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Meetings

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Introduction

Meetings have attracted significant interest over the years given their frequency and importance for participants and organisations. The term – as it is globally used by social actors as well as by scholars – covers heterogeneous gatherings in which people meet for professional and institutional purposes and work together on a common task and goal. On one side, meetings are a common way in which political activities are organised among large numbers of participants, allowing politicians to talk to large audiences as well as to enable citizens’ participation. On the other side, in the professional context, meetings always have a political dimension in that their organisation fosters or reduces issues of asymmetry, power and participation. More generally, meetings are a form of social activity that concerns a number of people engaged in institutions, organisations and professions (Schwartzman 1989). They involve a variable number of participants (from two to hundreds), the presence or absence of organising figures such as moderators, chairpersons, facilitators, and so on, a restricted versus public right to participate, and the use of artefacts (e.g. an agenda). As argued in early research, the form and function of the meeting varies considerably, but the participants always ‘commonsensically’ recognise it (Cuff & Sharrock 1985) despite the variations.

In this chapter, we refer to a diversity of political, business-orientated and institutional meetings, and we discuss similarities and differences in the genre. In a nutshell, **business/corporate meetings** research has drawn on different contexts from relatively small/medium enterprises to large firms and in some cases multinational companies. **Institutional meetings** research has largely focused on health-care, notably on collective discussions of clinic cases, and academic settings – notably in supervision contexts. **Political meetings** have been studied by mainly focusing on official political speeches and on mediated political talk (on radio and TV), and less on co-presented and more grass-roots participatory gatherings. Here, we draw on meetings from a diversity of settings to illustrate key issues raised by this form of institutional gathering.

We bring together scholarship from three areas, namely, conversation analysis (CA), interactional sociolinguistics (IS) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CA has studied
Meetings as social interactions within which institutions are brought into being through specific turn-taking systems, choice of linguistic and embodied resources, and the detailed sequential organisation of actions such as proposing, accepting/rejecting, formulating, rebutting, assessing, and so on. Workplace analysts taking an IS perspective have approached the meeting as a context where the participants negotiate and jointly construct roles and responsibilities, relationships and ways of ‘doing’. Analysts have addressed the ways groups make decisions, agree on problems and priorities and bring their practices and processes under scrutiny. Researchers taking a CDA approach have also found in meetings fertile ground for the analysis of power ab/use and the ways the more/less powerful in professional contexts are silenced, and the power distribution is resisted and challenged.

Overall, the study of meetings has been confronted with common challenges, which all methodologies have had to address. Common challenges occur while doing fieldwork and gathering data of different sorts (such as written documents, email exchanges, web pages, situated talk, elicited declarations) from contexts in which there are issues of confidentiality, hierarchy and competition. Getting authorisation to collect documents, to interview people, or to record actual meetings is often difficult, and may be constrained and restricted by confidential contents, but also by delicate hierarchical relationships. Even if the authority or top management delivers the authorisation to conduct the study, this does not always match the consent of all of the involved parties, who might be obliged to accept without fully agreeing. This might impact the choice of the terrains to access and the phenomena to study, as well as the type of feedback – or ‘counter-gift’, or even ‘counter-service’ to offer. As a consequence, lots of research has been carried out on institutions such as universities, and less on enterprises; medium/large enterprises have been studied more than smaller ones, white collars more than blue collars, and so on.

Different methodologies have been sensitive to a variety of approaches to meetings. Some insist on the importance of ethnography for a better understanding of how the institution or enterprise works; others use ethnography to produce the most adequate audio-video recordings and collect better data. Some methodologies have favoured various forms of triangulation of data, collecting a diversity of documents, historical information, interview data and recorded data. Other methodologies might prefer to focus on the meeting itself, as it is locally accomplished, and the materials (documents, PowerPoint, notes, etc.) that are actually used during that meeting. These methodological variations depend on different conceptualisations of meetings as historical events produced by a complex web of social, institutional and power relationships, or as social practices through which organisations and institutions come into being, are reproduced and transformed. Some approaches focus on the organisation of single meetings, most often various meetings are considered, either to draw studies of systematic cross-contextual practices, or to conduct a longitudinal study of how problems and relations are established and managed over time.

