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"*We don't need to abide by that!*"

Negotiating Professional Roles in Problem-Solving Talk at Work

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Abstract

In this paper we examine the dynamics of problem-solving as emergent and situated in interaction. We focus on the ways in which interactants negotiate their professional roles during the course of the business meeting event. We zoom in on the processes of formulating, negotiating and ratifying an issue as a problem and we argue that individuals negotiate their stances in relation to their perceived/projected professional roles. The processes of problem-solving are, simultaneously, processes of self/other positioning. We take an Interactional Sociolinguistic perspective and draw on audio-recorded meeting talk collected in a multinational corporate workplace. Our analysis shows that interactants draw on issues of accountability, perceived/projected responsibilities and expertise in pursuit of their own interactional agenda in the problem-solving meeting. We close the paper with directions for further research.

Keywords

Problem-solving talk; role negotiation; workplace discourse; interactional sociolinguistics; formulating; negotiating; resuming; business meetings; organisational communication; multinational corporate workplace

Introduction

Problem-solving is a high-stakes activity that has important implications for both individuals and organisations. What exactly 'counts' as an organisational problem, however, is much less straightforward. Multinational contexts represent a domain in which individuals and organisations operate at the interface of organisational, linguistic, geographic, and professional boundaries (Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2017). A range of 'problems' emerge in such a context, with employees often finding themselves in competing and conflicting roles when negotiating role-responsibilities in teams across different subsidiaries and countries (e.g. Haynes, 2018).

This article discusses problem-solving in the corporate meeting event. We focus on how interactants negotiate their own agendas and that of their interlocutors' in the problem-solving meeting. We pay attention to the interactional activities of formulating and ratifying an issue as a problem that emerges in the timeframe of the event. We are particularly interested in the ways in which professional roles are enacted which, we argue, are directly related to the negotiation of a problem, as well as a commitment to any action (Angouri, 2018; Halvorsen and Sarangi, 2015).

Organisational problem-solving activities have been examined from a range of non-linguistic perspectives. Organisational behaviourist and cognitivist approaches are common. In most cases, these approaches treat the problem as, more or less, a given, and problem-solving as constituting technical and generalizable steps or rules in a linear process (e.g. Posen *et al.*, 2018). This approach does not typically address the role of interaction in, and through, which problems are talked into

being (Sarangi and Roberts, 1999). It excludes the processes through which problems are negotiated and ratified by the individuals.

At the same time, workplace discourse studies focus on language used in different contexts, and the social meaning associated with the interactants' language choices and other semiotic recourses mobilised in interaction. It is through, and in, interaction that individuals construct and negotiate professional knowledge and complex work practices; simultaneously, through the same process, the organisation itself comes into being. A rich body of literature on workplace interaction exists, yet, with a few exceptions, relatively little workplace sociolinguistic research has explored how employees *do* problems in interaction (e.g. Holmes and Stubbe, 2015; Angouri and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011). There is a need for further research into the sociolinguistics of problem-solving, an area of study to which our paper seeks to contribute.

We draw on the corpus from one case study conducted in a British sales subsidiary of a Korean multinational company, Eco UK. HQ-subsidiary relationships have attracted considerable interest in business literature, particularly in terms of the organisations' conflicting interests: the 'ownership rights' or controls over symbolic and material resources (e.g. Mudambi *et al.*, 2014). From a workplace discourse perspective, however, organisational relationships and power (im)balances cannot be explained by reference to an organisational flowchart alone. Rather, it is through the situated processes – in which the negotiation of self/other and (organisational) interests in critical events such as resource allocation takes place (Geppert and Dörrenbächer, 2014) – that hierarchies emerge. We discuss this further in the light of our data.

We are particularly interested in the meeting event, commonly defined as the 'microcosm' of an organisation. Meetings provide the context in which new knowledge is constructed, and professional roles and identities are negotiated. Research on meeting interactions has shown the ways in which groups make decisions, agree (or not) on problems, and bring their practices and

processes under scrutiny (e.g. Alby and Zucchermaglio, 2006; Asmuß and Oshima, 2012). The prevalence and significance of meetings in any type of professional environment, therefore, make them ideal candidates for the study of relationships and ways of doing.

We have organised the paper into four parts. First, we discuss sociolinguistic research on problem-solving discourse, the role of enactment in interaction, and our methods and data to capture the dynamics of problem-solving interaction. We then turn to the analysis that illustrates employees' negotiation of roles in interaction and propose a visual representation of interactional moves in the timeline of the problem-solving event. We close the paper by discussing how problem-solving emerges locally and providing directions for further research.

Problem-solving discourse

We understand problems as socially constructed and emergent in interaction. (Socio-)linguistic research (Cicourel, 1988; Huisman, 2001) has shown that problems, as well as decisions, are not ready-made, and it is difficult, even in retrospect, to specify the exact moment when they are agreed upon. Sarangi and Roberts (1999), for example, argue that 'decision making is not simply out there waiting to be realised in some common-sense way' (p. 34). Problems, as well as decisions, need be understood as locally constructed in relation to organisational activities and situations. Thus, analysis of problem-solving requires an understanding of the workplace context, encompassing organisational structure, ideologies and local team practices (Roberts, 2010: 221).

