Situated talking

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ABSTRACT

In ecological psychology language use is not about inferring pre-existing meaning in the mind of the speaker, but it is tied to a practical process of adapting to the environment shared with others. A tension with such a processual account of language appears when we notice that affordances, i.e. the possibilities for action that the environment offers, are often considered meaningful prior to the activities of any particular organism. In this paper we start from affordances as temporally constituted: they are processes that set up the conditions for their own continuation by inviting individuals to participate in them. We explore the contribution of talking to that process. By looking closely at three examples of situated talking in the real-life practice of making an architectural art installation, we show how talking has a double ‘situated-situating’ character. In our observations we see utterances as invited by an ongoing process: talking is situated. It establishes practical continuity between activities that unfolded earlier and those that are unfolding now. Doing so, talking is also situating: it achieves this practical continuity from past to present so that future activities are enabled to continue the process further. By running different threads of unfolding affordances together, talking can contribute to determining an affordance of a larger timescale. Talking skillfully can thus concurrently bring multiple affordances across timescales closer to enactment. The paper suggests that thinking of language as inextricably bound up with affordances in this way, opens ecological psychology to a wide range of distinctively human activities.

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1. Introduction

Talking is traditionally considered an activity in which individuals put prior determined inner thoughts into words for others to decipher, hoping that the listener will uncover the meaning that the speaker originally intended. The ecological approach has long argued against the representational conceptualization of mental life that such a view of language requires (Gibson, 1979, p. 253; Turvey, 1992; Heft, 2001; Costall, 2011). Language use is understood as part of a practical process of
mutual adaptation, to each other and to the environment, it is not about inferring the meaning pre-existing in the mind of the speaker (e.g. Fowler, 1986; Cowley, 1994, 2011; Hodges, 2007; 2014; Rączaszek-Leonardi, 2016). A tension however emerges when we consider that on the ecological view affordances, i.e. the possibilities for action that the environment offers, are usually themselves treated as meaningful prior to the activities of any particular organism. This paper presents several concrete situations of architectural practice to explore a way of understanding affordances and language as inextricably entwined.

Thinking of language use ecologically, as a shared accomplishment distributed across space and over time, implies that meaningful talk is temporally constituted (e.g. Dent-Read, 1990, p. 694; Hodges, 2014; Rączaszek-Leonardi, 2016). This means that the meaning of current utterances depend constitutively on a relevant past of activity (linguistic or otherwise) as well as on the potential future activities that the utterance opens up for the participants. This is also important to Charles Goodwin’s view (2012, 2018). The invitation to talk, on his account, emerges as speakers continue each other’s activities in an ongoing series of “accumulative transformations” in which the “comprehension of any current utterance, and thus the ability to reply appropriately when addressed, requires a grasp of what was said earlier” (Goodwin, 2018, p. 32). Such a temporalized view of language avoids representationalism, in part, because it resists reifying the shared and distributed worldly process of talking as a prior intention of the speaker (Harris, 1981; Love, 2017; Van Dijk, 2016).

On a temporalized view of talking, humans “co-operate” over time on an ongoing flow of materials in action (Goodwin, 2018). Prima facie, this aligns perfectly with the ecological approach. Ecological psychology also foregrounds the practical flow in which the world shows up in terms of future possibilities for action, in terms of “affordances”. Affordances were introduced by James Gibson as “what [the environment] offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill” (Gibson, 1979, p. 127; see Gibson, 1966, p. 285). A leaf to an earthworm affords plugging its burrow, the edge of a knife is walkable to an ant and a keyboard affords writing to many humans. Affordances help researchers to cast the world pragmatically – for human and non-human animals alike – and thus fit well with theories of language use that stress the ongoing flow of action.

Indeed, affordances are highly dynamic, and what affordances are available changes from moment to moment as one acts, or talks (e.g. Reed, 1996; Chemero and Turvey, 2007). However, saying that the available affordances can change quickly as one acts is not the same thing as saying that affordances are temporal—that they depend constitutively on the historical process in which they are found and on the activities that continue that process in a particular way. In fact, in ecological psychology, affordances are often not temporal in that sense at all: there is a persistent tendency to require affordances to pre-exist the activity of any particular organism (Reed, 1996; Turvey, 1992; cf. Van Dijk, 2021). The flow of activity, including linguistic activity, consequently turns out to be instrumental to, but not constitutive of, such affordances.

If one follows this line of argument, linguistic activity would at best become a second layer of reality that may allow one to attune to the affordances that lie beyond language, but will not give shape to or determine those affordances (for discussion see Costall and Still, 1989; Heft, 2017). As a result there lurks a disconnect between talking and affordances not unlike the traditional distinction between language and reality. But while on a representational conception the latter distinction is bridged by assuming pre-existing mental states, reference, and so on, such an option, we saw, is not available to ecological psychology. Thus, the ecological approach has had difficulty expanding its reach into language (a difficulty that this journal’s current issue aims to redress; see also Dent-Read, 1990; Hodges, 2014). What’s more, a host of everyday phenomena, that in many cases take shape within linguistic practices, seem beyond the purview of the ecological approach. Think of long term planning, imagining, reflecting and so on. Indeed, both in- and outside of ecological circles the approach is often taken to be limited to understanding activities such as catching a ball or picking up a cup (leaving aside the social and linguistic situations in which one does so, see Costall, 1995; Heft, 2007).

