

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Pragmatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

How to do things with signs. The formulation of directives on signs in public spaces

Jan Svennevig ^{a, b}^a University of Agder, Department of Nordic and Media Studies, P.O. Box 422, Kristiansand, 4604, Norway^b University of Oslo, Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies, P.O. Box 1102, Oslo, 0317, Norway

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 August 2020

Received in revised form 4 January 2021

Accepted 16 January 2021

Keywords:

Directives

Linguistic landscape

Entitlement

Public signage

Compliance

Prohibition

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes signs and written messages aimed at regulating people's behavior in public spaces. Based on a collection of more than 700 verbal and pictographic signs, the paper focuses on how the formulation of the directives reflect and construct the authors' deontic authority, how they account for the social legitimacy of the directive and how they seek to evoke the addressee's goodwill and cooperativeness. The analysis shows that the author's entitlement to perform the directive may be grounded in references to institutional authority, or that it may be manifested in the linguistic or pictographic expression itself, such as use of imperative mode, exclamation marks, or threats of sanctions. Entitlement may also be established by providing accounts for the legitimacy of the directive. These take the form of reference to rules and norms or information about benefits of the requested action to the recipients or third parties. Finally, the analysis shows how signs may seek to evoke positive attitudes in the addressee by creating affiliation or by using humor and poetic devices. By comparing with previous research on directives in conversation, the paper identifies request practices that are specific to this form of written communication.

© 2021 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Public spaces are full of signs and written notes telling the public what to do and what not to do, such as the omnipresent “No smoking”-signs or the post-it notes commonly found in lunch rooms saying “Clean up after yourself”. Such signs are powerful indices of norms of propriety and social order. Not only do they provide insight into what sorts of actions are deemed mandatory or improper in which locations – and in need of explicit exhortation, they also provide insight into the entitlement various actors claim in regulating the actions of others, and the methods they use to seek compliance. While there is by now a rich literature on the formulation of requests in face-to-face interaction (for an overview, see [Drew and Couper-Kuhlen, 2014](#)), there is as of yet hardly any attention devoted to how public signs or other written texts seek to regulate behavior by using different linguistic formulations and pictographic representations. This article is a first attempt at identifying some common formats used on such signs and discussing how they display entitlement and seek compliance.

E-mail address: jan.svennevig@uia.no.

2. Directives in the linguistic landscape

There is an established research field studying written messages in public spaces, Linguistic Landscape Studies. It emerged within the field of sociolinguistics, and a main concern has been the representation of various languages on signs in multilingual societies. As stated in the introduction to the first issue of the journal *Linguistic Landscape*: “The main goal of LL studies is to describe and identify systematic patterns of the *presence and absence of languages* in public spaces and to understand the motives, pressures, ideologies, reactions and decision making of people regarding the creation of LL in its varied forms.” (Shohamy and Ben-Rafael, 2015:1, emphasis added). Originally dominated by quantitative studies of formal aspects of language, the field has increasingly widened the scope to more qualitative approaches, such as ethnography (e.g. Blommaert, 2013) and semiotics (Peck and Stroud, 2015). This has led to an increased interest in multimodality and different material artefacts (Thurlow and Goncalves, 2019). However, up until now, hardly any studies have addressed the pragmatic aspects of signs, especially the linguistic formulation of various classes of actions, such as warnings, informings, prohibitions, requests or offers. Only a few studies touch upon such issues as part of other analytic agendas.

One example of a study that partly addresses the formulation of directives is Ferencik (2018), which analyzes practices of politeness in regulatory signs and notices in a tourism site in Slovakia. He notes that in settings where the author has indisputable authority (such as property rights), signs tend to use direct formulations involving imperatives or nominalizations, thus reflecting a traditional Slovak politeness ‘ethos’. Signs in commercial settings, where the customer is assigned more power, conform more to an English or globalized politeness ethos by using conventional indirectness and politeness formulas such as ‘please’ and ‘thank you’. Apart from studies such as this one, there is still a surprising scarcity of studies investigating signs as social actions.

3. Requests in conversation

In the field of Conversation Analysis, the situation is diametrically opposite. There is a vast amount of studies of directives, but no studies of how they are formulated in written genres. This may not be surprising, given that the field of research deals primarily with oral *interaction* rather than with written text. However, many of the concepts used in CA for describing action formation are clearly relevant and applicable also to written utterances. For instance, Curl and Drew (2008) show how requests with modal interrogatives (‘can you...’) claim a higher *entitlement* to ask for the service than do requests formulated as ‘I wonder if...’. Similarly, imperatives claim higher entitlement than do modal interrogatives (Craven and Potter, 2010). Another dimension of requests is how speakers orient to *contingencies* (Curl and Drew, 2008), that is, potential obstacles to the accomplishment of the requested action. Interrogatives with modal auxiliaries, such as ‘could you’ and ‘would you’, display an orientation to potential problems related to the recipients’ abilities or willingness to complete the requested action (Urbanik and Svennevig, 2019).