In past research (Angouri & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011) we framed organisational problems as *work-related topics associated with potentially negative consequences raised by an employee and ratified as requiring further or different to current action*. This definition of 'problem' points to a social phenomenon achieved in interactional processes in, and through, which interactants negotiate and reach agreement, situated in local practices and a broader institutional and social context. In

this regard, we examine the interaction that employees perceive as having a primarily problem-solving function.

Problem-solving interaction is characterised by task- and resolution-oriented talk, requiring the mutual understanding and joint activity of participants who (often) have different perspectives and agendas (Ahern et al., 2014; van de Sande and Greeno, 2012). In this vein, we expand on past research on problem-solving interaction seen as 'a site for diverse opinions to be laid' and negotiated (Angouri & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2011:213). In the analysis, we demonstrate that the participants negotiate common ground by drawing on the organisation's existing knowledge, the taken for granted, commonly acknowledged ways of doing, and position self and others in interactional and institutional contexts. Through this process, the participants scrutinise existing knowledge and reaffirm practices, while also generating new knowledge and negotiating perceptions of joint reality. Shared meanings and agreement on whether an issue is a problem (or not) are reached through various linguistic practices, such as formulations, suggestions, rebuttals or resumption. These activities, although not linear, signal topic boundaries within the meeting, and are also used to negotiate roles and responsibilities related to the power (im)balance in any workplace context. 'Who says what' within the context of the problem-solving event is subject to 'who is entitled to what' according to the participants' understanding of the realities of each workplace (Asmuß and Oshima, 2012). In this context, the negotiation of a 'problem', as well as a commitment to any action, is directly related to issues of accountability and role responsibility (Angouri & Mondada, 2017). We discuss this further in the next section.

Negotiation of professional role responsibilities

The concept of professional role is directly related to expertise and problem-solving activities. From a constructivist perspective, roles are not static but dynamic positions enacted by the individuals (Halkowski, 1990; Halvorsen and Sarangi, 2015; Marra and Angouri, 2011; Sarangi,

2010). Roles emerge in the interplay between social structure and the agency of individuals; in this regard, they are jointly achieved by both the speakers enacting the performances and the audiences' understanding of 'the acceptable/expected spectrum of performances' in context. Sarangi's (2010) work on the performance of medical doctors in a consultation setting has shown the complexity of the process, as the doctors '(re)configure' relevant roles according to the character and expectation of the patients' (p. 54). In professional settings, the complexity of role enactment is evident in the ways individuals are subject to balancing their roles, shifting them strategically from one to another by appealing to one's responsibility, positioning and achieving interactional goals (Sarangi, 2011). Individuals are 'exposed to a repertoire of professional roles' in their institutional and social context (Sarangi, 2010: 54).

In a problem-solving meeting, interactants enact and construct their professional roles while also offering (or blocking) solutions to the problems at hand and balancing professional expertise with, for example, interpersonal issues and local politics. In our corpus, specific problems with, for example, guidelines, budgets, and approval processes emerge in business meetings. Dealing with these problems, employees project roles specific to their organisational responsibilities in relation to their teams and own agendas; they confirm or debate perspectives and propose/orient actions. Through the roles interactants negotiate, the organisation emerges (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and by the same process, the organisation provides the context within which the individuals operate.

Data and Methodology

This paper draws on data from an ongoing research project on organisational problem (-solving) talk at work. The data is collected through ethnographic fieldwork in a multinational company. The company's exact business activities are not discussed in order to protect the company's anonymity. We consider an ethnographic approach particularly useful for grasping the local understanding of

the workplace issues and context, social practices and meanings more fully (Blommaert and Jie, 2010).

The dataset includes audio-recorded (in)formal interactions in the company (app. 57 hours); interviews with 17 employees (app. 48 hours); field notes that the first author collected (app. 224 hours); and organisational charts and documents. In this paper, we focus on one audio-recorded meeting, which was also observed by the first author. All of the participants gave their consent to be audio-recorded in advance. The meeting we discuss here is particularly important, since its participants had to cope with a sensitive topic, a reduction in their marketing budget.

The dataset has been coded and analysed in full following an Interactional Sociolinguistic approach. We focus on how linguistic features are related to specific acts and practices in undertaking problem-solving. Interactional sociolinguistics examines 'the way localised interactive processes work' (Gumperz, 2015: 312), and, more specifically, 'what is communicatively intended and understood at any one point in the interaction' (ibid: 313). It therefore enables analysts to unpack the way everyday practices are negotiated, in addition to interactants' orientations in the 'particular conversational moment' (Georgakopoulou, 2007: 121–122). In the analysis of the meeting interaction, we pay special attention to linguistic features associated with floor management, and discuss the ways in which interactants index stances, roles and relations in their local context (Jaffe, 2014).

The meeting participants are a managing director and two managers in the marketing team,

Minjae	Managing director. Four years in the role and another four as a middle manager at Eco UK.
Ted	Marketing manager/market analysis expert. Product pricing and marketing activities - line manager to Kate. At Eco UK for nine years.

Kate	Marketing communication manager/expertise in marketing and public relations. Advertisement and communications. At Eco UK for five years.

Table 1. Profile of the participants

Data analysis

We provide an analysis of three sequential excerpts taken from different stages of the same meeting: excerpt 1 from the beginning, 2 from the middle and 3 from the end. We discuss the negotiation of roles in the interactional activities that construct an event as having a primarily problem-solving function in our data. We reflect on the significance of the timeline of the event in the ways in which participants negotiate their temporary (event specific) and organisational (pre-existent to the event) roles and positions in relation to the (formal and informal) agendas. We have organised our findings according to the two main stages which are consistent in our data set: formulating and negotiating issues and future actions, and ratifying problems and the action commitment. The patterns we report here are consistent in our data set and we discuss this further towards the end of this section (fig 2).

