

## Online Appendix I: Methodological questions and exemplary analysis

The following discussion supplements my chapter *A Method of Sequential Analysis* in *Talking Collective Action*. While the book chapter introduces the method of sequential analysis, this appendix includes additional methodological considerations about the feasibility of combining the methods of objective hermeneutics (OH) and conversation analysis (CA) as well as an exemplary analysis that follows the detailed steps of analysis as laid out in the book.

### A Critical Dialogue

While the method of objective hermeneutics is largely unknown among English speaking conversation analysts, German conversation analysts appear to be more interested in highlighting similarities than differences between both methods (Bergmann 2007; Hausendorf 1997).<sup>1</sup> To administer a critical reading from a fictive conversation analyst is nonetheless heuristically useful, because it allows us to discuss (1) how the context of a conversation can be treated as an analytical resource and (2) how analysts should deal with the ambiguity of utterances during sequential analysis, particularly in cases where there appears to be a determining relation between a first turn and a second turn following it such as a question and its answer.

A possible critique of the hermeneutic method could point to the fact that it does not proceed strictly from the data itself when analysts imagine different contexts of an utterance in phase one of analysis. This potential problem is touched upon in a study by Schegloff (1984), where he discusses ambiguities of questions in conversation and analyzes several examples. Schegloff convincingly argues that the sequential structure of conversation only occasionally serves as a source of ambiguity for participants. He concludes the text by suggesting that many other theoretically imaginable ambiguities of an utterance do not arise in conversations because the particular context of a conversation provides participants with the necessary resources for grasping the relevant sense of an utterance. Schegloff thus characterizes many ambiguities as an “overhearer's problem” that results from taking a single utterance out of its context. In describing the procedures that are involved in demonstrating the ambiguity of an utterance, Schegloff (1984) unintentionally characterizes phase one of the methodological procedure of OH quite well:

A great deal of the ambiguity that has troubled philosophers, logicians, linguists, and some sociologists seems to me characterizable in terms of the overhearer's problem, though the disciplines have not relied on being overhearers in fact. A ready procedure is at hand for generating ambiguities of the appropriate form: One starts with a single sentence [...], and one imagines a range of settings or scenarios in each of which the sen-

1 The methods differ in their assumptions about rules and their relation to interactions. CA is primarily interested in *discovering* the constitutive rules of interaction. OH assumes that there are both universal and historically contingent rules that guide interactions, for example rules of universal grammar (Chomsky). For Oevermann, the analyst *relies* on these rules and at times *explicates* them during analysis (Sutter 1994). I concur with authors who suggest that the theoretical assumption of universal rules is unsustainable, which has consequences for the truth claims of analysis (Bora 1994) and claims about the innovative or pathological nature of interaction (Sutter 1997), but neither implies that the method itself cannot be usefully employed.

tence, or some component of it would have, or be said to have, a “different meaning” or “different sense.” In the finding that the “same sentence” or “same component” can have “different meanings” across the imagined range of scenarios is the kernel of the problem of ambiguity. It is because actual participants in actual conversations do not encounter utterances as isolated sentences, and because they do not encounter them in a range of scenarios, but in actual detailed single scenarios embedded in fine-grained context, that I began this discussion with the observation that most theoretically or heuristically depictable ambiguities do not ever arise. (p. 51)

While OH does not use fictive sentences, it proceeds in a manner similar to the one described by Schegloff. Does this not imply that the method of OH is also troubled by overhearer’s problems? To show that this is not the case, we need to recall that this is only the first phase of analysis, and that the context of an utterance is explicitly considered in later stages. OH uses the procedure in phase one to systematically describe an “actual detailed single scenario” with reference to a “range of scenarios” that Schegloff speaks of, because it is only with reference to and comparison with a range of different scenarios that the characteristics of a single scenario can be brought to light. OH uses a procedure of de-contextualization and re-contextualization to gain a better understanding of the general and particular characteristics of the case at hand. The procedure utilizes a normal procedure of knowledge acquisition and rigorously systematizes it. Any scientific method at some point either asks explicitly “is this a case of X?” (as in “is this a question or an accusation?”) or assumes implicitly “this is a case of Y” (as in “this is a conversation” and not some other speech exchange system). Analysts always gain insights about the case at hand through comparison with other data, previous analysis, everyday experience, theory, etc. This is, according to Alfred Schutz, a procedure that any actor follows because we live in a typified world (see Heritage 1984, pp. 51). For Schutz (1967), we perceive the world around us as made up of objects to which we relate:

From the outset it is an object within a horizon of familiarity and pre-acquaintanceship which is, as such, just taken for granted until further notice as the unquestioned, though at any time questionable stock of knowledge at hand. The unquestioned pre-experiences are, however, also from the outset, at hand as *typical*, that is, as carrying open horizons of anticipated similar experiences. (p. 7)

The procedure OH utilizes aims to discover some of the things that are taken for granted by contrasting a list of potential contexts with the actual context that gets reproduced sequentially. The participants know “what-is-being-talked-about” (Schegloff 1984, p. 50), or as we would have to say with Garfinkel (1967), they assume to know “what-is-being-talked-about.” But the analyst, no matter which method preferred, is not in the same situation as participants. The analyst is not bodily present and does not feel the full sensory impact of the situation; time constraints are relaxed during analysis; the pragmatic aim is not to proceed with the conversation, it is to do analysis; etc. In summary, analysts do not know “what-is-being-talked-about” in the same way as participants do, analysts need a methodological procedure to examine what participants of a conversation take for granted and OH provides such a procedure. OH does not consider the potential contexts of an utterance as a source of regular problems for participants, instead it treats the potential ambiguity of an utterance as an *analytic resource* to discover a logic of selection in light of potential alternative meanings. CA asks, “why that now?” and OH adds, “what does that selection tell us about the emerging structure of this interaction?”

