“How about eggs?”: Action ascription in the family decision-making process during grocery shopping at a supermarket

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The problem of how an action of the first component of a conversational sequence is recognized or “ascribed” (Levinson, 2013) by its recipient in the responsive position is an issue for participants as well as for analysts, especially when the first component takes an indirect or inexplicit form. We often observe such indirect or inexplicit forms in the interaction among members of tightly bounded social groups such as families, since their “shared experiences, background knowledge, and daily routines lead to the conventionalization of indirect but recurrent forms” (Ogiermann, 2015: 32). Using the methodology of Conversation Analysis, this study investigates how the actions performed by family members’ indirect or inexplicit utterances are ascribed by other family members in the responsive position and how this process of “action ascription” is used as an interactional resource to manage the practical tasks that the family members are confronted with in their everyday lives. We focus in particular on examining how family members negotiate among themselves in the course of decision-making on what to purchase during grocery shopping at a supermarket.

Detailed analysis shows that family members orient to each other’s deontic authority, i.e., the right to determine one’s own and others’ future actions (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012), during the course of their decision-making on purchases at a supermarket. They do so by coordinating the utterance format used in the first move of their decision-making process and the subsequent action ascription by its recipient in the next turn. For example, the first move in decision-making can be ascribed by its recipient as such actions as “mentioning,” “proposing,” or “requesting.” While mentioning products does not exert much influence on purchase decision-making, proposing and requesting do. We found that when fathers and children initiate the decision-making process, they frequently use an abbreviated utterance format such as [category of the product] (e.g., Tamago? “Eggs?”) or [category of the product + topic particle wa] (e.g., Tamago wa?). In Excerpt 1, Father initiates a decision-making sequence by saying Sakana wa? “((How about)) fish?” (line 01). Utterances in these formats are routinely treated by mothers as “mere mentioning” of the product. This treatment is displayed by the mothers’ responses, in which they make their own decision as to whether to purchase the product or not. In Excerpt 1, Mother repeats sakana “fish” and produces the predicate iru “need” (line 03), thereby making the decision to purchase the fish mentioned by Father (“((We)) need fish.”). By treating the preceding utterances by fathers and children as doing “mere mentioning” and making their own decision, mothers claim their deontic authority.

On the other hand, when fathers and children produce an utterance in a sentential format (e.g., Tamago wa kau? “Shall we buy eggs?”), mothers routinely treat it as a “proposal” or a “request” by attributing to it the willingness of fathers and children to purchase the product (e.g. by saying “Do you want eggs?”). Excerpt 2 shows this point. In this excerpt, Father uses a sentential format (hutsuu ni kore akan no “Can’t ((we)) just ((buy)) this?”; line 01) to initiate a decision-making sequence. Mother responds by saying sore hoshii n? “((Do you)) want that one?” thereby treating Father’s utterance as a request. As these patterns show, family members constantly orient to their deontic authority to make a decision by coordinating the utterance format used in the first move of decision-making and the subsequent action ascription.
Data:

Excerpt (1)

01 Father : -> Sakana wa?
           fish TP
           ((How about)) fish?

02

03 Mother : -> Sakana iru
           fish need
           ((We)) need fish.

Excerpt (2)

01 Father : -> Eh (.) hutsuu ni kore akan no ((while holding a cheese))
           eh  just  PT this  no good QP
           Eh (.) Can’t ((we)) just ((buy)) this?

02 (3.1) ((Mother is approaching Father))

03 Mother : -> Sore? (0.8) sore hoshii n?
           that  that  want  QP
           That one? (0.8) ((Do you)) want that one?

Abbreviations used in the interlinear gloss:

QP    question particle
TP    topic particle
PT    particle

References:

