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### Assembling a Response: Setting and Collaboratively Constructed Work Talk\*

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This paper examines the ways in which participants in work settings make use of multiple resources in formulating responses during routine work encounters. It draws on materials from a three-year research project conducted by members of the Workplace Project (a team of anthropologists brought together by Lucy Suchman at Xerox Palo Alto Research Center) at a mid-sized American airport. Two different settings -- an airlines Operations room where ground operations are coordinated and an airline's gate where passengers check in and depart for planes -- are selected for analysis because they provide two contrasting types of social spaces for the conduct of work.

Comparing types of social space Goffman (1959: 134) has stated that while "front regions" can be described as areas "where a particular performance is or may be in progress," "back regions" are "where action occurs that is related to the performance but inconsistent with the appearance fostered by the performance." According to Goffman (1959: 128):

In general, then backstage conduct is one which allows minor acts which might easily be taken as symbolic of intimacy and disrespect for others present and for the region, while front region conduct is one which disallows such potentially offensive behavior.

While the airlines Operations room provides a "backstage" (Goffman 1959: 106-140) airport work space, the area where gate agents deal with departing passengers is by contrast quite public. The differences between these public and more backstage spaces influence the ways in which co-workers manage their talk and their bodies.

Quite crucial to each setting is what Goffman (1963: 16) has called the "mutuality of immediate social interaction"; individuals who are copresent to one another constantly monitor one another's action, such that "an adaptive line of action attempted by one will be either insightfully facilitated by the other or insightfully countered, or both" (ibid.). In describing *situated activity systems* Goffman (1961: 96) proposed that a basic unit of study should be a "somewhat closed, self-compensating, self-terminating circuit of interdependent actions." Goffman's notion of encounters captured nicely the

nature of interaction within situations involving a *single* focus of attention. However, in more complex work settings participants are linked not only with immediately copresent workers, but also with co-workers with whom they can communicate at a distance (C. Goodwin 1990). Though physically absent, they may well be "culturally present through various other agents and technologies" (Duranti, Goodwin, Goodwin 1991: 2); thus Operations personnel participate in more than one focus of attention (or participation framework!) simultaneously. Workers make use of a heterogeneous array of paper and electronic documents as well as the collaboration of co-workers in the mundane activity of "assembling a response" amidst ongoing work.

While Goffman's notion of encounters allows a framework for investigating mutual social activity, the methodology within conversation analysis provides rigorous procedures for analyzing the structure of talk as emergent situated practice within activity. As Sacks (1984: 24-25) has argued

It is possible that detailed study of small phenomena may give an enormous understanding of the way humans do things and the kinds of objects they use to construct and order their affairs. We would want to name those objects and see how they work, as we know how verbs and adjectives and sentences work. Thereby we can come to see how an activity is assembled, as we see a sentence assembled with a verb, a predicate and so on. Ideally of course we would have a formally describable method as the assembling of a sentence is formally describable.

Talk in a work setting such as the San Tomás airport is assembled or stitched together from moment to moment while simultaneously being embedded within situated activity systems which have their own routinized structure and sequence. Talk shapes an expanding horizon of possibilities, making relevant the articulation and deployment of tools in the setting as well as the invocation of collaboration from co-workers.

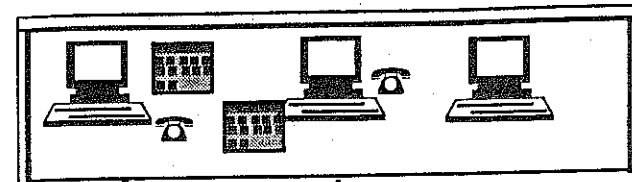
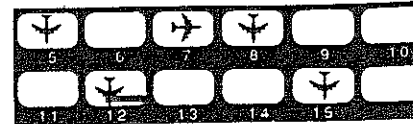
#### Collaboration in Assembling a Response in the Operations Room

The Operations room of an airline provides a center for coordination (Suchman 1992, in press) of work-relevant activity pertaining to ground operations. Information about the operation of the airline enters these centers via a variety of modalities -- radio and phone calls as well as electronically transmitted messages on computer monitors, hard copy print-outs, etc. In conducting routine service encounters -- for example providing a response to an incoming radio call -- participants both make use of the material and electronic documents in their work space and rely on their co-workers' assistance. Responses to incoming service requests are thus the achievement of collaboration between an Ops worker and the material artifacts at her disposal in the setting, copresent coworkers who continuously monitor others'

talk for its work-relevance, as well as co-workers who are linked electronically.