Another potential critique of OH implicated by findings in CA concerns turns such as the first pair of an adjacency pair that seem to determine the meaning of the second turn of the pair; once a question has been asked, an answer has to follow or is noticeably absent. To reiterate, it may appear puzzling to an observer that ambiguity is seldom explicitly treated as a problem by participants in everyday language use, given the potential for ambiguity in the meaning of language. As mentioned above, Schegloff and others convincingly claim that the broader context and sequential placement serve to minimize ambiguity, so that it seldom appears to be a practical problem for participants. Slight variations in wording, intonation and syntax seem to allow participants to grasp what a particular utterance means, so that the problem to distinguish other potentially imaginable meanings does not arise in practice. Yet at the same time, common understanding as a process evolves in time and operates with an irrevocable degree of vagueness at any point (see chapter 4 and 7 of *Talking Collective Action*). Garfinkel (1967) makes this clear when reporting on his experiments about “some essential features of common understandings” (pp. 38). In one of his experiments, students were asked to report conversations between themselves and an acquaintance. They were given the task to write down what was said on the one hand and to explicate what they understood this meant on the other. Consider the following example (Garfinkel 1967):

Husband:	Dana succeeded in putting a penny in a parking meter today without being picked up.	This afternoon as I was bringing Dana, our four-year-old son, home from the nursery school, he succeeded in reaching high enough to put a penny in a parking meter when we parked in a meter parking zone, whereas before he has always had to be picked up to reach that high.
Wife:	Did you take him to the record store?	Since he put a penny in a meter that means that you stopped while he was with you. I know that you stopped at the record store either on the way to get him or on the way back. Was it on the way back, so that he was with you or did you stop there on the way to get him and somewhere else on the way back?
Husband:	No, to the shoe repair shop.	No, I stopped at the record store on the way to get him and stopped at the shoe repair shop on the way home when he was with me.

((...))

This experiment reveals several things: First that an auditor has to assume knowledge about the biography and purpose of the speaker (including the importance of specific events) and the previous course of the conversation, in order to make sense of what is being talked about. Second, that the events that were talked about are vague in the sense that “the depicted events include as their essentially intended and sanctioned features an accompanying ‘fringe’ of determinations that are open with respect to internal relationships, relationships to other events, and relationships to retrospective and prospective possibilities” (p. 41). Third, the conversation, and the explication of what the students thought this meant, reveals a prospective-retrospective orientation towards common understandings. Participants worked with the assumption that what will be said sheds light on what has been said, thus the sense of some expression could be realized by waiting for the future course of the conversation to discover what the conversation was about all along. Garfinkel takes this as evidence that the alternate meanings of an expression or utterance are not definite and cannot be read like “precoded entries on a memory drum” (p. 41) by participants in some automatic fashion.

Bilmes (1992) offers a good elaboration of Garfinkel's position on common understandings in an article on mishearings:

When the recipient gives this utterance a hearing, as reflected in his response, one possibility is that the original speaker will identify the hearing as an accurate reading of what he had in mind and accept it. Another possibility is that the response will evidence an inaccurate understanding of the utterance and will therefore be corrected. But there is a range of other possibilities. An accurate hearing may be rejected because the speaker has changed his mind about how he wants to be heard. An inaccurate hearing may be accepted because the speaker is satisfied to be understood in that way. Or a hearing may elaborate or specify a speaker's meaning in a way that the speaker never thought about, in a way such that the speaker cannot 'simply know' whether or not that meaning was what he had in mind. That is, even if people do have their meanings "in mind," surely those meanings are not "complete" in the sense that every possible hearing is either unambiguously right or unambiguously wrong. (pp. 96)

CA has often discussed questions of participants understanding in the context of research concerning adjacency pairs. Yet adjacency pairs are a type of sequence in conversations where the participants themselves *work at* being clear. This empirical focus results in an ambiguous position of CA towards meaning and understanding in interaction. Adjacency pairs are pairs of turns by different speakers where a first turn requires a specific next turn in order to complete the pair. A potential question needs an answer to be a question-answer pair. Coulter (1983) writes: "You cannot specify the concept of a 'question' independently of any reference to the concept of an 'answer' and the same holds for all of the concepts of utterance-types with transitive properties" (p. 365). This implies that a first utterance needs to be identified first by a participant as a question in order for an answer to follow as a second utterance. If a participant would treat a first utterance instead as a complaint, and the participant who uttered the first utterance would not correct this interpretation, then the conversation would take on a different course than if a first utterance was identified as a question. The potential question would then appear to *always have been* a complaint. Arrangements for the future like invitations also need to be recognized and visibly accepted or declined, otherwise there is no way for the inviting party to know whether arrangements will come to pass. Likewise, the closing of a conversation needs to be mutually recognized or the parties do not stop talking.<sup>2</sup>