The study of such practices in conversation is often framed within the field of *social deontics* (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2012). The term is derived from the semantic term *deontic modality*, denoting linguistic expressions of necessity, obligation and desirability (Palmer, 2001). Deontic authority may be based on the speakers’ *deontic status*, such as their institutionally established rights to decide about the actions of others. Various degrees of authority may be claimed in conversation by various modal expressions, such as the use of imperative mood (‘Come here!’), modal auxiliaries (‘You must/should/ought to come here’) or modal adverbs and adjectives (‘Smoking forbidden’). By using such expressions, speakers express a *deontic stance*, that is, a claim to a certain degree of authority to decide about future actions.

The relationship between deontic status and stance is not a simple or direct one. Often they will be congruent, so that people with high deontic status will use strong deontic expressions. But sometimes people with high status will downplay their authority by using weak deontic expressions, or conversely, people with low deontic status will try to inflate their authority by using strong deontic expressions (Stevanovic and Peräkylä, 2012).

The current study proposes to use these concepts developed in CA as the analytical apparatus for describing the formulation of directives on signs.

4. Data and method

The signs included in the study are posted in public spaces, meaning that they are not addressed to specific individuals but to a broader, unspecified public. They range from ephemeral signs, such as handwritten post-it notes in lunchrooms, to more permanent ones, such as printed metal signs fixed to walls in public institutions. They all include as their main action a directive, that is, a semiotically mediated action with the purpose of getting the addressees to do something or to refrain from doing something in the interest of the person or institution responsible for the sign or some third party (Drew and Couper-Kuhlen, 2014). They contrast with warnings (such as ‘The floor is slippery’), where the purpose is to get the addressees to act in their own interest. The class of actions is rather broad, ranging from unconditional orders and prohibitions to weaker forms, such as ‘reminders’ and suggestions. Included are also ‘indirect’ forms, or *composite actions* (Rossi, 2018), such as “Thank you for not smoking”, where the directive is expressed by means of a vehicle conventionally associated with another class of actions.

The study is based on a collection of 700+ photos of signs and notices, taken in the period 2013–2019, mainly in Norway, but some also in various other countries, such as Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Greece, India, Malaysia and USA. The data

collection has been conducted with the aim of getting a maximum of variation in wording and other semiotic resources for expressing the directive. The inclusion of signs from different countries also contributes to this aim. This sampling technique differs from many linguistic landscape studies, which have more restricted and coherent sets of data. However, it is motivated by the fact that the study is a qualitative study of types of formulations rather than a quantitative study of frequencies related to contexts of use or types of directives. The inclusion of new instances has been guided by a principle of data saturation, meaning that after a certain formulation has been attested several times (for instance the sign ‘No smoking’ accompanied by a picture of a cigarette with a prohibition sign over it), new instances are no longer added to the collection. In this way, the collection represents as many different formulations as possible, enabling identification of similarities and differences among them and thereby to propose classes of practices with certain fundamental features in common.

The analysis uses the theoretical and conceptual apparatus developed in the study of action formation in the field of Conversation Analysis (Levinson, 2013). However, there is one fundamental difference between CA studies and the current one. The study of action formation and ascription in CA is a study of how interlocutors give a certain utterance status as a specific type of action by a process of interactional negotiation, in which responses and third position moves (responses to responses) are constitutive in determining the action status of an utterance. In Schegloff's (2007) words, action is determined partly by *composition* – the linguistic and embodied format of the directive – partly by *position*, that is, its place in a sequence of turns and actions.

When studying public signage, the latter aspect becomes problematic. It would in principle be possible to study how the public behave in the presence of signs involving various formulations of directives. However, it would prove difficult to establish the procedural consequentiality of the formulations, that is, to claim that the behavior observed was normatively oriented to the formulation of the directive. Furthermore, representatives of the institution responsible for the sign are seldom present to help clarify the meaning of the sign or to endorse or sanction the public's adherence or non-adherence. Consequently, there are clear limitations to the possibilities of studying signs in a sequential, procedural perspective with the standard methods developed for studying talk-in-interaction.

An alternative to investigating the sequential position of a written directive is to focus instead on another type of ‘position’, namely the physical placement of the sign. A directive on a public sign is not primarily designed by reference to a previous utterance or action, but rather to the physical surroundings and their affordances for action. For instance, some sculptures in public parks offer great opportunities for climbing and playing. Signs prohibiting touching the sculptures must therefore be analyzed in relation to the potential for illegitimate action offered by these physical structures. Thus, the analysis does not just investigate the signs themselves, but considers them in light of their physical placement. In doing this, the analysis adopts the principles of *geosemiotics*, a research field studying physical locations as holistic, meaningful structures, ‘places’ rather than ‘spaces’ (Scollon and Scollon, 2003).

