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# New technologies – new social conduct? A sequential and multimodal approach to smartphone use in face-to-face interaction

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Obwohl Smartphones und andere mobile Endgeräte mittlerweile ein fester Bestandteil unseres Alltags sind, betonen öffentliche und wissenschaftliche Diskurse immer noch bevorzugt mögliche negative Auswirkungen ihres Gebrauchs auf Gesundheit und Kommunikationsverhalten. Dieser Beitrag skizziert einen anderen Ansatz zur Analyse alltäglichen Technologiegebrauchs, indem er zunächst auf Studien aus der angewandten Linguistik und insbesondere der interaktionalen Forschung eingeht, die sich auf dessen öffentliche Beobachtbarkeit, Mobilität und Ubiquität konzentrieren. Anhand zweier Auszüge aus videoaufgezeichneten Interaktionen wird dann aufgezeigt, wie eine multimodale und sequentielle Analyse dazu beitragen kann, Technologiegebrauch als eine routinemäßige und geordnete soziale Praktik zu verstehen, die nicht mit sozialem, kooperativem Handeln in Widerspruch steht oder dieses gefährdet. Ein detaillierter Blick auf situierten Smartphonegebrauch in informellen und institutionellen Face-to-Face-Settings lenkt die analytische Aufmerksamkeit weg von einer generisch positiven oder negativen Bewertung der Technologie hin zu verschiedenen interaktionalen Phänomenen, die mit ihrer Handhabung und Erkundung in Zusammenhang stehen. Es wird abschließend argumentiert, dass diese Art von mikroanalytischem Ansatz zu einer facettenreichen und objektiveren Perspektive auf die situierte Nutzung mobiler Geräte beitragen kann.

## **Stichwörter:**

Konversationsanalyse, multimodale Analyse, Videodaten, Technologiegebrauch, Smartphones.

## **Keywords:**

conversation analysis, multimodal analysis, video data, technology use, smartphones.

## **1. Introduction**

Smartphones and other small portable devices such as tablets or laptops have become an integral part of our daily lives within the last decade. Despite their prevalence, however, both scientific and public discourses seem to essentially adopt a critical stance towards their effects on our well-being and social conduct. In more recent years, the addictive potential of technology and social media use or its possible negative impact on social development, etiquette, and family life has been frequently underlined. While it has been shown that these "moral panics" related to new technologies change throughout the years (Leick 2019) and depend on the participants' diverging perceptions of sociability and the role of technology (Haddon 2017), reporting on the "negative effects" of new technologies remains a popular bias both in the media and in academia (see e.g. Thurlow 2014). In this paper, I wish to show how applied linguistics, and more specifically, conversation analysis, can contribute to our knowledge of

smartphone use beyond its assumed positive or negative effects. Through detailed observations of linguistic and embodied conduct, I will comment on specific social activities involving mobile devices and draw attention to research topics that are relevant to the understanding of everyday routines related to ubiquitous technologies.

This contribution will allude to the most important topics discussed in existing empirical linguistic and communication research: firstly with respect to personal mobile devices in general, and secondly with regard to their use in face-to-face encounters (section 2). The focus on the ubiquity of mobile devices in everyday social settings and how participants articulate their technology use with other communication involvements is shown to be more recent and still in need of further development. Through the application of a multimodal and sequential approach to social interaction (section 3), this paper will then present two examples from video-recorded data and thereby illustrate some interactional phenomena related to mobile device use. The first example reflects on the interactional structure of smartphone-supported 'showing' sequences in ordinary conversation and offers an understanding of smartphone use as mundane multi-activity (section 4). The second excerpt, taken from an introductory course to smartphones in an adult education centre, shows how participants engage in spontaneous peer-teaching activities and how they use technology-related talk to reduce asymmetries in digital skills (section 5). Finally, I will discuss how this type of data and analysis can contribute to a valuable understanding of social practices with and around digital devices, and a more objective evaluation of the role of technology for social conduct in general (section 6).

## 2. Research on smartphone use (in face-to-face encounters)

Soon after the massive spread of personal mobile devices, research in domains such as sociolinguistics, discourse studies and media and communication studies began investigating social and linguistic phenomena ensuing from their use. While earlier studies have been interested primarily in new forms of writing and asynchronous communication (e.g. Harper et al. 2005), the (assumed) clash of private and public communication spaces (cf. König & Oloff 2019), or the creation and role of extended social networks (e.g. Glotz et al. 2005), social and linguistic research has then shifted its focus towards increasingly diverse social media platforms (e.g. Seargeant & Tagg 2014) or to mediated social interaction (e.g. Harper et al. 2017). As an "environment of polymedia" (Madianou & Miller 2012), the smartphone itself has indeed been considered rather as a source for *producing* various texts, discourses and remote communication channels than as a *material resource* in face-to-face encounters and relevant research object in itself. Consequently, empirical research on mobile phone use in non-experimental, co-present encounters is still relatively

sparse. In line with the gradual acceleration of mobile phone use, one can distinguish three main topics of interest regarding mobile device use in co-presence, detailed below.