In these and other ways, adjacency pairs are a structuring device that participants themselves employ to deal with recurring issues of organizing talk. Analysts who employ the method of objective hermeneutics are well advised to consider respective conversation analytical findings during analysis. The adjacency pair is particularly relevant for phase three of analysis when expectations for the turns that follow next are sketched and phase four when the analyst controls whether the ex-

2 Adjacency pairs thus cannot be treated as a "proof-procedure" as suggested by CA to identify participants' understanding of utterances (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974). Coulter (1983) argues that such a procedure is based on at least two contestable assumptions: "Firstly, it is assumed that discrepant understandings of any turn's status as an activity should be settled by opting for a determinate version, and that such a version could have an incorrigible status. Secondly, it presupposes that next turns invariantly furnish materials whereby prior turn's illocutionary force may be decided – even *proved* – for the analyst, committing him to the *ensuing speaker's analysis* of prior turns for the rendition of 'the parties' understanding of the prior turns' even when the parties' actual understandings may remain unreconciled or when *prior* speaker may have evidenced, elsewhere, a logically more defensible appreciation of the force of the turn in question" (p. 370).

pectations have been met. When the utterance under consideration appears to be the first part of an adjacency pair, this suggests that a second pair part is to follow, or that what is to follow will be oriented to the fact that the second pair part is not (yet) following, for example as an “insertion expansion” (Coulter 1983). The (provisional) identification of a first pair part does not relieve the analyst from performing the phases of analysis in the manner sketched in the methods chapter of *Talking Collective Action*. It is not only that the first part of an adjacency pair does not fully specify what is to follow next (for example how a question will be answered), it is also that adjacency pairs are not a ready-made ordering device; participants work collaboratively to produce them. This becomes more obvious if we consider adjacency pairs in their sequential context. Consider what CA calls a “pre-sequence” in relation to invitations. By asking a question like “what are you doing tonight?” prior to an invitation, the questioner may hint at the possibility that an invitation will follow in case the answer does not mention any existing plans for the night. But this is only a possibility. It is not only that no invitation may follow if the answer reveals existing plans. Even if the respondent does not mention any plans, the questioner may not formulate an invitation, possibly because he or she never intended to do so in the first place. Consider also the “terminal exchange” as an adjacency pair that serves to close a conversation (Schegloff & Sacks 1973). Schegloff and Sacks commit most of their paper to show how the prospect of closing the conversation is processed as a *possible* option throughout the entire course of a conversation until it is finally realized. They conclude:

[T]o capture the phenomenon of closings, one cannot treat it as the natural history of some particular conversation; one cannot treat it as a routine to be run through, inevitable in its course once initiated. Rather, it must be viewed, as must conversation as a whole, as a set of prospective possibilities opening up at various points in the conversation's course; there are possibilities throughout a closing, including the moments after a “final” good-bye, for reopening the conversation. Getting to a termination, therefore, involves work at various points in the course of the conversation and of the closing section; it requires accomplishing. For the analyst, it requires a description of the prospects and possibilities available at the various points, how they work, what the resources are, etc., from which the participants produce what turns out to be the finally accomplished closing. (Schegloff & Sacks 1973)

### **An Exemplary Analysis: Laughter in a Meeting**

In order to demonstrate how the method of OH is applied in practice, I provide an exemplary analysis of a sequence of talk during a meeting of an anti-nuclear group next. Activists talk about an information stand they organized and what one participant says in contribution to this topic produces laughter. Zijderveld (1983) argues that humor is a play with institutionalized meanings. “Joking invariably consists of playing with meanings. The technique used is generally quite simple: all the possibilities of an unexpected change or alteration of meaning are tried out and exploited” (p. 7). Insofar as Zijderveld’s description is warranted, objective hermeneutics should be an ideal method to analyze humor in conversation, because it systematically formulates expectations on how a sequence is to continue and therefore allows the identification of unexpected deviations. The task for our analysis will be to hypothesize why participants laugh, a task for which it is necessary to consider laughter in its sequential context, and further consider what participants play with meanings reveals about the style of the group EXIT.



[And fla:gs and butt]ons  
were ((sought after)) right?

Context 1: Employees at a gas station talk about the shift of the last weekend. There was a game of the German national soccer team and people were buying memorabilia for the game at the gas station. One of the employees just mentioned that many cars that came to the gas station were decorated with flags. The other employee adds that flags and buttons were in demand; people bought large quantities at the station, expecting a similar assessment by the other.

Context 2: Two schoolteachers in an elementary school designed a vocabulary exercise about nouns in plural form. They have used the exercise in class and are now discussing how the students performed. One of the teachers makes the statement above, “And fla:gs and buttons were ((sought after)) right?”, thus implying that these two nouns were difficult for the students and led to questions.<sup>3</sup> The teacher also expects that her colleague’s experiences were similar and she therefore expects the other teacher to agree to her question.

Context 3: There was a fair for kids and a local youth center was active at this fair. Volunteers from the youth center currently dismantle their booth and are talking about the activities that took place there. Kids could do different handicrafts at their booth. There was a machine for making buttons, the kids could make flags out of fabric and color them, pens for drawing were available, and they had stamps of different size and form. A volunteer just mentioned that the kids liked the stamps and another volunteer adds that buttons and flags were also popular with the kids.

Context 4: A union participates in a campaign where they inform the public about labor conditions in the textile industry of Bangladesh. At the next meeting, union members are collecting information about which articles were in demand and need to be ordered again for the next event. Next to a leaflet about the campaign, button and flags were in high demand.

