CHAPTER 9

Social Agency and Grammar

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One of the most everyday and conspicuous moments in which human agency is distributed is when we ask others for help. This happens all the time in daily life: we constantly rely on others for small and big practicalities such as getting the salt, moving a sofa, or cooking a meal. Requests have long been a topic of interest in the social and behavioral sciences, including research concerned with the distribution of human agency (see Floyd, chapter 8, this volume; Dingemanse, chapter 7. this volume). Some of our everyday requests are motivated by an individual goal (e.g., "can I have a glass of water? I'm so thirsty"), others by a common goal ("give me the cards so I can deal them to everyone"). Some requests are isolated from whatever else is going on at the moment, while others are bound up in ongoing activities. What is common to all actions of requesting is that a person's behavior is recruited by another to achieve a certain goal. In the domain of practical action, this typically involves manipulating the material environment or changing the course of one's bodily conduct.

Research on requesting has documented a variety of strategies that people of different cultures use to get another person's help (see Drew and Couper-Kuhlen 2014, Rossi 2015, for recent reviews). Not surprisingly, these strategies often involve language (Floyd, Rossi, and Enfield under review). Language has a number of properties that aid in making requests. One is the facility to encode symbolic meaning, which allows a speaker to specify the action requested with a verb (e.g. "pass") and the object implicated in the action with a noun (e.g. "salt"). Language can also specify who

is to participate in the action requested by means of person marking. Since requests are typically made by an individual to another, linguistic forms like imperatives (e.g., "pass the salt") and recurrent types of interrogatives (e.g., "can you move over a little?") either encode or conventionally imply a second person as the requestee. Second person marking has obvious consequences for the distribution of agency in a requesting event, in that it designates another person as the *animator* of the action requested—the participant who will physically carry it out—while the speaker usually maintains the role of *author* and possibly *principal* of the action—the participant who decides what is to be done and who is responsible for its effects (see Goffman 1981: ch. 3; Enfield, chapter 2, this volume). This is the typical way in which agency is distributed in a requesting event. But it's not the only one. In this chapter, we show that languages offer grammatical structures that afford alternative ways of distributing the agency of an action. We focus in particular on impersonal deontic declaratives like "it is necessary to x," which are used in several languages to express the need for an action without tying it to any particular individual (see Malchukov and Siewierska 2011).

From a grammatical point of view, impersonal deontic declaratives have three core components. One is deontic meaning, which invokes a social obligation that makes relevant the doing of something. Another is declarative form, which—unlike an imperative or an interrogative—doesn't constrain how people should respond to it (Vinkhuyzen and Szymanski 2005). Third, and most important, the statement doesn't specify the agent of the necessary action. In languages like Italian and Polish, this can be done by using either an impersonal verb, such as Italian *bisogna* or Polish *trzeba* ("it is necessary to"), or an intransitive construction with a nonhuman subject (e.g. "the rubbish has to be thrown out").

From an interactional point of view, the grammatical makeup of an impersonal deontic declarative has two main consequences. One is that the same statement can be used to accomplish actions as different as (1) a *request* for someone to do something or (2) an *account* of the speaker's doing that something. In these two scenarios, while the action is formulated as necessary for anyone in the current situation, only one person becomes involved in it (see Rossi and Zinken in press for an analysis of how these alternatives come about). The second property is that, at other times, the participation in the necessary action can be negotiated or avoided. These are cases in which the distribution of agency emerges interactionally and can be observed in vivo. This will be our focus in the rest of the chapter. Consider a first case from Italian. Sergio, Greta, and Dino are chatting in a kitchen while Sergio dyes Greta's hair. Just before the fragment begins,

Greta has asked Sergio to remove a "thingy" from her forehead, which he identifies as a wisp of hair (line 1). Sergio realizes that the hair has glued up because some dye has run down on Greta's forehead. This leads him to state that: "it is necessary also to wipe away the dye from the forehead."