The meeting event took place in Minjae's office (fig 1). Both Kate and Ted were holding documents, while Minjae used his computer and, occasionally, a calculator. The meeting agenda included three items, the most important of which was the marketing budget allocation. This was the first time the reduction was discussed by the team. As shown in Excerpt 1, the interactants negotiate perspectives on the current budget situation which has implications for the social media planning across the year. The interactants negotiate the head office guidelines on social media and debate who is accountable for the budget reduction. The issue is being ratified as a problem and the Interactants move towards commitment to action.
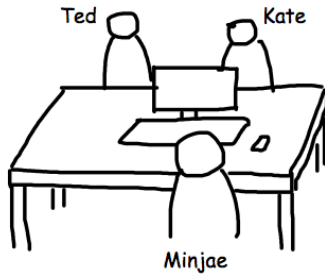
Figure 1. Meeting space

Formulating and negotiating

In the early stage of the meeting, the interactants provide and negotiate formulations of the problem and future actions when identifying and negotiating issues and situations. During this process, individuals offer their point of view by drawing on their roles, responsibilities and expertise.

Research on formulating work (e.g. Barnes, 2007; Drew, 2003; Heritage and Watson, 1979) regards formulating as an activity or practice that provides a summary of points in order to achieve support or consensus for perspectives on which individuals draw. In institutional interaction settings, formulations become a crucial resource mobilised as 'the device through which the practice is mobilised' (Drew, 2003: 296) and the interactants' realities are defined (Clifton, 2006: 203). Interactants' provision and negotiation of formulations in turn indicate 'matters regarded as being of special importance or significance' to the individuals (Heritage and Watson, 1979: 150). Formulating work, then, indexes the interactants' role-positioning. Our use of the term 'positioning' here is associated with roles, in the sense that they have implications for individuals' interactional and institutional positioning (Henriksen, 2008).

On the issues and situations being formulated, negotiations take place around diverging views and positions (Huisman, 2001). Negotiations in our data take place throughout the entire meeting in pursuit of reaching a consensus on how to address problems and establish a commitment to actions. The process involves the interactants' negotiation of role-positioning, as they bring to the events

'their habitus' (in Bourdieu's sense), standing in the organisation, their specific responsibilities and their perception of the nexus of relationships within which their activity takes place' (Angouri & Mondada, 2017: 474). The interactants' role-positioning is intricately linked to the way problems are talked into being.

In the following two excerpts, we examine the ways in which the interactants negotiate their professional roles in relation to expertise and responsibilities during the processes of formulating and negotiating the issues. In Excerpt 1, the interactants draw on an email from Jiwoo in the head office. Minjae, a managing director, and Ted, a marketing manager, provide diverging formulations while identifying the reduced marketing budget. Minjae in this excerpt looks into the overall marketing budget including above-the-line advertising (ATL) and below-the-line advertising (BTL), whereas Ted focuses on the latter in raising its reduction. Adding to the negotiation between Minjae and Ted, Kate, a marketing communication manager, formulates the situation in relation to guidelines on social media activities.

Ex. 1 (Transcription conventions are provided in Appendix 1)

```
31   Minjae   And: all the budget wise (.) I have seen Jiwoo's email this
32            morning ↑ Overall our ATL and BTL, all the subsidiary local budget
33            wise (.) nearly similar to last [year] (.) plan wise(.)
34   Ted                                     [Well-]
35            Well [it- (2.0)] well it is (.) but it isn't (.)
36   Kate          [no it's not]
37   Minjae   It is↑ it isn't (.)
38   Ted      Because it's in Euro (.) if you convert it back to GBP, it's lower
39            [.] by quite a bit.
             ((9 lines omitted))
49   Minjae   It's- it's not(.) a great deal of difference(.) four percent(.)
50   Ted      Yeah(.) [but
51   Minjae          [It's- it's not a great (.) deal of difference(.)
52            Our budget remains similar(.) yeah? (3.0)
53   Ted      Well(.)the ATL budget hasn't(.)I mean (.) because we didn't
54            do anything with social media this year(.)
55   Minjae   Mm
56   Ted      the- the difference between what I've planned (.)
57   Minjae   Mm mm
58   Ted      and:: what they've come back with is ((amount)) pounds=
```

```
59   Minjae   =So (.) isn't that enough? Or we need to (.) ask them to
60            increase our budget ↑ (2.0)
61   Ted      Well(.)this is a part [of]
62   Kate                           [Yeh::] So(.) well (.) let me go
63            through just quickly if I can(.) Sort of social media and-
64            and- and the guidelines which were presented at sort of the
65            workshop (.)and m- my thoughts (.) really on next year (.) So
66            (.) now there is an obviously gap in the guidelines (.)
67            which I found it very complicated (.) and
68   Minjae   Mm
69   Kate     ah: it put a lot of markets off ↑ Umm now (.) in all degree (.)
70            to have social media, obviously our initial plan was to
71            have a PR agency and social media work in different agencies
72            of one umbrella. Now as it stands(.) of course(.) we are a
73            little bit up in the air as we wait for (.) decisions from
74            (.) Europe and global on whether or not we will have a PR
75            agency […] So without that (.) we're certainly not in the
76            position to start=
77   Minjae   =Social media wise(.) are they ready (.)↑ to launch↑ […]
```