There is however a line of theorizing within the ecological approach that connects with the temporalized, sociohistorical views of the organism–environment relation that early pragmatists articulated (e.g. Noble, 1981; Shotter, 1983; Costall and Still, 1989; Heft, 1989, 2020; Hodges, 2014; Ingold, 2018; E. Gibson and Pick, 2000; Rietveld and Kiverstein, 2014; Szokolszky and Read, 2018). Openness to continue differently is key to these projects—as it is to ours. Amplifying this development, in a series of papers we have been arguing for a temporal and open-ended understanding of affordances (see Section 2). Our goal has been to develop an ecological, non-representational, approach to “cognitive” phenomena that the ecological approach generally has difficulty incorporating.

Our strategy has been to foreground the larger-scale processes in which affordances are situated, which enabled us to show a reciprocal relation between different time-scales of activity in which affordances take shape. Concretizing this approach we have been carrying out a philosophical ethnography of architects at work. In studying architectural practices we incrementally zoomed in on the architects’ activities to better understand anticipation and imagination (Van Dijk & Rietveld, 2018, 2020). In each case, these phenomena were understood, without recourse to representation, as an individual’s sensitivity to how their participation affects the way affordances across time-scales are jointly determined (see Section 2 for details). What we did not discuss in sufficient detail however, was the often crucial contribution of talking to that process.
This paper aims to show how to think of many affordances for humans as, in part, constituted in talking – as “enlanguaged” (Cuffari et al., 2015). To this end, in what follows an ethnography of talking in a concrete architectural context is presented. Section 2 first introduces the theoretical backdrop for understanding talking in the context of a multi-scaled self-perpetuating process of unfolding affordances and explains the ethnographical methods used for the current study. Section 3 presents a basic case of the “situated-situating” role of talking within that process, emphasizing how talking is situated in time. Zooming in on a different moment in the process of making an art installation, Section 4 will emphasize how talking is also situating. In particular how talking achieves coordination between earlier and later activities so that new activities are enabled. Having exemplified the “situated-situating” nature of talking, one implication of thinking of talking in process is that it would also be possible to situate previously situated talking. Section 5 will focus on how earlier situated talking can itself be made an issue if the particulars of the situation call for it. We end with exploring the implications of considering some affordances for humans to be constitutively enlanguaged.

2. Affordances in process

Affordances for humans are sociomaterial, forming as materials and people meet. One participates in the enactment of multiple affordances by acting: that is, by coordinating multiple timescales of ongoing, world-involving activity. Think of a piece of cardboard. Cardboard affords many things: its material structure allows for easy cutting, it can be drawn on, burned, it affords subjecting it to mass spectrometry in order to establish its molecular composition, and if you’ve trapped a spider under a cup, the cardboard is sufficiently rigid to use as a cover to take the spider outside. Looking within architectural practice however, specifically in the ongoing process of making a design, a piece of cardboard can at some point invite an architect to make a model of the design (Van Dijk and Rietveld, 2020). It affords measuring, cutting the cardboard in different shapes, assembling these, gluing the pieces to a piece of wood and so on. In these activities of measuring, cutting and gluing the affordance of making a model is enacted. Making a cardboard model is a larger-scale activity that consists in coordinating the smaller-scale activities of measuring, cutting, gluing and so on. The affordance of making the model thus unfolds over time and holds together in practical engagement. An affordance can thus be thought of as constituted across multiple timescales of activity.

On our view, responding to small-scale affordances such as those of cutting cardboard allows the larger-scales, the making of a cardboard model, to keep going. Conversely, by simultaneously participating in the larger-scale (the affordance to make a cardboard model), small-scale possibilities for action are inviting in terms of it (a utility knife inviting the architect to cut). Participating in large-scale affordances, from making models to making architecture, consists in coordinating activity such that affordances across timescales are jointly enacted – a process of coordination that increases the determination of these affordances (Van Dijk & Rietveld, 2018, 2020). For instance, the cardboard in context invites carefully cutting into shapes, and engaging that affordance simultaneously determines the possibility of making the scale model of the architectural design.

This process to which talking, as any other world-involving activity, contributes is depicted schematically in Fig. 1. The figure is a simplification that does not mean to capture all the intricacies that we observed in the work presented below. We present the figure here to situate our observations of talking in a wider theoretical context. In this figure the temporal constitution of the process of making an architectural art installation, i.e. a large-scale affordance, can be seen by noticing that the lines that represent unfolding activities intertwine to form strands, which intertwine to form the process itself. At least three strands can be identified flowing from left to right: one above, one in the middle and one below. They represent unfolding situations with their own direction. These strands in turn intertwine (the upper two strands meeting a little earlier than the lower one) to form a larger scale unfolding process – consisting of the figure as a whole (which also has a direction). Talking, in this conceptualization, is one of the activities that establishes continuity from one activity into the other (Goodwin, 2012; Van Dijk, 2016). Talking can do this, for example, by drawing together separated activities, elongating them or, indeed, directing activity away from the process as it has developed so far. Thus, talking is important for the constitution of larger scale processes from the smaller ones – adding to both their continuity and direction.