The following provides a diagram of the Operations room, showing the major positions in the room as well as the arrangement of artifacts. These include a schedule or "complex" board (at the right side of the room) and at the front of the room a bank of monitors connected to video cameras at each gate. These monitors provide a picture allowing those in the Operations room to see the activities in the area where each plane is parked.

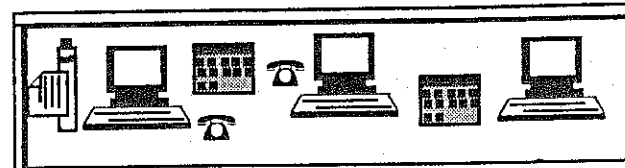
#### Atlantic Operations Room, New Terminal



Fuel & Meals



Ramp Planner



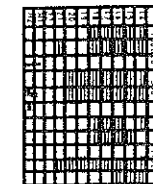
Flight Tracker



Passenger Planner



Manager



Complex Board

Atlantic Operations Room  
New Terminal

In this space, removed from public view, workers need not always be "on stage." In the Operations room people eat, read the newspaper, flirt, gossip, and engage in a number of different activities unrelated to work. On some occasions even the airline regulation dress code may be relaxed.

Participants in service encounters over the radio are located within different participation frameworks -- one entailing the caller/called and the other the framework of co-workers in their work center. In that the radio medium permits only one person to transmit at a time, each party can control what the other participant to the call can hear, so that conversations among copresent co-workers are unavailable to parties on the other end of the line. In essence participants can construct a "back stage" merely by not releasing the radio call button. Other activities in the room are inaccessible to those on the other end of the service encounter.

One routine service encounter in the Operations room involves announcements from pilots that their plane has arrived; in calling Operations pilots make inquiries about the status of the gate they are headed for, asking whether or not it is ready for the incoming aircraft. The announcement thus serves as a request for confirmation by the party receiving the call, the Flight Tracker (FT).

(1)  
89.11.03  
1:26:06

Pilot: Uh nine forty one's on the ground.  
Confirm Charlie nineteen.

FT: Confirm.  
Charlie nineteen.  
Awaiting your arrival.

Pilot: Roger.

Given the predictability with which such sequences are routinely played out in this setting, it is not surprising that the mere announcement of a plane's arrival by a pilot should be *immediately* followed by observations about the readiness of a particular gate for the arriving plane (or indications of problems) by a Flight Tracker:

(2)  
89.11.03  
01:13:52



Pilot: Ramp Atlantic?  
Three seventy two is  
on the ground?  
for gate fourteen.

Æ FT: Three seventy two.  
Charlie fourteen's aircraft  
Should be ready to push  
in just a few minutes.

Pilot: Roger.

The following service encounter differs from the two previous in that when the pilot calls in announcing his arrival, the Flight Tracker (FT) does not immediately confirm the readiness of the gate (Alpha seven) for the arriving plane. Conversation hearable over the radio is marked with a radio icon in the following transcript and RP is Ramp Planner. A bracket ( [ ) or double slashes (//) indicate onset of simultaneous action.

(3) 1.01.18 HP 17:01:581:12:08

	1	Pilot:	Operations. Atlantic ten ninety one's on the ground to gate seven. [
	2	RP:	((turns gaze towards monitor bank)) (2.5)
	3	FT:	((looking at monitors)) Roger ten ninety one. Charlie- Alpha: seven? uh::, (0.2) °Shoo:: (0.9)
			((creaky voice quality)) Hold on one second, Ten ninety one.
	4	FT:	Alpha seven, ((quizzical look as he gazes first towards monitor bank, and then to the complex board))
	5	RP:	That plane should be pushin.