- *Public observability*: Early research on mobile phone use in co-presence has been interested in audible and visible reactions to public phone use. Mainly based on ethnographic observational data, photos, breaching experiments or interviews, these pioneering studies have provided valuable descriptions of how participants publicly manage the potential conflict between diverging communication involvements (e.g. Kopomaa 2000; Ling & Pedersen 2005; Höfllich et al. 2010). This type of data, however, did not allow for a more systematic description of social conduct and tended to reproduce a dichotomic view on public and private social spheres (cf. König & Oloff 2019). There have been only few early and detailed accounts of modified or new social practices resulting from mobile device use: for example, in mobile call openings (Laurier 2001; Weilenmann 2003).
- *Mobility*: While within the first wave of studies on mobile phones, researchers prioritised observing mobile device use in delimited or unchanging spatial settings, the attention was then drawn to the study of actual *mobile* use, mainly within interactional research. Participants were equipped with small recording devices, such as camera glasses or action cams; sometimes with additional screen recordings of the devices. One could thus examine how participants use their phones on the move: for instance, while commuting or driving (e.g. Haddington & Rauniomaa 2011; Licoppe & Figeac 2015), while texting and simultaneously interacting with the environment (Relieu 2008), or while exploring a city using mobile maps and other resources (e.g. Brown et al. 2013; Laurier et al. 2015). More recently, there has been increasing interest in various forms of locative media, in and through which participants can locate and meet others or playfully explore urban spaces (e.g. de Souza e Silva & Sheller 2015; Licoppe & Morel 2017). These studies mainly focus on the interaction between the phone user and their complex, changing environment, thereby underlining the management of external, material affordances or tasks rather than those of the interaction proper (however, see Thorne et al. 2015 as an exception).
- *Ubiquity*: Likely linked to the fact that smartphones have become truly pervasive within the last decade, there has been a recent growing interest in mobile device use in mundane and non-mobile interactions (e.g. in student hostels, private homes, pubs or cafés). As these settings are mainly driven by conversational activities, the focus of this type of study lies in the coordination of mobile phone use and talk. The device use can be linked or not to the ongoing talk, in that it can converge or diverge

(Brown et al. 2013). Convergent use can be either self-initiated by the user or occasioned by some previous action, such as when using the phone as a topical resource or for collaborative searches (Brown et al. 2015; Keppler 2019; Suderland 2020). Media content on the phone can be shared for joint action, such as in the case of showing pictures (Raclaw et al. 2016; Oloff 2019). Solitary (or divergent) use of a mobile device is usually displayed as being a secondary involvement (vs a primary involvement, usually the co-present encounter; DiDomenico & Boase 2013). Participants disengage from the ongoing talk for the sake of their phone as soon as they are not the primary speaker anymore and if minimal reciprocity can be maintained (DiDomenico et al. 2018), or if the general activity allows for certain "phone breaks" (Kontio & Asplund 2019). Although these studies have shown that participants treat public mobile device use usually as accountable and adapt it to the respective participation framework (Porcheron et al. 2016; Suderland 2020; Oloff 2021), more systematic descriptions of sequential action patterns related to technology use are yet to be established, and studies taking into account other face-to-face settings (such as the classroom; Sahlström et al. 2019) are still scarce. The present paper augments this line of research by contributing to furthering our understanding of how smartphones are part of our routine social conduct.

### 3. Data and method

The following analyses are based on video recordings of naturally occurring (i.e. non-experimental) social interactions in everyday social gatherings and in adult education courses. This choice has not been made in order to, for example, contrast smartphone use in informal and institutional settings, but instead to illustrate the variety of interactional phenomena and research questions related to mobile device use that can be investigated through these different types of data. The first excerpt is drawn from an informal get-together between two Czech friends at home; the second is from an introductory course to smartphones organised by a German adult education centre (for more details, cf. sections 4 and 5). Informed consent was obtained from all participants for the recording and use of the data in scientific publications. Participants' names and other personal information have been anonymised in all excerpts.

Collecting and analysing data from naturally occurring interactions is related to conversation analytic fundamental principles (Sacks 1972, 1984; see also Mondada 2012): rather than relying on participants' reports of their practices (such as through interviews or questionnaires) or on their accomplishment of specific tasks (such as in experimental settings), ethnomethodological conversation analysis (Garfinkel 1967; Sidnell & Stivers 2012) aims at discovering orderly social conduct as it spontaneously emerges and happens in various social encounters. This allows for the exploration and systematic

description of situated practices that go beyond decontextualised hypotheses about this conduct (Sacks 1984). Detailed transcripts (Jefferson 2004) reveal the dynamics between initial and responsive social actions and enable the comparison of similar action types and the recognition of regular patterns (Schegloff 2007). By adding precisely aligned annotations of embodied conduct and video stills, a multimodal approach (e.g. Goodwin 1981; Deppermann & Streeck 2018; Mondada 2018, 2019) will be used to understand how participants refer to, observe or handle mobile devices, and how this relates to the overall encounter.

#### 4. Smartphone use in everyday communication

In everyday face-to-face settings, smartphones are recurrently used for showing images, videos or text to co-present participants. Based on an excerpt in Czech, we will first examine how this type of mobile device use might affect the ongoing conversation. During an informal get-together at Yveta's home, two friends are having coffee and chatting about various topics related to their families, everyday chores and leisure time. Prior to the excerpt, Yveta (YVE) and Marta (MAR) have been talking about YVE's recipe for potato salad, and MAR then enquired how long this salad could be kept once prepared. She now expands on the recipe topic by initiating a new sequence (l. 1) on a dish her sister prepared last year during a joint vacation. YVE not only provides a delayed first answer to this new sequence (l. 6) but also introduces a seemingly unrelated topic, and switches from Czech to German (l. 10):

##### (1) CAJ\_1412\_5300\_stika\_beginning

- 1 MAR .h ségra dělala, (.)  
 .h (my) sister did (.)  
 2 minulej rok; (.) ale my jsme  
 last year (.) but we are  
 3 vždycky na horách; °že jo°  
 always in the mountains; °huh°  
 4 (0.7)  
 5 MAR .ts [takže] tam#1 je te:; (.)&  
 .ts [so ] there is th:- (.)&  
 6 YVE [°no:°]  
 [yeah ]  
 7 MAR &to nakupování trochu těžší,  
 &the shopping a bit more difficult  
 8 .H a dělala podle:: (.)  
 .H and she did according to(.)  
 9 podle nějaký tý::=  
 according to some of these::=  
 10 YVE =<der hecht.#2((in German))>  
 =<the pike ((in German))>  
 11 (2.3)  
 12 MAR <der hecht.((G))>(.) mh;\_hm:,&  
 <the pike ((G))>(.) mh;\_hm:,&



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

YVE self-selects (l. 10) before MAR has syntactically completed the last part of her multi-unit turn (l. 7-9), in which she seeks to formulate the source of her



sister's recipe. The figures show that at the beginning of MAR's turn, YVE is already looking at her smartphone (Fig. 1, l. 5), and that her 'interruption' of MAR's turn relates to something that she seems to have found on her phone and that she is now showing (Fig. 2, l. 10). While this could be interpreted as a prototypical example of the intrusive potential of mobile devices, MAR then responds to the showing instead of continuing her own turn (l. 12). A more detailed look at a longer version of this excerpt (including multimodal annotations) illustrates how both participants handle the phone use with respect to their previous and ongoing conversation.

