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Reflections on the micro-politics of social action, in interaction

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I'm not offering any research findings here – I'm not reporting any systematic practice, or anything of that sort. This is only a reflection on the how participants can 'position' themselves as regards which of them is *doing* what; and on the struggles that can occur about what a speaker is 'doing'. In many respects I'm only reconfiguring what we already know – in order to highlight that in the minor struggles about who is doing what in talk-in-interaction, we can see that when a recipient treats the prior speaker as having done something, *they* are doing something (i.e. 'ascribing an action' is itself an action). All of which may contribute in the longer term to shedding further light on how we construct social actions – how we 'do' them, and how we construct them out of the linguistic, pragmatic and embodied resources and practices that we have.

A starting point: Some actions are 'valued' over others. For instance, there seems to be a value attached to having the opportunity to *resign*, rather than be *dismissed* – a value that is particularly apparent when that opportunity is denied. Some in CA propose that *offers* are favoured, or 'preferred', over *requests*. It is, perhaps better, to be *invited* to something (or join something) than to have to *ask*.

These hint at the interactional 'positioning' that can attend certain actions, including ways to avoid some actions - positioning that is associated with the value that can attach to some actions. That 'value' rests, in part at least, on the intersection between the social *solidarity* principle (or the principle of contiguity and affiliation); the *voluntarism* of social actions; and in certain cases (disguising) the matter of *who benefits*.

I'll outline the following 'positionings', illustrating each with one or two examples, highlighting how each is related to the 'politics' of action – and what each tells us about action construction:

i Avoiding an action – leaving it to recipient to 'find' and enact
ii Disguising an action
iii Recipient's treatment of the prior turn/action as having been what it was putatively not designed to be/do
iv Deniability & disclaimers
v *Selecting* a particular form (perhaps the 'inappropriate' form) with which to conduct an action
vi Literal/innocent actions, vs. not-so-innocent (disaffiliative) actions
vii Incomplete

1 Avoiding an official, on-the-record action, leaving it to recipient's uptake: 'Displaced' (or indirect?) actions

```
#1    [NB:II:2:1] (Pomerantz 1980)
1     Nan:        Oh: 'I:: 'ow a:re you Emmah:
2     Emm:        FI:NE yer LINE'S BEEN BUSY.
3     Nan:        Yea:h (.) my  u.-fuhh h-.hhhh my fa:ther's wife ca:lled me,h
4                 .hhh So when she ca:lls me::,h .hh I always talk fer a lo:ng
5                 ti:me cz she c'n afford it'n I ca:n't.hhh hhh °huh°

#2    [TC:1:1:1]
1       Shi:      =.hhh Suh how'r you?
2       Ger:      Oka:y d'dju just hear me pull up?=
3       Shi:      =.hhhh NO:. I wz TRYing you all day.'n the LINE wz
4                 busy fer like hours.
5       Ger:      Ohh:::::::, ohh:::::. .hhhhhh We::ll, hhh ah'm
6                 g'nna c'm over 'n a li'l while help yer brother
7                 ou:t,
8       Shi:      Goo[:d.
9       Ger:         [.hh Cz I know he needs some he::lp, ((mournfully))
10      Shi:      .khh Ye:ah.  Yeh he'd mention' that t'day.=
11      Ger:      =M-hm,=
12      Shi:      =.hhh Uh:m,  .tch.hhhh Who w'yih ta:lking to:

#3    [Rahman:B:1:IDJ(12)]
1     Jen:     *Hello?,*
2                 (0.5)
3     Ida:     Jenny?
4                 (0.3)
5     Ida:     It's me:,
6     Jen:     Oh hello I:da.
7     Ida:     Ye:h. .h uh:m (0.2) I'v jis rung tih teh- eh tell
8              you (0.3) uh the things ev arrived from Barker'n
9              Stone'ou[:se,
9     Jen:             [Oh:::::.
10           (.)
11    Jen:     O[h c'n ah c'm rou:nd,h[h
12    Ida:      [An'                  [Ye[s please[that's w]'t=
13    Jen:                               [ha  ha  [.a : h  ]
14    Ida:     =I wantche tih come rou:nd.


#4     [Virginia:1] (Family dinner. Mom sits at end of table, her son
Wes on her right; Wes's girlfriend Pru sits to his right, between him
and his sister Beth. The casserole pot is placed in front of Pru, who
evidently is going to serve the food)
1     Wes:        Heavenly father give us thankful hearts (fuh)
2                 these an' all the blessings °ahmen.
3                 (.)
4     Vir:        >°Ahmen.<
5                 (2.0)
6     Pru:        Oka[y.
7     Mom:           [˙hhh Beth [wouldju (have) some a-uhm] (0.2)
8     Pru:                     [(                        )]
9     Mom:        cassero:le?
10    Pru:        Which way 'us it go, °(Beth).
11                (1.7)
12    Mom:        Ihf- 'idn' it awfully ho:t?
13                (0.5)
14    Wes:        (She c'n) serve the plates.
```