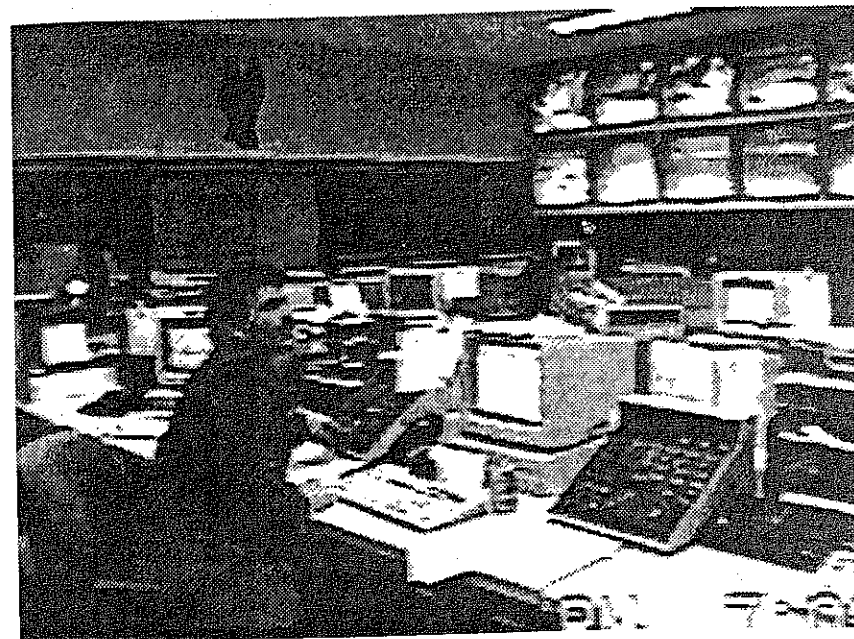
6	FT:	That aircraft should be // off the gate shortly. Stand by until seven clears. Ten ninety one.
7	RP:	((starts to put on glasses and engage in another activity, then gazes towards documents on his desk))
8	Pilot:	Roger. Could you tell them we're gonna need ground power please.
9	FT:	That's affirm.
10		Did you catch that Ed?
11	RP:	Yeah.
12	FT:	Okay.

Within the Ops room the standard situation for Operations workers is that they participate in multiple participation frameworks (C. Goodwin 1990) in multi-activity settings simultaneously, rather than one single focus of attention. Therefore, co-workers' primary orientation is not exclusively talk among co-present participants situated in a classic "F formation" (Kendon 1977) where a single focus of visual and cognitive attention is maintained. Seated back-to-back or front-to-back they frequently rely on auditory rather than visual cues from co-workers for updates regarding the status of ongoing activity. In delivering announcements to co-workers situated back-to-back, for example, Ops workers can make use of formulaic intonation patterns which distinguish their talk from the hub of other activity in the room (M.H. Goodwin in press), in effect singing their announcements of arriving planes to co-workers. In the present instance others in the room, on hearing the pilot call in, can recognize that a habitual sequence is in progress and begin to operate upon it.

While workers do not generally have visual access to each other they do have visual access to information of another sort -- a bank of monitors which display the current state of affairs on various gates and a "complex" or schedule board. Here another Ops worker in the room (the Ramp Planner) makes use of the monitor bank in helping Fred to assemble his response. Seeing the activity in progress and the problems with it, he can begin to interrogate resources in the room. When the gaze direction of the Ramp Planner is plotted (line 2), it can be seen that just after the opening term of address -- "Operations"-- (and even before the word "gate" is uttered) he is orienting towards the monitor display. As argued above, pilot call-ins routinely request information about the status of a gate they are headed for. Ramp Planners have considerable experience outside on the ramp and indeed their major job inside Operations is monitoring activities in that locale; they

thus constitute particularly appropriate parties for interpreting events in that site.

Presenting a view of the current state of affairs from a particular perspective is a crucial feature of Ops work (as it is in the work of other institutional settings, such as the police (Whalen and Zimmerman 1990: 474-479) as well. Others in the room are alerted via auditory cues as to the epistemic stance (Chafe 1986) their coworkers are taking up towards ongoing talk; that is, they can monitor the voice quality of coworkers for indications of uncertainty or hesitation. In the present case the call-taker indicates in several ways he is encountering trouble in responding: 1) during the phone conversation through his repetition of the trouble source, first with *rising* intonation, an intonation contour associated with marking uncertainty in repair sequences (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977), and 2) when off the phone through his repeat of the trouble source as an "outloud" with *falling* (Gunter 1974) intonation. In the present case the intonation contour is treated as indicating that speaker is having problems resolving the issue at hand, and solicits the coparticipation of the Ramp Planner. The look on the Flight Tracker's face (line 4) towards the complex board (an updated schedule board), while not visible to RP, displays a facial gesture recognizable to those so positioned to see it as "puzzlement."



Work on the construction of repairs in conversation has argued that there is a preference for self-correction over other-correction (Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks 1977). Analysis of the interactive construction of word searches (Goodwin and Goodwin 1986) shows that the precise nature of co-

participation in such events is something negotiated by participants. Experienced Operations workers are expected to be able to complete their work without hitches, to have ready access to electronic and paper documents which can assist them in responding to incoming calls. When experienced Ops workers explicitly ask for help in routine service encounters their actions are open to chiding by co-workers.