## (2) CAJ\_5300\_stika\_multimodal

- 1 MAR .h \*ségra €dělala, (.) minulej rok; (.)  
 .h (my) sister did (.) last year (.)  
 yve >>gazes down at phone display----->1.6  
 yve \*1.tap (opens keyboard)  
 dis €keyboard opens on screen
- 2 ale my jsme vždycky na ho\*rách; °že jo°  
 but we are always in the mountains; °huh°  
 yve \*2.tap
- 3 \*(0.2) \*(0.5)  
 yve \*3.tap \*4.tap
- 4 MAR .ts [\*takže] tam \*je te:; (.) to nakupování\* trochu €těžší,&  
 .ts [so] there is th- (.) the shopping a bit more difficult&
- 5 YVE [\*°no:°]  
 [ yeah ]  
 yve \*5.tap \*6.tap \*7.tap (enter)  
 dis €new page

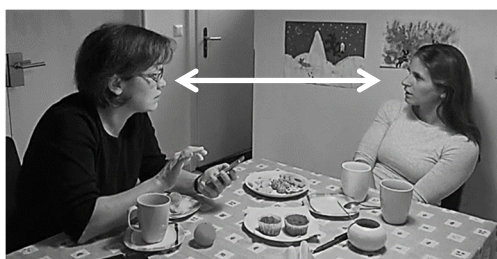


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

- 6 MAR &\*.H a dělala +po#3dle:~+ (.) podle #4nějaký tý::~=  
 & .H and she did according to: (.) according to some of the::~se=  
 yve >\*...gaze MAR-----\*,,,gaze down/phone-----\*...>  
 yve >holds phone with left hand & right hand up-----\*...>  
 mar >gaze t/right----+YVE-----+,,,down----->
- 7 YVE =der he+cht.#5  
 =<the pike((in German))>  
 yve >..turns gaze & phone to MAR->  
 mar >down--+...gaze YVE->
- 8 (0.4)+(0.4)+((0.2)\*#6(1.0)+#7(0.3)  
 mar >YVE-+gaze phone----->  
 mar +..leans fwd...+---->  
 yve >-----\*..moves phone  
 closer to MAR->



Fig. 5 (= Fig. 2)

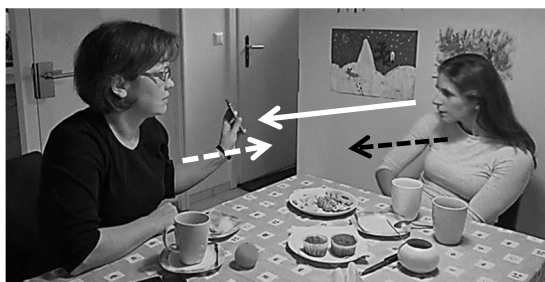


Fig. 6

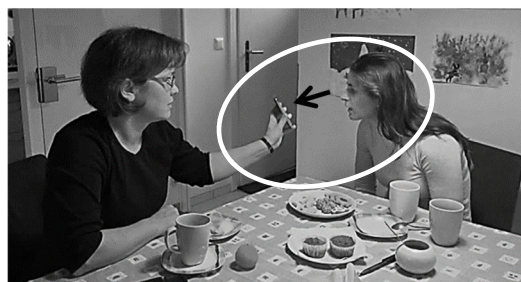


Fig. 7

- 9 MAR der hecht. (.) mh;\_hm:, a- a+dej to tam do francouzštiny?#8  
 <the pike((G))>(.) mh;\_hm:, and- and put it there to French?  
 yve >holds phone for MAR---\* , , , , , , ,  
 mar >gaze display-----+ .gaze phone-->
- 10 (0.5)  
 11 YVE \*°francouzs\*+ky°  
 (in) French  
 yve \*..index t/display\*1.tap  
 mar >gaze phone-+ , , , , ,  
 mar +...leans back->
- 12 MAR mh;\_hm,  
 13 (0.6)  
 14 YVE °šti\*ka°  
 °pike°  
 yve \*2.tap
- 15 MAR .h:: +(0.3) tady ta Sedláčková;#9  
 .h:: (0.3) here this ((name of Czech chef))  
 mar +...gaze YVE-->
- 16 (0.2)\*  
 yve \*3.tap
- 17 YVE \*.H[::, (.) je::=#10 jo; počke:j;  
 .H[::, (.) ye::=# yes; wait
- 18 MAR [ty seš na ni někdy koukala?]  
 [have you ever watched her? ]  
 yve \*...gaze MAR, phone/index hold----->