1 This section closely follows Van Dijk and Rietveld (2020).

2 Note that our notion of affordance is relational in that it constitutively involves the activities of organisms over time. In this temporal context, one may feel a “special kind of attraction” to an aspect of the environment (Gibson, 1979, p. 139). On our view this is expressed by saying that an organism is invited by an affordance, while it is the affordance that invites. In a relational process, this invitational experience is neither to be attributed wholly to a self-sufficient organism nor to a ready-made environment. This view finds its antecedents in radical empiricism: where organisms experience the relation they actively establish in terms of what the environment affords them to do (Heft, 2001; Van Dijk and Kiverstein, 2020). This ongoing process exhibits a directional “tendency” to which individual animals need to grow responsive (Heft, 2003, p. 167). Affordances are thus said to “invite” or “solicit” us to act (Rietveld, 2008; Withagen et al., 2012). The immediate experiential character of affordances is also foregrounded in work that explores ecological psychology’s relation to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger (e.g. Heft, 1989; Käufer and Chemo, 2015; Van Dijk and Withagen, 2016) as well as to Gestalt psychology (e.g. Gibson, 1971; Heft, 2001; Kiverstein et al., 2019). Crucially, thinking of affordances as temporally extensive and experiential allows us to approach situations of “cognitive” activities that have so far receive little attention from ecological theory in a different way; foregrounding the material in process as it invites the actions we observed from a third person perspective.
Goodwin's notion of 'accumulative transformation' has a tension at the heart of it. Emphasizing the transformative aspect it is a temporal concept: activity simultaneously organizes "the past as something relevant to the present by not only incorporating, but transforming, the materials it emerged from" and "the future that will immediately follow from it by providing a constrained but open-ended framework for subsequent action" (Goodwin, 2018, p. 32, emphasis original). However, focusing on 'accumulation', Goodwin can be interpreted to have a more "interactionist" project, where "building new actions ... leads systematically to the accumulation of structure being organized as resources for the construction of relevant action" (Goodwin, 2018, p. 31). Goodwin was aware of this tension, and notes that accumulation should not indicate a "mere piling up of earlier material" (Goodwin, 2018, p. 31). We will not pursue the question of whether Goodwin has been entirely successful in avoiding this latter reading. Ours can be read as a way of expanding on Goodwin's transformative project—we do not want to reify material structure nor do away it, but we temporalize it; considering material constraints as ongoing historical achievements (see Fig. 1 and Van Dijk and Rietveld, 2018 for details).
In the current ethnography, we’ll focus on the activities of talking that such a process invites. After explaining the method that we developed to foreground this process in architectural practice (Section 2.1), we’ll focus on several bouts of talking in concrete situations and their larger temporal context. We start from the simple observation that the practical dealings of our daily lives often invite us to talk (talking is situated), and doing so in turn affords further actions of many kinds (it is situating). We show how coordination to past and future activities is achieved in talking, and how talking thus constitute affordances unfolding across multiple timescales.

2.1. Methods in process

The aim of our fieldwork was to identify and make tangible concrete situations of abstract activity – of imagining, reflecting, anticipating and so on. If such activities are temporally extensive processes, these could be observed by being embedded in the practice of architects for an extended period of time (Ingold, 2013; Mol, 2002; Suchman, 2007). To study such processes we developed a method befitting the entwinement of practices our theory suggests. According to this method, which we dubbed “philosophical ethnography” (Van Dijk and Rietveld, 2020), we entwine observations of real-life activities and philosophical work in a way that enriches both.

The fieldwork for this article was carried out by one of the authors (LD) at a studio for experimental architecture called RAAAF and at several of their on-site locations over the course of over a year. ER was already well acquainted with this architectural practice as he works not only as a philosopher but is also one of the founders of the architects’ studio. LD divided his time between the architects’ studio, or on site locations (a warehouse, shops, bars and exhibitions), and his office. In this way LD, as well as ER, would bring concrete observations to the discussions within their philosophical team and bring the philosophical discussions to the observations of the architects at work, in hopes of transforming both practices.

At the architects’ studio LD had unrestricted access to all situations. The architects consented to, and were aware that, LD was observing their activities. LD was observing the architects in their daily work. This included observing them making models, drawing pictures, planning appointments, sculpting clay, gluing paper, talking on the phone, and so on. LD would join meetings and listen in on conversations. He made notes and took pictures or video on the fly, mostly by phone. Occasionally LD would participate actively in discussions. He would also be asked to join to participate actively or observe when the architects felt that this would be of interest.

The notes and videos would be analyzed by LD, looking for events that would help to foreground the temporal structuring of the architects’ way of life. Recorded situations of the doings and sayings of the architects were transcribed, and LD and ER discussed the transcripts and videos in search of a description of the situations that best captured the engagement of affordances over time. The architects would be asked for clarification of situations if necessary. Over the course of months, in the back and forth of observations and philosophy, the most fruitful way of approaching situations in their larger practical context became clearer. So would our description of the recorded situations evolve to capture the temporal structuring of the phenomena that we sought. In the ethnographical descriptions below we have transcribed all utterances as everyday English writing for ease of access. Throughout this article we try to emphasize the use of language in sociomaterial situations, without imposing the Western grammatical tradition on those situations.4 The final descriptions were presented to the architects for feedback. These have been included in this article with their approval.