#5 [Trip to Syracuse] (Charlie had been going to give Ilene a ride to Syracuse, but now...)

```
Cha:      hhhe:h heh .hhhh I wuz uh:m: (·) .hh I wen' ah:-
          (0.3) I spoke teh the gi:r- I spoke tih Karen.
          (.hhhh)/(0.4) And u:m:: (·) ih wz rea:lly ba:d
          because she decided of a:ll weekends fuh this one
          tih go awa:y
          (0.6)
Ile:      Wha:t¿
          (0.4)
Cha:      She decidih tih go away this weekend.
Ile:      Yea:h,
Cha:      .hhhh=
(Ile):    =.kh[h
Cha:          [So tha:[:t
(Ile):                [k-khhh
Cha:      Yihknow I really don't have a place tuh sta:y.
Ile:      .hh Oh:::::.hh
          (0.2)
Ile:      .hhh So yih not g'nna go up this weeken'¿
( ):      (hhh)/(0.2)
Cha:      Nu::h I don't think so.
```

#6 [P3:64] (from Robinson and Heritage 2006:485)

```
Doc:      An' what can we do for ya today.
Pat:      .hh Well I was here on September=h twenty third because I had
          bronchial (.) an' I was put on z:ithroma[x
Doc:                                              [Mm hm,
Pat:      .hh thuh following: tuesday wednesday I had such a sore throat I could
          hardly swallo[w
Doc:                   [Mm hm,
Pat:      .th I came i:n fo:r a culture an' it was negative.
```

#7 [Frozen Shoulder] (Heritage & Robinson 2006)

```
Doc:      So what can I do for you today.
Pat:      W'll- (.) I have (.) som:e shoulder pa:in
          a:nd (0.2) a:nd (.) (from) the top of my a:rm. a:nd (0.2)
          thuh reason I'm here is because >a couple years
          ago< I had frozen shoulder in thee other a:rm, an'
          I had to have surgery. and=(  ) this is starting to
          get stuck, and I want to stop it before it gets stuck.
```

#8 [MPS:NSY:29] (An emergency call to the police: Ca is Caller, Com is the police call-taker)

```
Com:      Hello police
Ca:       Yeah hello (becca) uh I live at (address)
          (.)
Com:      Y[eah
Ca:        [Right and I'm (not home) my daughter was there (who is thirteen)
          and she's home and somebody has broken the house
          (.)
Com:      (oh=one=seven) (.) what's the address you want police to go to
```

2 Disguising an action: doing one action in the guise of another

```
#9    [NB:IV:5:1]
 1  Emm:    ...oney=OH: I'[M f:i::ne?hhh
 2  Gla:                  [(I-)
 3  Gla:    Well goo:d, ah:'ll tell you I:: .hh have a proposition:
 4          uhm.t.hh u-Bill: u-o:f course goes off on that uh (0.2)
 5          ↑tou↓:r: (.) Mondee< (.) i-his reguluh ↑go:lf ga:me.
 6  Emm:    Ye:ah:?=
 7  Gla:    =An' now I've got (.) tuh wash my hair en get the ↑goop
 8          out 'v it'n evrything? .hh 'n ah have the ↑paper here I
 9          thought chu might li:ke tih ↓have it.↓.hhhh[h
10  Emm:                                               [Th[a:nk you.
11  Gla:                                                  [En then
12          you: could return it ub (.) ↑Oh along about noo:n,
```