In this opening phase, Minjae provides the summary of an email from Jiwoo at the European head office. By formulating it in terms of the '*overall*' local budget (line 32) which is '*nearly similar to last year*' (line 33), he provides an assessment of the allocated budget as unproblematic. This, however, is followed by Ted and Kate's disagreement, suggested by their disconfirming responses (lines 34-36). In Ted's turn, the *well*-prefacing response (lines 34-35) denotes that his upcoming contributions are not going to fully agree with Minjae's formulation (Schiffrin, 1987: 102), illustrated in his following remarks from line 38 onwards, which enact and problematise the reduced budget. Minjae, however, continues to formulate it as unproblematic by the assessment '*not a great deal of difference*' (lines 49, 52). His remark in line 53 perhaps invites Ted to agree with his view, and thus elicit a confirming answer (Heinemann, 2008:57).

Ted's role-positioning is enacted in the negotiation, wherein he continues to raise the reduced ATL budget and formulates it by drawing on the accountability of his team, who '*didn't do anything with social media*' (lines 53-54), and his role, one responsible for the marketing budget (liens 56, 58). The role Ted enacts here is supported by his claim made in interview talk: '*From my area […]*'

budgets and marketing plans, I have, sort of ATL marketing plans, started communicating now with the head office copied in European office'. This remark illustrates the role Ted projects to himself, being entitled to negotiate the marketing budget with the head offices on behalf of the subsidiary. Following Ted's formulating of the budget reduction, Minjae's minimal response tokens (lines 55, 57) suggest alignment being achieved between the interactants. The minimal response tokens afford Ted the floor until the completion of the formulation (Stivers, 2008:34). In addition, Minjae's '*so*'-prefacing uptake (line 59-60) can suggest Minjae's engaging with Ted's formulating work by drawing a conclusion from Ted's argument.

Ted's attempt to develop the issue is interrupted by Kate initiating her formulating work from line 62. In the formulation, by mobilising '*the guidelines*' (line 64) and '*the workshop*' (lines 64-65), which are 'primarily known' to Kate, she enacts her epistemic status, as well as the marketing communication expert role (Heritage, 2012: 9). The enactment of the expert role is crucial, especially at the early stage of this meeting event, for the interactants to establish common ground on the situation. A similar pattern is observed in Kate's role enactment in Excerpt 2 below, where she conveys information and shares views. The role enacted here entitles Kate to diagnose the problem situation. By identifying a '*gap in the guidelines*' (lines 65-66), she holds the HQ accountable for the local team's undelivered activities. In this regard, Kate's formulation can be seen as her attempt to pre-empt criticism for the unspent ATL budget. Given Ted's comment on the undelivered social media activities (lines 53-54), for which the local team, or Kate, is primarily responsible, the role accountable for the budget issue is still in negotiation at this interactional stage.

It is important to note Kate's account from line 69, which mobilises the interactants' taken for granted organisational knowledge. Denoted by '*now as it stands (.) of course*' (line 72), the account enacts the institutional order as shared social facts among the interactants (Geppert and Dörrenbächer, 2016). As expressed in Kate's claim, '*we are certainly not in the position to start*' (lines 75-76), this importantly affects not only their interpretation of the situation and the

construction of the future action but also the interactants' role-positioning in doing problem-solving. The institutional order enacted here is negotiated throughout the meeting by the interactants making relevant and legitimate claims to the context and through their 'specific courses of action', which are accountable to the organisational norm circulated and shared by employees (Sarangi and Roberts, 1999: 16). By the same process, the interactants' professional roles are actively enacted.

In the excerpt below, we examine the ways in which interactants' professional roles are negotiated in relation to their standing in the organisations while negotiating a specific situation. Minjae and Kate discuss their plan to use a PR agency for the social media activities the following year, as well as when and how to initiate their social media activities.

Ex. 2

```
237  Minjae   Agencies might help us (.) to a certain degree (.) yeah?
238  Kate     yeah↓ This- this is with an agency(.)=
239  Minjae   =yeah
240  Kate     They said you need four hours a day (.) That's only (.) you know
241           (.) Eco Employees (.) four hours a day (.) […]
242  Minjae   Who's- who's (.) saying that (.) this four hours a day?
243  Kate     This has come from the guidelines (.) from the European PR
244  Minjae   ((cynical laughter)) why do they designate four hours a day?
245           Somebody(h)-somebody(.) [who is (.)]
246  Kate                             [I don't] think that's
247           realistic though:=
248  Minjae   =Somebody who is- who is doing their job very well can- can
249           spend only one hour a day(.) […] It really depends (.) on (.)
250           who is doing those responsibilities (1.5) I think! That is just
251           general guidelines (.) We don't need to abide by that!
252  Kate     Well (.) if we do: as discussed (.) if that's agreed (.)umm:: to
253           review it (.)
254  Minjae   Mmmhm
255  Kate     sort of(.) halfway through next year(.) then(.) of course we can
256           call upon the other subsidiaries and ask [them]
257  Minjae                                            [Do you-] do you think
258           it will be acceptable from the head office?
259  Kate     Sorry?
260  Ted      Going midway through the- halfway through the year (.)
261  Minjae   Yeah
262  Kate     It's our decision (.) They said- [they made] it very clear (.)=
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```
263  Ted                                              [Isn't it-]
264  Minjae   =Yeah
265  Kate     Throughout the entire workshop (.)=
266  Minjae   =Yeah
267  Kate     That it is ultimately (.) whatever we do with the social media
268           is our decision (.) it's down to each and every subsidiary's and
269           their MD's (1.5) so it's our decisions (.) […]
```

