

Language/activity : Observing and interpreting ritualistic institutional discourse

Srikant Sarangi

Cardiff University

<Sarangi@Cardiff.ac.uk>

1. Introduction

The topic of language-action interrelationship has been subjected to considerable debate across disciplines and sub-disciplines in social and human sciences. One can draw upon many theoretical and analytical traditions to complement or contest a particular understanding of human action vis-à-vis language use (e.g., Weber's *purposive action* ; Parson's *social action* ; Bourdieu's *field* and *habitus* ; Habermas' *rationality* and *communicative action* ; Giddens' *structuration* ; Goffman's *presentation of self*).

In general terms, one can juxtapose a model of rational intentionality (mainly work in the tradition of linguistic pragmatics represented by Austin, Searle, Grice, Habermas) with a model of intersubjective interactionism (based on the works of Goffman, Schütz, etc.). Perhaps Habermas' theory of communicative action, with its premium on rationality and idealistic universalism and moral principles, belongs at the intentionality end. Goffman's model of presentation of self and participant framework can be located at the interactionism end. Habermas, however, is critical of Goffman's model of self as performing strategic performances : « the dramaturgical qualities of action are in a certain way parasitic : they rest on a structure of goal-directed action » (Habermas 1984 : 90). In mapping the two ends of the spectrum, it is possible to locate other perspectives on this continuum, although one can notice differences across scholars as where and how they see interactions between agents and structure (cf. Goffman's interaction order ; Giddens' structuration – i.e., structure-action dualism leading to dialecticism). For instance, Ahearn (2001) from a linguistic anthropology viewpoint, critiques Giddens' notion of structuration which is not only a recursive loop (actions influenced by social structures and social structures (re)created by actions), but also pays little attention to the role language plays in maintaining social practices and in bringing about social change. What we need is a middle ground between

rational intentionality and intersubjective interactionism in the context of institutional discourse studies.

I see three different starting points to address the foundational relationships between language/action. These relations can be formulated in terms of *as*, *of* and *and* paradigms. The first – language as action – privileges the language at the expense of other communicative modalities. It also relies heavily on intentionality, as is evident in speech act pragmatics. The second – language of action – is restrictive with its focus on performance and manifestation, with an emphasis on the representational function of language. The third approach – language and action – is more open-ended as it invites us to assess the role of language in our understanding of action vis-à-vis other factors such as interpersonal role-relations in a given communicative activity.

In what follows, I use the notion of institutional discourse very broadly to include both professional and organisational settings as well as routine communicative activities in everyday settings such as the family, the community, etc. Against this backdrop, while focusing our attention on the notion of action, we need to invoke a range of associated concepts such as agency, responsibility, authority, event (state of affair), knowledge, evidence, motives, performance, practice, accountability, role, value etc. One can go on adding to this list, but here my concern is to suggest that our conceptualisation of action must be grounded in a notion of activity (which I see as broader than action and act and more along the notion of embodied practice in a given event). The activity perspective, while paying adequate attention to the context-specificity of language use, stresses issues of responsibility and role-relations in the analysis of action in institutional settings (Sarangi 1998).

I proceed by structuring my argument in three stages :

- The activity of language-action, or what I refer to as language/activity
- The activity of observation
- The activity of interpretation

In conclusion, I raise issues of communicative ecologies and the potential uptake of our research activity.

2. Perspectives on Language/activity

Within linguistics, speech act pragmatics can be taken as a point of departure with its mapping of illocutionary acts on to linguistic forms. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* clearly establishes the language-

action link, although there never was the suggestion of a one-to-one correspondence between language form and its communicative function. Searle (1969 : 17) goes further when he announces that « a theory of language is part of a theory of action ». Two major criticisms have been labelled against speech act pragmatics and its view of language-action relationship. Both criticisms point to the underestimation of the dependency of language on context, and further, a rather simplified notion of context itself. Levinson (1997) points to the apparent paradox that utterances can create their own contexts :