It may also be argued that signs are objects that the members themselves treat as different from turns in conversation. For instance, given that authors of signs do not have any opportunity to clarify their meaning or respond to the audience's reactions to the signs, we might expect that they will strive for maximal clarity and non-negotiable claims of deontic authority. They will compensate for the possibility to negotiate the meaning of an utterance by reducing ambiguities and other potential sources of misunderstanding. This contributes to giving signs a status as texts ‘speaking for themselves’ (Olson, 1996). As such, the *composition* aspect of the action realized becomes more important. The analysis will thus focus primarily on the linguistic and semiotic conventions drawn upon in the formulation of the individual directive.

5. Analysis

The analysis first addresses formats that express a high entitlement to perform the directive, either based on the responsible actor's deontic authority (status) or by taking a strong deontic stance. Second, it shows how entitlement is claimed by accounts for the legitimacy of the directive and the requested action. Third, it addresses how signs may seek to create affiliation with the recipient and thereby establishing a relation of cooperativeness. Finally, it shows how rhetorical devices may be used to evoke positive attitudes toward the directive.

5.1. Expressions of authority

In public signage, reference to deontic status is sometimes used to signal authority. The social actor responsible for the sign is most commonly an institutional body or a person in an institutional role. These actors are thus ‘principals’ in Goffman's (1979) terminology, that is, the figure “whose position is established by the words spoken” and “who has committed himself to what the words say” (Goffman, 1979: 17).¹ The actor responsible for the directive is often not identified on the sign, but occasionally there is some form of a ‘signature’ at the bottom. In such cases, this actor is most commonly an institution or an institutional figure with authority and high deontic status. In Fig. 1, a sign placed at the entrance to Taj Mahal monument in India, the signature is ‘Superintending archeologist’ plus the institutional body ‘Archeological Survey of India’. In Fig. 2, on a sign posted on the entrance to a building of the University of Oslo, it is the ‘University director’ (Universitetsdirektøren), that is, the head of the administration. Common to these signatures is that they represent the highest ranked function in the

¹ In the rest of the article, I do not use this term but instead the less technical term ‘author’ to refer to the actor responsible for the sign.

administrative hierarchy. The fact that the signs only indicate the title (and not the name of the individual, for example) highlights the institutional character of the authority.



Fig. 1. Carrying eatables, paan, paan masala, cigarettes, match box, bidis, arm, electronic goods, tripod etc. are strictly prohibited inside the monument. Please do not make the monument dirty. Superintending Archeologist Archeological Survey of India.

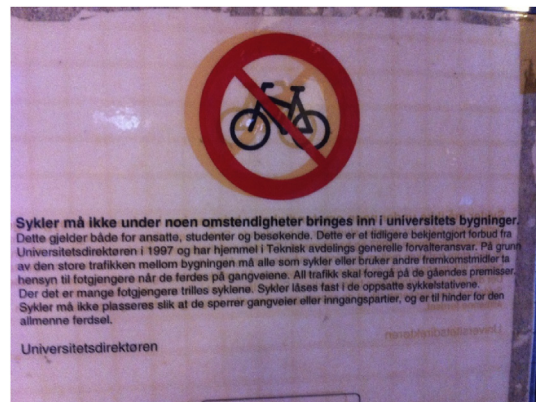


Fig. 2. Bicycles must not under any circumstances be brought into the buildings of the university. This concerns both employees, students and guests. This is a previously announced prohibition by the University Director in 1997 and has statutory basis in the general stewardship of the Technical department. [...]. The University Director

Markers of modality indicating deontic stance are practically omnipresent in signs regulating behavior in public. The majority of signs display a strong deontic stance, claiming unequivocal and complete authority to regulate the actions of others. In the signs in Figs. 1 and 2, we find strong modal expressions, such as imperative ('do not make the monument dirty'), strong modal auxiliaries ('bicycles must not...') and verbs indicating institutional authority ('prohibit'). The deontic stance is furthermore upgraded by various reinforcing adverbs and adverbial phrases ('strictly prohibited', 'under no circumstances'). The physical position of the signs at entrances to public institutions adds to the expression of authority in that the signs acquire a symbolical function as 'gatekeepers', regulating the admission to the premises.