Kate's provision of formulation of what '*they* (the head office) *said*' (lines 240-241) in the guidelines conveys information and establishes common understanding of the guidelines. The uptake, pointing out '*four hours a day*' (lines 242, 244), and cynical laughter (line 244), indicate Minjae taking a critical stance toward the guidelines, and distancing himself from the head office. Kate's subsequent comment (lines 246-247) aligns with Minjae's by submitting a negative assessment of the guidelines. Overlapping (lines 245-246) and latching (lines 247-248) talk here contributes to establishing 'the sense of unanimity' when judging the problem with the guidelines (Sarangi, 2012: 306).

By providing a perspective on the guidelines and future action, Minjae enacts his standing in the subsidiary, and its authority over the action through the claim featuring a deontic modal verb, '*don't need to*' (line 251). As denoted by the expression, '*well (.) if we do:*' (line 252), the enactment of the local authority appears to provide Kate with an environment to propose a future action, i.e. carrying out the social media activities at the discretion of the subsidiary, which corresponds to her interest. Kate's proposal formatted with the mobilisation of '*we*' (line 252) transforms her own opinion into the matters that are (to be) collectively agreed (Angouri & Mondada, 2017), and serves to ensure that the interactants have shared common ground or agreement on the action. The proposal is also heavily mitigated with the mobilisation of '*if*' (line 252) and the hedging devices, '*umm*' (line 252) and '*sort of*' (line 255). Mitigation is commonly observed in Maseide's (2007: 637) work on medical problem-solving, as a means of politely or carefully formulating opinions in case interactants harbour different viewpoints. In this way, Kate perhaps exercises caution when

proposing actions in line with her interest (i.e. doing social media activity at the local discretion), without sounding too aggressive while seeking agreement (Asmuß, 2011:208).

The discourse shifts following Minjae's questioning (lines 257-258) concerning the compatibility of Kate's proposal with the HQ management perspective. The enacting of the HQ perspective suggests Minjae is required to balance the local and global management roles. Minjae's role positioning here indicates the professional ambivalence inherent in enacting roles and institutional positioning in the given interactional moment (Sarangi, 2016). Alternatively, Minjae's role could, though, be regarded as an intermediary bridging the two organisations, being 'acted upon and shaped by organisational and institutional dimensions' (Simpson and Carroll, 2008:45). In this context, his roles in global and local management may not necessarily be in conflict but, rather, complementary, requiring him to balance the roles that are in constant negotiation (Sarangi, 2016).

Following Minjae's questioning, Kate, from line 262 onwards, makes claims about the ownership of local decisions. Her explicit claim-making here evinces her expertise as well as her standing in the subsidiary, in line with her interest in pursuing local discretion. The claim is supported by her following formulation of what '*they said*' (line 262) '*throughout the _entire_ workshop*' (line 265), which again draws upon her primary epistemic domain. It therefore enacts her authority in order to construct the proposal. The enactment of the local expert role here is important for it brings to the interaction its 'legitimated right' (Henriksen, 2008: 48) to determine the local actions, as shown in the formulation (lines 267-269). The remark, '*It's down to each and every subsidiary's and their MD's (.) so it's our decision*' (lines 268-269) conveys explicitly the authority of the local team, while constructing the authority of Minjae (Stevanovic and Perakyla, 2012). By positioning him as the local authority and the team member, Kate may intend to invite Minjae to approach the situation in his capacity; she also makes appeals to take her position into account.

The process of negotiation demonstrates how the organisation in general as well as the HQ and the subsidiary relationship emerges through the roles that the individuals embrace. Interactants' role enactment, projecting the perspectives of the organisation and their own interests, becomes critical in shaping the way future actions are proposed and negotiated.

Ted, in the meantime, as shown in lines 260 and 263, adopts a minimum participation role. This may be because the planning of local social media activities being discussed here is not his area but Kate's. This point is further supported by the latter stage of this meeting (Excerpt 3), wherein he actively participates in the interaction by drawing on his topic (i.e. the local budget).

In the next section we visualise the spiral nature of the problem-solving activity and the negotiation of common ground in relation to the linearity of the material time of the event; we also examine the professional role negotiation in relation to the ratification of problems and a commitment to future actions.