In this chapter, we choose to focus on one crucial type of data: audio-video recordings of meetings. We also opt for exemplary analyses of small fragments of recorded meetings. These analyses emanate from different analytical sensitivities, aiming to give examples of how data might be approached in different ways. We identified four areas of study that represent crucial issues and challenges for meetings. First, we focus on the specific turn-taking organisation of meetings, mediated by a facilitator or chairperson, who selects the next speakers and distributes opportunities to speak. Second, we point at the multiple identities that are made relevant in meetings, related to the management of talk (such as ‘chairperson’, ‘facilitator’, ‘presenter’, etc.), but also to expertise and knowledge, as well as
to other aspects such as national or ethnic categories in multilingual meetings, or gender. Third, we develop issues related not only to the identity of participants, but also to the choice of languages, especially in international contexts, intertwining issues of language competence and participation. Fourth, we describe how topical aspects of the meeting are managed, such as elaborating on solutions, taking decisions, arguing and (dis)agreeing. For each of these areas, we offer a brief state of the art as well as an example, aiming at not only summarising findings, but showing how they can be empirically discussed. These examples aim at showing how different theoretical and methodological traditions address data details and relevances for the issues at hand.

Turn-taking and the management of meetings

The organisation of meetings crucially relies on how the floor is successively given to participants. Turn-taking organisation has been described within CA for ordinary conversation as well as for institutional settings. Whereas in conversation turn-taking is mostly unconstrained and takes a diversity of forms (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974), in institutional settings, the system has been described as being more restricted and specialised (Drew & Heritage 1992). Moreover, this specification of the turn-taking system indexes the way in which participants locally and reflexively accomplish the institutionality of the setting, both by adapting to its normative expectations and by contributing to this normativity through their ordered conduct. Particular turn-taking formats shape the opportunities for action and participation.

For institutional situations in which large numbers of participants gather together, such as meetings, specialised formats restrict the number of persons allowed to speak and who can initiate talk, contributing to focusing the activity on a main participant and to defining the audience as constituting a single party rather than a number of possible persons (Schegloff 1995). There are two particular ways to manage larger groups (Heritage & Clayman 2010): within the turn-type pre-allocation system (such as in interviews, courts and formal academic events), the type of person and action performed is restricted (the interviewee is expected to answer questions and does not engage in other types of action); within the mediated turn-taking system, a chairperson mediates the distribution of turns, controlling both speakers and topics. Mixed systems exist, in which a mediator can impose restrictions on the type of action or turn allowed for given participants.

Studies of political meetings in CA have focused on mediated political interactions, such as news interviews (Clayman & Heritage 2002) and broadcasted debates (Bovet 2009). Political speeches have been treated as events in which the speaker addresses the audience treated as one party. Specific practices by which the speaker invites the audience to respond, as well as the organisation of responses, either in the form of applause (Atkinson 1984) or booing (Clayman 1993), have been examined. Occasions in which the audience participates more actively have been less studied, such as when it participates in public debates in differentiated and not exclusively choral ways (but see Llewellyn 2005; McIlvenny 1996; Mondada 2012).

Studies of turn-taking management in professional meetings (Boden 1994; Ford 2008) have focused on the actions of the chair (Boden 1994; Mondada 2013; Pomerantz & Denvir 2007; Svennevig 2008) and on how turn-taking practices shape opportunities to participate, manage asymmetries and restrict access to the floor. Participation can be facilitated or obstructed, access to the floor can be enabled in a distributed or in a centralised way (Ford 2008). Turn formats and access to the floor define participants’ categories, such as
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‘chairperson’, ‘speaker’, ‘expert’ or ‘guest star’ in a locally situated way (Antaki & Widdicombe 1998; Sacks 1972, 1992). As shown by Goodwin and Goodwin (2004), revisiting Goffman’s classical paper on participation frameworks (1979), participation is designed in a highly dynamic way and is made possible by the step-by-step opportunities offered by the sequential organisation of talk, which are offered and taken (or not) thanks to various multimodal resources (Goodwin 2007). In meetings, these are deployed gesturally, by displaying the status of the imminent speaker (Ford 2008; Mondada 2013), visually, by gazing and orientating bodily towards the next speaker, thereby recognising them as such (Ford 2008; Markaki & Mondada 2012).