This tendency to take a strong deontic stance is not restricted to senders with high deontic status. In Fig. 3, from a waste bin in a sports center, we see a similarly strong admonishment, using imperative mood and multiple exclamation marks to upgrade the deontic stance. However, this text is signed by the 'cleaning dept.' (renholdsavd.), an institutional body which is not normally associated with the authority to regulate people's handling of waste. Instead, the multiple exclamation marks seem to indicate a different basis for claiming deontic authority, such as personal frustration or moral indignation. Other signs do not have a signature at all, but may still use strong deontic expressions. In Fig. 4 (from the same sports center), the request not to take bikes inside is formulated with the strong modal auxiliary 'skal' (shall) and the stance is upgraded by underlining. Who is responsible for this sign is not indicated, but its placement on the booth of the supervision guard may indicate some institutional authority associated with the practical administration of the premises.

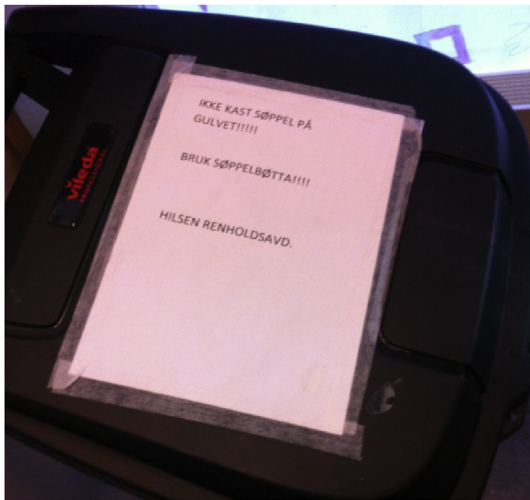


Fig. 3. Do not throw garbage on the floor!!!! Use the waste bin!!!! The cleaning dept.



Fig. 4. Bicycles shall not go inside.

A power-based strategy for gaining compliance is imposing *sanctions* on non-compliance. In Fig. 5, the sanction is expulsion and economic compensation, and in Fig. 6 it is confiscation. Actually, in the latter case the prohibition is not expressed explicitly at all, so the readers have to infer it from the sanction. Furthermore, the spatial range of the prohibition is left implicit, so it has to be inferred from the position of the sign. In these cases, the authors claim the right to impose the sanction and thereby provide the basis for their deontic authority. The legal basis for the sanction is seldom expressed and it may be questionable in the case of Fig. 6 (but see below on references to legislation).

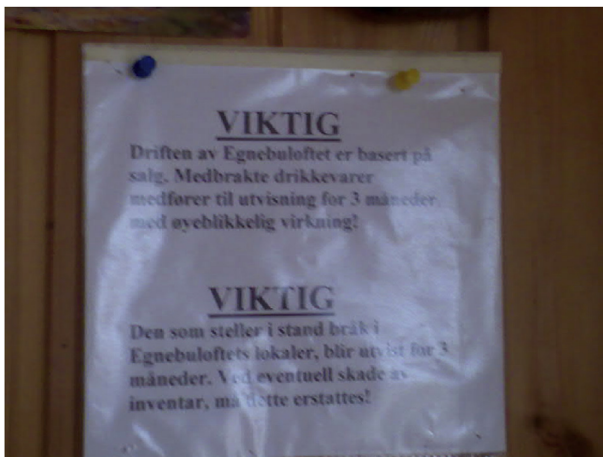


Fig. 5. IMPORTANT The operation of Egnebulloftet is based on sales. Brought-along drinks lead to expulsion for 3 months starting immediately. IMPORTANT Whoever starts a fight in the premises of Egnebulloftet will be expelled for 3 months. If inventory is damaged, this will have to be recompensed.



Fig. 6. Bicycles will be removed without warning. Bicycle stand beneath the café.

5.2. Accounts for the legitimacy of the directive

The author's entitlement to perform the directive may also be established by using accounts, that is, providing reasons for the directive in terms of either causes or motives (Heritage, 1988). Accounts are used when social actors anticipate that their addressees will question or object to their social actions (Scott and Lyman, 1968). The account thus seeks to make the action more understandable or acceptable and thereby to preempt potential resistance from the recipient. Accounts may be explicit

and take the form of an independent clause or they may be more implicit and embedded in the social action itself (Robinson, 2016). We will here primarily consider explicit accounts formulated in separate clauses.

Signs requesting or prohibiting some action are often presented as unproblematic and fully legitimate without any accounting practices, such as in Fig. 3 above, where there is no account for the cleaning department's right to regulate people's behavior. Others present extensive accounts for the legitimacy of the directive, as in Fig. 2 above: 'This is a previously announced prohibition by the University Director in 1997 and has statutory basis in the general stewardship (forvalteransvar) of the Technical department.' The account here provides the institutional and legal basis for the prohibition.