Context 5: A mail order company takes stock of the business concluded in the last quarter. One employee presents the sales numbers to management and has created a presentation with charts where it is possible to compare different categories of goods in terms of sales. The aim of the presentation is to identify the popular products and to increase advertising of those products. Based on the presentation, an employee seeks confirmation from the presenter that flags and buttons were among the products in high demand that could qualify for increased advertising.

#### *Common Characteristics of the Potential Contexts:*

All contexts have in common that they are retrospective because of the past perfect of the verb “were ((sought after))”. In addition, there is overlap to the previous turn in an ongoing discussion. Overlap in this form either signals agreement with the previous speaker, a competition for the right to speak that the current speaker wins, or a conflict where neither speaker is willing to let the other have the floor. Agreement is likely in this case because Erika uses the conjunction “and” which suggests that she adds something to whatever the previous speaker has just said. She also finishes her utterance with “right?”, which invites other participants to agree with her. All this indicates that she is continuing a previous topic and not initiating a new one.<sup>4</sup>

3 There is no ideal translation for “nachgefragt” in this case. In German, “nachgefragt” can either mean that “something was in demand” or that “somebody had a question”. The latter meaning inspires context 2 but is unfortunately not well captured by the English translation “sought after”.

The German verb “nachgefragt” can be translated as „were ((sought after))” in English (see footnote 3). In German, the verb can be used either when somebody had a question or when something was in demand. The latter is more likely because “flags and buttons” are objects of which there can be a demand. Specific assumptions about the context are necessary in order to understand “nachgefragt” as implying that there was a question (e.g., the objects have to be understood as words in a vocabulary exercise as in context 2). Objects in demand can implicate an economic context of supply and demand (contexts 1, 5) but the objects do not necessarily have to be sold. In a more general sense, the verb “sought after” (“nachgefragt”) implies a heightened interest in the objects that are mentioned. “Flags and buttons” if mentioned in combination can be symbols of a community (contexts 1, 4), haptic objects (context 3), or a commodity (context 5).

### [1] Phase 2: The Actual Context

In the next phase, we consider the actual context of the utterance as it is known to analysts. Analysts’ knowledge about the actual context does not provide a ground truth, but it provides a necessary starting point and description against which the list of potential contexts is compared. Erika’s statement is uttered in an ongoing meeting that several anti-nuclear activists participate in. The current topic is a review of past protest activities and the group is currently talking about an information stand that they set up in the city center to inform passersby about current local issues and broader national developments concerning nuclear power. Today’s meeting was prearranged through an electronic mailing list. Meetings of the group take place irregularly currently but usually at the same location and at the same weekday. Nine people are in attendance, including the ethnographer, who also made the recording.

Because we can interpret a sequence from different analytic perspectives, it is helpful to sketch our research interest at this point of the analysis in order to clarify the perspective that is applied here. Therefore, some directions of interpretation that are of little relevance for the research interest are not presented in the text. From a methodological perspective, the analysis is always temporary and may be revised in the future if other research interests are formulated or other interpretative patterns are discovered. The research interest in the selected sequence can be circumscribed with two related questions: How do the activists of this group talk about past protest events and how are such past events assessed? Activists can participate individually in protest activities because of social action orientations that are either traditional, expressive, value-rational, or instrumentally-rational (Weber 1978, pp. 24), but for the organization of protest activities that is of interest here, the instrumentally rational and value-rational action orientations are most important because they imply planning (see also chapter 8 of *Talking Collective Action*). So, protest activities could be organized in order to achieve a specific aim with the right means or because of a moral obligation where other aims are secondary. The analysis of a discussion of past protest activities organized by meeting participants should reveal which action orientation dominates and why activists organized this protest activity. A strength of the method of objective hermeneutics is that it not only allows the analysis of what is said explicitly but also of the sense and its implications. An analysis could reveal not only how participants assess past activities but also whether they actively avoid certain assessments. Any assessment is based on implicit or explicit criteria which can take the form of explicit aims. Since

4 Especially in the beginning of a research project, it is recommended to begin analysis with the beginning of a recording, e.g., the beginning of a meeting. In this case, I selected a sequence approximately 2 minutes after the meeting has begun because it can be presented in a more compact form.

we can assume that this is not the last meeting of the group and the information stand not its last activity, it is possible that the group may also discuss what to do differently the next time based on the discussion of what they have done in the past.

Based on an analysis of the preceding discussion that cannot be replicated here, we know that the previous speaker Markus already evaluated the information stand activists are currently talking about as a partial success. Markus argued that the topic of nuclear power seemed to interest passersby, and Erika's statement "And flags and buttons were ((sought after)) right?" (l. 21) follows this. If we take into consideration that an information stand is typically equipped with leaflets and brochures providing information about the issues the group is concerned with, plus buttons, t-shirts, and other items that portray symbols or slogans of the anti-nuclear movement, then it is likely that the verb "sought after" refers to the observation that many passersby were interested in flags and buttons, items they could take with them for a small donation. Because Erika's turn follows after the positive assessment of Markus and is structured like an agreeing turn, it is likely that Erika continues the positive evaluation of the activity here: there was a demand for buttons and flags, and this demand is a potential indicator of success. This potential success can have different dimensions, which we can assemble with the help of the list of potential contexts:

- a) donations provide the group with a source of income;
- b) passersby support the group with donations;
- c) the buttons and flags under question are aesthetic or of good quality;
- d) passersby identify with the symbols and slogans on these objects;
- e) passersby who were interested in flags and buttons support the anti-nuclear movement;
- f) the agreement of passersby with the movement is quantifiable (the more buttons given away, the better).