The paradox would be : if it takes a context to map an interpretation onto an utterance, how can we extract a context from an utterance before interpreting ? The idea that utterances might carry with them their own contexts like a snail carries its home along with it is indeed a peculiar idea if one subscribes to a definition of context that excludes message content, as for example in information theory. (Levinson 1997 : 26)

Along these lines, Bourdieu (1991) argues that the meaning of what is said depends crucially upon the status and role the speaker of the utterance occupies in a given social milieu. This is not to suggest that an individual's status and role are fixed. In fact, language allows for constant shifting between roles, with the possibility of distinguishing social roles from discourse roles – the latter referring to the relationship between participants and the message (Thomas 1995 ; Sarangi & Slembrouck 1996). In other words, the interactional context influences the sense and force of what is meant. The monologic orientation and speaker bias (intentionality) inherent in speech act pragmatics misses out on *intersubjectivity* (Streeck 1980 ; see the notion of *inter-act* in a dialogical framework, Linell & Markova 1993). Searle himself acknowledges the limitations of speech act model, because of its preoccupation with intentionality and speaker-bias. If we accept the multifunctionality of utterances (as Searle admits), in institutional discourse contexts they have to be specific (see also Labov & Fanshel 1977), but at the same time, the utterances may not explicitly refer to intended actions.

In this regard, the ethnomethodological and phenomenological perspective can be seen as a corrective as it calls for a preoccupation with the question : « how is that social activity done ? » (Atkinson & Heritage 1984). Sacks (1992) continually draws our attention to the verb *to do* in thinking about social activities : doing arguing, doing joking, doing questioning etc. Ethnomethodologists regard reflexivity as central to human conduct : « reflexivity refers to the social activities whereby members create and maintain the very situations in which they at the same time act » (Churchill 2003 : 6). This echoes Goffman's (1967) formulation of a paradox : character is both unchanging and changeable, the latter when

they find themselves in fateful moments : « Possibilities regarding character encourage us to renew our efforts at every moment of society's activity we approach, especially its social ones ; and it is precisely through these renewals that the old routines can be sustained ». Such a dynamic view of language-action relationship is at the heart of the sociocultural perspective which sees language as one of the many mediational tools underpinning the conduct of human activity.

Conversation, as a prototypical human activity, did not receive much attention from linguists for a considerable period of time, especially in light of Saussure's pronouncement that *langue*, not *parole*, should be the object of linguistic inquiry. Firth (1935) called for a different orientation in what can be seen as a shift towards activity-based linguistic analysis :

Conversation is much more of a roughly prescribed ritual than most people think. Once someone speaks to you, you are in a relatively determined context and you are not free just to say what you please. We are born individuals. But to satisfy our needs we have to become social persons... it is [in] the study of conversation... that we shall find the key to a better understanding of what language really is and how it works. (Firth 1935 : 66,70-71)

This call, however, went largely unheeded until scholars such as Hymes (1962, 1964), independently, developed the ethnography of speaking model to study everyday encounters. It is worth mentioning the seminal work of Mitchell ([1957] 1975) which was built upon Firth's concept of the *context of situation* : « a group of related categories at a different level from grammatical categories but rather of the same abstract nature » (*Papers in Linguistics* 1934-1951, p.182). According to Mitchell, « meaning must be sought in use », and this foregrounds an activity perspective on language use. Mitchell illustrates his argument with a structural analysis of the five stages in the buying-selling activity in Cyrenica (Bedouin Arabic of Jebel) : Salutation ; Enquiry as to the object of sale ; Investigation of the object of sale ; Bargaining ; and Conclusion. Activity-focused analysis is more firmly put on the linguistic map by Levinson's (1979) proposal of *activity type*, which is based on Wittgenstein's notion of the *language game* (for an overview, see Sarangi 2000).

Before I elaborate the activity-based analytic framework, it is necessary to determine what is meant by action. Burke (1966) draws a distinction between *action* and *sheer motion of things* (e.g., splashing of waves against the beach). Many scholars have addressed not only what constitutes action, but also how to explain human action. For some, individual action is juxtaposed to social/collective action. For others, action is juxtaposed to behaviour. According to Parsons & Shils (1962 : 53) :

Any behaviour of a living organism can be called action ; but to be so called, it must be analysed in terms of the anticipated states of affairs toward which it is directed, the situation in which it occurs, the normative regulation (e.g., the intelligence) of behaviour, and the expenditure of energy or « motivation » involved. Behaviour which is reducible to these terms, then, is action.

