charlene’s dish. However, rather than waiting until this task nears completion, Laura launches into a single, loud and protracted cry burst just as the first spoonful is dished up.\footnote{\text{Illustration 6a.}} Moreover, this vocalization is not accompanied by a point to the staging area (or even to the site of the dishing up). This long cry, begun just as spooning up of the food begins – and not at the end of the distribution phase as was the case with earlier interventions – constitutes a full-fledged expression of strong displeasure at being excluded from the meal service. On its completion, and as the Caregiver picks up the lid
ILLUSTRATION 6: EXPRESSION OF DISPLEASURE

6a. Laura launches a loud, protracted cry as the first spoonfull is dished up.

6b. Caregiver closes the food jar and tells Laura "You're gunna have snack in a little while Laura, you've already had breakfast."

6c. As Caregiver sits, the food service concluded Laura produces continuous crying.
from the table and closes the jar, she says, “You’re gunna have snack in a little while Laura, you’ve already had breakfast.” (See Illustration 6b.) The Caregiver’s utterance draws Laura’s gaze from the now-full dish just as the lid reaches the jar (at the word “snack”). Laura first looks toward the Caregiver’s face as she speaks and then shifts to watch as the Caregiver finishes closing the lid on the jar, but Laura neither begins an appeal at the completion of this task nor does she track the Caregiver’s subsequent move to the railing. Rather, she returns her gaze to Charlene eating as the Caregiver returns the jar to the railing. In short, there has been no appeal for a next item, but an intervention designed to express her displeasure and fitted to the beginning of the distribution phase of the task, and thus placed while that task – the “complainable matter” – is in full swing.

We now turn to the completion of the meal service by the Caregiver and the further change in Laura’s conduct that is occasioned by it.

**Concluding Meal Service to Charlene**

Having fixed her gaze on Charlene, Laura only returns her gaze to the Caregiver as she drops down from the railing empty handed. Moreover, this time the Caregiver does not return to her kneeling position from which she has prepared Charlene and served up the food; rather the Caregiver changes to a cross-legged sitting position that can be understood to mark the end of the service phase.

As the Caregiver sits down (i.e. during the transition), Laura produces a pair of staccato cry vocalizations and then once the Caregiver is fully seated she shifts into continuous crying, broken only by in-breaths and by momentary attention to others’
actions (e.g., the Caregiver again adjusting Charlene’s bib or Ryan returning to the table). (See Illustration 6c.) The Caregiver, once seated and after the first long wailing cry burst, says to Charlene, “Don’t listen to her Charlene.” The Caregiver is no longer dealing with the crying as an appeal for food, but as a possible distraction to the now-eating Charlene.17

By the time the Caregiver deposits the second jar on the railing, returns empty handed and then sits down (thereby punctuating the completion of the meal service phase of the mealtime routine) Laura’s actions are no longer fitted to the structure of the meal service in a manner designed for inclusion. All that is left to her is the expression of distress and displeasure, which looks backward to her exclusion from the now-completed meal service. The move to a more or less continuous bout of crying seems fitted not only to the completion of a task, but to the recognizable completion of the meal service itself. Here crying furnishes its own occasion for subsequent bursts once the possibility of task-occasioned opportunities are no longer available – at least for the moment.

Finally, we can again note that Laura’s sequence-retrospective expression matches Ryan's initial response to having been physically barred from participation at the table. He accepted that as a denial (at least for the time being) and moved directly to an expression of displeasure, while Laura, who was able to seat herself at the table (albeit sideways to it), persisted in her appeals through much of the meal service.

**Charlene Eats Breakfast: Two Additional Structurally-Occasioned Nascent Appeals**

While Charlene continues to eat her breakfast with the Caregiver still supervising, there are two additional contributions by Laura that apparently constitute a return to a
prospective stance. Our claim has been that the prospective interventions have been coordinated with the task structure of the meal service. How then do we account for these interventions that occur after meal service has been completed?