The architects at RAAAF make site-specific work at the crossroads of visual art, architecture, and philosophy. At the time of the fieldwork they worked on making a new architectural art installation which developed over the course of 9 months. The architects were invited to create an art installation at the headquarters of a national fund for the visual arts (“Art Fund” for short) in an old and monumental building. This art installation means to question the contemporary sitting society and imagines what a world without chairs could look like (for background see Rietveld, 2016). It aims to offer new ways of supported standing after being suspended in a metal frame (visible in Fig. 2a and c).

3. A basic case of situated-situating talking

The architects have been working on the design of the installation for some time and have tested several materials for their look and feel and for the possibilities they offer for new ways of supported standing, such as lashing straps (Fig. 2a), rubber tubing (Fig. 2b), and carpet (Fig. 2c). All these materials had been explored by the team members in life-sized models of “positions” for supported standing after being suspended in a metal frame (visible in Fig. 2a and c).

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4 We are aware that this is a fine line to walk. For instance, our choice of using everyday English writing should not be read as a commitment to reified ‘linguistic’ entities; to pre-existing words in the flow of talking. We thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue. The transcriptions moreover sacrificed the representation of intonation, pacing, timing and so on in favor of readability. Our overall point would not have been served by introducing a more elaborate system of transcription to represent such qualities of language. Yet we acknowledge that these are vital to everyday talking [see Section 3.1].
Between testing materials and various other activities the architects are trying to visualize the installation they are designing. We now join the team as architect (and founding partner) RR updates CS, who has been away for a few weeks, on the designs that are now being considered and to discuss what designs of the installation will work best. In this episode RR, CS and ER (the other founding partner of the studio) gather around a large computer screen that can display the different drawings, and where one can change these drawings, create new ones, show similar or different works through (internet) databases, and so on (Fig. 3).

![Fig. 2. Three “positions” built to test the possibilities the materials offer for supported standing. The modelled positions are all attached to a custom made metal frame. From left to right (a) lashing straps, and (b) rubber tubing tightened in the frame, and (c) a piece of carpet suspended and tensioned between the beams of the frame.](image)

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![Fig. 3. An everyday situation at the architecture studio. A computer screen displays an image of a possible design for the Art Fund installation. Senior architect RR sits on a chair in front of the screen and traces out the suspended carpet that is shown in the image. Architect CS stands to his left hand side. ER is behind RR, off screen next to LD, who made the recording (see text for details).](image)

3.1. Episode A

RR is sitting in front of the screen and working the computer by mouse and keyboard while having pen and paper at the ready. ER and CS are standing to the left and behind RR so as to have a clear view of the screen and of each other (LD aiming to observe the whole thing is standing off to the right side – and the others adjust slightly to accommodate for that too). RR is explaining to ER and CS what they are looking at while clicking through several possible designs. RR is talking to CS.5 Two of the images the architects discuss are shown as Fig. 4 and Fig. 5.

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5 Both English and in Dutch this sometimes led to incomplete or non-grammatical sentences. In contextualized and concrete situations, this is quite normal and hardly ever leads to problems. The architects spoke English most of the time, as CS did not speak Dutch. In Episodes A and B the discussions were in English. In Episode C the discussion was predominantly in Dutch. We have translated it into English where necessary. We have attempted to stay close to the meaning and form of the utterances in such cases, even when they were fragmented or ungrammatical. These translated sentences appear in square brackets.
The images of the different options shown on the screen invite RR to comment on them. He goes through them one after the other. Discontented with one of the images on the screen [Fig. 4] RR pauses and is invited to remark: “yeah, this is kind of a military structure. Heh, so, but it feels really separated and... boring. I like military structures but absolutely not in this way... and it’s...” he now gestures at the screen to show the separatedness of the image as he exclaims “tak, ding ding ding” and RR flicks on to the next image.

Notice that RR’s talking is thoroughly situated both in a spatial and a temporal sense. First, trivially almost, the architecture studio (Fig. 3) contains, tables and chairs, pens, rulers, papers, a standing table, computers etc. The walls are covered with photos of earlier installations. Samples of materials are laid out on the floor, the coffee machine is always at the ready, and shelves contain books, boxes with documents, and 3D models of past art installations that are all standby to offer new points of comparison. In that context, RR responds to the currently relevant opportunities for acting – to some relevant affordances among many other possibilities. RR for instance responds to the images that he sees on the screen. That brings us to the second way in which talking is situated: it is situated in a temporal sense. The image is part of an ongoing process and indeed RR displays the image because CS has not participated in that process for a few weeks. RR brings CS up to speed on the designs. As said, our main focus will be on the temporal situatedness of talking: the way it is enabled by and woven into the rest of the ongoing activities.

On the one hand, talking is coordinated with gestures and changes in the environment and, on the other hand, talking coordinates these gestures and changes the environment further. For instance, as RR flicks through the images, one of them invites his comments. Without the image, there would have been no talking about it. All the while, the activity of talking required the image to be displayed on the screen. If there were no talking, the image might not have remained so long. In
other words, the image and the talking were coordinated. Importantly, this coordination happens at several timescales simultaneously. For instance, RR’s saying that “it feels really separated” enables the possibility to refine or explain further. RR does so by gesturing at the structure of image while coordinating speech: “tak, ding ding ding,” these sounds (they aren’t dictionary words in Dutch either) and gestures go together, and together they have their use, but only in light of the unfolding situation and the preceding utterances that invited them.