Parsons & Shils illustrate their position with the example of a man driving his automobile to a lake to go fishing. They go on to argue that each actor has a system of relations-to-objects, i.e., a system of orientations based on one's personality system and cultural system : « The frame of reference of the theory of action involves actors, a situation of action, and the orientation of the actor to that situation » (Parsons & Shils 1962 : 56).

Adopting a dramatisitic approach, Burke captures his perspective on human action in his account of the *pentad* :

We shall use five terms as generating principle of our investigation. They are : Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose. In a rounded statement about motives, you must have some word that names the *act* (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the *scene* (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred) ; also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (*agent*) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (*agency*), and the *purpose*. (Burke 1969 : xv)

More recently, Wertsch (1998), among others, has developed the notion of mediated action by focusing on agents and their cultural or mediational tools, which becomes the hallmark of socio-cultural analysis. His illustration of pole vaulting in its historical and contemporary form is a case in point :

Pole vaulting considered as a form of mediated action provides clear illustration of the irreducibility of this unit of analysis. For example, it is futile, if not ridiculous, to try to understand the action of pole vaulting in terms of the mediational means – the pole – or the agent in isolation. The pole by itself does not magically propel vaulters over a cross bar ; it must be used skillfully by the agent. At the same time, an agent without a pole or with an inappropriate pole is incapable of participating in the event. (Wertsch 1998 : 27)

Notions of competence, appropriateness are central to the framework of mediated action. The activity of pole vaulting is also tied up with rules and norms. This can be linked to the notion of activity type in Levinson's sense, although extending it beyond language use.

3. The activity of observation

Let us move now to my second concern : the activity of observation. Labov (1972) proposed the notion of observer's paradox to draw our attention to how the act of observation itself can contaminate the data being gathered.

By extension, he argues that we only get authentic data when we are not observing. The human activity under study (in this case speech performance) is bound to be influenced by the activity of observation – e.g., participant observation, research interview, recording equipment, etc. – albeit to different degrees. Labov succeeds in minimising the observer’s paradox by asking informants what he calls *danger of death* questions in research interviews or by opting for covert recording of naturally occurring interaction. It poses least problems because the research activity is conceived of as less participatory as far as the researcher is concerned, especially when the object of research is some kind of sociolinguistic variations such as accent, use of tense markers, silencing of consonants. Elsewhere (Sarangi 2002) I have extended Labov’s observer’s paradox to account for other biases inherent in many communicative activities : e.g., participant’s paradox (the activity of participants observing the observer) and analyst’s paradox (the activity of obtaining members’ insights to inform analytic practice). Instructive here are ethnographic studies involving marginal communities such as heroin users (Stoddart 1974) or homosexuals (Humphreys 1970). Humphrey’s study of the *tearoom trade* (tearoom is men’s conveniences in the American homosexual slang) is concerned with analysis of private encounters in public settings. He manages this by taking on the role of *watchqueen* to watch out for the arrival of police or intruders :

A man who is situated at the door or windows from which he may observe the means of access to the restroom. When someone approaches, he coughs. He nods when the coast is clear or if he recognises an entering party as a regular. (Humphreys 1970 : 27)

Such a researcher stance is very different from the traditional notion of *participant observation*. This is more like a *participation activity* as observation here slides into some form of participation in the activity, which is not unproblematic in itself as it can disrupt the very activity one has set out to observe. However, as Humphreys points out, it is an essential commitment not only to be able to continue observing clandestine homosexual behaviour, but also to be able to draw on this experience for purposes of interpreting the specialised argot and the practices of those being observed (see the discussion of analyst’s paradox above).