Accounts may explain and motivate actions in two ways. First, they may provide *causal* explanations in relation to already existing norms, conventions, rules or regulations (*because*-explanations). Second, they may provide functional or *teleological* explanations with reference to potential, hypothetical or future events or states (*in order to*-explanations). For instance, the request not to bring bicycles into the building could instead have been motivated by a concern for cleanliness or navigability. We will deal with these two types of accounts in turn.

Many causal accounts refer explicitly or implicitly to some type of rule or regulation providing the legal or institutional basis for the directive. In Fig. 7, we find explicit references to codified legislation, with references to specific paragraphs in the law on "Protection of non-smokers' health". Here we find a statement of the range of fines applicable in case of transgression (cf. above on sanctions) and the authority in charge of enforcing the legislation. In addition to this explicit reference to legislation, we might also note the use of the prohibition sign. This is a more indirect and associative reference to another sort of regulation, namely traffic legislation. Prohibition signs of this sort are extremely common, and are used with a wide range of actions that are not regulated by traffic legislation (as for instance urinating, cf. Fig. 27 below). By using the prohibition sign, senders associate the directive with a formally regulated domain and thereby associatively upgrade their deontic authority.



Fig. 7. Smoking forbidden. Law of 16 January 2003 no. 3 art. 51 "Protection of non-smokers' health". Law of 11 November 1975 no. 584. Law 28 Dec. 2001 no. 448 – administrative fines of transgression from 27.50 Euros up to 275.00 Euros. [...].

Apart from legal regulations, accounts may also invoke more informal types of norms or conventions. On the sign in Fig. 8, from a classroom in a primary school, we find a series of directives, bolstered by accounts underneath in the form of statements of norms of behavior. The norms are formulated in the present tense as descriptions of how 'we' behave. The normative regulation is thus disguised as a convention – a generalization about actual behavior. This is common in pedagogical contexts, but is also found in other settings where the public is treated as in need of some form of guidance or education. In Fig. 9, from the lunch room of a renovation company with many multilingual employees, we find the same type of

normative regulation concerning language choice. The placement in the lunch room also seems to imply that having one's lunch break is being 'at work', which may be a controversial claim. Actually, in this case the directive is not stated explicitly, but merely implied by the norm formulation, which serves as an account for it. However, the directive intent and exhortative function may be gleaned from the underlining of 'speak' and the capitalization of 'Norwegian'.

The 'pedagogical' tone in these normative statements may be experienced by many as patronizing or condescending, especially by adults who are not in an educational context. A way to avoid this can be to attribute the norm to the addressees themselves. In a sign posted on the entrance to an orthodox church in Greece (Fig. 10), the Church Council motivates the request to wear 'decent' clothes by referring to the readers' conscience. The request itself is represented pictographically, by a cross over the kind of attire that is prohibited. The verbal text provides an account which *alludes* to a norm, without, however, stating it explicitly. The public is thereby invited to take a decision based on their conscience rather than on externally imposed norms (and neither on obedience to authorities, note the weak deontic expression 'we make a suggestion'). The risk with this line of accounting, especially in a cross-cultural context such as this one (with many foreign tourists visiting), is that religious norms and conventions differ both between individuals and cultural groups, so that it is not at all certain that the foreign tourists' conscience will guide them in questions of what is considered decent attire in places of worship.



Fig. 8. Show respect. We start the class by entering quietly and calmly. Take responsibility. We take responsibility that everyone has someone to be with. Show compassion. We show compassion when someone is sad. Keep order. We keep the classroom tidy.

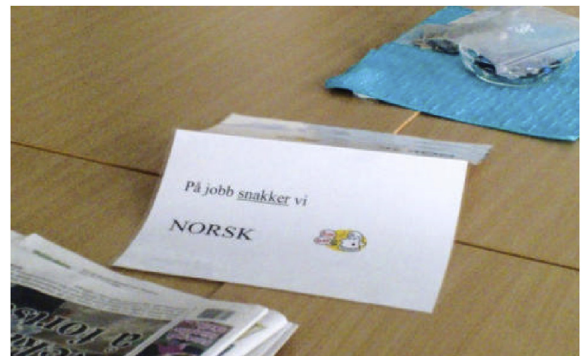


Fig. 9. At work we speak NORWEGIAN.