Not every dimension on this list seems equally likely, but the point of this list is to describe the potential meanings of Erika's utterance as broadly as possible. Up to this point, it is unclear which dimension(s) of success are relevant for meeting participants. Erika talks about objects with a symbolic value for the anti-nuclear movement but does so by using an economic frame of reference of high demand (creating a potential friction to be considered later). Meeting participants may highlight certain dimensions or downplay others as the discussion continues. In its current form, Erika adds an indicator for success that supplements or solidifies what Markus previously said about the interest of participants in the topic of nuclear power (transcript not provided).

### *[1] Phase 3: Possible Next Turns*

Erika's turn indicates a preference for agreement (Pomerantz 1984). She talks in slight overlap with Markus, she appears to agree with his assessment, and she invites the next speaker to agree with her with the particle "right?" as well. We can thus assume that a next speaker not only accepts the content of Erika's statement (that there was a demand for buttons and flags), but also agrees with her positive assessment. Agreement could take the following forms:

- A) Agreement could be voiced with different intensity ("yes" would be weak or moderate agreement, and "yeah, totally" upgraded agreement, for example);

- B) A next turn could refer to the different dimensions of success that were enumerated above (the list from a. to e.);
- C) Another indicator for success could be introduced.

*[1] Phase 4: The Next Turn*

22 Markus: ja,  
Yes,

As we expected, Markus, who has spoken before Erika, agrees with her in moderate form by saying “yes”. Markus thus indicates that he regards Erika's addition as a legitimate one and that he shares her observation that there was a demand for flags and buttons. This is the third turn for Markus where he would have to indicate whether Erika somehow misunderstood his previous utterance. In terms of turn-taking, that Markus does not add something substantially indicates that others are free to speak next.

*[1] Phase 5: Summary*

So far, we have gained only limited insights into the research questions that were sketched in phase two. The demand for buttons and flags is used here as an indication for success that Erika and Markus agree on. The demand could provide the group with donations, it could indicate that certain objects are more sought after than others, or it could indicate a growing public support for the movement. Exactly how or why this demand indicates success is not explicitly discussed so far and it may not be further discussed as the meeting continues. Activists need not explicate exactly how the demand for buttons and flags indicates a success of their information stand, they can simply assume to understand each other well enough for-all-practical purposes (Garfinkel 1967). But how they continue to talk about this topic indicates what understanding is relevant for them. With objective hermeneutics, the list of potential contexts generated in phase 1 is narrowed as further turns are investigated, making certain contexts unlikely and defining the actual context more clearly. In case activists follow a primarily value-rational action orientation, the observation that the support for the movement is growing would be satisfying in itself, indicating that the public shares the values of activists. In case activists follow a primarily instrumentally rational action orientation, the question remains what aims the information stand is a right means for. Is it a means to receive donations, spread information, or increase the visibility of the anti-nuclear movement? In either case we might ask what the consequence of their positive assessment of their information stand are. Are they going to organize more information stands and order more flags and buttons in order to meet the demand they observed?

The analysis so far already shows that it is necessary to proceed sequentially to grasp what participants are talking about during their meeting. If we would take an utterance like “And fla:gs and buttons were ((sought after)) right?” (l. 21) out of its sequential context and leave it at that, we would be unable to consider how participants react to such utterances and at what point during a discussion they are made. The next step is to consider how the discussion continues, for which we will initiate a new cycle of analysis with the next turn in the sequence.

*[Cycle 2], Phase 1*

23 Erika: also wir hatten nicht genug buttons, wir hätten da:  
(0.1) mehr buttons noch abgeben können und fahnen haben

wir ja auch .h sind wir gut losgeworden n paar .

So we did not have enough buttons, we could have (0.1) given more buttons away and flags .h we ((got rid of some very well)).

Erika talks again after Markus. She says that they “could have (0.1) given more buttons away” and that they got “rid of some” flags. After considering the third turn in our sequence we can now reduce the list of potential contexts. That Erika talks about giving away buttons makes it clear that the German “wurden nachgefragt” (l. 21) cannot be understood as “somebody had a question”. For this reason, context 2 can be excluded from further consideration. Note that we should only exclude the other potential contexts from consideration unless there is clear evidence in the turns themselves that they can be excluded. The remaining potential contexts can be used as an analytical resource. For example, it is possible to further clarify the economic dimension of Erika's two turns by considering the potential contexts and comparing them with the actual context. Concerning context 5, it seems unlikely that an employee from a sales department would say “we could have (0.1) given more buttons away” because this would indicate that they were given away for free, whereas they would be a source of income for a mail order company. But an addition to the context story generated in phase 1, for example that the buttons were free giveaways, could explain Erika's wording in line 23. What this wording tells us about the actual context is that the donations received in exchange for the flags and buttons do not seem to be central to the current discussion as a source of income (see phase 2 of cycle 1), although this dimension may still become relevant. Context 3 also cannot be excluded yet, but it appears that buttons and flags are not of interest to the group as objects of handicraft or design; how they look and what specific symbols or slogans they portray is of no relevance so far.