Turn-taking practices in political meetings with larger groups of participants are a perspicuous setting in which to observe how the practical problems of managing the interactional order are situately solved in embodied ways, with important political consequences on issues of transparency, participation, democracy and fairness (Mondada 2013). We give an example in the fragment below, taken from a political meeting in grassroots democracy, in which citizens contribute to an urban-planning project aimed at transforming a military site into a public park (for further analyses, see Mondada 2011, 2012). According to the golden standards of the field, the participants in all examples quoted in this paper have given their formal agreement to be recorded, analysed and represented in transcripts (including screen shots). The transcript uses pseudonyms in order to anonymise the speakers. We join the meeting as citizens make proposals about structuring features of the park, mediated by a facilitator.

The sequence is initiated by the facilitator selecting the next citizen uttering a proposal: he walks towards her, looking at her (1), in a way that makes publicly visible her emergent status as the next speaker. But also, even before she answers, he repositions himself (2) facing the room, although continuing to gaze at her – in a double orientation of the upper versus the lower part of the body (which Schegloff [1998] calls body-torque). When Turenne responds (3), the facilitator looks at her (Figure 1 in Fragment 31.1) and then immediately turns to the room (Figure 2 in Fragment 31.1), self-selecting, although her turn is not complete, and repeating her proposal with an interrogative intonation, ‘closed at night?’ (4).

With his body-torque, the facilitator exhibits the relevance of two distinct spaces within the room: one, on his right, is where the author of the proposal is located, the other, in front of him, is where the co-participants he addresses are distributed. By repeating Turenne’s turn while looking at the co-participants, the facilitator re-addresses it to the entire audience (Mondada 2015); he collectivises the proposal that was initially addressed to him.

Next, the facilitator continues to look in front of him, with a circular gaze monitoring the responses of the audience (Figure 3 in Fragment 31.1). Progressively, a disagreement emerges (6–11). Although it is expressed by various people scattered around the room, the facilitator identifies two persons in particular, Rossi and Maurane, sitting at the same table, in front of him. By saying ‘OH not agreeing here’ (12), the facilitator performs several actions: he completes his monitoring and exhibits its result; he not only states that there is a disagreement, but, by pointing at a particular table (Figure 4 in Fragment 31.1), he localises it within space, ‘here’ (12). Thereby, he also constitutes the table as a group having an opposite opinion – a party in a double sense, interactional (Schegloff 1995) and political. Pointing at other participants at the back of the room (14), the facilitator identifies two antagonistic camps (Figures 4 & 5 in Fragment 31.1), located in two different spots, and organises the space of the controversy. Next, he selects the party defending the proposal (14) – interestingly, not the first author – before he comes back to the opponents.
1 FAC *y avait *aut’cho:*se?
was there something else?
*turns to TUR*points---*walks tow her-->