There are parallels to be drawn between an activity orientation to observation practices and anthropological inquiry more generally. Holy and Stuchlik (1983) urge us to combine the sphere of notions (knowledge, beliefs, ideas and ideals) with what is observable at the sphere of actions. This leads them to transform the question of « how we do things » to « why we do things the way we do » (see earlier point about the ethnomethodo-

logical perspective on social activity and the reflexive character of language and action). Descriptions of observable actions and events without any reference to notions that underpin such actions and events run the risk of being trivial and uninterpretable. Consider the example they cite from Holy's fieldwork among the Toka of Zambia :

One morning, most of the men and women from three neighbouring villages assembled in the village in which I stayed. After a while, they set out on a march, together with the people from this village, out of the settlement. The march, in which altogether about eight people took part, was led by a middle-aged man. The marchers sang and occasionally stopped and danced for a while to the accompaniment of more songs. After having marched for about three miles, they stopped in the bush. The women cleared a small patch of ground by removing the grass. Then all except the leader of the march sat down on the ground and slowly clapped their hands in rhythm. The rhythmic clapping of hands was occasionally accompanied by the beating of a drum. While this went on, the man who had led the procession poured some water, beer and milk on the cleared patch of ground and simultaneously delivered a short speech, obviously addressed to no one in particular. (Holy & Stuchlik 1983 : 35)

The details of action and participation in this activity can only be interpreted if we were to invoke the notion of the rain making ritual. We then identify that there was a particular sequence to the activity, there were constraints on actions and participation (the man who led the march and poured water, beer and milk was the village headman ; what is described as « a short speech, obviously addressed to no one in particular » is actually addressed to the ancestors which would then bring rain. We are invited to share the Toka's belief systems in order to understand this ritual activity although we can still find it hard to establish a causal link between the activity and the coming of rain as an outcome. Such ritual activities have an institutional and cultural character about them which are not readily available for the activity of observation and interpretation by a remotely positioned third party (here, the researcher).

A similar episode from Bailey (1971) will make the point clearer :

When a woman appears in the public arena (village of Valloire in the French Alps) wearing an apron, it is a way of signalling that she has pressing domestic tasks to return to and so cannot stop for gossiping. That the woman is politically *off-stage* can only be understood by paying attention to the local everyday practices. If a particular community goes about conducting their lives by using specific communicative resources (such as the apron in this case), then an analyst needs to turn the members' resource/method into a topic of investigation in its own right. (Bailey 1971)

It is useful here to draw our attention to the topic/resource tension in analysing everyday actions and interactions. Study of action is not possible

without an adequate understanding of situated notions and concepts in a given social system. Meanings of acts have to be derived from the activity – or *interactivity* – participants are engaged in, thus aligning members' and analysts' interpretive practices (Sarangi & Candlin 2001). A further issue which emerges from both the examples above is that language is only one of the many available means which constitute action.

4. The activity of interpretation

As can be seen from the discussion so far, the activity of interpretation is already embedded in the practice of observation. I am here using the term *interpretation* in a broad sense to include both participants' and analysts' sense making practices.

Let us revisit Mitchell ([1957] 1975) and his interpretation of the communicative activity surrounding the buying-selling encounters. In very general terms, Mitchell is of the view that observing and interpreting what is going on needs to be selective. According to him :

A text is a kind of snowball, and every lexical item and every collocation in it is part of its own context, in the wider sense of this term ; moreover, the snowball rolls now this way, now that. To make progress in statement at all possible it is necessary for the linguist to select from his material and to focus attention on some elements to the exclusion of others. Not every part of a text lends itself to collocational statement, nor will it always be necessary to make statements about *every* (habitual) collocation in a text. (Mitchell [1957] 1975 : 186)

Activity-based interpretation involves selection of one kind or another and this is even more true in institutional and professional contexts. Goodwin (1994) draws our attention to the constitution of 'professional vision' through the discursive practices of coding, highlighting and articulation of material representations, all of which involve a selective interpretive bias. From a more general standpoint, Weber argues in favour of an interpretive explanation of human action.