Fragment 1   Tinta_ 2051380 (Italian)

1 Sergio   [questo- ((gets hold of wisp of hair))
              this-

2 Greta   [(eh non lo so) c'ho un coso
              (PCL not 3S.A know-1S) EX=have-1S a thingy
              (well dunno) I've got a thingy

3 Sergio   scusa sì bisogna pu[lire:: anche la crema dalla fronte
              sorry yes necessitate-3S clean-INF also the cream from-
                the forehead
              sorry yes it is necessary also to wipe away:: the dye from
                the forehead

4 Dino   [((turns and reaches)) faccio io
                                                        do.1S 1S.N
                                                        I'll do it

5 Greta   [((reaches out for kitchen paper))

Sergio's statement presents wiping away the dye as the right thing to do for anyone in the current situation. Here, the action could be done by any of the three participants, including Sergio himself. He is the person who is most directly involved in the dyeing process, and who is responsible for having let the dye drip on Greta's forehead, for which he apologizes ("sorry"). While saying *bisogna* "it is necessary to," Sergio moves his hand in the direction of the table, possibly toward the kitchen paper, but then hesitates. At the same time, he gazes at Dino, and in so doing prompts him to get involved. Dino is arguably in a better position to wipe Greta's forehead, because Sergio's hands are stained with dye. Also, Dino has already assisted Sergio more than once earlier in the interaction. Here again, Dino volunteers his help ("I'll do it," line 4). But, as he reaches for the kitchen paper, Greta gets to it before him and goes on to wipe her own forehead.

In this case, two recipients of an impersonal deontic declarative find themselves "competing" for the animatorship of the necessary action. Although Dino makes an explicit bid for it ("I'll do it"), it is Greta who

eventually takes it on without much explanation—after all, it is her own body.

The indeterminacy of animatorship left by an impersonal deontic declarative is shown even more clearly in cases where this becomes a matter of explicit negotiation. In fragment 2, from Polish, the family are beginning their lunch. After wishing everyone an enjoyable meal, Jacek (the father) moves to sit down, while Ilona (the mother) surveys the laid table (line 3). She then says something to get Jacek's attention ("eh you know what," line 4) and begins an impersonal deontic statement about the need of doing something with the juice.

Fragment 2   PP2-4 00:19 (Polish)

1	Ilona	smacznego
		tasty-G
		enjoy your meal
2	Jacek	smacznego ( )
		tasty-G
		enjoy your meal ( )
3		(1.2)/((Ilona touches gravy jug and napkin holder, then raises left arm))
4	Ilona	y wiesz co kom[potu¿ (.)
		PCL know-2S what juice-G
		eh you know what, juice
5		[((reaches right arm across the table for the juice jug))
6	Ilona	trzeba ((touches jug))
		necessitate
		it is necessary
7	Jacek	już [ja naleję]
		already 1S.N PF-pour-1S
		right now, I'll pour it
8		[((Ilona lifts the jug))]
9	Ilona	[wziąć] dob[rze
		take-INF good
		to take good
10		[((Ilona puts the jug down))

11	Jacek	[ty nalejesz¿ ja
		you PF-pour-2S 1S.N
		you'll pour it? I'll
12		na[leję
		PF-pour-1S
		pour it
13	Ilona	[to weź już to nalej
		then take-IMP already then PF-pour-IMP
		then go ahead already, pour then
14		(.)/((Jacek takes the jug))
15	Jacek	będzie mi wygodniej ((picks up jug))
		be.FUT-3S 1S.D convenient-CMPR
		it will be more convenient for me
16	Jacek	((pours juice into everyone's glasses))

As Ilona begins the statement ("juice . . . l"), she reaches across the table toward the juice jug, thus making a bid to take charge of the need she is in the process of formulating. As Ilona continues the statement (" . . . it is necessary . . . ") and her hand reaches the jug (line 6), Jacek begins responding by saying that he will do the necessary action "right now" (line 7). Immediately after this, while Ilona lifts the jug and completes the statement (" . . . to take"), Jacek continues his response by explicitly volunteering to pour the juice ("I'll pour it," line 7). Ilona then accepts the offer ("good," line 9) and puts the jug back down (line 10). Meanwhile, Jacek has started to retract ('you pour it?," line 11), but after Ilona's acceptance he repeats his offer ("I'll pour it," line 12), which is then ratified by Ilona (line 13). While proceeding to pour the juice, Jacek adds an explanation for why he is taking over the job from Ilona: "it will be more convenient for me" (line 15).