Pushing a button affords making a new image appear on the screen. The image is depicted in Fig. 5. RR continues:

“This is the carpet” RR says as he looks briefly at CS, “you see, here...” RR’s utterance invites him to trace out the carpet on the screen. CS, who participated in their earlier experiments with carpet, responds: “Yeah,” inviting RR to continue. He does: “See yeah, it’s hard to see, but it’s quite nice actually,” RR then goes on to trace out the vertical pillars on the screen in front of him, “this should of course not be too thick in this case.” RR looks up at CS who nods understandingly.

Again, talking is both situated and situates further – it coordinates several activities across timescales. Let us look at three of these timescales here. First, most saliently, within the unfolding situation RR’s utterances are coordinated with looking at CS, with tracing the image, with being invited by CS’s response to continue and with RR’s further explanation of how to use the image. Second, this back and forth between RR and CS was enabled by RR’s initial remark: “This is the carpet” – with which the utterances are thus also coordinated as they served to explain the use of this initial remark. Third, it was against the architects shared background of discussing different materials, looking for and buying carpets, experimenting with different carpets (Fig. 2c) and so on, that RR was able to say “this is the carpet” in the first place. Saying “this is the carpet” brought these earlier activities to the present situation too. In turn, the present situation continued these activities: they allowed RR to show how to use the image of a possible design in this situation (by tracing out the carpet and commenting on the vertical pillars of the frame and looking at CS to see if she was going along with him).

In this multi-scale coordinating then, the present situation of discussing images of possible designs was made continuous with earlier activities (in particular their experimenting with carpets in a frame). That is, coordination among these activities was achieved: the current activity is coordinated in light of the earlier activity (which establishes continuity between them and enacts an activity across a larger timescale). Thus the affordance of making the architectural design is slowly enacted in skillfully enacting the affordances of the current situation. In this way, activity establishes coordination across enacted affordances and makes the current situation a practical continuation of the preceding ones. Continuity gets established from the way the carpet(s) were used in their earlier explorations to what is now seen on the screen. RR was thus invited by his own talking to go on and trace out the carpet on the screen. But discontinuity was equally important. Pointing out the pillars RR for instance explained: “this should of course not be too thick in this case.” By attending to the now relevant and irrelevant aspects of the image, RR continued the use of the images in the design-process and established a path from earlier activities (in which they had used a strong and relatively thick metal frame to experiment in) into the present situation.

What this short excerpt from a situation unfolding in an architects’ studio shows is that talking, at least in this particular case, can be seen as achieving practical continuity in the shared environment. Talking is situated and in turn situates. Importantly, as we saw, this situatedness is temporal: the activity of talking, itself a temporal phenomenon, coordinates different timescales in which activities unfold relative to one another. From the small scales in which vocalizations and gestures are coordinated, to the larger scales in which utterances and the showing and using of images are coordinated, and to the even larger scales in which the discussion itself is coordinated with the use of materials many weeks earlier. Think of what would happen if we would change the dynamic of talking; for instance by talking more slowly, by changing the order or pacing of the utterances, or by changing what “listeners” attend to as RR is speaking (see Kukla and Lance, 2009). This would all inevitably change the way the situation unfolds, and would change the continuity between activities across timescales. Put differently, talking is radically situated in place and time. We will unpack this point by considering the achievement of continuity across timescales further in discussing Episode B in the next section.

4. Situating as coordinating now for future use

At the studio, the architects often explore their possibilities for action by modeling aspects of a future design. Sometimes this exploration takes the form of images (as we saw above), sometimes of small 3D models made out of cardboard, wood, clay or metal and sometimes of models at the scale of the body. In all cases, these models have particular functions: they model one aspect while leaving out another one. For example, the images we saw give a visual impression of a possible design and show something of its atmosphere as a whole, but it does not afford the architects to determine how the carpet feels, or if the materials will allow to be draped over the metal beams as they might imagine. Models made from the right material do afford an opportunity to test whether a design might be realized, at least in principle. And it allows the architects to explore possible limits or constraints of the design posed by the material structures. In each case, how the model can be used, the way it adds to the continuity of the process of making the installation, needs to be established. In this episode, Episode B, we will highlight the situating character of language in this process that, while achieving continuity with a relevant past, sets up the conditions for future activities. In the week to come, the architects will experiment with models at the scale of the body for which they are here preparing (see next section).
4.1. Episode B

Fig. 6 shows the architects gathered around a model of one of the possible “positions” for the design. The architects DH and CS discuss the progress of the project with RR, discussing the possibility to create a “position” for supported standing using strips of carpet (its structure is similar to Fig. 2c). This situation unfolds about 3 months after the previous episode (A). The possibility to have the carpet follow the contours of a metal frame has since dropped out of the process of making, which now more readily invites using steel cables to hold and anchor the carpet, i.e. suspend it in the air. These cables anchor it directly into the ceiling and to a custom built wooden floor of the space at the Art Fund.