In the present instance, though Ramp Planner is positioned to potentially help Flight Tracker in his quandary, he holds off offering his reading of the scene until after FT has turned off his radio channel and indicates through the production of his utterance "Alpha seven." (line 3) that he indeed is in need of help. In response to the Flight Tracker's "Alpha seven." the Ramp Planner offers an observation regarding the current status of the gate, a statement which will be helpful in figuring out what to tell the pilot. By stating "That plane should be pushin" (line 5) RP indicates that the gate should be ready to receive a plane in the near future. FT's next action is to open the radio channel and communicate with the pilot. This time (line 6) his utterance displays none of the uncertainty of his prior talk; hesitation, sound stretch, and creaky voice are eliminated and talk is delivered without hitches -- smoothly and authoritatively<sup>2</sup> in what is recognizable as an "airline register."

If we inspect the gaze direction of RP during this talk, we see that in the course of Fred's delivering his message to the pilot, after the word "be" in "That aircraft should be off the gate," RP (line 7) begins to disengage from his orientation towards the monitor display, puts on his glasses, and initiates activity unrelated to the prior activity, gazing towards his work surface. His actions thus provide a member's reading/ratification of the activity in progress as one no longer requiring his attention.

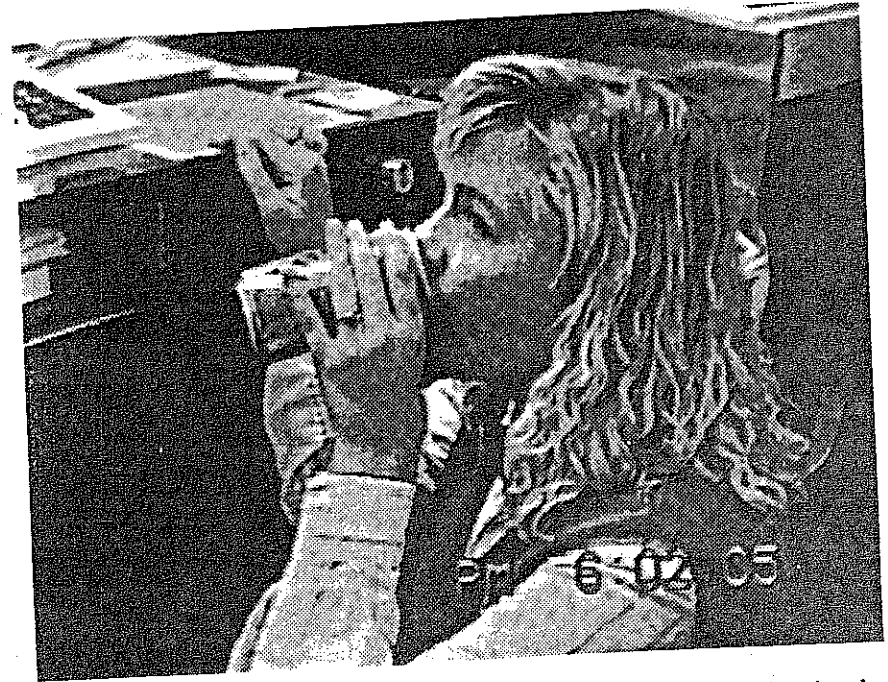
As the call continues with pilot's request that Ops contact relevant parties who can provide ground power (ramp workers) we see that the message was intendedly relevant in more than one participation framework; specifically, it implicates Ramp Planner. At the close of the exchange with the pilot, the Flight Tracker (line 10) explicitly asks if Ramp Planner has "caught" the message to be relayed -- that ground power is needed at a particular gate. Monitoring the incoming call, in fact, had occurred from the very onset of the pilot's call, even prior to the pilot's announcement.

Tools such as gate monitors allow workers to inspect a location situated at some distance. Response to a caller's question is achieved in part through linguistic resources which display party's alignment towards the unfolding event: in the present case, for example, uncertainty about what is happening at the gate. The intonational cues in the Flight Tracker's talk secure the Ramp Planner's participation, which allows the call to be brought to a close. The assemblage of a response is therefore the product of both an interrogation of the material resources in the setting as well as the deployment of linguistic resources for invoking the backstage assistance of a co-worker. The particular shape of that invocation, and the context in which it emerges, have a bearing on how the request gets treated by co-workers.