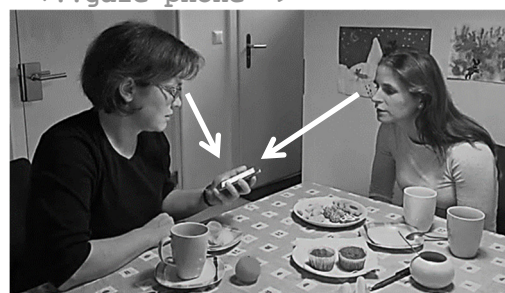


Fig. 8

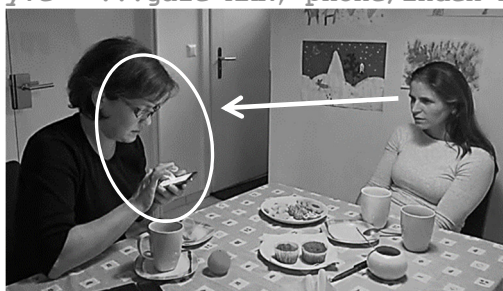


Fig. 9

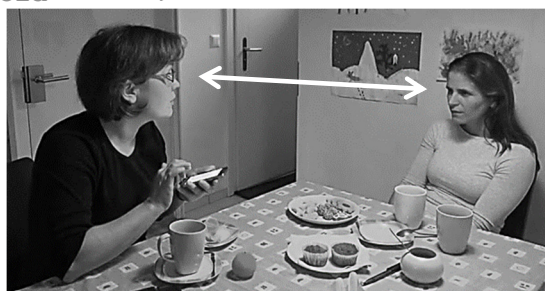


Fig. 10

The multimodal annotations show that YVE is tapping seven times on the display of her phone (l. 1-5). The first tap (l. 1) is carried out in simultaneous onset with MAR's new turn, both actions hinting at the presence of a previous transition-relevance place (Sacks et al. 1974). Although following this first tap, the keyboard appears at the bottom of the smartphone display (l. 1), YVE enters the first letter only towards the end of MAR's next turn-constructural unit (l. 2; note that it is also the first syntactically complete clause of MAR's turn). YVE enters the next two letters during the following pause (l. 3), which can explain the absence of an immediate response to MAR (cf. the TCU-final tag, l. 2). While



delivering her delayed answer (l. 5), YVE continues to enter text on her phone, appearing nevertheless to be sensitive towards MAR's incremental turn production as her taps on the display are timed in relation to transition-relevance places or syntactic phrases. More generally, the typing is started and carried out during a part of MAR's talk that provides additional information to the main line of talk (which has been previously suspended; see the syntactically incomplete turn in l. 1, cf. Mazeland 2007). As a new page is loading on the display, YVE's last finger tap can be understood as having pressed the 'enter' key (l. 4). Immediately afterwards, YVE looks up to MAR, who is now linking back to her host turn (l. 6). MAR, who has previously gazed in different directions (but not at YVE), now also shifts her gaze to YVE so that they briefly engage in mutual gaze (Fig. 3). It is also at this moment that the progressivity of MAR's turn comes to a halt (on *podle*::, "according to"). MAR then withdraws her gaze and restarts her turn, while YVE is looking back at the phone display (Fig. 4, l. 6). When MAR enters a possible word search (cf. the vowel stretching on the final demonstrative, l. 6), YVE starts moving her left arm (and the phone) outwards and directing her gaze to MAR. Through the simultaneous presentation of the phone, her noun phrase 'the pike' can be understood as referring to what is on display (l. 7, Fig. 5).

These first lines show that YVE's individual smartphone use is sensitive to the grammatical and pragmatic development of her co-participant's audible action. YVE also aligns to it by providing an adequate verbal response (l. 5). Finally, she does not immediately present the smartphone to MAR as soon as a result seems to be available on display: instead, she monitors MAR beforehand (l. 6, leading to a mutual gaze and possibly foreshadowing a subsequent action from her side) and self-selects only when MAR's ongoing turn has come to an audible halt in progressivity (Lerner 1996). Thus, YVE chooses to introduce the phone by taking into consideration the basic rules of speaker change (Sacks et al. 1974). The fact that MAR does not continue her turn even for one beat (or engage in competitive overlapping talk; Schegloff 2000) also underlines the unproblematic character of this speaker transition.

Whereas one might think that it is through holding up the phone in the co-participant's direction that the showing is carried out, the multimodal annotations of the following pause demonstrate that, in fact, "showing" involves several action pairs (Oloff 2019). YVE's turn in l. 7 is to be understood as an initial action most likely relating to some text on the screen. Due to the distance between the display and MAR, however, it is merely an announcement rather than a showing proper. In response to this, MAR first directs her gaze to YVE's face (l. 7, Fig. 5), and then, after 0.4 seconds, to the phone display (beginning of l. 8, cf. Fig. 6). After another 0.4 seconds, MAR starts moving her upper body forward while opening her mouth (l. 8, Fig. 6). YVE treats this movement as a "go-ahead" response to the showing: shortly after the beginning of MAR's movement, she

starts moving the phone and display closer to MAR's face (l. 8, Fig. 7). It is in the remaining 0.3 seconds of the pause that MAR can inspect the on-screen content. Only when the recipient of the showing – here, MAR – is physically able and enabled to perceive something on the display, can they formulate a response to the visual content in a next step (l. 9). Here, the full repeat illustrates that MAR is reading from the screen (rather than, for instance, assessing), as her next-positioned response token and her slight concurrent head nods also show. It is only after the first syllable of this response token has been produced that YVE starts retracting the phone (l. 9). Thus, before the showing can truly occur, the showing participant (here, YVE) first establishes mutual gaze with the potential recipient and waits for them to turn their focus of attention towards the device and, as such, to display their readiness to look at it. The participants then arrange a bodily and artefactual constellation that ensures the visibility of the on-screen content and allows for its actual showing. The ensuing visual inspection makes relevant a recipient response acknowledging in some way the perception of the visual content.

Although YVE introduces a new topic at this moment (l. 7), the fact that MAR neither initiates repair nor produces a change-of-state token (Heritage 1984) indicates that what is shown on screen might not be new information with regard to the overall conversation. This is also supported by MAR's turn continuation, starting with *a*, "and" (l. 9). Indeed, more than one minute before, the two women had talked about the preparation of pike and explicitly sought for a translation of this word from Czech to other languages, which initially triggered YVE's smartphone use. It should be underlined that even without knowing about the participants' previous conversational topics and actions, the precise turn and sequence formatting (or the absence of specific actions, such as repair) provide for an understanding of the "non-newness" of the smartphone use at this point. MAR then asks YVE to search for a translation to French of the Czech word for "pike" (*štika*, l. 14, cf. YVE's previous five taps l. 1-4), her deictic *tam* "there" being disambiguated by her continuous gaze towards the phone (Fig. 8, cf. Stukenbrock 2018).