2 (0.4) * (0.2)
---*stops in front of the room and looks at TUR-->

3 TUR donc euh: ferm- fermé# la nuit, [( )] 
ost ehm: clos- closed at night, [( )]

4 FAC [fermé# la nuit,* # h
{closed at night, h

-->*looks R/L-->

fig #fig.1 #fig.2 #fig.3

5 ? *fermé la nuit°
"closed at night°

6 ? n[on
n[o

7 ? [non
{no

8 ? [non
{no

9 ? non
no

10 ROS "non on [n’est pas d’accord, [nous°
"no we [aren’t agreeing, [we°

11 MAU [non [non
{no {no

12 FAC A:*H, pas d’accord ic#i,
O:H, not agreeing here,
->*points at ROS and MAU’s table in front of him-->

fig #fig.4

13 ? *pas d’accord°
"not agreeing°

14 FAC AH* (.) alors monsieur, pour#quoi? fermé la *nuit?*
OH (. ) so mister, why closed at night?

fig #fig.5

->*points at CUN in the back of the room------*,,,,,*
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This fragment shows how turn-taking organisation in political meetings manages much more than the turn-by-turn distribution of talk between participants; it not only establishes rights and obligations to speak, providing opportunities to participate, but also organises, makes publicly visible and identifies individual versus collective opinions, and therefore manages agreements and disagreements, and also spatialises controversies in intelligible and spectacular ways. In this sense, turn-taking management of political debates achieves political accountability for what is debated, and who debates.

Identity and role

Researchers in workplace discourse, the young but established sub-field of sociolinguistics, have also paid special attention to the meeting event (Holmes & Stubbe 2003) characterised as a ‘microcosm of an organisation’s communication’ (Tannen 1994, p. 277). Meetings are seen as a discourse site within which the participants claim and project roles and identities to the self and others. In a business meeting, participants perform membership in the organisation, and claim and project status and expertise. Context-specific positions, notably the role of the chairperson, have been particularly prominent in this respect (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 1997; Holmes & Stubbe 2003; Schwartzman 1989). The role of the chairperson is often one of the criteria used by researchers for distinguishing a meeting from other work-related communicative events. A chairperson is in the powerful position of the meeting controller and this may (or not) be aligned with their overall status in the organisation. Hence, recent work (Angouri & Marra 2011) has focused on the ways that meeting chairpersons construct their role and identity in the community within which they operate.

Within CA, identity issues have been tackled mainly within the framework of Membership Categorisation Analysis developed by Sacks (1972, 1992; see also Hester & Eglin 1997; Jayyusi 1984). The main issue is how a given category – which might belong to different ‘collections of categories’ (such as profession, expertise, nationality, language, gender…) – is made endogenously relevant in a situated way at a given interactional moment by the participants (rather than decided upon by the analyst). For meetings, this has been elaborated on in different directions: categories bound to speech activities have been studied (such as ‘chair’: Boden 1994, 99ff; Pomerantz & Denvir 2007; Svennevig 2008), with a specific focus on opportunities to enhance or restrict participation and on the rights and obligations exhibited through practices for allocating turns. However, categories related to the local identities of participants have been analysed in their emergent, fluid and transient character: gender (Ford 2008), multiple expertise (Housley 2003), nationality and cultural background (Markaki & Mondada 2012), institutional roles (Schmitt 2002) as well as language competence (see p. 475).

At the same time, researchers taking a critical perspective have approached the meeting as a site where the power imbalance, inherent in any organisational context (Wodak 2000, 2009), becomes evident (van Dijk 1996), power struggle may be manifested (Krzyżanowski 2008; Wodak 2013) and power is actively used by those in leadership positions in organisations (Wodak et al. 2011). Current work focuses on the importance of consensus in decision making (Angouri & Angelidou 2012) as well as the different discourse styles, notably authoritarian versus egalitarian styles, participants adopt in meetings (Wodak et al. 2011). These styles index different positions in the local context and are negotiated as the event unfolds. Depending on the task at hand, the meeting participants orientate towards different in-groups (the organisation, or their own team, for instance), and align (or not) their positions.
By bringing together different sociolinguistic approaches to the study of the meeting genre, new insights emerge. The meeting provides the analyst with a frame for studying how participants, through specific discourse practices, take positions and are being positioned by others in relation to specific roles and identities. Current research moves away from static universal and essential categories and understands this process as being dynamic and context-specific. This is in line with the social constructionist paradigm, according to which, ‘identity’ is socially situated and actively negotiated by participants in relation to the situation, interactional agenda and their goals, among others (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). The meeting participants draw on their institutional roles in constructing their professional identities. The relationship between role and identity is not straightforward, despite being used interchangeably in workplace discourse literature (Sarangi 2010). The operationalisation of the former can shed light on the latter, which is best understood as an abstract notion (Angouri 2015).