What distinguishes an interpretive explanation is that it involves explaining behaviour by reference to the agent's conceptions of what he is doing, as opposed to explaining it by causal laws. Interpretive explanation takes into account the fact that an agent's knowledge of his own actions differs in important ways from that which an observer can have of those actions. (Levison 1974 : 101)

Weber's main concern here is that causal explanation which is characteristic of the scientific paradigm does not apply neatly to the study of human sciences. It becomes necessary to minimise the participants' and analysts' ways of understanding a given phenomenon. As can be seen from

our discussion of the Toka ritual of rain making, there is the need for checking our interpretation with the agents (cf. the notion of analyst's paradox). Interpretation is, by default, a reflexive and collaborative activity.

Let us consider the following textual/interpretive scene in the context of a hotel room in a cosmopolitan city. The room has the following language/activity scripts adjacent to various artefacts :

1. Next to the kettle : « Don't go thirsty ! More tea and coffee available at reception »
2. Next to the telephone : « Make a call, go on, it's cheap » (followed by local, national, and international rates and dialling instructions)
3. On the table : [with a fork dipped into a sausage] « Smile. Start the day with our traditional breakfast (followed by the whole menu) » ; [with a half peeled banana] « Feeling fruity ? Select our lighter option. Cereal of your choice, chilled fruit juices, fresh fruit salad, fresh fruit, yoghurt, toast or croissant, conserves and tea or coffee » ; [with a cup of ice cream] « Get a FREE breakfast for your little soldiers (for children 12 and under when accompanied by a full paying adult) »
4. Attached to the bath/shower : « ! Enjoy your shower, please take care not to slip »
5. « Tell us what you think ! ... we would really like to know about your stay »

There is something institutional about this textual ambience. (1) offers an invitation, but does not specify the mechanism involved in accessing the reception, or whether this would incur extra charges. (2) comes across as persuasive use of language as it appeals to certain norms of sociality : it is highly desirable to call others on a routine basis, so it may be a social sin not to do so when cheaper price is guaranteed. While (3) and (5) are self-explanatory, (4) is particularly interesting as it draws attention to the fact that it is the guest's responsibility to be safe. There is the hint that in the case of an accident, the hotel is not to be legally implicated. All the textual messages draw upon role and responsibilities of various kinds beyond the immediate context of the host-guest communicative setting.

The next example (taken from Thomas 1995) illustrates my overall orientation towards role and activity analysis. The following is a note sent by the Department Secretary to a research student one Friday afternoon in a British University setting :

Dear Beulah

A research student named [name deleted] from Zambia is arriving at Manchester tomorrow at 19.30. She's got a room booked in County College and I don't know whether she will have money or not. She can see me on Monday morning and we'll sort things out. (Thomas 1995 : 123)

We notice here a mixture of directive and non-directive statements. It is possible to list what actions are predicated :

B to receive the guest at the airport

B to bring the guest to her accommodation in County College

B to lend her some money for the weekend (or at least take care of her need)

B to bring the guest to the Department and introduce her to the secretary.

Note that none of these actions are explicitly stated. Both Beulah as the addressee and we as analysts have to rely on inferences and implicatures to derive the sense and force of these statements. As analysts we draw on the role-relationships and responsibilities of both participants – the secretary and Beulah – to aid our interpretation. Given our understanding of the role of secretaries in academic departments in a British university, we can assume that secretaries normally do not issue such requests or instructions to fellow research students. However, in this instance we see that the message is directly addressed to Beulah in her role as a research student. Having chosen Beulah as the direct addressee of her request, the secretary cannot be blamed for negligence or indifference with regard to the new arrival. Notice that the message is delivered to Beulah on a Friday afternoon, giving her no response slot to either show her unavailability or reluctance. The lateness of the request may have been caused by the suddenness of the news of this new arrival or other arrangements having fallen through. Similarly, the choice of Beulah may have been guided by Beulah's Good Samaritan profile as well as by the fact that she shares the demographic origin of the new arrival. If Beulah is unable to carry out the intended actions, it is at least expected that she make alternative arrangements – pass the buck, as it were. The exact stipulation of events (name of the guest, place and time of arrival, details of accommodation arrangements) contributes to our meaning making, i.e., what actions are intended to follow. Assuming that the guest was received and looked after on arrival, we can point to two issues: role-relationship between a secretary and a research student; and responsibility of each participant in light of what is taken as given or shared knowledge/expectations, and what might result as consequences if appropriate actions were not taken.