YVE responds to this request by looking back at her phone and starting to enter the new search request (l. 11, cf. Fig. 9). She also responds verbally by first repeating the core feature of the new search – the adjective "French" – and thereby displays her compliance with MAR's request (see also her "search-accompanying comment" in l. 14, Suderland 2020). After this response, MAR dissolves her inspecting posture and leans back again (l. 11, compare Fig. 8 and 9). She then initiates a new sequence (l. 15), tying it topically loosely back to her previous telling about her sister cooking a specific recipe (likely by the chef in question). As she does not use any particular lexical or other resumption technique (Mazeland & Huiskes 2001), MAR treats the suspension of her prior turn (l. 6-7) as unproblematic and the showing sequence, in turn, as topically

relevant (De Stefani & Horlacher 2008: 395-397). She also clearly orients to YVE's ability to manage both her individual searching activity and the conversation. While YVE first continues to use her phone (l. 16), she looks up to MAR at the next transition-relevance place. She thus displays her attention to the talk (l. 17, Fig. 10), momentarily suspending the text input while also verbally responding to MAR's strongly response-implicative polar question (l. 17-18). YVE will present the result of this second online search only a few turns later (not shown).

This first example has demonstrated how a detailed analysis of verbal and embodied conduct can lead to a profound understanding of how mundane technologies are used in everyday communication:

- Much like other types of multi-activity (Haddington et al. 2014), participants manage mobile device use and other conversational or practical activities in parallel or by momentarily suspending or delaying particular actions. Even individual smartphone use is notably sensitive to the ongoing turn and the sequential development: that is, the ongoing talk is still treated as a primary involvement. Altogether, the minute, joint coordination of talk and technology use shows how the mobile device becomes both a social object and a resource for social interaction.
- Even if participants *can* indicate the problematic nature of smartphone use through specific subsequent action types or action formatting, no trouble-indicating action formats occur in the excerpt that has been analysed here. Consequently, we can claim that smartphone use in co-presence is not problematic *per se*. Thus, even if, at first sight, the handling of a mobile device appears to be disruptive to the conversation, this claim needs to be analytically grounded in the presence of trouble-related actions.
- Participants frequently have a precise motivation for using their phone in co-presence of others: for example, a topic proffer, a request, or an announcement of this use has been previously formulated. Mobile device use in co-presence is, therefore, usually subject to joint negotiation, and participants can be held accountable for the absence of this negotiation (e.g. Robles et al. 2018; Oloff 2021).
- Unconstrained smartphone use enables us to observe the complexity of basic social practices that both the participants and analysts tend to overlook. Showing something on a smartphone display involves more than just holding up the phone: as for other joint social activities, it requires a stepwise and coordinated entry therein, which is shown by various systematically occurring action pairs (Oloff 2019). The precise way in which a showing is initiated and carried out reveals something about the type of object to be shown (Rosenbaun & Licoppe 2017), both concerning its material features and its topicality within the ongoing conversation.

While the first example has allowed me to comment on some features of routinised smartphone use in everyday social encounters, in the next section, I will focus on an educational setting that specifically targets the handling of mobile devices by less experienced users.

## 5. Learning how to use smartphones

Learning how to use new technologies is a fundamental element of everyday communication activities, and older adults typically obtain hands-on training regarding computers, smartphones or tablets when interacting with family members or peers (e.g. Busch 2018). It might, therefore, be difficult to get hold of these mundane learning opportunities as they frequently emerge in a contingent and unplanned way. In contrast, adult education provides a precise framework for gaining insights into the ways digital skills are explained, instructed and practised. Previous research has been particularly interested in how (very) young participants are introduced to and use mundane technologies in their daily (institutional) routines (Lahikainen et al. 2017; Parry et al. 2017; Sahlström et al. 2019). The acquisition of digital skills at a more advanced age has been mainly investigated on the basis of surveys or interviews (e.g. Selwyn et al. 2006; Quan-Haase et al. 2016), meaning that the *situated* learning of mundane technologies by older adults has rarely been considered (Weilenmann 2010).

I will use an excerpt from an introductory course to Android smartphones provided by a German adult education centre in order to outline some of the possible phenomena and research questions for which the analysis of video-recorded non-experimental educational settings allows. This example is part of a three-session course (about 3 hours each) in 2019, of which two sessions have been recorded.<sup>1</sup> Preceding the excerpt, the eight participants have learned how to carry out web searches through text input in a browser. The instructor, Mr Behnke (BEN), then seeks to demonstrate how to carry out searches via voice command: namely, by using the Google app and the built-in microphone function. He has previously pointed at the app icon on the smartboard screen (Fig. 11, cf. the black circle), then shown the corresponding widget (Fig. 12) on his phone and checked if the participants had either the app or the widget on their devices.

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<sup>1</sup> These data have been collected within the frame of the project "Smart Communication: The situated practices of mobile technology and digital literacies" (Academy of Finland, 2019–2023, project number: 323848). I would like to thank the course instructor and participants for their cooperation and interest.



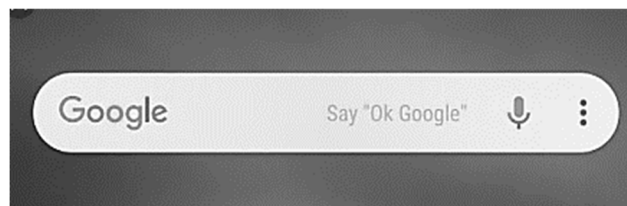
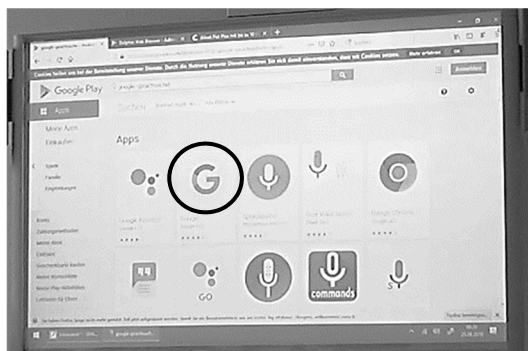


Fig. 11: The smartboard screen shown (ex. 3-5) Fig. 12: Google widget with microphone icon

The next step in discovering the voice assistant starts when BEN mentions the microphone icon for the first time, simultaneously pointing to the top of his phone display where the widget is usually located (ex. 3, l. 1, see Fig. 13). The participants are now meant to find the microphone icon on their own devices (l. 7). The example is divided into three consecutive parts (ex. 3-5), each focusing on a specific sequence.