Overall, the meeting participants bring to the event their habitus (in Bourdieu’s sense; Bourdieu 1984), standing in the organisation, their specific responsibilities and their perception of the nexus of relationships within which their activity takes place. In this context, they perform their roles, drawing on local practices and anchored positions outside the temporary context of the meeting event. The participants negotiate roles specific to their professional expertise (e.g. ‘sales expert’), but also in relation to their team (e.g. ‘sales department director’). These are not static, but fluid positions, constructed through a set of discourse practices: participants negotiate and balance the here and now of interaction and issues that go beyond it. For instance, the accountability for decisions taken, the implications for their own team and their own agenda play a key role in the positions the meeting participants take.

Fragment 31.2 aims to illustrate some of these issues. The excerpt draws on the case of four senior managers in a small consultancy business (here named LeadingCom UK), who are debating how to best engage their membership, constituting small–medium businesses, in the activities of the organisation. The three interactants collaborate, share the floor and enact a ‘we’ the organisation and ‘them’ the membership divide throughout the excerpt. The interactants know each other well and have long discourse histories developed through their collaboration. Dan introduces the metaphor of a family whereby the senior board (the interactants) are the parents and the members are positioned as the children – building an in-group constituted by the team of senior executives. The use of metaphors is a common strategy for team-building (Vaara et al. 2003). The particular position here alludes to an evident power imbalance, which is reinforced with the positioning of Tom (the company’s director) in the frustrated parent’s role who goes as far as to ‘bang the kids’ heads together’ (line 4). Paul takes a softer line on a cost–benefit analysis of what the members ‘get’ for their membership (an argument introduced earlier in the meeting) and mitigates the strong metaphor introduced by Dan (lines 2–10). This is resisted by Tom who, in line with Dan, expands on the members’ responsibility for creating ‘belonging’. Although all three interactants are senior, Tom’s role as the meeting chairperson and company director can be seen in the foregrounding of ‘I’ in the positions taken in the interaction (e.g. lines 19–22). The way, however, that the three managers enact their roles is dependent on the norms of the community, the agenda and the meeting participants (see also Angouri 2015). This is a closed-doors meeting, and the fact that the participants share practices is also relevant to the force of the utterances. Through successfully creating common ground, the meeting participants can debate different positions, scrutinise perceived problems (note the explicit position by Tom ‘we’ve got a bigger problem’, lines 18/19) and reach solutions. This,
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1 Dan (...) for them (.) and be a parent we and i think tom’s ((inaudible)) reaction sometimes is he becomes like a frustrated parent (.) for fucks sake you know (.) bang the kids heads together whatever (.) and i think what we gotta say is look we’ve all (.) you know the members have got to step up from being children (.) they’ve got to become adults and [LeadingCom] to an extent has got to say right were not going to be the parents here (.) we’re not gonna lead this all the time (.) it’s down you know to you have just an equal responsibility=

11 Paul =that’s good theory and I agree with you whole heartedly but at a very sensitive time when were trying to actually do a cost benefit analysis on their behalf (.) or show them a way through a cost benefit analysis (.) i wouldn’t want to come down too heavy on ((inaudible))[

15 Tom [...] it it may well be (.) but i don’t believe the membership has ever seen itself as a membership (.) because ther’s been nothing to belong to so i think we’ve got a bigger problem uh (.) than the one that’s being articulated at the moment (.) and i don’t believe that there is a feeling of belonging to anything (.) and i think what i hear dan saying is that in order to create that there has to be a responsibility taken by the members yea

24 Dan to build something to belong to (.) because we cant do that (.) or can we?

26 Tom

Fragment 31.2 (Corpus_JA)

however, is not a linear process: the architecture of meetings is complex and we discuss this further in the next two sections.

Multilingual meetings

The fact that meetings increasingly take place within a cosmopolitan context generates considerable interest about their multilingual, intercultural and cross-cultural dimensions. International meetings can adopt diverse linguistic solutions: choice of a lingua franca, use of various languages, everybody speaking their language, use of code-switching, punctual use of improvised translations, and so on, which have been variously described in the literature.