#### [2] Phase 2: The Actual Context

By making a summarizing statement and using the inclusive first person plural “we”, Erika elaborates on and upgrades her first positive assessment of the demand for flags and buttons after Markus agrees with her assessment. Markus previous agreement is important, as it indicates that other participants share Erika's assessment and the observations it is based on. That the interest in buttons and flags allows a positive evaluation of the information stand appears to be intersubjectively validated now, although only two of the nine people attending the meeting have been talking so far (see chapter 4 in *Talking Collective Action*).

Her upgraded positive assessment, “we did not have enough buttons”, also indicates that the demand for buttons was higher than their supply. Taken in isolation, this statement could also be understood as a critique of poor planning: If more buttons would have been available, more could have been given away and more donations would have been received. Yet in its sequential context it is clearly not a critique, although it indicates a potential for future improvement. For this potential to be realized, a next speaker would have to say that the group should bring more buttons with them the next time they plan a similar activity in order to better meet this observed interest in buttons and flags.

#### [2] Phase 3: Possible Next Turns

Erika's turn has a summarizing quality, and this indicates a speaker change. Erika seems to be finished and Markus already indicated in line 22 that he does not want to contribute substantially to

the topic at the moment. Because Erika's summary does not implicate a specific next turn, several different turns may follow next. A participant could introduce a new indicator to assess the activity; or participants could change the topic and talk about the consequences from their assessment of the activity, for example to bring more buttons with them the next time.

### [2] Phase 4: The Next Turn

24 Ole: und aufkleber. (0.5)

And stickers. (0.5)

Instead of starting a new topic, Ole mentions “stickers” (l. 24). Because this turn is marked as an addition to Erika's last turn and mentions an object that could belong to the same class as buttons and flags, Ole indicates that passersby were also interested in “stickers”. Being an incomplete clause, this turn also indicates that the speaker is unwilling to make a more substantial contribution. Nonetheless, it adds another detail to Erika's assessment. If the group would be interested in drawing conclusions for a next activity, they may not only want to bring more buttons but also more stickers. This transition to future planning is not made by Ole, it only indicates one possibility how the sequence might continue.

### [2] Phase 5: Summary

The sequence so far has the following simplified structure: a first assessment by Erika (l. 21), agreement by Markus (l. 22), a second upgraded assessment by Erika (l. 23), a mentioning of an additional object by Ole (l. 24). Flags, buttons, and stickers appear to be relevant primarily as indicators of a successful activity and not as objects in their own right. But in what way they indicate a success is still inconclusive (to us as analysts who are interested in the matter). Erika mentions that they did not have enough buttons and could have “given more buttons away” (l. 23), thereby evoking an economical frame of reference of supply and demand, if it were not for the verb “giving away” which indicates that the objects in questions are not relevant as a source of income.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, potentials for future improvement, such as a proposal to provide more buttons for the next information stand that Erika's second utterance (l. 23) implied, have not been taken up. Up to this point, reviews of past activities do not follow an instrumentally rational action orientation where activists identify aspects of a protest activity they consider as having been successful and then plan to improve them in the future. Because the interest by passersby in buttons and flags seems to be intersubjectively validated by now among the participants of the meeting, we should expect such an instrumentally rational proposal of what to improve for future activities in one of the next turns. If no such proposal follows, we could then hypothesize that the review of past activities by EXIT does not follow a an instrumentally rational action orientation. Such a negative hypothesis would require further analysis in order to be replaced by a positive hypothesis that describes what it actually is that activists of EXIT do when they review past activities.

### [Cycle 3] Phase 1

25 Erika: und aufkleber, genau.[ a]lso devotionalien (--) werden  
nach[gefragt nach wie vor.]

5 One way to solve this tension would be to apply a logic of quantification (cf. dimension f on the list assembled in phase 2 of cycle 1): the more buttons are given away, the higher the (visible) agreement of the general public with the anti-nuclear movement, but this has not happened so far.

And stickers, right. [so] ((devotional objects)) (--)  
cont[inue to be sought after.]

26 Xw: [hm]

27 Sarah: [°ehehehehe°]

Erika's turn in line 25 of the transcript is overlapped by several other turns. The principle of sequentiality requires us to consider these overlapping turns together as soon as they overlap because they happen at the same time. But in order to reduce the complexity of analysis, we will consider each turn individually first and consider how they overlap as a second step.

Erika talks again and confirms Ole's "stickers" (l. 24) as an adequate addition to her list of objects that were sought after. Erika then describes these objects in a "formulation" (Deppermann 2011; Garfinkel & Sacks 1970) as "((devotional objects))". For reasons that will become apparent below, this is an analytically interesting expression we will describe in more detail in order to gain a better grasp of its potential meaning. Such a detailed description is done in a similar way as list of potential contexts done in the first cycle of analysis, the key difference is that only an expression is considered and not an entire utterance.

Now, "devotional objects" are objects that indicate a religious context. Examples of such objects are crucifixes, rosaries, and figures or pictures of saints. They can be used in prayer or be an ornamentation. Their use is not restricted to priests or other religious professionals, they are available to anybody and can be bought by anybody, and they are often sold near sacred sites or pilgrimage sites. Devotional objects are not necessarily Christian, but the German expression "Devotionalien" refers specifically to religious objects associated with the Roman-Catholic faith. The analysis will follow this limited definition.<sup>6</sup> Memorabilia of soccer teams and other popular sports are also sometimes described as devotional objects, implying that being a fan can be like religious activity to some. Because of the reference to "devotional objects", the potential context 3 of kids who are doing handicrafts can be excluded from analysis. Because the kids are assumed to design their buttons and flags individually, they cannot have an overarching and unifying symbolic quality.