Ratifying issues as a problem and orienting towards the future actions

Moving towards the end-stage of the event, interactants in our dataset tend to recycle or resume formulations established earlier. Studies (e.g. Local, 2004; Sutinen, 2014) have shown resumption occurs in a sequential environment where interactants return to previous talk after an expended discussion of other issues. Resumptions in our data emerge as a recognisable pattern in reviewing issues and re-orientating towards negotiations of the same or different issues and proposals (Heritage and Watson, 1979, p. 150). This indexes the individuals' re-orientation towards the negotiation of issues and proposals; and, hence, interactants' role-positioning becomes conspicuous through the resumption of the individuals' attempts to ratify issues as (not) a problem. Putting together the interactional work the individuals do, the graph below (fig 2) represents the cumulative process to move from formulation to ratification of problems and actions, taking account of the influence of the material time of the meeting event on interaction.
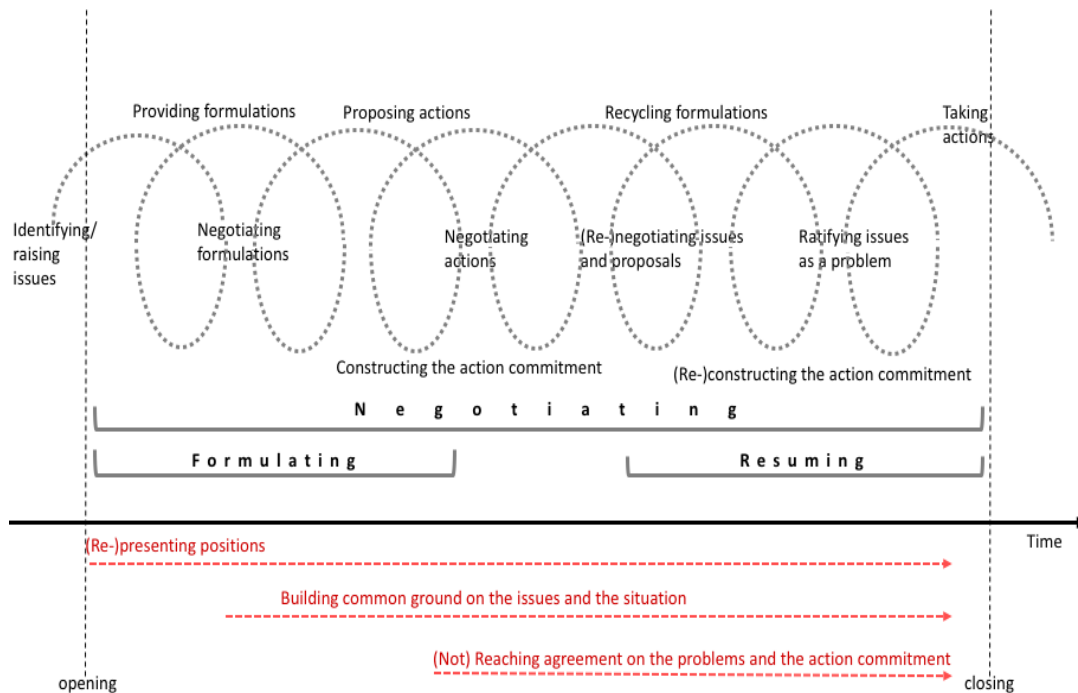
Figure 2. Representation of interactional activities and moves in problem-solving interaction

Expanding past work on the problem-solving architecture (Angouri, 2011), we understand problem-solving as a gradual process in which interactants with diverging views jointly establish common ground, at least in part, and reach (or not) consensus on the problems and the action commitment. The latter is intensified in the material end of the meeting, which in its turn signifies the temporary completion of the problem-solving process. This does not mean that the matter raised in the first place will not return in future formal/informal encounters. Temporary closure positions feed into the issues interactional history and provide part of the context for future formulations of the 'problem' (Angouri, 2018). These discourse histories form part of the knowledge of the community and part and parcel of workplace practices.

The importance of time in the sequential organisation of talk is not new (e.g. Boden, 1997); it is, however, often not explicitly discussed in workplace discourse studies on meeting talk where the utterances such as 'I need to leave soon' or 'I need this closed today' (not shown here) directly impact the tone and interactional pace of the event. Interactants enact and reify 'temporal structures'

through their recurrent use with 'temporal features of the work' such as trajectories, patterns and regularities of practice in interactions (Reddy et al., 2006:34). As the data show, the interactants 'orient to the temporal dimension of actions in a dynamic way' (Mondada, 2012:305) while at the same time they work on their stances in relation to issues that may have medium/long term effects on their team and organisation; temporal structures or structuring, then, shape the interaction, 'the form of ongoing practices' (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002:684) as well as the shape of future events. The problem-solving model here (fig 2) attempts to show its temporal dimension, as it is managed by the interactants moment by moment 'within the emergent, incremental achievement of action' (Mondada, 2012:305). The situated action, however, is also subject to histories and structures pre-existing the event and feeds into future events and actions.

In the following excerpt, the interactants draw on their positions and formulations of the local marketing budget established at the beginning of the event. (Excerpt 1). We discuss here the way roles are projected and negotiated in ratifying issues as (not) a problem in the activity of resuming and how the interactants reach agreement on the problem, leading to the action commitment.

Ex. 3

```
781  Minjae   Overall budget wise (.) are you happy with that? ((name of Eco UK's
782           branch))'s budget allocated in there? (1.5)
783  Ted      Yes quite.
784  Minjae   Quite a big portion?
785  Ted      Yeah (2.0)
786  Minjae   We don't know […] we cannot be that aggressive to secure all the
787           budget because we haven't spent lots of budget (.) Yeah? Lots of
788           remaining budget, yeah? (2.0)
789  Ted      Unfortunately, with the ATL budget (.) the biggest part of the
790           social media which will allow us to do.
791  Minjae   Mm mm mm
792  Ted      So:: I feel a bit
793  Minjae   Mm
794  Ted      not a bit, I feel a lot disappointed to actually be taken that away
795           (2.0) the ATL budget (.) because it's out far too controlled (.)
796  Kate     It's come out during our conversation and=
797  Minjae   =Our-
798  Kate     =We were waiting for our guidelines (.)
```

```
799   Minjae   Our- our ATL total overall budget is that much decreased?
800   Ted      The ATL budget is decreased by ((amount)) nearly ((amount)) pounds.
801   Kate     That's the social media.
802   Ted      [that's- which] is effectively social media content.
803   Kate     [Which is-]                                    Which is a bit
804            unfair(.) because [it's out of control] (.)
805   Minjae                     [Not- not because] of the currency?
806   Ted      No (.) the total budget (.)
807   Minjae   Euro decreased at the same time?
808   Ted      Yes (.) and it's gone into the local budget.
809   Minjae   Jiwoo, Jiwoo, Jiwoo.((making a phone call))
```