Sociolinguistic scholars have studied code-switching and language choice in meetings. These choices, as well as the specific moments at which participants switch from one language to another, are revelatory of both local negotiations and reproduction of relationships and asymmetries (Gumperz 1982, 1987; Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz 1992). This has also prompted research on intercultural meetings (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 1997; Mariott 1997, on business meetings; Unger, Krzyżanowski & Wodak 2014; Wodak et al. 2012 on institutional settings).

Within the now-established field of study of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Seidlhofer 2009), the use of ELF has been described as having very different consequences. In some contexts, it has been seen as a ‘neutral code’, facilitating the participation of employees of different languages through a ‘shared communication code’ – as, for example, in the fusion of Swedish and Finnish companies studied by Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005), in which ELF is adopted to avoid asymmetries between native and non-native speakers. In other contexts, although ELF remains the reference, the switch to other
languages has a ‘solidarity-building function’ and fosters complicity and personal relationships in business (Poncini 2004). In other cases, miscommunication has been highlighted (House 1999; Wei et al. 2001; Ulijn & Xiangling 1995).

From a conversation-analytic perspective, Firth (1996) shows that participants negotiate actively and collaboratively the ‘lingua-franca’ character of the language they use, namely by perspicuously disattending non-standard features of talk and normalising them actively, orientating to the work being done skilfully rather than to linguistic deficiencies. Pointing at the fact that a linguistic choice is never fully established and might be constantly renegotiated, Mondada (2012) and Markaki et al. (2014) show how lingua-franca meetings can convert into plurilingual gatherings in order to achieve or adjust to changing participants’ constellations.

Thus, language choices possibly concern a multitude of issues, from securing mutual understanding to managing identities, participation and asymmetries. As we will see with the next example, multilingual and multicultural meetings enhance the plurality of identities of the participants, who have multiple types of expertise and various institutional roles – and thus can be orientated to by making different categories relevant (see p. 473).

Fragment 31.3 is extracted from a meeting in which French immunologists and medical specialists are discussing the possibility of developing a new vaccine (see Mondada 2012). They host Mary, a well-known biologist from London, with whom they want to initiate collaboration. Although most of the participants are not fluent in English, the meeting is held in English lingua franca because Mary does not speak French. We join the meeting as a member of the local medical team, Mederic, is giving a presentation, in which he mentions a category of patients who could be good candidates for collecting human samples necessary for the experiments planned within the project. At this point, the chairperson, Gilbert, makes an observation about the necessity of obtaining the adequate ethical authorisations. In the unfolding discussion, our analytical attention focuses on the conditions that progressively lead to a change of language in the meeting.

Gilbert self-selects and addresses Mederic (Figure 6 in Fragment 31.3): although his turn is presented as an observation, it can also be understood as a request, projecting a response. But after a pause (3), Mederic only acknowledges this minimally, without offering any solution to the problem. At this point, Gilbert pursues his action: he repeats his point about ethical issues and changes his addressee, now turning to the audience (5), thereby disqualifying Mederic as a possible interlocutor for obtaining an answer. Another participant, Robert, the director of the local research programme, sitting behind Gilbert, also turns back towards the audience. He nominates Blandine (6), who is selected as the next speaker and as a person knowledgeable about how to solve ethical problems.

So, a progressive reorientation of the participants occurs. The relevant interactional space, designed by the disposition of the participants’ bodies (Mondada 2011), is no longer orientated towards the front where the official speaker stands, but is reorientated towards the back, with the selection of a member of the audience. These participation shifts and reorientations within the interactional space of the room correspond to the search for a person able to give a response to the problem raised by Gilbert (Figure 7 in Fragment 31.3).