### [3] Phase 2

Erika adds "stickers" to her list of objects that were sought after and summarizes: "so ((devotional objects)) (-- continue to be sought after)". This description of buttons, flags, and stickers as devotional objects compares these objects of the anti-nuclear movement with religious objects. Erika repeats that these objects were "sought after", as she already said in line 21, and now adds that this is not new but an ongoing demand. Because this verb actualizes the dimension of supply and demand, the activists themselves become metaphorical merchants of devotional objects by implication.

Erika's formulation connects different spheres of society (religion, politics, commerce). Religion because of the expression "devotional objects"; commerce because of the verb "sought after"; politics because this group is part of the German anti-nuclear movement. Yet this does not exhaust the possible interpretations of the utterance. What does this utterance tell us about the group and

6 Note also that in Germany the Roman-Catholic church and the Evangelical Church are the largest and most important Christian churches that also have a special status under German law. When Germans talk about organized Christian faith, they talk about these two churches unless there are indications to the contrary.

about Erika's views about those who are interested in "devotional objects"? Three possible interpretations come to mind:

- 1) The description "devotional objects" could imply that those who are interested in buttons and stickers are part of a group of people that follows a value-rational orientation and is motivated by religious or moral concerns. The demand for devotional objects would then express a *conviction*. The question would nonetheless be, why this peculiar expression now? Why does Erika use the expression "devotional objects" among the many ways that allow the expression of a moral conviction. One explanation would be that Erika is herself Catholic and that she considers anti-nuclear activism as a moral obligation to protect God's creation from the risks of nuclear disaster. The expression "devotional objects" in this context would then indicate that Erika does not differentiate between activism and religious activity and, by extension, that this group may be a religiously motivated activist group.
- 2) Devotional objects are an expression of religious beliefs, but they are not necessary for religious practice. The possession of devotional objects does not necessarily indicate that somebody practices religion regularly. The purchase of a devotional object can also be a memento of a visit to a pilgrimage site. For this reason, Erika could allude to a *difference* between the activists who participate in today's meeting and the passersby who are interested in buttons and flags as mementos. Those who organize an information stand and provide information show through this activity itself that they are dedicated. They are motivated and informed, whereas passersby who are interested in buttons and stickers do not have to be particularly motivated or informed. Erika would in this way express her superiority and a difference in conviction.
- 3) Devotional objects can also be considered as a form of religious kitsch, especially by Lutherans who place less value in religious objects in general or activists who are non-religious. Devotional objects would then be no expression of true faith as they are not deemed necessary to express it by Lutherans, or deemed altogether unnecessary by non-religious activists. This interpretation would implicate that those who are interested in devotional objects are being distracted; they wear buttons and put stickers on their cars but do not thereby contribute meaningfully to the movement's cause. This *cynical* use of "devotional objects" would imply that Erika knowingly accepts that some passersby are only token supporters of the movement, and it would also be self-critical, raising the question why she supplies passersby with devotional objects if she considers them to be of little value. Following this interpretation, "devotional objects" could in fact only be indicators of success if considered as a source of income, as they are objects that say little about the commitment to the cause of the movement of those who carry them.

These three interpretations are not mutually exclusive. The suspicion that some of the interested passersby are merely token supporters of the movement would also conform to the second interpretation; it would further illustrate the difference between activists and other supporters of the movement. Alternatively, supporters of the movement could also be differentiated internally; there may be those who are interested just in buttons, and those who are interested in information as well as buttons. Recall that these three interpretations only capture potential meanings of Erika's formulation. The next step is to consider how meeting participants themselves react to and thereby under-

stand Erika's formulation. The fact that Erika's formulation has a potentially critical character, where interpretation 3 questions whether the demand for devotional objects can be an indicator of success, suggests that further critical observations are possible.

Yet instead of continuing the discussion, Sarah begins to laugh in reduced volume while Erika is still talking (l. 27). Laughter is first and foremost expressive behavior. Its meaning is undetermined and it cannot be translated; it gives us no clear indication how exactly Sarah understands Erika's statement.<sup>7</sup> For its interpretation, laughter points back to the previous utterance. While laughter has no clear meaning as such, it still tells us something about Erika's formulation because it is embedded in a sequence: Sarah hears the formulation as an invitation to laugh; she treats the utterance as a "laughable" (Jefferson 1984). If we return to the three interpretations above, it appears that each could be a cause for laughter in its own way:

- 1) In the first interpretation, we argued that Erika may talk about devotional objects because she regards anti-nuclear activism as religious activity and is religious herself. Sarah's laughter could now indicate an implicit rejection of an identity that combines activism and religious activity; Sarah could be laughing to distance herself from Erika's identity or even belittle it implicitly.
- 2) In the second interpretation, we indicated a difference between activists and passersby. Following this interpretation, Sarah could treat Erika's observation as a witty remark and laugh in agreement with her about people who are less motivated and less informed than the activists of today's meeting.
- 3) In the third interpretation, we defined devotional objects as kitsch that is unnecessary for anti-nuclear activism. The laughter would now have a cynical note. Passersby may think that they are doing something for the movement and showing that they are a part of the movement, but activists know better, buttons and stickers do not further the goals of the movement, and we provide them nonetheless because there is a demand to satisfy, but this demand does not indicate a true commitment to the anti-nuclear movement.