An impersonal deontic declarative doesn't constrain participation in the necessary action, but leaves it open to any relevant contributor. In fragment 2, the interaction initially favors a certain individual to take on the action (Ilona), but its subsequent development leads to a change of animatorship. When Ilona begins the statement, she is projectably engaged in pouring the juice. At the same time, however, the preface to her statement "you know what" (line 4) marks it as relevant for Jacek and calls for his attention to what is happening. This complex configuration leads to an explicit negotiation of who will pour the juice. The result is that

the animatorship of the necessary action is eventually taken over by the participant who is best positioned to do it.

The last case to be discussed illustrates a reverse situation from the first two, one in which, instead of competing for the animatorship of the necessary action, people try to avoid becoming involved. Michele and Remo are looking for a utensil to pour tea into mugs. In line 1, Michele notices a soup ladle in the sink, immersed in a dirty pot ("well there is this one"). As Michele gets hold of the ladle and inspects it, Remo states that "it would be necessary to wash it."

Fragment 3   Camillo_1241239 (Italian)

1	Michele	cè ci sarebbe questo
		PCL EX be-CND-3S this
		well there is this one
2		(2.4)/((reaches towards soup ladle in the sink))
3	Michele	c'è un po' di pizzoccheri (nel recipiente) però ((grabs ladle))
		EX=be.3S a bit of NAME (in-the container) but
		there's some *pizzoccheri* (in the container) but
4	Remo	allora bisognerebbe lavarlo
		then necessitate-CND-3S wash-INF=3P.A
		then it would be necessary to wash it
5		(2.6)/((Michele shakes ladle and lifts it out of pot))
6		(0.5)/((Remo walks to kitchen door))
7	Michele	ma vuoi farlo tu ((turns to Remo))
		but want-2S do-INF=3S.A 2S.N
		do you want to do it?
8		(0.3)
9	Remo	come
		how
		sorry?
10	Michele	( ) lavarlo (volevi lavarlo)
		wash-INF=3S.A (want-IPF-2S wash-INF=3S.A)
		( ) wash- (you wanted to wash it)?
11	Remo	no no no ( ) perché stavo ( ) perché io ho un impegno
		no no no because stay-IPF-1S because 1S.N have-1S one commitment
		no no no ( ) because I was ( ) because I've got something to do

As in the two cases above, before the impersonal deontic statement is made, none of the participants is particularly responsible for the action in question. One element that may at first glance tilt the balance is that, at the time of the statement, Michele is holding the ladle (line 3), which puts him in a better position to go ahead and wash it. But note that this manipulation is motivated by his just-prior noticing and doesn't imply any commitment to wash it. Also, Remo is standing just beside Michele (up until line 6), with visibly nothing to do. This appears to warrant a negotiation of animatorship. In line 6, Remo walks away from the sink, making a bid to leave Michele in charge. Michele then attempts to devolve the washing to him ("do you want to do it?"), bringing into the open the matter of designating the agent. After giving a rather opaque excuse (line 11), Remo dodges becoming involved, and Michele is left to do the washing.

Negotiations of animatorship such as those we have examined in this chapter generally do not occur with forms that designate another person as the animator of an action (e.g. "pass the salt" or "can you move over a little?"). An impersonal deontic declarative, on the other hand, affords such negotiations by virtue of its grammatical design, which doesn't restrict animatorship to a single individual. Although there are a number of cases in which the responsibility for the action in question falls on a specific person (see Rossi and Zinken in press), impersonal deontic declaratives have the potential to generate complex interactions in which the identity of the animator must be sorted out. The three cases we have examined also illustrate the kinds of reasons at play in these interactions, including the presence of obstacles or concurrent commitments, the relative easiness of the action for different people, the rights over one's body.

The case of impersonal deontic statements demonstrates the importance of grammatical detail for social action. What may at first glance appear only subtle, differences of expression turn out to put constraints on what people can or should do in a given situation. Moreover, given the great diversity among languages, grammatical variation will be consequential also for social interaction across cultures. Studying grammar as a resource for social action, and in particular for the distribution of agency, is therefore a crucial piece of the science of human cooperation and sociality.

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