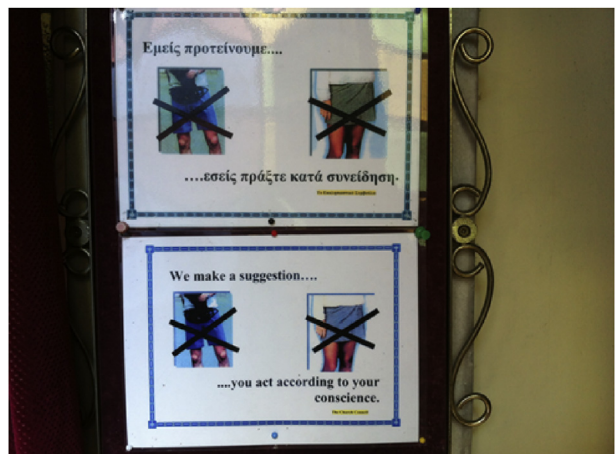


Fig. 10. We make a suggestion....you act according to your conscience. The Church Council.

The second class of accounts are the functional or teleological ones. They motivate directives by invoking potential or future consequences of actions for various groups of beneficiaries (Clayman and Heritage, 2014). Typically, such consequences are negative, constituting either a hazard or some form of disadvantage to individuals or the general public. In Fig. 11, it is the health risk to the animals and hazard to the public, and in Fig. 12, it is discomfort to allergics. When the beneficiary of the action is represented, it is usually a group 'worthy of compassion'. For instance, allergics constitute a group disadvantaged by an illness that is not self-inflicted.

Accounts may be more indirect and subtle than in the cases above. In Fig. 13, from a street in Agra, India, the account is represented pictographically by a girl holding her ears. This picture conveys the discomfort caused by honking, thereby

providing an account for why the public should comply with the request. This sign is also interesting in that it attributes the request to a representative of the group of beneficiaries, namely children. This is conveyed by the highly expressive, colloquial style of the verbal text, with a curse and a request to *terminate* an action (rather than refrain from it), a formulation normally associated with the expression of annoyance. The picture and the dramatized exclamation thus constitute a vivid representation of the discomfort caused by the unwanted behavior. And compliance is sought by appealing to the addressee's empathy with children, a group that adults normally have plenty of compassion for.



Fig. 11. Feeding the animals is not allowed. They may get ill and die, or dangerous situations may occur.



Fig. 12. Tobacco-free entrance! Don't smoke here! Show consideration – think about our allergies! Thank you!



Fig. 13. For God's sake, STOP HONKING.

However, accounts may also focus on positive consequences of positive behavior. Usually, such consequences are presented as positive to the addressees themselves, thus motivating them to act out of self-interest. On the sign in Fig. 14, the subway authorities in Copenhagen ask passengers to let people out of the train before entering, and motivate the request by claiming that this will make the subway ride better for all. And in the university cafeteria in Trondheim, Norway, the request to clean up one's plates is presented as in the interest of the students themselves by giving them a more pleasant cafeteria (see Fig. 15).



Fig. 14. First out, then in. Then the subway ride gets better for all.



Fig. 15. Cleaning duty! Everyone shall clean up after themselves. Show goodwill. Then you [pl] get a more pleasant cafeteria.

Teleological accounts thus differ from causal accounts and authority-based directives in that they appeal to the addressees' reason, idealism, conscience, compassion, etc. They invite the reader to consider rational or emotional arguments for a certain course of action and take a personal stance. As such, they seek compliance on the basis of personal *motivation* rather than *obedience* to an authority or a rule.

5.3. Seeking compliance by establishing affiliation

An alternative to seeking compliance by appealing to the authority of the author or the legitimacy of the directive is to appeal to the cooperativeness of the addressee. This may be done by establishing affiliation, that is, emphasizing the personal relationship between the author of the sign and the addressee. One way of doing this, is using modal interrogatives (such as 'can/could you' or 'would you') instead of imperatives. These forms display a weaker deontic stance by orienting to contingencies, for instance that the interlocutor is not willing or able to perform the requested action (Craven and Potter, 2010). By taking into account contingencies and providing the opportunity to decline, they show respect for the interlocutor's right to self-determination and freedom of action (what is described as 'negative politeness' in Brown and Levinson, 1987). Thereby they make compliance contingent upon the interlocutors' goodwill and cooperativeness.

Interestingly, in the type of signs studied here, directives with modal interrogatives are extremely rare. However, there are some instances in the corpus. In Fig. 16, posted on a reverse vending machine, the modal auxiliary 'can' is used in combination with an appeal to the customers' 'kindness'. In Fig. 17, from a conference hotel room, the chamber maids limit their deontic stance to an expression of appreciation for complying with their request. And on a sign on a cottage serving light meals and refreshments to cross country skiers (Fig. 18), the owners merely express a wish that the visitors will buy the drinks.² Also the request to leave dogs outside is formulated with a rather weak deontic expression, the performative verb 'ask', which focusses metacommunicatively on the act of requesting, thus leaving room for non-compliance.