All three interpretations are potentially problematic in their own way for the group. The third interpretation is the most interesting with respect to the research interest formulated in the beginning. Activists have assessed the information stand positively by mentioning different objects as indicators of success, without elaborating whether the demand in objects also indicates that certain aims have been reached. One interpretation of Erika's "devotional objects" now reveals that these objects may not be suitable as indicators of success at all. But Sarah's laughter effectively avoids the explication of this interpretation. The laughter itself offers us no indication which interpretations might be correct, since the very nature of laughter permits us from settling for a definitive interpretation. We know from ethnographic observations that Erika has not described herself as religious so far, so the first interpretations seems to be the least likely one. Yet this does not allow us to exclude such an interpretation from consideration because we would require evidence from the sequence itself to do so. Our next step is therefore to consider how the sequence continues.

<sup>7</sup> Authors who have attempted to formulate a general theory of laughter come to different conclusions that appear to depend more on their scientific background and less on the inherent qualities of laughter itself. To Freud, laughter is a way to discharge psychic energy; to Plessner, laughter is an expression of the tension between having a physical body and a mind with imagination; to Bergson, laughter reacts to the rigidity of social life but does not correct the rigidity and has a social control function (Zijderveld 1983).

### [3] Phase 3

In conversation analysis, laughter is considered to contribute to a shift in framing if it is accepted by other participants (Coates 2007; Glenn 2003; Holt 2013; Norrick & Spitz 2008). Other participants, including Erika, can join in Sarah's laughter or they may not. They thus treat Erika's statement either as something funny to laugh about, or as something serious to discuss further.

### [3] Phase 4

28 Ben: [ehhe]hehehe  
29 Markus: [ehhe]hehehe h  
30 (1.0)

Other participants laugh in slight overlap with the end of Erika's turn that included the expression "devotional objects" (l. 25). They treat the formulation as something to laugh about as well; laughter thus appears as an appropriate response for all, after which a pause of a second follows (l. 30). At this point, it appears to be increasingly unlikely that Erika regards activism as an expression of Catholic faith. Following interpretation one, the laughter of several participants would imply that they all disagree with Erika's attitude; she would appear to be isolated in the group. If this were the case, we would have to ask why Erika makes such a reference in the first place, since we would assume her to know that the others are not motivated by religious beliefs as she is.

### [3] Phase 5

Although the analysis of this sequence could continue, the structure of the sequence can now be provisionally described. The sequence focuses on the positive assessment of the last activity of the group. The formulation about devotional objects distinguishes the meeting participants from other supporters of the movement who are less committed than they are. While this distinction is perhaps factually true, that activists do more than the average passersby for the anti-nuclear movement is in part what defines them, it is also problematic. Laughter does double duty in this context: By laughing, participants can implicitly endorse the distinction between them and others. Yet their laughter also allows them to avoid any discussion as to what Erika's formulation implies in this particular situation:

Humour and laughter have their functionality in the fabric of social life, but they are just as often playfully useless and senseless. Every scientific analysis of humour and laughter risks neglecting this fundamental ambiguity. A sociological analysis, in particular, should take account of the fact that much humour and laughter is indeed tied to the social world and its conventions, yet transcends this world in playful merriment and joyfulness, liberating people from what ought to be thought, felt, said and done. (Zijderveld 1983, p. 57)

Laughter liberates participants from continuing talk about the laughable utterance. Given the implications of a distinction between activists and other supporters of the movement, this might be a perfectly adequate reaction for three reasons: (1) Such a distinction is difficult to sustain because the anti-nuclear movement is the overarching identity of both the participants of today's meeting and the interested passersby. (2) There are no differences between activists and other supporters of the movement that do not also differentiate the group internally. Some supporters may not be very committed to the movement and participate in few if any of its protest activities, but something

similar can be said about participants of the meeting; some of them are more committed than others and participate in many protest activities. The only criterion that clearly distinguishes the participants of today's meetings from other movement supporters is their presence in today's meeting itself. (3) If meeting participants would suspect the passersby who showed an interest in the symbols of the movement to be only token supporters, this could raise the question whether the information stand was really as successful as participants claimed so far; if the possession of buttons and stickers says little about commitment to the movement, it may not be a good indicator for success.

We can now formulate three hypotheses: First, meeting participants distinguish themselves from other supporters of the movement, but this distinction is not explicitly articulated. Ideologically, everybody's contribution to the movement's cause is equally valid. In practice, the contributions of some participants may be valued more, but this is not openly expressed. Second, meeting participants assess activities positively by using different indicators of success without mentioning the aims these indicators point to. Activists discussed reasons at previous meetings for organizing the information stand, but those reasons are not evaluated from an instrumentally rational perspective at today's meeting, and whether the demand for certain objects is a valid indicator for success is not critically reflected. Third, laughter is an interactive resource that allows participants to change frame. Laughter interrupts topical talk and thereby interrupts potentially problematic reflections.

These hypotheses need to be tested by further analysis that cannot be undertaken here. They will be discussed further in chapters of *Talking Collective Action*, most prominently in chapter 6, which is concerned with assessments of past activities and compares two different styles of doing so in different groups. The book chapters present the results of sequential analysis in a condensed form and the detailed analysis provided here is not continued. While the presentation in the book follows the sequential order of the meetings under consideration, the most convincing interpretation of the material is given priority and alternative interpretations are only presented where absolutely necessary.

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