#10 [Medeiros 2] (Call from a US high school truancy office)

```
1   Off:    Yea:h. Well, u::h the- obviously she's not going to
2           her cla:sse:s an' we need tuh find out where she is:
3           going would you: talk t'her about it tonight'n .hhh
4           send her into the attendance office tomorrow morning so
5           that we c'n straighten these out.
6   Mom:    Mmmkay[:: I'll see what she says about it.
7   Off:          [Uh::: we have a new-
8   Off:    .hhh Okay:. We have a new uh:: detention system now
9           (.)
10  Off:    that if they don' clear the:se they'll become truants.
11          (.)
12  Off:    .hh A:nd she will need to come in en clear them up.
13          (.)
14  Mom:    Nnk[ay
15  Off:       [Okay?
16  Mom:    Do: I have tuh get back t'you 'r (.) jus' sending her is that enough.
```

3 Recipient's treatment of the prior turn/action as having been what it was putatively *not* designed to be/do

Example: What did the other do? Apologise? Really? Absolution for unacknowledged sins

#11 [Field:C85:3:1]

1	Myr:	=I'm dreadf'ly sorry,[it's hhh] hones]tly ah-ah- this=
2	Les:	[That's ^al]ri:ght]

#12 [Rahman:1:2:1] (Jenny phones her opticians)

1	Desk:	Hello Goodzwin,
2	Jen:	Ehm good morning. eh it's Missiz Rah:man here, I ca:lled
3		in on Thursday: tih see: if uh I c'd make en appointment
4		t'see Mistuh (Thornley,)
5		(1.2)
6	Jen:	An', I haven't heard anything'n I wz wondring if: uh:m
7		(I c'd possibly see im) one day next week.
8		(0.8)
9	Desk:	Uh:m I'll j's check iz diary c'n you hold a minute (eh [please).
10	Jen:	[Yes,
11	Desk:	( ),
12		(7.0)
13	Desk:	Hello:,
14	Jen:	Hello?
15	Desk:	Uh what name was it again[please
16	Jen:	[Missiz Rah:man. R-a-h m-a-n.
17	Desk:	R-a-h m-a-n. .h Right. Ken you just hold on one moment.
18	Jen:	eYes.
19	Desk:	Thank you,
20		(15.0)
21	Tho:	Hello:::,
22	Jen;	Hello?
23	Tho:	I tried tuh ring you on: Thursday evening. b't I couldn' get'ny reply::.
24	Jen:	Oh dea:r. ehh hnh[h
25	Tho:	['T's alright Now?, when uh:: dihyou wan'tuh come in
26		Monda:y?,

#13 [Field:U88:1:4:3] (Gordon phoned Dana late the night before, a little the worse for drink, Dana's mother answered the phone, and she & her mother were freaked by receiving such a late call. Moreover Dana had been out late after a difficult evening; she's been complaining bitterly about a particularly uncooperative friend)

1	Dana:	And I was so a[ngry
2	Gor:	[kuhhhh .hh-[h
3	Dana:	[a:n' (0.3) ( )
4		([ ) an' oh::: Ghhhod.[C'z-
5	Gor:	[.hhhhhhhhhhh [But was: was the ↓film good. ↓
6		(0.3)
7	Dana:	Yes it wa[s b't
8	Gor:	[Did you en↓joy it. ↓
9		(0.6)
10	Dana:	Yes but it's: (.) oo I can't hardly remember the film
11		becuz I got so (bucked) up 'n ↓mm:-mm:.
12	Gor:	ehhhhh ↓↓Oh-:-:-oo,hh
13	Dana:	It's not you:r fault, but it's just becuz (0.3) Christie's ((w)) ˚so damn thick.˚

Example: An invitation, possibly, treated as having been a suggestion or proposal?