Experiments found that the carpet would need to be strengthened by laminating it over another fabric such as rubber or felt, or else the carpet might tear. A small model testing this possibility was created at the studio by DH and CS using nylon wires to suspend laminated sheets of paper (Fig. 6). But with this model, other possibilities could also be explored:

“... and then there is one other thing in the end, not for now, but it’s important to keep in our heads,” RR says. RR continues as he gestures at the whole table with the model and several sheets of laminated paper and then points specifically at the nylon strings: “So, I’m really trying to think whether, if this is going to work technically, although this is, this is difficult to step, because you step in like this”. The paper cutout of a person invites to be picked up by RR and to move it past the strings approaching the model from the front.

In the way RR moves the paper cutout into the model, the cutout encounters a nylon string. But this is not how the position is continuous with earlier designs – that is, RR uses the model wrong. This invites DH to respond:

“No, no, you step in through the back. Because all the positions are more or less here,” With his hands he indicates the other positions that are envisioned for the space in the air surrounding the model. “So you always walk in the ... middle, in the back.” This explanation invites RR to move the paper cutout again and make it approach from the back: “Nja, okay, you come here, and then?” he asks, inviting DH to respond: “you can come...” pausing as he encounters a nylon string that was necessary to fix the scale model in its frame, but one that will not be required at the Art Fund, DH points to the string: “this is not there”.

Again, going back and forth between talking, gesturing and doing, the architects determine how to use the model in this situation. They achieve continuity with the earlier designs (of the whole space in which this model was only one of several positions) by showing how to use it: its relevant practical similarity (the presence of nylon strings that constrain the way people should approach the position), and practical dissimilarity (the absence of a particular nylon string in the final version of the design). Note that pointing to a string and saying “this is not there” is neither incorrect nor non-sense – in the context in which it functions to continue the situation it does its job very effectively.

After the activities described above, some further back and forth between the model, the cutout figure, RR and DH unfold. The architects start to agree on the use of the model, which enables the architects to return to the coordination that they were
out to establish before the discontinuous use of model got in the way: that between the current situation and the experiment that they are going to do next week at a real-life scale. Specifically, in showing how to use the model with a paper cutout figure, the figure encountered a nylon string several times. So together learning to make use of the model had made the model a continuation of earlier activity. Concurrently, this also started to extend the use of the model into future activity. This continuity now poses a constraint on next week’s testing activities. DH remarks:

“Yeah. But in all, eum, positions people will have to start taking care of not walking into the wires,” he says while touching the nylon strings on the model. DH continues as he puts his thumb and index finger together, forming a precision grip. He moves his hand up and down in mid-air: “Cause people are not used to wires going through the space.” This invites RR to respond: “That means that the wires, in one way or another, should be really visible in the end.” DH agrees as he picks up his coffee: “Yeah, they should be clearly visible, not disappear.” “No” RR then says.

In this way the model allowed the continuation of the design into the experiments the following week and after that. Practical continuity has been achieved across timescales: the architects are now responsive to the constraint posed by the use of cables in future activity. They first coordinated the current situation of using the model with earlier activities (determining how to “read” the model, how it fits in the room at the Art fund and with the older models and images made). This then, secondly, allowed for new ways of situating the model into the design process to be established (e.g. using the cutout person to encounter the nylon wires). This allowed the architects to make new aspects of the design relevant and so constrain future activities unfolding as much as they could: they need to find a cable that fits the design aesthetically, is strong enough, but will also be visible enough to avoid people bumping into it.

5. Situating situated talking

In the ethnography discussed so far, we’ve seen how talking gets interlaced with other doings and is thus situated while in turn situating the activities that can continue the process further. This dual situated-situating character consisted here in making utterances that establish the practical similarity and dissimilarity between activities unfolding now, activities that unfolded earlier and activities that could unfold later. Doing so, talking achieves continuity across activities (from earlier to now and future). This makes the current activity continuous with past activities and together pointing towards relevant future possibilities for action.

It is a main theme of this paper that skilled participants can use utterances adequately in as much as they are sensitive to affordances unfolding across different timescales simultaneously (see Section 2 above).6 That is, being responsive to how, on the one hand, the relevant affordances across a small scale (such as the action possibility of explaining that “this is the carpet,” or pointing out a nylon wire and saying “people will have to start taking care of not walking into the wires”) allows the larger scales (the affordance of making an architectural art installation) to keep inviting. On the other hand, being responsive to how this larger scale affordance of making an installation invites enacting small scale affordances in light of it. For example, the difficulty of navigating the nylon wires in the small model (Episode B) points to the importance of testing the position at real size later (see below). Thus, by inviting skilled participants to contribute to the enactment of affordances across multiple timescales simultaneously, it becomes clearer to those participants what needs to be done to continue the process of making. In other words, as a self-perpetuating process, the affordance increases in determinacy as it unfolds. Our observations showed that talking, considered as a situated-situating activity, is important in reducing indeterminacy.