My analytic commentary above differs considerably from traditional speech act analysis. It is very much in line with Weber's interpretive explanation, although we do not have access to the agents' perspectives in a follow-up interview. It also shows that Levinson's notion of *activity type* goes somewhat towards offering a stable framework to interpret action in institutional/professional settings (Levinson 1979; Sarangi 2000). The model draws on structures of expectations (hence notions of frames,

schema) and constraints on participation structure (hence notion of role-relations, authority, power, etc.). What Levinson calls « activity specific inferential schemata » can be taken as context-bound, including role and participation-specific inferences and implicatures.

The general point here is that institutional and professional action is constituted in language/activity. In the context of social work involving child abuse, consider the following textual examples from the key social worker in a research interview (Hall, Sarangi & Slembrouck 1997) :

The hospital felt ... a clear picture of failure to thrive ; had the situation been left further the child would have died ; the child was admitted.

The staff found the mother difficult ; the situation caused much anxiety ; a place of safety was taken.

Because the mother was so hostile the foster parent found it impossible to work ; she asked for the child to be transferred ; the child was transferred.

Because we felt that we couldn't arrange access in foster home as we normally would ; arrangement of access in area office was a horrendous task ; we involved the Family Welfare Association with two objectives.

What we see here is how event descriptions (e.g., mother's hostility as an extreme case formulation) provide conditions for institutional action (e.g., « we involved the Family Welfare Association »). It is the activity of providing an account which endorses the actions taken.

Let us consider further examples of ritualistic encounters in the institutional setting of meetings and therapeutic encounters. Atkinson, Cuff & Lee (1978) examine how recommencement of a meeting at a local radio station, following a coffee break, is to be regarded as members' accomplishment. In the following example, the background noise, the chairperson's attention-getting summons in the form of words, pauses, intonation etc. have to be interpreted in the context of this meeting activity :

Right-e :r-
 ((general background noise))
 ((pause ca. 4.00)) ((general background noise))
 - Are we ready to go again now ?
 ((general background noise))
 ((pause ca. 3.00))

The activity of interpretation here includes the activity of transcribing the meeting as a situated communicative activity. What gets characterised as *general background noise* only holds from the perspective of the meeting activity ; the ongoing talk between members over coffee is far from being background noise ; indeed it could be about topics central to the meeting

activity, but such talk will not be designated as *meeting talk* unless someone reports these when the meeting recommences. Similarly, the lengthy pauses have a specific function of reiterating the summon, which is rather different from their function in the meeting talk itself.

Turner (1972) discusses participation structure in relation to question-answer sequences in group therapy sessions. Clients' questions such as « why are we here ? » are not answered literally but in activity-specific terms. If we take the client's question « why are we here ? » as first action ; the therapist normally withholds second actions, which leads to a controlling of the interaction.

... the therapist gives a theory-governed hearing to *all* patient utterances « during » therapy ...the therapist's productions can be brought under a rule that provides for him not to produce « second actions » as responses to patients' « first actions ». A further characterisation would be that patients can find any and all of their talk to be accountable, in that one property of second actions is their recognition of corresponding first actions as warranted. (Turner 1972 : 393)

The clients' question stands for « I know you are here because you have some problem since that is why anyone comes here. What is the nature of that problem ? ». In this light, the client's question is followed by the therapist's invitation to clients to formulate their own problems so as to resolve them. This could appear as *therapeutic indifference*, but it constitutes a display of situated expertise. By focusing on the formulation of problem, the status of the client is legitimised. The client is regarded as the possessor of the problem, and the therapist as the expert for whom treatment of such problems is the rationale of his/her profession.