#14	[NB:VII:2]	
1	Edn:	=I shoulda ca:lled you sooner b't I don't know where the
2		week we::n[t,
3	Mar:	[u-We:ll::=
4	Mar:	=Oh- yEdna you don'haftuh call me up=
5	Edn:	=[I wa::nt [t o : .]
6	Mar:	=[I wz jus [tickled] thetche-
7		(.)
8	Mar:	nYihkno:w w'n you came u:p en uh-.hhh=
9	Mar:	= W'l haftuh do tha[t more] o[: f t en.]
10	Edn:	[.hhhhh] [Wul w]hy don't we: uh-m:=
11	Edn:	=Why don't I take you'n Mo:m up there tuh: Coco's.someday
12		fer lu:nch.We'll go, bkuzz up there tu[h,
13	Mar:	[k Goo:d.
14	Edn:	Ha:h?
15	Mar:	That's a good deal. .hh-.hh=
16	Edn:	=Eh I'll take you bo:th [up
17	Mar:	[No::: wil all go Dutch.=
18	Mar:	=B't [l e t's do that.]
19	Edn:	[N o : we wo:n']t.

4 Deniability & disclaimers (defeasibility: Hart 1960)

#15 [Field:X(C):85:2:1:2:9] (It's coming up to Christmas. Joan's husband isn't getting a bonus this year, they're strapped for £££, and so they're not going to 'do' Christmas)

```
Les:   I think they're having- (0.2) I think they're having a sticky
         ti:me [aren't they. ]
Joa:   [Oh: are the]y?
       (0.5)
Les:   Y[es.
Joa:     [Oo:: dear,=
Les:   =Think s[o,
Joa:     [Well we're all in the same boa:t, I'm quite  (          ).
       (.)
Joa:   e[nd up in a s]tate .he:h .he:h .hhh[hh heh-heh-heh
Les:   [O  h  :  : .]                      [Well come over
       'n have a dri:nk['n a mince:  p]ie:.
Joa:                                  [u-  N o : :  :   ] no I didn't mean that
       (.)
Les:   No[no I- I wz gon'oo ask you anyway don't worry h[h
Joa:     [No (     )                                    [No it's your turn t'come
       to us. That's what's annoyin'me with Fred as well. I keep sayin' there's loads'v
       people I want (       ) invite so that we were g'n 'av a pa:rty.
```

#16 [NB:1:6:4]

```
Lot:   °Oh I love tuh gee I ride mine all [th' ti:me.°
Emm:                                      [°Ye:ah.°
Lot:   I love it.
Emm:   .hhh WELL honey? ( ) Ah:ll (.) pob'ly SEE yih
       one a' these da:y[s,
Lot:                    [Oh: Go:d yeah [(ah wish)]=
Emm:                                   [ehh huh  ]=
Lot:   =But I c- I jis [couldn' git do:w[n (      )
Emm:                   [Oh-u           [Oh I know=
Emm:   =I'm not as[kin yih tih] c'm dow-]
Lot:              [Je e : z i z]  I  m e an ]  I jis
       (0.2)
Lot:   I didn' have five minutes yesterday.
Emm:   Ah don' know how yih do i:t.
       (0.3)
Lot:   Ah don' kno:w. nh huh
Emm:   You wuh: work all day tih da:y.
```