In the first case, a nascent appeal seems positioned by reference to another type of organization that itself has a completion: the episode of co-present engagement itself. About 5 minutes after Charlene starts eating, Laura rises from the Caregiver’s lap, where she had been seated for awhile, and leaves the table area (having calmed down). (See Illustration 7a.) As she departs she does make another fleeting attempt at meal service: she produces a brief point toward the staging area to her left, while gazing directly at the Caregiver’s face to her right and simultaneously producing a vocalization with appeal intonation (“dah¿”). (See Illustration 7b.) She then continues to look to the Caregiver for a response for about 1 1/2 seconds, and then departs when the Caregiver does not take her own gaze off of Charlene or offer any other indication of registering Laura’s appeal.

In the second case about a minute later (and with both Ryan and Laura having left the table area), the Caregiver again assumes a knee-sitting position to retrieve additional milk for Charlene from the staging area after her cup has tipped over. After she retrieves the milk container and pours a small amount into Charlene’s cup (see Illustration 8a), both Ryan and Laura return to the table area as she returns the milk container to the staging area on the railing. As Laura comes to the table, she looks to the staging area as the container is placed there and continues to gaze in that direction until she reaches the table - even after the Caregiver has withdrawn her arm. (See Illustration 8b.) By contrast, as Ryan arrives he looks to Charlene as she drinks from the newly filled cup and then with Charlene occupied drinking, he attempts to take something from her dish (but is
ILLUSTRATION 7: DEPARTING APPEAL

7a. Laura rises from Caregiver's lap.

7b. Laura points toward the food staging area (arrow) simultaneously producing a short vocalization while gazing directly at Caregiver's face.
ILLUSTRATION 8: A NASCENT REPRISE

8a. Caregiver retrieves milk from the food staging area and refills Charlene’s glass.

8b. When Caregiver returns milk to the food staging area, Laura returns, gazing upward all the while, but arrives after the return is completed.
stopped by the Caregiver). Here we have a brief resumption of the meal service’s ‘retrieve, distribute, return’ phase structure and it is here that Laura returns to the table, looking to the staging area, but perhaps having arrived too late to mount another appeal.

To summarize, in both of these cases Laura’s actions are occasioned by and fitted to an ongoing course of action: her own departure in the first case and the resumption of meal service in the second case.

Concluding Remarks

As Goffman (1983) reminds us, occasions have their own orderliness. And as the corpus of conversation-analytic research has shown empirically, conduct in interaction cannot be fully appreciated without a rigorous explication of the sequential environment that forms the activity context for everything that happens in interaction – even seemingly unilateral action (e.g. Goodwin, 1987). In this chapter we have explicated one child’s sequential analysis of the unfolding activity context that served as a resource for her participation. In one sense this is a ‘single case analysis’; however, in another sense, because of the repeated interventions, we have been able to build our analysis across multiple instances of sequentially-related interventions. Our analysis has shown how the unfolding mealtime routine can form a highly structured task-based activity context for the actions of very young children. Describing the placement of Laura’s interventions, including changes in that placement, allowed us to locate the episodic and formal phase structure of the
Caregiver’s actions as a \textit{resource for action} – i.e. as an oriented-to, sequentially structured constituent of the interaction order.

Our analysis demonstrates an orientation to task completion as a locus for participation by an excluded participant with each next completable task furnishing a next opportunity to participate – or at least an opportunity to appeal for participation. The tasks entailed in serving a meal to Charlene furnish Laura with repeated structurally-given opportunities to first seek inclusion in the meal service and then later on to register displeasure that she has not been included. That is, the serving routine’s task structure of ‘retrieve, distribute, and return for retrieval of a next item’ - and especially within that structure the recognizability of task-specific completion - provided Laura with repeated opportunities to participate. In particular, Laura’s interventions were placed at the beginning of the transition space created by a move to possible completion of one task and with it the projected beginning of a next. Thus, Laura first intervenes at those places where the Caregiver’s next action might turn out to include her in the meal service, and thus her initial interventions have a sequence-prospective character. As each transition space was closed down – by the Caregiver returning to the food staging area for the next item - Laura assumed a ‘wait and see’ anticipatory recipiency that stretched through the retrieval and distribution phases of the next task.

