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REGULATIONS ON USE**Stephen C. Levinson and Asifa Majid**

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The contents of manuals, entries therein and field-kit materials are modified from time to time, and this provides an additional motivation for keeping close contact with the Language and Cognition Department. We would welcome suggestions for changes and additions, and comments on the viability of different materials and techniques in various field situations.

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SOCIAL ACTION FORMULATION – A ‘10-MINUTES’ TASK⁶

N. J. Enfield, Stephen C. Levinson & Tanya Stivers

Project	Multimodal Interaction
Task	Detailed consultation with native speakers towards a very narrow description of form, meaning, and pragmatic function in 10 minutes selected from video-recorded conversation.
Goal	To establish a maximally rich description of a representative, good quality piece of conversational interaction, which will serve as a reference point for comparative exploration of the status of social actions and their formulation across languages.
Prerequisites	You must be in possession of good quality video-recordings of maximally informal conversational interaction in your language. See Field Manual 2007 for a guide on collection.

Background

Human actions in the social world – like greeting, requesting, complaining, accusing, asking, confirming, etc. – are recognised through the interpretation of signs. Language is where much of the action is, but gesture, facial expression and other bodily actions matter as well. Further, the complex ‘moves’ people make are embedded in interactional *sequences*, and the position of a move in such a sequence will matter for how it is interpreted.

The central puzzle for a model of human communication is to specify how it is that interpreters can recognise the social action being performed by any given move. Many variables matter. *What are you doing?* might be a question or a complaint, context will tell. But how? Changing second to first person reference, *What am I doing?* won’t be understood as a complaint, but could be an ‘out-loud’. How do we know which it is? Clearly, there is no direct mapping from linguistic semantics and grammar onto social action. For this, we need access to the full richness of semantic, pragmatic, and multimodal elements of a move in context.

1. What social actions do people perform?
2. What makes these actions reliably recognisable?
3. Are there universals in the design of social actions?

(1) *The task*

(A) From video-recordings of conversational interaction, select a total of about 10 minutes of good quality (i.e. good sound, clear image) ‘turn-by-turn’ talk. It is important to get a coherent stretch of interaction from which a clear sequential structure may be discerned. Ideally, the sequence you select should include the opening of the interaction.

⁶ This is a reprint from the 2008 Field Manual.

If you have short sequences which comprise an entire interaction, including opening and closing, these would be useful as well.

(B) These 10 minutes should be transcribed particularly carefully, capturing every detail of overlapping talk, silences, phonetic variations in pronunciation, stress, intonation, emphasis, etc. We want every detail, since we cannot know in advance which of these details will be crucial for recognising and distinguishing social actions.

(C) Each ‘turn-constructural unit’ and each turn should be then coded for what sort of action the researcher thinks the speaker is performing. For example, is the speaker confirming? Complaining? Announcing? Noticing? **Important:** a speaker may be performing more than one action with a single move.

In carrying out this task, you will be discussing different social actions with your language consultants, in their own language. Note down these native terms, and spend time with consultants figuring out what these mean (see task on ‘Metalanguage for speech acts’ in this field manual). Assume they are different in meaning to their apparent equivalents in English, and try to figure out what the differences are.

(2) Analysis

With materials derived from (1) in several languages, we will pursue comparative analysis of social actions and their formulation. This will begin with exploratory sessions in Interaction project meetings in Autumn 2008.