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Formulating Problem Behavior

Action descriptions in direct social sanctionings of transgressions and misconduct across (European) languages and cultures

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Interactants who encounter co-participant conduct which they find to be socio-normatively problematic or troublesome are faced with a range of choices. First and foremost, this includes the issue of whether to directly address it, or to simply 'let it pass' (at least for now) (Emerson/Messinger 1977). In the case of the former, the issue then becomes *how* to address it. Across the various ways in which participants can pragmatically engage with what they perceive to be transgressive or untoward behavior (e.g., Pomerantz 1978; Schegloff 1988b; Dersley/Wootton 2000; Günthner 2000; Bolden/Robinson 2011; Potter/Hepburn 2020; see also Rodriguez 2022), they sometimes meta-pragmatically formulate the co-participant's doings in terms of specific actions. Such action descriptions are necessarily selective (Sacks 1963; Schegloff 1972, 1988a; Sidnell/Barnes 2013): They foreground certain aspects of the co-participant's conduct, while backgrounding others, and thus contribute to publically construeing the formulated conduct in particular ways (Jayyusi 1993), viz. *as* socio-normatively problematic, transgressive or untoward, and interactionally accountable (Robinson 2016; Sidnell 2017). Consider the following case from an English family breakfast.

(1) PECII_EN_Brkfst_20210919, 05:34-05:41

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01    Mum:    BEANS?
02            (0.3)+(0.6)
      rut          +visibly swallowing and chewing-->
03    Mum:    RUthie?
04            (0.7)
05    Rut:    <<chewing> i'm o+KAY;>
                         -->+leading fork to mouth-->
06            (0.2)
07    Rut:    <<chewing> (mum)>
08            (0.7)+(0.4)
      rut       -->+fork in mouth, continuous chewing-->>
09 => Mum:    (hm/don't) shovel it IN; ((clears throat))
10    Rut:    +?hm;+
              +frown, single lateral headshake+
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In line 09, Mum formulates Ruthie's food intake as *shoveling*, which is hearable as taking issue with and criticizing Ruthie's manner of eating as overly hasty (note Ruthie's dismissive response in line 10). This is different from using a fully indexical prohibitive, such as *Don't do that*, or a corresponding directive without a comparable action description, such as *Calm down* (which Mum uses a little later). Other languages may offer further, or very different, lexico-syntactic choices and options.

From a cross-linguistic perspective, it thus makes sense to contrastively examine the verb phrase as a locus for action descriptions and to ask how language-specific lexico-syntactic or grammatical resources (e.g., certain aspectual distinctions) may enter into the specific interactional work that such descriptions are used to accomplish. Further, as has been argued in research on cross-cultural pragmatics, where similar phenomena have been studied under the rubrics of politeness and conversational (in)directness (e.g., Brown/Levinson 1987; Blum-Kulka 1997), cross-linguistic differences in such practices can provide a window onto culture-specific patterns of interactional conduct (e.g., Ogiermann 2009).

This paper reports on an in-progress exploration of the role that such action descriptions play in direct social sanctionings of socio-normatively problematic behavior across four European languages and cultures (British English, German, Italian, Polish). Drawing on Conversation Analytic methods (e.g., Clift 2016) and a large collection of such episodes from family mealtime and board game interactions, the paper asks when and how speakers use such action descriptions as part of their sanctioning attempts, and whether there are differences to be observed in the way they are being constructed and used in those four lingua-cultures.

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