### The Co-Construction of Collaboration at the Gate

The first example we looked at was from an Operations room, an area hidden from public view. Here while conducting service encounters with other divisions of the airline, a type of backstage is easily constructed through putting the radio caller on hold. Talk among co-workers which assists in assembling a response to the party on the other end of the line is not audible or visible to the caller. Activities such as eating or drinking also take place without problem, and participants are free to manage their bodies as they wish.

In another area of the airport, the gate, where passengers check in and depart for their flight, the principal type of service encounter is a public event. Here there are few private areas and the spatial constraints of the work setting affect how participants talk and manage their bodies. For example, workers in this public space must distort their bodies in order to be hidden from view to attend body cares; for example, gate agents duck beneath the ticket counter to take a drink of soda.



Emerging from such a position to conduct business with a passenger (as the following frame several seconds later shows) requires special attention to the reassembling of one's physical alignment to assume the appropriate "in play" facial expression and posture for greeting passengers.



At the gate as in the Operations room of the airport, monitoring of work-relevant activity is ongoing. Here talk among coworkers is, however, accessible to the public, especially to those standing at the ticket counter. If a worker requires prompting, then gate workers must find ways of designing talk which is in some fashion hidden from the public despite its being audible. One solution is for gate agents to make use of an elliptical code in order to coordinate activity at the gate.

The particular example of such code use to be analyzed involves a routine type of activity: an oversold flight. At the beginning of each new "complex" (a bank of planes that come in during an hour's time slot) the lead gate agent has the job of determining which flights are oversold (flights for which there are more passengers than seats available). In the commuter airline of Atlantic Airlines this is particularly important, in that no more than nineteen passengers can travel on any given flight. Once the lead agent has been informed of the "payload" (the number of persons who will be permitted to fly-- computed in terms of flight destination, weather, fuel, and amount of bags and mail on board by a co-worker whose job it is to coordinate communication between the various commuter divisions), she begins to trace incoming passengers' planes to see if they will in fact meet their scheduled arrival times (and therefore be available to board the flight in question).

The lead agent thus makes use of the work of colleagues at many distant locales who are connected through the nation-wide computer system as well as a local colleague who computes the payload and then radios to the gate the

precise the number of people who can fly given baggage, weather and flight destination. After checking to see how many passengers can actually be expected to arrive for the problematic flight, she then figures out alternative later flights for incoming passengers (the ideal solution unless they themselves are oversold) and determines how much travel voucher money the airline should offer to a volunteer for forfeiting his seat to take a later flight. If time between complexes permits, the lead agent will verbally inform each of the other three gate agents and scotch-tape a slip of paper with instructions near each agent's workstation. For example, one note read:

SAIF  
put on 5118  
@ 7pm-7:49  
offer \$200 vocr

Oversold flights thus have their own predictable courses of activity. Repetitive features of oversold flights involve 1) indicating the alternative means of transportation available, usually a later flight (though occasionally ground transportation) and 2) offering a cash amount to someone for volunteering to give up his seat. The larger activity of "oversold flights" provides a grid against which a sequence of conversational activity is made relevant. Knowing the routine, co-workers can refer to features of it in a short-hand manner, especially useful for preventing passengers from knowing what's going on while providing co-workers information in as concise a manner as possible.

In the following example we will see gate agents collaborating in the production of a response to the initiation of a service encounter by a passenger who is scheduled to fly on an oversold flight. In this particular instance the lead gate agent, Linda, is stationed adjacent to Sally, the agent involved in the service encounter; on this occasion Linda has not had the opportunity to inform her colleague (Sally) of anything other than that the Monterey flight she is in charge of is overbooked. As Sally begins to help a passenger who approaches the counter, Linda carefully monitors her coworker's interaction, cueing her into the details of the oversold flight. The service encounter begins as Linda emerges from beneath the counter where she has been taking a drink of soda.

(5)  
90.9.7Y2:6:02:02

- 1 Sally: °Hit the bottle. ((as Linda is drinking a soda underneath the counter))
- 2 Linda: Well, (.) This has gotta be on the list of (:) jobs that drive you to it. ((said from underneath the counter))



- 3 Passenger: ((presents ticket to Sally))  
 4 Sally: Monterey this evening?  
 5 Passenger: Yep.  
 6 Linda: Two hundred. Cab.  
 7 Sally: ((nodding to passenger)) Okay.<sup>3</sup>  
 8 ((turning to Linda)) Not an eight o'clock?  
 9 Linda: Over.  
 10 Sally: O:kay,  
 Mr. B at um (if) you're going to Monterey  
 we're offering a two hundred dollar travel  
 voucher and a cab ride, as an alternative,  
 cuz the flight is oversold.