When she responds, Blandine contributes to a further enlargement of the interactional space, by introducing a new person, Anne Rambeau, pointed to as having a solution to the problem. Blandine responds with a body-torque (Schegloff 1998) both maintaining her orientation forwards, to Gilbert and Robert, and adding a new orientation backwards, to Anne.
1 GIL  #maybe we need to start thinking the the difficulties,  
>>looks at Med-->
fig  #fig.6
2   >I mean, < we need to have (0.3) a comité d'éthique,  
   an ethical committee,
3   (0.4)
4 MED  >yeah< h

5 GIL  we *need to: start* building those questions. i"i mean:" ah=
  -->*..........*turns back toward the audience--->
    i turns to Bla-->
6 ROB  =blandine you contacted °( )°
7 BLA  so[zry ?
8 ROB  ["ethic committee" or #ethics [()]]
fig  #fig.7

9 BLA  [yeah *i mean, *
   *turns back-->
10     (2.2)
bla  --extends her arm backwards-->
11 BLA  anno ram*beau# is [ohm  
   -->*points back--> line 20
fig  #fig.8

Fragment 31.3 continued overleaf
The latter is introduced by a pointing gesture (emerging line 10), towards her (Figure 8 in Fragment 31.3). Blandine reveals Anne’s name (11) while she points at her. But before going on, she mentions Anne’s linguistic preferences (13), thus accounting for her silence and pinpointing a linguistic problem hindering the progression of the activity. Gilbert aligns in French (‘oui/yes’ 15) with this insertion, thereby confirming the possibility of a change...
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of language. Then Blandine reintroduces Anne and describes her tasks and responsibilities (14–16). During her turn, Gilbert progressively focuses on Anne and stands up, turning towards her (Figure 9 in Fragment 31.3), producing a mild acknowledgement. His invitation to continue includes an authorisation to change the language, uttered in French (17). At this point, Anne is established as the next speaker by him as well as by other participants turning towards her, like Mary (Figure 9 in Fragment 31.3). Anne’s first response acknowledges the change of language (18), with laughter. Others join in with this laughter, displaying an affiliation concerning the problem of language choice.

In this brief sequence, the language of a meeting that was held in ELF until then is changed into French, while giving the floor to a new participant, silent until then. This is not the only change happening in the fragment: the co-participants’ attention, which was orientated towards the presenter at the front of the room, is now reorientated to the last row, where the French speaker is sitting. The radical reorganisation of the interactional space, of the participation framework and of the linguistic resources available operates a reconfiguration of the distribution of talk and knowledge.

Solving problems and reaching decisions

We have already shown that the ‘meeting’ constitutes a focal interactional site in which the participants build the organisation’s knowledge and negotiate perceptions of the joint reality. In this context, the participants scrutinise their norms and processes in negotiating routine and critical issues that shape the organisation’s future action/s. Most meetings are multifunctional and although participants often label them according to predominant task/s on an (explicit or tacit) agenda, the boundaries between the activities the meeting participants handle are anything but clear-cut. Workplace discourse studies have gone beyond analysis of the form and structure of the meeting event to unpacking some of its key functions, notably the ways in which participants solve problems and reach decisions (Holmes & Marra 2010).

Problems and their resolution constitute a common agenda for meetings in all professional contexts. What ‘counts’ as problem is negotiated between the professionals in their own setting (Angouri & Bargiela 2011). Both the organisational ‘problem’ and the ‘decision’ are fluid and temporary positions that are recycled and revisited in an organisation’s life cycle. This process is ‘discursively dispersed and fragmented’ (Atkinson 1999), and typically it is difficult to spot the moment when a problem is ratified as such or a decision is made (Boden 1994). Sarangi and Roberts point out that ‘decision making is not simply out there waiting to be realised in some common-sense way’ (1999, p. 34). Hence the need for understanding the local interactional context within which this process takes place has been highlighted by all workplace approaches. The meeting event provides a key site for organisational learning and for developing the necessary expertise in handling the tasks that form an organisation’s set of activities. Interactants negotiate different ways of doing depending on their role and professional expertise. This process also involves disagreement (Marra 2012), a term that typically carries negative connotation, although it is a common stage in the problem-solving encounter. The way participants enact disagreement depends on a range of contextual factors, such as: who they are with, the discourse histories of the participants, the agenda, whose responsibility the ‘problem’ is, and so on. In some communities, heated and direct disagreement is the norm and represents an unmarked way (Angouri 2012) for reaching a commitment to action – a decision.