As the Caregiver’s meal service for Charlene continues without Laura having been included at several opportunities, there was a change in her conduct, both in its composition and in its placement from sequence-prospective to sequence-retrospective. The move to sequence-retrospective actions begins with short complaint cries placed late in the transition space that were thereby still somewhat oriented to a next task because
they were produced before the next distribution. Laura’s actions then changed markedly. First, they changed to a loud and prolonged single cry burst placed at the beginning of the distribution phase, and then to continuous crying occasioned by and fitted to completion of the meal service phase itself (as the Caregiver sat down to supervise Charlene while she ate her breakfast). Continuous crying was then carried forward across a long stretch of the meal. Moreover, her visual tracking of the retrieval and distribution phases was also abandoned as part of her shift to sequence-retrospective participation. Importantly, it was this visual tracking that allowed the precision placement of her appeals and the return to “anticipatory recipiency,” and thus by abandoning visual tracking of the Caregiver’s conduct, Laura surrenders such visibly-available opportunities for participation.

One can recognize at a glance that the Caregiver is serving food and serving it to a particular child, but this is too coarse an understanding to participate in interaction. Rather, participation requires a much finer appreciation of emerging opportunities to participate informed not so much by identification of the activity, but by the recognizability of emergent structures of action-in-progress. While Laura may well have a practical appreciation of meal service as a routine, it is the progressive realization of that routine as situated action in a course of action that furnishes a locally-constituted formal scaffolding for intervention at task completion. Similarly, the Caregiver’s subsequent return to the railing furnishes an occasion to now wait for possible service. Here again, projection of a next task from its nascent beginnings (reaching up toward the setup area) furnishes a locally-produced occasion for the return to a “wait-and-see” anticipatory recipiency.
Given that the emergent structure of the meal service is made manifest as a sequence of recognizable tasks-so-far, it does not seem necessary to posit that Laura, or any other toddler, relies on a detailed cognitive representation of the overall organization of the meal service routine. Rather, Laura can be understood to have a situated *practical* grasp of the routine-so-far. This requires a capacity to (know how to) operate within the emerging routine, rather than a capacity to consult a cognitive representation of it. Laura, like other toddlers in the daycare center, has been repeatedly engaged in meal service activities. She has a practiced, procedural grasp of the emergent routine, and can employ this situated grasp to design and implement actions fitted to its unfolding realization. It seems to us that very young children only require the *in situ* practiced capacities required to recognize, in each particular case, the formal structures of the in-progress actions that recurrently fill their social-interactional world and the practical skills to participate in each context-specific realizations of those structures of action as they are progressively realized and as each next element in its progressive realization projects a next constituent of that structure.

Research into early childhood cognitive development might profitably explored points of contact between cognitive and the interactional concerns. Certainly, the interactional domain rests upon a foundation provided by the evolved human brain and the cognitive capacities thus afforded. Yet, the positing of cognitive abilities should surely conform to the actual requirements of the observable interaction order and participation in it that research such as this can establish empirically – e.g. the interactional ability described herein to recognize, project and employ unfolding structures of action from the naturally situated behaviors of others. Whatever cognitive
capacities are found to underwrite the interaction order, the specification of the elements of the interaction order requires a close and systematic examination and independent analysis of naturally occurring interaction addressed to the manifold contingences of everyday life.

However mundane the meal service, and however simple the tasks that constitute it may appear, this is a sequentially organized, locally realized practical activity with an emergent structure that provides the resources for the recognition and production of actions relevant to it. And it may seem quite remarkable that very young children, very early on in their encounter with the structures of action found in their toddler social world, can employ a finely-tuned appreciation of such routines-in-progress. It is here, in the course of and in the service of action in inter-action that humans routinely recast the structural projectability of practical tasks-in-progress from co-present conspecifics’ conduct as the ‘goals’ and ‘intentions’ of their producers. It may be here that these anthropomorphic inferences take their original (and most proximate) practical form (cf. Jefferson, 1989; Byrne, 2006); and it may be here, at the point of production of culture in action, that what is glossed as socialization takes place in and as conduct situated in these most quotidian constituents of human social life.
References


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Notes

1 Earlier versions of this chapter were presented to the National Communication Association Convention, San Antonio, Texas (2006) and the American Sociological Association Convention, New York (2007). The videotaped extract examined here is part of a large corpus of recordings from the Very Young Children Project at UC Santa Barbara which was originally supported by grants from the Vice Chancellor for Research’s “Research Across Disciplines” initiative. We are grateful to Pat Clancy, Tom Wilson and Tony Wootton for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

2 Investigations along these lines that show how language use is employed in the social lives of young children can be found in the work of Tony Wootton (e.g., 1997, 2007).