Minjae's role as the HQ management is projected from his opening turn, which resumes the formulation of '*overall budget*' in the early stage of the event (lines 31-33 in Excerpt 1). Minjae's resumption here, which adds the evaluative predicate '*quite a big portion*' (line 784) to the formulation in the prior talk, justifies the budget allocation. It further signifies his orientation towards not ratifying the budget as a problem. The orientation is again underscored in his turns from line 784, where he provides a positive evaluation of the overall budget in the form of a yes/no interrogative, eliciting a preferred response from Ted (line 785) (Raymond, 2003: 955), and hence establishing agreement with his stance.

His agenda is made clear in Minjae's following turn, in which he claims '*we cannot be that aggressive to secure all the budget*' (lines 786-787). In this account, '*we*', referring to the local team, is being held accountable for the unspent, '*lots of remaining budget*' (lines 787-788), recycling the formulation of Ted (see lines 53-54, Excerpt 1), which effectively justifies his claim. Through the recycling of formulations, Minjae affirms his position towards the situation, and his institutional standing, by displaying his understanding of the budget allocation from the perspective of the head office, which cannot allocate more funds to the subsidiary for social media.

Minjae's proposal, however, is disaffiliated by Ted and Kate. This is, firstly, signalled by the pause after Minjae's turn in line 788, indicating that there may be 'trouble with agreeing with' Minjae's formulation of the budget situation (Stivers *et al*., 2011:22). Ted's minimal acknowledgement, '*yeh',* in line 785, followed by the pause (2.0), may suggest that he was not fully convinced, and

therefore triggers Minjae's further justification of his positioning (lines 786-788). Ted's disaffiliative moves away from Minjae continue, and simultaneously develop the issue of the local budget. '*Unfortunately*', (line 789) in Ted's turn, conveys his attitude (Fraser, 2009:892), disagreeing with Minjae, and returning to 'what the problem is' with the local ATL budget. His positioning on the problem is (re)affirmed through the use of an affective predicate (Du Bois, 2007:142), '*a lot disappointed*', in line 794. The conveyance of negative emotion here indexes his embrace of the marketing management role that is responsible for securing the local marketing budget, while also demonstrating how (institutional) role identities are 'linked to affective stances' (Ochs, 1996: 424). Ted's evaluation of the situation as being '*far too controlled*' by the head office (lines 795) is supported by Kate's following turns, where the head office, not the local team, is being held accountable for their unspent budget (lines 796 and 798).

Ted's role positioning is jointly achieved by Minjae's aligning moves, signalled by his minimal responses (line 791, 793) (Stivers, 2008:34), which evidence his recognition of the budget's inadequacy. Kate, from line 796, shares the role perspective with Ted by aligning with his formulation of the situation being '*out far too controlled*' by the HQ (line 795) and, hence, constructing the HQ as accountable for the situation (line 796-798). Minjae's uptakes seeking information from line 799 onwards signal Minjae himself according with Ted and Kate by considering ratifying the budget reduction as a problem and orientating towards the action in the final stage of this meeting. Here, Minjae's role as a local representative/intermediary is clearly projected in his non-verbal act of 'making a phone call' in line 809 (the phone conversation is not shown in this paper) and making an enquiry about the budget allocation, which meets Kate and Ted's demands in the interactional moment. Given Minjae's act of projecting the HQ management perspective earlier (lines 257-258 in Excerpt 2) and the formulation of the budget (lines 31-33, 51-52 in Excerpt 1), it can be read as his reconfiguring of roles (Sarangi, 2010) by performing what is

being expected in the interactional moment, as they reach agreement on problem and the action commitment.

Overall, this meeting illustrates the complexity as well as temporal aspects of the process, in which the local budget issues are negotiated and ratified as 'problem'. It also shows that problem-solving is contingent on the interactants' role negotiation. In line with Angouri (2011) view on problem-solving talk, the process of negotiating the issue and ratifying it as a problem is interrelated to the interactants' negotiation of roles, responsibilities and expertise. Kate explicitly draws on her epistemic domain (Heritage, 2012), the marketing workshop and guidelines on social media. Similarly, Ted draws on his responsibilities in managing the local marketing budget when he ratifies the budget issue as a problem. In doing so, these two interactants clearly show their standing in the local subsidiary, negotiate their positions in the specific meeting we are discussing and build discourse histories and feed into future iterations of the same 'issues'. Minjae's role positioning here is significant. As illustrated in Excerpt 1, the interaction shifts through his institutional footings. This can also be seen as his balancing of the roles of local managing director and in global management (Sarangi, 2010), which brings to the interaction the perspectives of the organisations in doing problem-solving (Henriksen, 2008: 48). This suggests then a) the significance of the interactants' role-positioning in a problem-solving meeting, the way problem-solving unfolds, and how the organisation emerges through the individuals' role-positioning; and b) that roles are not static but dialogically and intersubjectively constructed in interaction.