Common to these weak deontic expressions is that they do not take compliance for granted, but instead leave the decision to the addressee (Craven and Potter, 2010). Rather than basing compliance on authority, they appeal to the addressee's 'kindness', 'conscience' or consideration for the authors' wishes. By doing so, they invoke a logic of solidarity and empathy rather than a logic of power and authority. The more personal tone in these signs is also reflected in the use of personal pronouns. Here we find expressions of both a 'we' (Figs. 17 and 18) and a 'you' (both in singular (Figs. 17 and 18) and plural (Fig. 16)). This contrasts with most other signs, which avoid reference to either the author or the addressee by the use of imperative mood (as in Figs. 3 and 19), passive voice (as in Figs. 1 and 2) or nominalization (as in Figs. 7 and 11). Other features of the more personal tone in these signs are the use of smileys (as in Figs. 16 and 17) and the expressive actions of wishing welcome (Fig. 18) and thanking (Figs. 16 and 17).

The scarcity of modal interrogatives and other weak modality markers reveals a distinctive feature about directives in public signage, as opposed to in conversation. The anonymous and non-committing relationship between the parties in sign communication invites authority-based compliance strategies. Only when a more personal relationship is created or implied, more solidarity-based compliance strategies seem to be used.



Fig. 16. Dear customers. Can you (pl.) be so kind and remember to empty the bottles before you deposit them? Thanks in advance 😊



Fig. 17. Dear guest, We would appreciate that you (sing.) use the luggage stand and just one of the beds. Thanks a lot 😊 The Chamber Maids.

² The verb phrase in Norwegian 'ser gjerne' (literally 'see with pleasure') is difficult to translate directly, but constitutes a weak expression of a wish or a preference.



Fig. 18. We wish you (sing.) welcome to the NEW GREINE COTTAGE. Here you may take a rest and eat your lunch bag if you like, but we would like you to buy the drinks. We also ask you to keep your four-legged friend in a leash outside the cottage. Bærums Verk Rotary Club.

One way to deal with potential resistance from the audience is to use conventional politeness formulas, which constitute symbolic markers of respect for the addressee (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In English, the most common politeness marker is 'please' (as in Fig. 1 above: 'Please do not make the monument dirty'). In Norwegian, the corresponding marker is 'vennligst' (literally 'most kindly'), as illustrated in Fig. 19.³ However, unlike directives in conversation, mitigation seems largely restricted to these highly standardized forms of 'token politeness'.



Fig. 19. Please place the dishes here. Thank you!



Fig. 20. Thank you for keeping your feet on the floor. Then we all get a more pleasant journey.

³ However, conventional politeness formulae such as this one seems less used in Norwegian signs than in English signs, probably as a result of a general tendency in Norwegian to use such formulae less (Fretheim, 2005).

Another way of underlining interpersonal solidarity as the basis for the directive is thanking the addressee for complying. In the last sign above (Fig. 19), the thanking occurs after the request. In sequential terms, it is a third position action occurring after a first position action (Schegloff, 2007). The missing second position action is of course the addressee's granting of the request. The expression of gratitude thus anticipates and presupposes a positive response to the request. This 'strategic' anticipation of a positive response may be considered a compliance-gaining practice in that it portrays the addressee as cooperative and willing to help.⁴

An associated practice is not writing the first-position action (the directive) at all, but merely presenting the expression of gratitude as a first-position move. This is the case in Fig. 20 from a poster in a bus. This request practice pushes the logic of cooperativeness even further by portraying the addressee as someone who behaves in line with the transportation company's wishes even without having been asked to do so. The image contributes to this portrayal by showing two young women sitting in the desired position. This is an 'indirect' or 'composite' action (Rossi, 2018), in which an explicit action format ('thanking') is used as a vehicle for a different type of action ('requesting'). Although this practice might have evolved as an implicature, today it is conventionalized (in Norway and many other societies) as a polite formula for realizing requests, especially in public signage (Terkourafi, 2015).



Fig. 21. Are you the last one! Remember to turn out all lights in the assembly hall.



Fig. 22. Have you remembered to clean up after yourself?

Another practice that presupposes compliance and thereby reduces the social sensitivity of imposing on the addressee is presenting the directive as a *reminder*. In Fig. 21 the directive is formulated this way, and thus does not orient to contingencies related to the addressees' willingness, only to their ability (to remember). Fig. 22 from the exit from a classroom also addresses memory problems, although here, we might consider this a strategic choice since unwillingness might also be a very real contingency. The placement of these signs on exit doors contributes to their function as memory prompts for checking routine obligations when abandoning a public locale.