### (3) VHSD\_2519\_001444\_mikro\_part 1

- 1 BEN =SO: da is ja\$\*so n#13 klei%nes mikrofon, drin;  
=so there's now such a little microphone inside  
ben \$ppp to widget/display-ppp----->  
thi \*gazes down at her own phone---->  
kle >gaze in front/BEN-----%gaze own phone>1.32  
2 (.) wenn\* sie \*dies; (0.3)\$\*wenn sie die\_äh  
(.) if you open this (0.3) if you open the er  
thi >-----\*..head t/ZAN----->  
thi \*.....\*ppp mic ZAN's SP->  
ben >-----pppppppppp\$, ,turns/gaze phone  
3 (.) #14app auf[\*machen\$ oder das widget;  
(.) app (o[pen) or the widget  
4 ZAN [°ja;°  
[ yes  
thi >-----\* , , , ,  
ben >-----\$ppp widget/corner>



Fig. 13

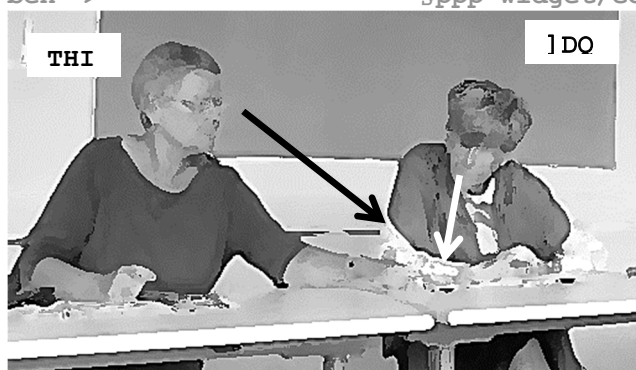


Fig. 14



Fig. 15

- 5 (0.4)  
6 FF1 mhm:;\_mh,  
7 BEN sehen sie da son kleines+ mikrofon?#15  
do you see such a little microphone there?  
sch >gaze front/BEN-----+...gaze down/phone->

While BEN starts calling the participants' attention to the existence of the "little microphone" (l. 1, Fig. 13), Mrs Thies (THI), seated to his left, brings her gaze quickly to her own smartphone lying on the table in front of her. She then turns her head to Mrs Zander (ZAN), who is sitting to her left, and moves her index finger towards her seatmate's phone display (l. 2, Fig. 14). THI is now pointing at the top-right corner of the display, where the microphone icon in the widget is usually located. We can thus conclude that THI has already found the icon on her own phone, although the participants have not yet been explicitly instructed to do so (cf. l. 7). While ZAN has, by now, directed her gaze towards the display (Fig. 14), THI is holding both her pointing and her bodily orientation until ZAN has audibly acknowledged the icon's location (l. 4). This indicates that THI's pointing was indeed designed to help ZAN accomplish this task, without, however, ZAN having explicitly displayed any trouble regarding this.

One more participant confirms having identified the icon (l. 6) before BEN formulates the instruction proper in a polar interrogative format (l. 7). In the meantime, he has adopted another way of showing the phone display, now pointing at the widget in which the icon is located (Fig. 15). He neither describes what the icon looks like nor points to the various similar icons visible on the smartboard screen (Fig. 11); the participants must now identify it on their own devices independently. BEN's gaze is wandering around the classroom (cf. Fig. 13, 15) in order to monitor the participants' responses to the task. The multimodal annotation shows that THI is not the only participant having anticipated BEN's instruction: in l. 1, Mrs Klein (KLE) starts looking down at her phone shortly after BEN has begun his first pointing (Fig. 13). She, however, does not redirect her gaze to BEN or to a co-participant (such as THI did) which projects possible trouble: indeed, KLE subsequently claims that she doesn't 'see anything there' (on the display, l. 11), and she also reaffirms this by a "no" in response to the instructor's check in l. 14 (l. 16, compare with THI's positive responses, l. 15, 17):

(4) VHSD\_2519\_001444\_mikro\_part 2 (continuation of ex. 3)

```

8  FF2  °ja: , °
      yes
9  SCH  (°also; °)
      (so)
      sch >gazes at her phone->
10      (1.3)
11  KLE  °ich seh da nischt; °
      I don't see anything there
12      (0.6)+
      sch >----+...turns head to KLE->
13      (3.1)
14  BEN  hat jeder ge$sehen?
      has everyone seen (it)?
      ben >gaze t/right$gaze front/KLE->
15  THI  +mhm_hm,=#16
      sch +..gets up from chair and bends
          twd KLE, looks at display

```



Fig. 16

16 KLE %nee.  
no  
kle %headshake  
17 THI \$ja,  
yes  
ben \$,,,,  
18 (0.25)  
19 KLE \$sick seh bloss irgendson rad;  
I just see some kind of wheel  
ben \$...moves to KLE->  
20 (0.6)  
21 KLE °x#17 x,°  
22 (0.3)  
23 KLE °wo is hier det [mikro;° ]  
where is the [mic (here)]  
24 SCH [genau; ] [+das- das- ] das.  
[exactly ] [this this ] this (one)  
25 BEN [\$da#18hinten.]  
[there in the back]  
sch  
ben  
26 % (0.2)  
kle %...>  
27 KLE %\$des +hier?  
this (one) here?  
ben >\$,,,  
kle %ppp twd icon->  
sch >ppppp+,,,,  
28 BEN \$ja%:  
yes  
kle >--%,,,  
ben \$,,,straightens up and goes  
backwards to the front  
29 + (0.3)  
sch +,,,straightens up and sits  
down again->