5 Selecting a particular (perhaps 'inappropriate') form

Example: *Do you want me...?* forms of offers should *not* be used in next position to the other having explicitly mentioned a trouble or problem (so Lottie uses the correct form of offer in #17) – but in #18 Leslie uses the 'incorrect' form)

```
#17  [NB:IV:10:19]
Emm:   Uh: that's where he lives. in that (.) nice home there on
       the corner aCROSS fr'm *uh (0.2) yihkno:w at thih a(.)CROSS
       f'm weh-wer the PINK hou:se is.=
Lot:   =Ye:ah?
             (.)
Emm:   [Yah,
Lot:   [Yeah I know where i[t-[ Y  a]:h.[U h]huh?]
Emm:                       [nY[aa:h.]   [.hh].hhh]h ALRIGHT HONEY
       WELL .hh good- I:'m SO gladje hhadda wunnerf'l ti:me.h=
Lot:   W'l listen (.) e-uh: dihyou want me uh come dow'n getchu
       to[morrow or [a n y t h]ing?
Emm:     [n:N o : : [dea*:r. ]
Emm:   No:  I'm fine
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```
#18 [Field:1:5:2] (Nan is Leslie's elderly mother-in-law)

Nan:    (We:ll) .hh Mister (0.4) You: said, phone on Mondee
        .hh that's still damp in the bathroo:m?
Les:    Ye[s.
Nan:      [And I: said if the:y couldn' get it ri:ght, (0.3)
        Mister Sutton ought tuh come on Tuesday.=you said
        phone Tuesday.
Les:    Ye:s we[ll dju want me to pho:ne e-or=
Nan:          [(    )
        =d'you want tuh phone'i:m?
        (0.7)
Nan:    Pardon?
Les:    .hh Are you going tuh phone i:m?
        (0.3)
Nan:    Oh no: I-:: (.) can't speak tuh anyone on the
        phone as you kno-:w, .hh but uh-: (0.3) if he will
        ca:ll, (0.2) and have a look an' see: if there's a
        leaK.h up the:re,
Les:    Y[eh are  y o u  out-]
Nan:     ['Cause it's still d]amp.
```

#16 [NB:1:6:4] Again

1	Lot:	°Oh I love tuh gee I ride mine all [th' ti:me.°
2	Emm:	[°Ye:ah.°
3	Lot:	I love it.
4	Emm:	.hhh WELL honey? ( ) Ah:ll (.) pob'ly SEE yih
5		one a' these da:y[s,
6	Lot:	[Oh: Go:d yeah [(ah wish)]=
7	Emm:	[ehh huh]=
8	Lot:	=But I c- I jis [couldn' git do:w[n ( )
9	Emm:	[Oh-u [Oh I know=
10	Emm:	=I'm not as[kin yih tih] c'm dow-]
11	Lot:	[Je e : z i z] I m e an] I jis
12		(0.2)
13	Lot:	I didn' have five minutes yesterday.
14	Emm:	Ah don' know how yih do i:t.
15		(0.3)
16	Lot:	Ah don' kno:w. nh huh
17	Emm:	You wuh: work all day tih da:y.

A frequent source of claimed misunderstanding involves the joke/serious difference. Here's an interesting case that is so slight that it reeks of discord and unhappiness

#19 [NB:III:3] (Emma, who is at their beach house, has called Bud, who is in the city, on their wedding anniversary. Their daughter is called Barbara)

1	Emm:	THIRDY SEVEN YEARS AGO TUHNIGHT WIR WERE ON OUR WAY
2		DUH VE:NTURA. [((SNIFF))]=
3	Bud:	[↑M m h m]=
4	Bud:	=W'ddiyih know'bout thet.
5	Emm:	Sanna Barbra hhhh huh h[uh I-]
6	Bud:	[Ba:rbr]a. [Mhm?
7	Emm:	[.hhh
8		(.)
9	Emm:	We gotta Ba:rbra didn'we. ((smile voice))
10	Bud:	Yeh.
11		(0.4)
12	Emm:	Ye:[ah.
13	Bud:	[Tik time uh,
14	Emm:	↑Wha:t?
15	Bud:	Took t(h)ime
16	Emm:	Took t(hh)i(h)me(hh) Y(h)e(h)ah we got two little
17		bra:ts huh [heh ah]ah ah .k .uhhh.hhh
18	Bud:	[Ye:ah.]
19	Emm:	W'l HONEY WIR LOOKIN FORW'R DUH SEEIN YUH...