Scheff (1968 : 12) characterises the psychotherapeutic interview in a similar fashion, as « a series of offers and responses that continue until an offer (a definition of situation) is reached that is acceptable to both parties ». He analyses a case which involves a 34 year-old nurse, who is depressed and sees her husband's behaviour as the cause (he is alcoholic, verbally abusive, and doesn't like her working). She has thought about divorce, but is afraid about child care, finance etc. She feels trapped. The therapist is keen to find out her role in this situation, rather than accept the client's definition – that there is an external situation as the cause. The patient goes on to disclose that she was pregnant by another man when her present husband proposed. She cries. Throughout the interview the psychotherapist's agenda is hidden from the client :

In the psychotherapeutic interview, it is probably the psychiatric criteria for acceptance into treatment, the criterion of « insight ». The psychotherapist has probably been trained to view patients with « insight into their illness » as

favourable candidates for psychotherapy, i.e., patients who accept, or can be led to accept, the problems as internal, as part of their personality, rather than seeing them as caused by external conditions. (Scheff 1968 : 13)

This perspective underlines how questions are framed, how the therapist controls the interaction by shifting topics, while rejecting the clients' offers. Hence – at the interactional level – there is a relationship between activity-based assessment technique and the outcome that ensues.

Ferrara (1994) also analyses therapeutic interaction and draws an important distinction between the rhetorical force and the speech act force in interpretation in view of the norms of the speech event. In focusing on the role of repetition in therapeutic settings, she identifies two types of repetitions : echoing and mirroring. Echoing is seen as an instance of insight and empathy – two key values in psychotherapy. Echoing involves « the contiguous repetition of another's utterance or statement using the same downward intonation in an adjacency pair », which is usually done by the client, sometimes allowing for pause. Echoing signals *emphatic agreement* more than explicitly formulated confirming utterances such as « yes », « I know », « you're right ». What the therapist proposes as candidates for echoing are what Ferrara calls « interpretive summary about the client's experience » ; so the repeat by the client signals agreement of assessment proffered by the therapist. Mirroring, on the other hand, involves « partial repetition by the therapist of a client's statement » using the same downward intonation. This is meant to be heard by the client as a request for elaboration.

Labov & Fanshel's (1977) analytic framework of A and B events is useful here (A events are known to A, B events are known to B and AB-events are known to both). According to Labov & Fanshel (1977 : 101) :

Responses to assertions are heavily determined by the relation of the proposition being asserted to knowledge shared by the participants. If A asserts an A-event, he normally requires only an acknowledgement of a minimal kind : he often uses such assertions to introduce a narrative... ; B simply must show that he is prepared to pay attention during an extended turn at talk. In the special case that A makes an assertion about a B-event, his utterance is heard as a request for confirmation.

Both echoing and mirroring work at an inexplicit level. Mirroring is non-direct and non-imperative – it's more declarative (unlike the more direct forms « keep talking », « go on », « please elaborate », « say that again »). Echoing and mirroring can be seen as what Sacks (1992) calls *local operations*. But these are also indicative of where the therapy is going and what the client and therapist are accomplishing in any one session.

5. Conclusion

In this article I have argued for a shift from a view of language as action and language as representation towards a view of language as activity (goal-oriented action). In the institutional sphere, it is the case that both dimensions intersect as event descriptions and categorisations provide a necessary condition for action/intervention. Generally speaking, this view of language is more useful in categorising institutional discourse. It allows for identifying the tacit-level knowledge which underpin linguistic action, with goals and intentionality providing additional interpretive scaffolding. The language as activity view helps to align participants' method with analysts' method. In concluding, I raise more questions than answers : What knowledge do discourse researchers bring to bear on their understanding of activity-based practices and their communicative ecologies ? How does one avoid extreme reductionism in the interpretation of local practices ? How do we go about acknowledging the problem of providing an evidential link between observable communicative practices and tacit knowledge systems ? To what extent are the observational and interpretive practices of discourse researchers informed/influenced by the personal knowledge of practice and action under study ? In other words, can the activities of observation and interpretation have consequences beyond the *research act* in terms of uptake (Roberts & Sarangi 2003 ; Sarangi *et al.* 2003) ?

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