

Mobile presence and intimacy—Reshaping social actions in mobile contextual configuration

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Abstract

Mobile communication has putatively affected our time–space relationship and the co-ordination of social action by weaving co-present interactions and mediated distant exchanges into a single, seamless web. In this article, we use Goodwin’s notion of contextual configuration to review, elaborate and specify these processes. Goodwin defines contextual configuration as a local, interwoven set of language and material structures that frame social production of action and meaning. We explore how the mobile context is configured in mobile phone conversations. Based on the analysis of recordings of mobile conversation in Finland and Sweden, we analyze the ways in which ordinary social actions such as invitations and offers are carried out while people are mobile. We suggest that the mobile connection introduces a special kind of relationship to semiotic resources, creating its own conditions for emerging social actions. The reformation of social actions in mobility involves the possibility of intimate connection to the ongoing activities of the distant party. The particularities of mobile social actions are discerned here through sequential analysis that opens up contextually reconfigured actions as they are revealed in the details of mobile communication. In this way, we shed light on the reformation of social actions in mobile space–time.

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1. Introduction

Mobile telephony has been widely linked to ‘time–space compression’. Indeed, the ubiquity of mobile phones potentially enables an intimate connection to any moment of social life. Mobile communication through different media – text, talk and images – may become so frequent and multiplied that co-present interactions and mediated distant exchanges become woven into a single, seamless web (Licoppe, 2004). Mobile media integrate the ‘virtual’ as a pervasive presence in everyday practice and place by combining remote and networked relations as co-presence (Ito et al., 2005). The merging of remote or mediated relations and physically co-present relations creates the ambient mobile presence and a condensed mobile time–space (Arminen, 2008).

There is a consensus that mobile communication has accelerated information exchange between people, contributing to changes in social networking. The perpetual mobile connections are the new third space (Katz and

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Askhus, 2002). Social contacts have become increasingly frequent but shorter, as new technologies allow for new forms of incipient talk (Szymanski et al., 2006). Despite consensus on accentuated mobile time–space, there is no agreement on the details of emerging social structures and their significance. On the one hand, optimists claim that mobile tools empower people (Rheingold, 2002). Castells et al. (2007) envisioned quite far-reaching political impact from mobile communication: “wireless communication considerably increases the information and communication power of people at large, making them more independent of formal sources of information” (Castells et al., 2007:256). On the other hand, communication technologies have been seen as ‘anonymizing’ and socially erosive. This process has been referred to as ‘balkanization’ (Ling, 2004; Geser, 2005); social disintegration and breakdown due to the rise of hostile, competitive sub-units. Although some researchers, such as Gergen (2002), suggests that mobile communication reverses the trend towards anonymization that has followed the weakening of face-to-face community, Ling and Geser, among others, claim that mobile communication allows people to escape immediate situations to interact with like-minded people. The strengthening of egocentric networks may lead to the tragedy of the commons, in which communication takes place only among ‘the inner circle’. Thus the revival of community with the help of mobile communication has been claimed to involve the danger of the balkanized world in which the tyranny of the like-minded prevails. Broader social causes will suffer, which is in stark contrast to the utopias envisioned by Castells et al. (2007).

The disagreement on the future direction shows that the research has not yet been sufficient. Much of the research making such claims has been based on theoretical arguments or empirical data from indicators on group level data, statistics or surveys. These studies have failed to look at the everyday use of mobile technologies or have remained largely metaphorical in their accounts. The mobile phone is a mundane matter, used for a range of different social and informational purposes, and it has to be considered in its context of use. Schegloff (2002:298) has, indeed, emphasized the importance of studying new technology in its natural setting, as it provides “naturalistic versions of experimental stimuli”.

This paper is based on the analysis of recordings of naturally occurring mobile phone conversations from Finland and Sweden, amounting to findings on the ways in which the mobile phone is applied in mundane routines, such as making invitations and offers. Through detailed attention to the achievement of social actions we try to open seen-but-unnoticed features (Garfinkel, 1967) that illuminate the changing nature of social actions in the mobile context. We use Goodwin’s notion of contextual configuration (2000) as an analytic tool to elaborate, review and specify the reformatting of social actions under mobile conditions. According to Goodwin, the contextual configuration can be defined as a situated set of language and material structures, including technologies that frame the social production of action and meaning in interaction. We argue that the mobile context achieved via mobile ICT is a particular configuration of social action—a mobile contextual configuration.

2. Data and methods

The analysis is based on over 100 recordings and ethnographic observations of mobile phone conversations in Finland and Sweden. Ethnomethodological, ethnographic and CA methods have been combined to capture mobile co-presence.

The Finnish data was recorded in summer 2002, including 74 complete calls and 8 partial recordings. Calls were recorded with a recording device in the mobile phone itself. The mobile calls of two women and two men (aged 23–38) were taped during 1 week. The data consists of about 40 dyads when the communication partners are taken into account. The set covers almost all calls from the subjects, about 4 h of speaking time (only a few calls were deleted). It covers mobile-to-mobile and landline-to-mobile or mobile-to-landline conversations. Most of the calls were between friends and relatives, but some were work-related. Additionally, 107 Finnish landline-to-landline telephone calls from the 1980s and 1990s were obtained for comparison, revealing the differences between landline and mobile calls (Arminen and Leinonen, 2006). In addition, over 200 SMS messages were collected in 2005, allowing an inspection of the communicative structure of text messaging.

The Swedish data was recorded as part of a larger study of mobile phone conversations. Four people were studied over 2 weeks, and their conversations were recorded using the Autorecorder enabling the automatic recording of all in- and outgoing mobile phone calls (Axelsson and Leuchovius, 2003). The people participating were four 24–28 years old male university students. They were also observed part of the time. Ethnographic notes were taken, and SMS

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