Situations do not always unfold that fluidly however, and as activities, linguistic or otherwise, take off from the larger scale process, the anticipating participants, sensitive to the unfolding of the process, may sense this mounting indeterminacy and be invited by the process to try and re-establish the coordination over time.7 It is here that we can find another interesting phenomenon: we encounter the use of “reflexive” talking (Taylor, 1990, 2000; Van den Herik, 2017), used in the service of (re)establishing practical continuity across a larger scale process much like the coordination we saw in Episodes A and B. On our view of situated talking, such talking “about” a situation is understood in terms of talking “in” or “along” a situation. That is, reflexive talking does not transcend the situation, but transforms it.

To emphasize how talking “about” a situation is an affordance of talking “in” a situation, we want to introduce one last episode. In this episode we turn to the opportunities previous talking provides for coordinating earlier and later activity. As we shall see, such coordination with earlier talking is prominent when the situation is not unfolding as fluidly as the participants would hope. That is, when the overall situation is practically indeterminate, without a clear way of continuing. In such less determinate situations, the fragmented utterances, and gestures observed in the previous two episodes might not succeed in situating the activity further. Coordination among earlier and later fails, continuity does not get established, and activity

6 Indeed, the situated-situating nature of talking implies a temporal mutuality—between affordances unfolding across different timescales (see Van Dijk, 2021 for more on the notion of mutualism this requires).

7 A crucial element of our approach is that it emphasizes the indeterminate aspects of living in a complex and pragmatically structured environment. An indeterminate environment is an open-ended and potentially precarious environment. This may give indeterminacy or ambiguity a negative connotation, and indeed, the examples in this paper focus more on the tension one may experience in such indeterminate situations. Note however that indeterminacy is not inherently negative or positive. An open-ended environment also offers possibilities for new and creative use of materials. In fact, it might be argued that imagination and creativity are features of indeterminacy. Conversely, having one’s environment be practically determined may not be a particularly hopeful situation (think of life in a prison).
unfolds in a new direction. One activity invited in such a case however is to situate previously situated talking by further talking.

5.1. Episode C

Let us now rejoin the architects 10 days after Episode B. We join the architects RR, DH and CS as well as ER and carpenter KS as they are exploring the life-size model of the position discussed and modelled there (Fig. 7). The life-sized model did not solve the problems anticipated in Episode B but did bring it further into focus: the cable would run through the room at the Art Fund and this would be dangerous for the visitors there. During a long discussion about the impact of the cables and the design of the position itself, tension is mounting. In Fig. 7, RR is pointing out the problem to everyone while, at the same time, DH and KS are starting a discussion. DH is about to point at the attachment of the strap to the metal frame and is asking KS:

"[If we try to put this one there]", DH points upwards to a higher point in the metal frame. However, KS has done that already and it didn’t work: “Yeah, that’s how I starting this morning” he’s invited to respond.

The cable placement continues to be a problem that does not offer a quick solution and this “destabilizes” the process and the situation unfolds in different directions. An indeterminate situation unfolds that does not invite a quick response. The architects interlace their discussion of this problem with the visibility and necessity of using metal cables, the possibility to include a pillar for support. But uncomfortable with the prolonged indeterminacy of the situation, they also try to get away from it. Here we first see a clear example of the discussion itself becoming an issue in talking. RR, who’s standing in the model next to CS, remarks with an ironic tone:

“Okay, maybe we are a little bit too much concerned about aesthetics.” RR starts laughing. This divergence invites KS, standing outside the model, to go along and add “[we could also make a big black dark room. Then the details won’t matter.]” “[No, yeah],” RR says and translates for CS, “In a black room, the details won’t matter.” They laugh.

Here then we see how the unfolding discussion itself, being part of the process, affords more talking. In this case, the direction of the discussion, relative to the larger scale process, provides a means of stopping the activity of talking that it keeps fueling, as the directions the discussions take do not seem particularly helpful. That is, responsive to how the discussion unfolds as it draws activities of talking together, i.e. responsive to the direction that one of the ‘strands’ of Fig. 6 is taking, RR can make the discussion itself an issue. KS, at that point, senses the opportunity for a joke to help RR to relieve some tension (lightening the mood) and get away from continuing the discussion. After a comparison of different cables and checking the measurement of the models, however the situation remains as indeterminate as ever:
“No, the problem is the cables” ER is invited to say, as he leans against the metal frame. RR agrees: “The real problem is the cables.”

Next, we see another attempt to establish new ways of continuing, and another bout of talking about talking. Now, however, such coordinating to previous talking is more constructive: rather than only an attempt to let go of the current discussion, it is a way of continuing current activity in terms of even earlier activity. DH has joined the discussion, standing next to the model, and is still invited to attach the strap higher in the model. He says to KS:

“[KS, KS, should we not try it nonetheless?]” “[What?]” KS asks. “50 centimeter,” says DH. Annoyed KS again responds “[Yeah, you go and try that. I’ve done that already this morning]”

DH is trying to continue a possible unfolding of a situation that they started about 10 minutes earlier. This attempt initially failed: asking KS to “try it nonetheless” was not properly situated in the activities, as the situation had taken several different turns since. That indeterminacy, however, invites a simple reflexive utterance: “What?” KS asked. This interjection quickly coordinated KS with DH so that a simple remark “50 centimeter” sufficed to establish continuity.