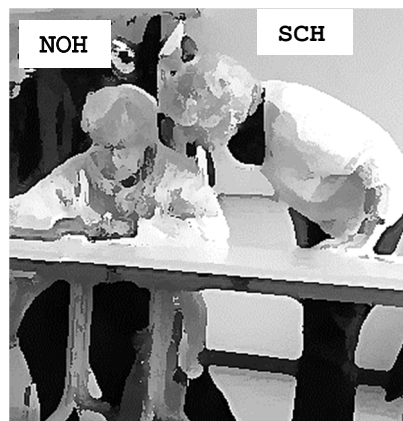


Fig. 17



Fig. 18

While KLE has not formulated an explicit request for help, the seatmate to her left, Mrs Schulz (SCH), quickly responds to her trouble report (l. 11, Kendrick & Drew 2016: 6-7). SCH, for her side, has brought her gaze down towards her own phone during BEN's first explicit instruction (l. 7), her turn in l. 9 possibly relating to the successful identification of the icon. Her following action confirms this: much like what THI did earlier, she now turns her head and gazes towards KLE (l. 12). Meanwhile, BEN has also moved his gaze in KLE's direction (l. 14), meaning that both BEN and SCH can perceive KLE's body posture as displaying trouble (see Fig. 16, *ibid.*: 8-9). SCH now gets up from her chair and bends down to KLE (l. 15, Fig. 17). When BEN is also moving towards her, KLE describes what she can see (l. 19, "some kind of wheel"). Interestingly, she formulates more explicit descriptions of the trouble once two participants are perceivably orienting to her (see also l. 23, "where is the mic"). These "updates" provide first SCH, and then BEN, with more information about the actual trouble and display, at the same time, KLE's attempt to independently accomplish the task. While KLE utters the more descriptive turn (l. 19) when SCH is standing next to her, she formulates the explicit question (l. 23) when BEN is standing in

front of her. This displays KLE's orientation to different rights and obligations in asking for help: whereas a classmate can provide assistance, but *cannot be expected* to do so, the course leader can be *expected* to help (e.g. by presenting an answer to an information request such as 'where is x?'; cf. Kendrick & Drew 2014). SCH and BEN then assist KLE in finding the icon by formulating its location and pointing at it (l. 24-25, Fig. 18). They withdraw their pointing once KLE has responded by bodily and verbally pointing at a possible candidate herself (l. 27, "this one here?"), and then they move back to their respective initial positions (l. 28-29).

Directly afterwards, THI comments on the icon's appearance, describing it as looking "like a flower" (the top part possibly resembling a pistil, cf. Fig. 12), a description with which both previously assisted participants ZAN and KLE immediately agree (l. 30-32):

(5) VHSD\_2519\_001444\_mikro\_part 3 (continuation of ex. 4)

30 THI sieht aus \*wie ne blume.  
it looks like a flower  
thi gaze down-\*...gaze KLE->  
31 ZAN °ja genau° [°xxx°  
yes exactly [ xxx  
32 KLE [%aber ehr\*lich.  
[ well really  
kle >gaze down/SP%...gaze THI->  
thi \*...smiles->>  
33 THI es soll aber n mikrofon sein.#19  
but it's meant to be a microphone



Fig. 19

34 SCH oder [wie n maiskolben.]  
or [like a corncob ]  
35 KLE [na das müssen sie aber nochma er]klären;  
[well they really have to explain this] once more  
36 [wa? (0.3) daneben ] schreiben;  
[huh? (0.3) write (it)] next to it  
37 THI [\*th: hehe, sh:: ]  
thi >\*, , , ,

THI's self-selection and her gaze towards KLE (l. 30, leading to mutual gaze, Fig. 19), demonstrate that she has listened in on the previous problem-solving activity (her turn setting in as soon as the sequence is closed). Her compound turn ("it looks like a flower", l. 30, "but it's meant to be a microphone", l. 33) condenses the possible problem and the reason for it; it is not about finding an icon in general, but of associating the shape of the available icon to that of a microphone. By alluding to its design, THI publicly reduces KLE's potential



responsibility for her problem and legitimises her request for assistance. SCH affiliates with THI's action by providing another description of the icon ("or like a corncob", l. 34). Noticeably, the two participants providing a description of the icon's design are the ones who did not have any trouble in identifying it and who assisted their co-participants with this task (THI and SCH), while the two participants responding to these descriptions are indeed the ones having received help (ZAN and KLE, l. 31-32). In a subsequent turn, KLE aligns with THI's previous action by explicitly criticising the lack of user friendliness of the icon design, which, according to her, should be supplemented with further explanations or a written note (l. 35-36). THI audibly affiliates by producing some laughter particles (l. 37, Glenn 2003).

THI's complaint provides an opportunity for KLE to produce a second complaint (Selting 2012). While THI clearly did not have any trouble in identifying the icon herself, her formulation of an "objective" reason for failing in this task offers a new possibility of categorising the participants: whereas the preceding sequences have established a possible contrast between participants immediately and independently finding the icon and those having trouble doing so, THI's turn enables the interactive establishment of another category. Singling out the opacity of the visual design relativises both THI's displayed expertise and the possible absence thereof in other participants. By jointly engaging in a friendly complaint sequence about "bad" design, the possible asymmetry between assisting and assisted participants is balanced out. Through mutual alignment in this short sequence, the participants display their affiliation to the same group (Markaki et al. 2010): that of participants learning to cope with technology and technology-related problems.