3 While we focus on a single case of mealtime interaction in this report, our analysis of it has been informed by an examination of additional cases in the same daycare center. We make reference to some of these other cases in the course of our discussion. We do so, in part, to suggest that our findings are not case specific (or child-specific).

4 For comparison, see Wootton (1994) for an analysis of practices employed by a very young child in order to avoid food she is being given, but does not want.

5 It has not escape the notice of some readers that we do not attempt to present our data in a standardized transcript format. This raises the matter of the independence of our data presentation from our analysis of it. However, our data are the field recordings, which stand independent of our analysis. It is this record - and not any depiction of it - that provides our window on the conduct that is the focus of our analysis. To be sure, body
behavior can be depicted in relation to speech in a transcript (cf. Goodwin, 1984), but there is very little speech to anchor the body behavior displaying participants’ action with respect to the structure of mealtime task routines. We do not believe - in this case - that presenting schematic depictions of the coordination of unfolding gaze and body behavioral would add anything (except perhaps confusion that could result from tracking multiple streams of body behavior across three participants). We believe this because here we are describing an oriented-to-by-participants formal task structure and consequently this structure furnishes a quite formal framework for describing visible conduct systematically. Thus we echo Schegloff’s (1984) lament, that absent access to the video record “There is no satisfactory device for the presentation of the sort of material appropriate to the themes of this essay” (p. 294). Because we are unable to incorporate excerpts of our field recordings into our report, we too employ discursive description as a fall back (cf. Schegloff, 1984:295) – and as a guide for evaluating the descriptive basis of our analysis should the recordings become available to readers. We also hope that the multi-pane illustrations of key moments may be of some use to readers.  

6 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine in detail how summoning a particular child results in all three children coming to the table. We will just note that Laura has been gazing toward the railing while the Caregiver uses a clipboard stationed near the food tray and then follows the Caregiver the three steps to the table before the summons is issued. Laura, who is nearest the table, then sits down on the closest chair right after the summoning utterance is completed and the Caregiver has knelt down by the table. Moreover, Ryan is in the direct line of the Caregiver’s gaze (directly in front of Charlene)
when the summons is produced. The fact that this table is repeatedly used and oriented to as a locus for eating, that food has already been stationed near the table, and the mere fact that the Caregiver has knelt by the table may all figure into the multiple arrivals. (Of course, for children of this age, the mere presence of their primary Caregiver at floor level can act as a magnet.) Also, relevant may be what Shatz (1978a, 1978b cited in Garvey, 1984) has identified as an “action bias” in young children’s comprehension of adult speech, so that the ‘action part’ of the Caregiver’s utterance (“come” or “come and sit down”) may be what is most salient and actionable.

There is evidence that these children treat it in this way. For example, in one case (‘971216 Two Services’) as a tray full of meal service items is brought out to the porch by a Caregiver and placed on the railing, Charlene gets up off the floor (where she is cuddling with another Caregiver) and walks directly to the table and sits down, after which the first Caregiver says to the second, “Charlene knows what’s happening” and the other responds “yeah”. And in another case a child seats herself at the table even though there is nothing as yet on the railing, but an offer of a drink has been made. Going to the table is then treated as a response to the offer. In this case (‘980115 Sit and Point’) Charlene is seated on a Caregiver’s lap (apparently attempting to get her to read a book). In response, the Caregiver tells her that she won’t read a book now as another child is about to have snack. and that she is “going to have some juice (.) or milk, (1.2) you thirsty?” In response to this question, Charlene gets up from the Caregiver’s lap, walks over to the table and sits down. In response to this move the Caregiver states, “Yeah, I
take that as a ‘yes’.” Moreover, Charlene immediately points to the (empty) railing upon sitting down.

Somewhat later, after all the food has been served, Ryan does make another bid to participate by returning and pointing directly to Charlene’s food and uttering “(ee-) (.) dah ḃaː h”. He seems to be indicating his interest in the food (presumably because he wants some), but the Caregiver treats his interest as simply an occasion to identify the items of food by name – thereby responding in a fashion that parries the request import of the action.