As Sally attempts to solicit a volunteer for an oversold flight she gets assistance from her co-worker, Linda, who (line 6) cues her as to 1) what amount of money ("two hundred") is being offered in a travel voucher for being a volunteer and 2) what the alternative mode of transportation to one's destination will be ("cab.") This triggers a query by Sally; turning to her right towards Linda she questions whether the passenger could possibly fly on the eight o'clock flight as she asks (line 8) "Not an eight o'clock?" The following frame grab captures Sally's position in the midst of turning towards Linda:



In response Linda (line 9) replies "Over," a short hand way of indicating that the eight o'clock flight generally used as "protection" for earlier flights that are oversold is itself overbooked and therefore does not constitute a viable

alternative for the passenger. After getting help from Linda, Sally is able to continue with her solicitation of volunteer status from the passenger (line 10).

For gate agents work is conducted in a public arena, face-to-face with passengers and there exists little backstage room for coordinating a response. Gate agents can, however, make use of an elliptical language to build a backstage to update one another, here about information regarding oversold flights. The public setting thus influences not only how one's body may be displayed, but also the ways in which co-workers assist each other. Though the talk of gate agents can be heard by passengers, it is disguised through the use of an elliptical code.

### Conclusion

While it is common to analyze texts and speech acts outside of the local situations in which they occur, in this paper I have examined several ways in which speech is embedded in specific activity systems, each with its own "circuit of interdependent actions" (Goffman 1961: 96). As talk is unfolding, participants make use of their local settings, interrogating the tools and resources in their environment to build appropriate, improvised responses. Given the predictable structure of work activity, co-workers can anticipate next moves and assist during the course of ongoing activity in the assemblage of responses to opening moves in service encounters, whether a radio call or the presentation of a ticket on the counter. Speech acts are thus not the product of isolated individuals; they are rather assembled achievements emerging from the collaborative work-web of copresent workers who constantly monitor ongoing interaction for their possible involvement in it, nonpresent participants whose work is made relevant through electronically transmitted messages and documents, as well as the tools in their work spaces (such as video monitors positioned at gates) which provide access to information of various sorts.

The setting in which talk occurs constrains both how the body is presented and how collaboration among co-workers is managed. In the nonpublic Operations room participants need not concern themselves with issues of dress or routine body cares; by way of contrast, in the gate area where workers meet the public, different demands are placed on one's presentation of self. Participants cannot turn on and off a backstage with the push of a button; though they collaborate in the co-production of service encounters, they disguise their interaction by using an elliptical code and hide private activities by distorting their bodies under the counter.

This analysis has obvious relevance for theories about human cognition. The notion that understanding the world is a situated practice that relies on collaboration among one's fellows as well as artifacts in one's environment has been a recent theme in the study of everyday cognition (cf. Hutchins 1989; Lave 1988; Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff and Lave 1984; Scribner 1984; Siefert and Hutchins 1989.) This perspective, building on work in the Soviet socio-historical school of psychology (Vygotsky 1978, 1981; Leont'ev 1981)

argues that cognition involved in the accomplishment of everyday activity is not located within the mind of a single individual, but instead distributed across actors and their artifactual environment (Wertsch 1981: 11). The integrated study of how talk, the body, artifacts, and action with one's fellows are coordinated thus offers new perspectives on how moment-to-moment social order is shaped and reshaped in the workplace.

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\* Versions of this paper have been presented at the Conference on Current Work in Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis, University of Amsterdam, July 19, 1991, the Conference on The Body and Language in Interaction, Stockholm, August 22, 1991, and the Invited Session on Communicative Acts as Socially Distributed Phenomena, American Anthropological Association Annual Meetings, Chicago, November 24, 1991.

1 Goffman (1981: 137) defines the notion of participation framework. As he states "The relation of any one such member to this utterance can be called his "participation status" relative to it, and that of all the persons in the gathering the "participation framework" for that moment of speech. See also Erickson (1990) and Erickson and Shultz (1977).

2 Note that the modal "should be" is used. Such expressions are characteristic of more formal radio talk to pilots and constitute a routine way of presenting information where lack of access to complete information is generally the case (C. Goodwin and M.H. Goodwin in press).

3 On the multiple uses of "okay" see Beach (1991). In this sequence the first "okay" signals "state of readiness" for actions to follow and acceptance of prior talk. The "O:kay" in line 10 is produced with falling rising intonation and has an additional affective loading; it assesses prior talk as something which presents a problem for matters to follow, while also cueing recipient of receipt of prior talk.