Here then we see that the situated-situating nature of talking has a down-side, but one that provides its own solution. We saw that if talk is properly situated, utterances can help to establish practical similarities and dissimilarities between the current activity, earlier activities and future action possibilities. As such it can enable continuity by constituting a large scale inviting affordance unfolding across all these episodes. If the utterances are not adequately adjusted to the demands of the situation however, such as DH’s initial remark, the same process that situates utterances to allow for further situating may lead instead to further ambiguity. A simple “What?” is enough to establish coordination again. Asking “What?” thus situates the situated question “should we try it?” at a short timescale.

In response to DH, KS is invited to start climbing into the metal frame. RR, still standing in the model, responds to the way KS and DH are continuing the earlier direction of unfolding. Perhaps noticing some of the tension mounting, RR interjects:

“Yes, you, but KS, to be serious for a minute, you’re saying that you would pull the whole thing up. That’s what you’re saying!”. “[Yes, but I’m happy to just do it again]” KS says, climbing into the metal frame.

Here we see a clear case of talking about talking, inviting further activity: the metal frame invites climbing in order to move the strap up. In this case simple utterances help to establish continuity from one activity to the next. They are situating situated talking. RR’s asking, “You’re saying that you would pull the whole thing up” is situating KS’s current situated activity in the process from his earlier attempts in the morning to the discussions that followed, thus allowing for new activity: KS will do it again (and the model indeed gets skewed).

The problem with the use of cables, both their trajectory through the room and their visibility, was in the end solved in the process of making the installation. Without following this process any further here, the analysis of Episode C however allows us to make an important point: situated talking is part of a process of unfolding affordances that by inviting participation sets up the conditions for its own continuation. Situated talking can establish coordination among past and present activities in order to allow future activities to continue the process. But the converse also holds: if activities are enacted that do not contribute to the joint enactment of the process across timescales, i.e. if the process fails to set up the conditions for continuing it, the process starts to waver and risks diverting, or even dissolving. As talking is however part of continuing the process, it offers a unique way of redressing that problem. By making earlier talking itself an issue, by situating situated talking, ambiguous or indeterminate situations may invite more or more elaborate talking in order to establish new coordination across the process and find new ways of continuing the situation.

6. Concluding remarks

By looking closely at the use of language in its wider temporal context, this paper aimed to show how many affordances for humans are constituted in talking. As we have shown by exploring several real-life examples of talking in an architectural context, talking is coordinated with gestures, materials and people across multiple timescales simultaneously. Thus it establishes continuity across activities (from earlier to now and future). When coordination fails, reflexive talking, i.e. the activity of situating situated talking, can help to get the process back on track. So situated talking makes the current activity continuous with past activities and together pointing towards relevant possibilities for future action. Talking is both situated and situating. Rather than abstracting away from concrete activities, this situated-situating view of talking suggests a view of talking about talking as a possibility that develops over time in concrete situations.

As the observed process of making exemplified, the enactment of affordances, by coordinating of materials, people and utterances, is not confined to a single practice. From birth, human beings are caught up in processes belonging to many practices unfolding concurrently and each individual will have learned skills for continuing a multitude of them. Indeed,

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9 Although reflexive talking is crucial, in our view, for coordinating timescales of activity that start to diverge, we do not mean to suggest that reflexive talking is exclusively a matter of correction or repair (e.g. think of remarks such as “that’s a nice way of putting it” or “let me tell you a story”). There is a wide range of situations where humans incorporate and refine reflexive talk in their practices in various ways, and reflexive talk seems especially crucial for language development (Taylor, 2000, 2010; Van den Herik, 2021). Yet not every situation invites reflexive talking. In our observations reflexive talking was most prominent when the practical continuity of a situation starts to waver.
skilled talking, which is enabled by learning to participate in a multitude of practices, allows for coordinating our various human ways of life. Talking helps keeping these multiple practices separate when necessary, drawing them together if required: it enables someone to enter a new practice or leave a practice in which one used to be embedded. Coordinating diverse practices simultaneously, for better or worse, we live our lives in a particular way and help maintain a way of life for others to join in (Hodges, 2014; Goodwin, 2018). It allows one to make an architectural installation by day, shop for groceries when one has the opportunity, and strive to be a good father throughout doing both (and more). Talking, in short, is inextricably part of the processes of human becoming (Ingold, 2018). And this brings us back to our starting point.

Emphasizing the continuity across diverse animals, ecological psychology has rightfully and consistently resisted retrofitting the machinery traditionally thought to be required for language to the processes of perception and action. It has, moreover, come to reject that representationalist picture of language itself in favor of a view that places linguistic practices within a participatory and open-ended world. Once in this position, language use should seamlessly “work backwards” on direct perception (see Gibson, 1966, p. 28; Kiverstein and Van Dijk, 2021, this issue). This ecological position promises an account of how our lived experience of everyday engagement can gain a reflective quality, without at any point reverting to a representational picture of mental life (e.g. Gibson, 1979, p. 255 ff.; Heft, 2020; Noble, 1987; Van Dijk and Kiverstein, 2020). By engaging affordances, people experience an enlaged world directly. Yet language has not been nearly as vital to ecological psychology as it is to our everyday life. We wonder therefore, in the spirit of Alan Costall (1995, p. 467): what would ecological psychology stand to lose if all our affordances were enlaged?

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