Note that Laura does this even though she had not seen the bib being retrieved from the railing. The railing is a common place for such items to be placed before meal service, and children orient to the railing (in apparent anticipation of eating) even before food is brought out. So, for example, there are cases of children pointing to the railing area while seated at the table before food has been brought out, as happens in one of the cases we mentioned in Note 6 (‘980115 Sit and Point’). As we mentioned, as soon as Charlene sits down, she points to the (empty) railing. In response to this the Caregiver states, “Its not here yet, Gail will bring it in a moment.”

Given the Caregiver’s earlier admonition, it is probably safe to assume she very likely understands the import of the squeal and proto-words without looking at Laura’s embodied actions directly. Persisting unperturbed with a line of action – and thereby refusing to ratify its sequential import – is one method for managing competing conduct. (See Jefferson (2004:49-50) and Schegloff (2000:30) for discussions of this practice when applied to simultaneous talk in conversation.)
The use of the task transition space by a not-yet-served child is not unique to this case. So, for example, in the following case from another mealtime (‘980120 Point for Food’) one child is served a dish of food and then just as the Caregiver returns to the railing – i.e. in the task transition space – a second child who is seated at the table points upward toward the railing. This is followed by the Caregiver retrieving another dish of food and (in this case) presenting it to the second child.

This type of accelerated action, that rushes through a transition space is not unique to this episode (or to manually-realized action), and in fact was first described by Schegloff (1987) for conversation. In conversation a speaker can speed up the tempo of their talk across the transition space so as to begin a next TCU before a next speaker can begin – thereby in effect depriving them of a transition space to begin speaking.

It is not that such multifaceted appeals are always ignored or rejected. So, for example, in the following case from another mealtime (‘971216 Successful Appeal’) Laura, who is currently eating, appeals for more food by standing with a splayed-finger reach pointing upwards toward the staging area, while producing a vocalization and gazing at the attending Caregiver. In response, she is indeed given more food to eat.

This may also be what occurs in the First Appeal, when the Caregiver, after coming to a possible completion of the bibbing task, then adjusts the position of the bib - as a non-projectable expansion of the task. In that case, Laura produced an appeal with gaze and gesture pointed toward the railing, but she then looks back toward the site of the bibbing task. Seeing that the Caregiver has not yet begun a return for a next item, Laura then
expands her appeal and then moves to anticipatory recipiency just as the Caregiver withdraws from the bibbing and begins her return to the railing.

15 It is one thing to not receive a bib or a washcloth; it is quite another matter to not receive any food – the object of her appeals. Thus, it is not immaterial that it is here that Laura “changes her tune.”

16 She actually prepares for this intervention a bit before the actual beginning of the distribution. As the Caregiver’s spoon approaches the jar for the first time Laura seems to take a big preparatory in-breath (with her shoulders rising). This preparatory conduct occurs in the immediate lead-up to the food distribution. Note that such preparatory conduct also paves the way for some of Laura’s earlier interventions. For example, she shifts posture and stance just before she produces her first appeal as Charlene’s bib is attached. In the present case, her preparation occurs in what may be terms the pre-beginning of the distribution, while in the earlier case of the bibbing, the preparation occurs when completion of the task is imminent– i.e., at its pre-completion. Taken together, the importance of these preliminarily-placed actions is that they indicate a clear orientation to imminent, but not-yet-produced task beginning and task completion, and thus show Laura to be projecting these places from the task-so-far – that is, before their fully fledged realization and not just on their actual occurrence.

17 After about 40 seconds of wailing, the Caregiver does again turn to Laura and says, “I’m sorry if that upset you Laura. You already ate. You can eat again in a little while.”

18 Note that Ryan had momentarily returned to help with the spilled milk, but had already left the table area again – after accidentally knocking the empty cup onto the floor.
This is consistent with Ryan’s earlier return to the table area (shortly after the meal service phase ended): He came up to the table and pointed to the food on Charlene’s dish while saying “(ee-) (.) dah d̩ːːh”. There, as in the present instance, he indicates an interest in Charlene’s food (which the Caregiver deflects by naming the food, “oatmeal, pears and pancake”) and not, as Laura had done, by indicating an interest in being served next.