We discuss the theoretical implications of our work in the last section of the paper.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of meeting data, we demonstrated the complexity of the problem-solving activity that involves interactants' enacting of roles situated in the interactional- and institutional context and the temporal meeting event. The analysis, illustrated in figure 2, showed the dynamics

of problem-solving interaction constituted by specific activities and moves, and their recurrence in the timeline of the event. In line with workplace interaction studies that have shown the spiral nature of the interaction (e.g. Holmes and Stubbe, 2003), the moves and activities in our model are not intended to fit a neat pattern, but to be recognisable through the interactants' linguistic acts and cues. In particular, formulating and resuming are visible to interactants, and take on specific meanings as a strong indicator of their role enactment in undertaking problem-solving; in turn, it is these practices that construct the event as having a primarily problem-solving function. In the material context of the meeting, they also emerge and, in turn, construct the beginning and end of the event.

Our analysis has also contributed to the discussion on the complex relationship between problem-solving and decision-making. Studies see these two as emergent and parallel in the flow of actions and events embedded in the complex workplace practices (Alby and Zucchermaglio, 2006; Chia, 1996), and acknowledge it is difficult to pin down one particular moment at which problems are ratified and resolved and decisions are made (e.g. Boden, 1994; Huisman, 2001). We see the two as co-constitutive. Although we distinguished between the two in past research and we refer to problem-solving here, this analytical decision is an artefact. Organisational *problems* and *decisions* construct each other in the meeting event. Hence, problem-solving and decision-making is best seen as dialogic and fluid, embedded in complex workplace practices.

Finally, we found the concept of role to be a useful analytic tool. This paper provides empirical evidence on the interrelation between interactants' role enactment and interactional activities in the context of problem-solving. Interactants in pursuit of their own interactional agenda enact their roles by drawing on (perceived) responsibilities, expertise and anchored positions that go beyond the here-and-now of the interaction, and also in relation to their team (Angouri & Mondada, 2017: 474). Who says what in the meeting event, directly depends on their perceived and projected role

expectations, as well as the discourse histories, the trajectory of the specific issue in question and the material context of the event which provides boundaries that enact and are enacted in talk.

The temporal dimension of the problem-solving event shapes and is shaped by interactants' ongoing forms of actions (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002). This usefully informs the interactants' orientation towards the problem-solving activities within the situational, spatiotemporal context and the local, institutionalised norms. This adds to the current work on the relation between time and work in organisations which demonstrates the impact of the former on the latter. More specifically time has been repeatedly shown to be central in collaborative work in the local context of any organisation (e.g. Reddy et al., 2006; Steinhardt and Jackson, 2014). In this paper, we further this perspective by capturing the interactional work participants do towards the material end of the event; they converge to achieve some form of problem *solving* albeit provisional and recontextualise their own/their co-interactants' roles.

Role enactment in our analysis becomes intrinsic to the unfolding of the problem-solving interaction, foregrounding and negotiating diverging perspectives on issues, situations and proposals. In line with (socio)linguistic studies on problem-solving and other workplace interactional studies (e.g. Angouri, 2011; Asmuß and Oshima, 2012; Halvorsen and Sarangi, 2015), our analysis shows that roles are not static but dialogically and intersubjectively constructed in interaction. Through this process, the organisation emerges in and through the roles that individuals enact. This, in turn, contextualises role enactment processes, and reinforces the value of analysing roles in understanding the organisation, in that a role enacted 'brings structural issues into the interaction' implicating 'its socially legitimated rights, duties, values, norms and perspectives are brought into play' (Henriksen, 2008: 48).

Through the interactional analysis, we have shown Interactional Sociolinguistics (e.g. Gumperz, 2015) as an analytic framework to be appropriate for investigating how employees do problem talk

in the here-and-now of interaction in association with the institutional- and social context. The analysis of language use in context allows us to situate interactants' positioning and interactional moves and their orientations to the matters that go beyond the here-and-now of the interaction. This can be examined further in relation to organisational knowledge management studies that focus on the way individual knowledge is transformed into the organisational one (e.g. Rašula et al., 2012), or strategic management research that investigates strategic business activities in general and doing problem formulation specifically (e.g. Baer et al., 2013). This is an angle suitable for future interdisciplinary research on the topic, which could shed new light on the problem-solving processes, particularly in relation to subsidiary/HQ relationships.

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Appendix 1

Transcription conventions:

All names used in extracts are pseudonyms. Line divisions are intended to support understanding and typically represent sense unit boundaries. There has been minor editing for ease of reading. The following conventions have been used:

[	Left square brackets indicate a point of overlap onset.
]	Right square brackets indicate a point at which two overlapping utterances both end, where one ends while the other continues, or simultaneous moments in overlaps which continue.
=	Equal signs indicate continuous utterance with no break or pause and/or latch.
(.)	A dot in parentheses indicates a short pause.
[…]	Section of transcript omitted
?	Questioning intonation where not obvious on paper
emphasis	Underlining is used to indicate some form of stress or emphasis.
th-	Cut off word
(2.0)	Pause about 2 seconds

:	Sound stretching
(( ))	Other details
?	Questioning intonation
↑↓	The up and down arrows mark rises or falls in pitch.