The second example (i.e. ex. 3-5) has illustrated how non-expert mobile device users in an adult education course respond to instructions and thereby demonstrate their mastery and understanding (or lack thereof) of the task, of mobile devices and of the educational setting in general:

- While the course instructor is assisting the participants in accomplishing individual tasks (and is expected to do so), course participants are observed to frequently engage in spontaneous peer assistance without having been asked. These assisting sequences can be positioned early with respect to the official instruction and thus anticipate possible trouble (ex. 3) or occur in post-instructional position and after a participant has displayed some trouble (ex. 4). Regardless of the volunteered or responsive nature of this peer assistance, the assisting participant usually orients to the production of an audible response from the assisted co-participant before closing the sequence.
- Even during the post-instructional opportunity to ask for assistance, participants rarely seem to ask for help explicitly. They rather rely on embodied trouble displays or verbal trouble reports (ex. 4). It might be that



a 'literal' or structurally type-conforming response to the instructor's offer for assistance (e.g. "Have you seen x?" – "I don't see anything"; "Has everyone seen it?" – "No") is the preferred way of formulating a trouble report in this setting, and that this relates to a matter of responsibility for initiating the assistance (Kendrick & Drew 2016: 11; Fig. 6).

- Despite perceivable differences in digital skills (e.g. assistance sequences making relevant the dichotomic categories of *assisting* and *assisted* participant), participants can skilfully overcome this asymmetry by engaging in joint joking or complaint sequences (ex. 5), thus proposing new membership categories with which all participants can affiliate.
- Beyond their potential for establishing group cohesion, complaints about technology features or tasks also reveal what type of difficulties non-experts are facing when learning about mobile devices (Weilenmann 2010). Here, the difficulty in relating BEN's instruction to the corresponding icon hints at a lack of experience in identifying generic technology-related icons and their meaning. By publicly manipulating, orienting to, and commenting on their mobile devices in specific ways, the course participants can display a lack of understanding or ask for assistance, which can then lead to further, customised instructions.

## 6. Conclusion

Since their mass-market launch, smartphones have been criticised for their isolating or addictive potential; they have, however, also been celebrated for their capacity to produce big and easily quantifiable data and for facilitating remote communication and the production of various digital texts. A considerably smaller number of studies has acknowledged mobile devices as social objects in face-to-face encounters. This paper aimed at showing how applied linguistics can contribute to this latter line of research in the digital age. This has been exemplified by analysing two examples from video-recorded social interaction, the first from everyday conversation among friends, the second from an adult education centre course on smartphones.

In the first excerpt, we took a closer look at a seemingly problematic incident, as the current speaker has been possibly interrupted by her co-participant's smartphone use. However, the analysis of verbal and embodied action has shown that the smartphone holder's handling of the device was actually adapted to the interactional organisation of the ongoing talk and treated by her co-participant as unproblematic, which illustrated that the device use must have been announced or negotiated earlier. More generally, participants carefully choose when and how to use and orient to mobile devices in face-to-face encounters; they do so accountably, and frequently design this use or their response to it with respect to the ongoing or some projected joint action. If it is

claimed that the handling of a smartphone comes into conflict with other activities, this should be based on observations regarding specific trouble-indicating actions. Moreover, the showing sequence in this excerpt illustrated the complexity of social actions involving mobile devices. While it has already been shown that mobile devices are skilfully integrated in our everyday conversations, more micro-analytic descriptions are needed in order to systematise these findings.

The second excerpt provided an example of situated learning of mobile device use. Within this institutional setting, the participants have not yet or only partially established routines concerning the handling and understanding of their smartphone, which allows for the discovery of usually hidden everyday learning processes. Here, the analysis focused on how the participants respond to the instruction of locating an icon on their phone. Their responses revealed heterogeneous skills, with some participants being able to anticipate the task while others had trouble in independently accomplishing the task. From the instructor's point of view, this asymmetry is challenging, but it can also lead to a more active involvement of the course participants: they can become co-instructors at specific moments, either by volunteering and thus anticipating their co-participants' possible problems, or by responding to others' multimodal trouble displays. These sequences of spontaneously occurring peer assistance also reveal the type of concrete technology-related problems participants can have, and that will differ from decontextualised formulations of such problems that can be obtained through interviews and questionnaires. Furthermore, situated technology-related troubles or assessments can also contribute to the understanding of problematic interface designs or recurrent problems for less experienced users, which can lead to possible modifications of these interfaces or of the instructions on how to use them.

As most of us have become more and more accustomed to mobile communication technologies within recent decades, the scientific interest has been rather directed towards perceivably new(er) technologies and platforms. However, the digital is not solely to be found online or remotely; it is also an important part of our communication conduct in face-to-face encounters. A micro-analytic approach that investigates digital practices also as part and parcel of situated social conduct can contribute to grasping the role and materiality of everyday technologies for our linguistic and social routines. By providing analyses of detailed and empirically observable practices with and around smartphones, the domain of applied linguistics can usefully contribute to "de-dramatising" overly pessimistic or otherwise biased discourses on everyday technologies.

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## Appendix

### Transcription conventions

The excerpts have been transcribed based on Jefferson's (2004) and Mondada's (2019) conventions.

|           |                                                                                         |       |                      |
|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|----------------------|
| [         | overlap                                                                                 | (.)   | micro-pause          |
| (2.1)     | pauses in seconds                                                                       | x     | inaudible syllable   |
| , ?       | mid-rising, rising intonation                                                           | exTRA | accentuated syllable |
| ; .       | mid-falling, falling intonation                                                         | :     | vowel lengthening    |
| ((cough)) | non-transcribed phenomena                                                               | .h    | inbreath             |
| < >       | delimitation of phenomena in (( ))                                                      | par-  | cut-off              |
| &         | continuation of speaking turn                                                           | =     | latching             |
| + *%\$    | signs delimiting the annotation of participants' gaze, gesture, or other visible action |       |                      |
| ...       | onset of visible action                                                                 |       |                      |
| ---       | visible action is held or continued                                                     |       |                      |
| ,,,       | retraction of visible action                                                            |       |                      |
| ppp       | pointing gesture                                                                        |       |                      |