#20 [Rich/Hyla] (Hyla has called her boyfriend long distance. The phone rings for some time, then at last Rich answers. In line 28 Rich just pulls out of completing an ironic complaining)

((Dialing))
((ring ring ring ring ring))

1	Ric:	Hull (h)o(hh)
2	Hyl:	Hull::o
3	Ric:	Hello(h)
4	Hyl:	Hi:: .hh
5		(0.2)
6	Ric:	Hi:
7	Hyl:	Hi hehuhuhuh .hh
8	Ric:	hhh
9	Hyl:	How(hh)re you(hoo)?
10	Ric:	.hhhuh
11	Hyl:	Uh huh ha besides [out of b]rea(h)th(h).
12	Ric:	[h h h]
13	Ric:	Uh: fine(hh).
14	Hyl:	I wuz just about tuh hang uhhu[h]
15	Ric:	[he]h[hh]
16	Hyl:	[uh]uheh
17	Ric:	.hh I jus got ho:me. .hh
18	Hyl:	I::: figure th(huh)at.
19	Ric:	.hhh
20	Hyl:	.hh
21	Ric:	hhhh
22	Hyl:	How are you(huheh).
23	Ric:	Oh, hhhh
24	Hyl:	hehehuh
25	Ric:	Oh:: (.) I love driving up to [t h e]door: .h
26	Hyl:	[heheh]
27	Hyl:	Yeh,
28	Ric:	en hearin the ph- no (.) How are you?
29	Hyl:	Eh I'm fine. I['m] fine(heh).
30	Ric:	[good.]

#21 **"Yo, Blair!": Overheard conversation and the 'special relationship'** (George Bush and Tony Blair, recorded at the G8 meeting, St Petersburg, 17th July 2006. Bush is sitting in his place, and his microphone happens to have been left on as Blair was passing his chair when they were breaking for lunch. Bush has hailed Blair, "Yo, Blair", and they have been joshing about this and that)

1	Bush:	…tell her to put me on, then on the spot. Thanks for the sweater it's
2		awfully thoughtful of you.
3	Blair:	It's a pleasure.
4	Bush:	I know you picked it out yourself.
5	Blair:	Oh absolutely, in fact (inaudible, but possibly 'I knitted it') ((both laugh))
6	Bush:	What about Kofi? (he seems alright. I don't like his ceasefire plan.) His attitude is
7		basically ceasefire and everything else … (sorts out)/(happens)
8	Blair:	Yeah, no I think the (inaudible) is really difficult. We can't stop this unless you
9		get this international business agreed.
10	Bush:	Yeah.
11	Blair:	I don't know what you guys have talked about, but as I say I am perfectly happy
12		to try and see what the lie of the land is, but you need that done quickly because
13		otherwise it will spiral.
14	Bush:	I think Condi is going to go pretty soon.

15	Blair:	But that's, that's, that's all that matters. But if you…you see it will take some
16		time to get that together.
17	Bush:	Yeah, yeah.
18	Blair:	But at least it gives people…
19	Bush:	It's a process, I agree. I told her your offer to…
20	Blair:	Well…it's only if I mean…you know. If she's got a…, or if she needs the ground
21		prepared as it were…Because obviously if she goes out, she's got to succeed, if it
22		were, whereas I can go out and just talk.
23	Bush:	You see, the irony is what they need to do is to get Syria to get Hizbollah to stop
24		doing this shit and it's over

What do these examples (above) demonstrate about action construction?

- Turns can be constructed to seem not to be doing the action they are doing
- Recipient's response can 'select' what action the prior speaker is taken to have been doing (action attribution) – which is itself an action, trading off an ambivalence in the construction of the prior action
- As well as ambivalence, action construction can involve
    - Disguise
    - Displacement
    - Avoidance
- In constructing an action, speakers may orient to the 'voluntarism' of social action
- An action may be constructed in such a way as to disguise 'who benefits'

References

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