Conversation-analytic studies have been interested in how mutual intelligibility, intersubjectivity and understanding are both established and repaired in social interaction
In meetings, the common understanding of what is going on might be achieved through different practices – such as formulations (Heritage & Watson 1979), which might be used to summarise points that have been discussed and negotiated in the preceding talk and provide an entry into transitions and closings (Barnes 2007), as well as to reorientate a proposal and transform it from an individual suggestion into a collectively agreed matter (Mondada 2015). Such practices build agreement and common concerns (Huisman 2001). However, meetings are also the locus of disagreements and disaffiliative actions. These can be formatted in a bold, aggravated and direct way, but also in a cautious way orientated to the preference for agreement, using delays, mitigations, prefaces and accounts (Ford 2008). Moreover, meetings are characterised by the use of artefacts (notes and formal documents, whiteboards, and so on (see Knoblauch [2008] and Rendle-Short [2006] about PowerPoint presentations; Ochs, Jacoby & Gonzales [1994] and Mondada [2012b] about visualisations). Through these interactional resources and practices, problems, topics and knowledge are collectivelly established, negotiated, challenged or stabilised.

In the field of workplace discourse, it is common to adopt a Communities of Practice (CofP) framework in order to relate the interaction in a particular context with the norms of a group. Wenger (1998, p. 73) identifies three dimensions of a CofP: namely a) what it is about – its joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members; b) how it functions – the mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity; and c) what capability it has produced – the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time. The latter has been discussed by discourse analysts arguing that CofPs develop a specific discourse repertoire that distinguishes one community from others. This co-constructed and constantly renegotiated repertoire is a powerful resource that interactants draw upon in order to construct a collective ‘we’ identity, while interacting within various communities in their workplace (Angouri 2015).

**Conclusion: the politics of meetings**

Currently, a massive amount of collective work in organisations is carried out in the form of meetings. From political meetings (Fragment 31.1) to business meetings (Fragment 31.2) and institutional meetings (Fragment 31.3), very different matters – ranging from political opinions and scientific issues through to socio-economic problems – are established, discussed and decided. These meetings can take different forms, managed through specific organisational practices, such as mediated turn-taking systems, which adapt to, and in turn reflexively shape, opportunities to integrate or to exclude participants (p. 470). In these meetings, different persons come together, achieving different tasks, displaying different identities, making relevant issues of expertise, but also nationality and gender (p. 473). These identity displays are further made publicly intelligible through the linguistic choices of the participants, which enhance or minimise differences, competences, asymmetries and forms of participation (p. 475). Turn-taking, identity displays and choice of communicative resources contribute to shape the way in which (dis)agreements are managed, convergences and divergences interpreted and common decisions are taken (p. 479). Despite differences between them, a case can be made for a meeting genre, one that is recognisable to the participants and presents similarities in its organisation despite contextual variation.

The discussion shows that there is indeed a *politics of meetings*. These *political meetings* are one specific form, among others, in which positions, problems, facts and solutions are debated – and in which political rights to talk and be listened to – and where representativeness
and participation are shaped. However, the politics of meetings pervades the variety of forms and procedures that characterise institutional and entrepreneurial gatherings: in all of these cases, participants are confronted with turn-taking choices that favour different forms of participation; linguistic choices that enhance or limit access to the floor of different categories of participants; and types of actions and sequences that implement the tasks at hand and impose various constraints on the way in which issues are discussed and decided. These issues might be even stronger in contemporary institutions and workplaces, becoming increasingly complex, delocalised, technologically mediated, multilingual and multi-professional – constantly posing new challenges within established routines.

**Transcript conventions**

Talk is transcribed according to the conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (2004). Multimodal details are transcribed according to the conventions described in Mondada (2001).

**References**

Angouri, J & Bargiela-Chiappini, F, 2011, “‘We are all here today to solve problems right?’ Problem solving talk at work”, *Discourse and Communication*, vol. 5, no. 3, 209–229.