These signs thus presuppose (and thereby invoke) an attitude of cooperativeness from the recipient. Affiliation may also be nurtured by symbolically creating intimacy or an in-group relationship with the addressee (positive politeness in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms). In the sign in Fig. 23, from a door leading to a terrace outside a bar, such a relation is signaled (and co-created) by means of several indexes of an intimate relationship as friends or buddies (so-called 'camaraderie' style, cf. Lakoff, 1985). First, there are personal expressions of affection, such as the expression of regret (Sorry, Mac), and an expression of devotion ('love you all the same'). The personal tone is underlined by an informal, oral style, such as the Norwegian transcription of the English oral expression "sorrimekk", the ellipsis of the subject and verb ('(It is) not allowed'), the verb-based syntax ('smoke' instead of 'smoking') and the fact that the words are written in dialect (with the use of *apocope* characteristic of the Trondheim area ('ittj' for *ikke*, 'røyk' for *røyke* and 'drekke' for *drikke*). So, although the directive is formulated with a rather strong deontic stance ('It is not allowed..'), the imposition is mitigated by presenting the message as addressed to a buddy from the local community, from whom one may expect solidarity, and thus compliance.

⁴ The picture here may seem a bit confusing, since it depicts a woman who is doing the opposite of cleaning up, namely scattering the utensils around. The logic seems to be to mock those who do not comply with the request, thereby adding a humorous appeal (more on the use of humor below).



Fig. 23. Sorrimækk (Sorry, Mac), not allowed to drink or smoke outside. Love you all the same.

5.4. Rhetorical devices: framing, humor and poetics

A rather heterogeneous category of signs involve various rhetorical devices, such as framing the directive positively, making a humorous point or using poetic devices such as rhyme, rhythm and personification. Common to such devices is that they are oriented towards creating an aesthetically or emotionally pleasant experience for the addressee and thereby to generate an attitude of goodwill and cooperativeness.

One way of doing this is to bring attention to the positive sides of the message and downplay or ignore the negative ones. This is often referred to as *framing*, which has been defined as follows:

To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described*" (Entman, 1993:52).

Some signs in the collection seem to use positive framing strategically in that they shift the perspective from what is *prohibited* to what is permitted or recommended. For instance, instead of telling people where *not* to park their bike (as in Fig. 6 above), one can tell them where it *should* be parked (as in Fig. 31 below). Similarly, the sign in Fig. 24 from a recreational area at a conference center does not admonish the public not to throw liquid coffee in the waste bins or leave half-full cups on the tables, instead it presents a solution for what to do with remaining coffee. A clue revealing the double message of this sign is the gaze of the smiley, expressing some type of mischievousness. The sign from a playroom at IKEA in Fig. 25 does not focus on which children are *not allowed* to enter but instead informs us about who *is*.

Common to these signs is that they avoid the socially sensitive action of prohibiting certain actions or admonishing the recipients. Instead, they convey this implicitly as a possible (but not necessary) inference. Also the practice described above of thanking instead of requesting (Fig. 20) may be considered a positive framing device. Not incidentally, the signs using this device are all taken from commercial organizations, which are dependent on good relations with their customers.



Fig. 24. DID YOU KNOW: you may empty half-full cups in the drain of the coffee machine?



Fig. 25. All children 3–7 years old are welcome to play here!

Another rhetorical device is the use of humor. Humor may take many forms, but a common pattern in the corpus is to exaggerate the punishment for transgression to the point of absurdity. For instance, in Fig. 26 it is that misparked cars will be disassembled and sold, and in Fig. 27 that urinating will be filmed and published on YouTube. Another figure is to portray the world as incongruous and absurd, such as people having cigarette stubs in their urine (Fig. 28). Finally, humor may result from altering a conventional figure of speech into a surprising and incongruous one. An example is Fig. 29, where the conventional exhortation to drive slowly because of hazard to children playing in the street is altered into a warning about hazard to the driver due to scouts playing with axes and knives. As can be seen, this sign is physically altered by taping over and replacing words and by taping on an addition to it (which is in turn altered by adding words in handwriting).

What these humoristic signs have in common is that they seek to activate positive emotions in the readers and thereby to create a positive attitude to the directive. This may in turn have the rhetorical effect of making them more positive to complying with the directive. The humorous effect of the signs lies much in the unexpected, unconventional and often implicit formulation of the directive. If such formulations become conventional they lose much of their humorous and thus rhetorical effect. This can be observed in the phrase “Your mother doesn’t work here”, which has become so conventional and worn that it is no longer perceived as humorous.



Fig. 26. Parking for visitors to Betania community center. NB: Misparked cars will be disassembled and sold to raise funds for mission in Swaziland.



Fig. 28. If you regularly suffer from litter in your urine for instance cigarette stubs, cotton pads etc. you ought to see your doctor. with kind regards the plumber.



Fig. 27. Pictographic signs prohibiting urinating.



Fig. 29. Drive slowly. Scouts are playing. with axe and knife. (Photo: Helene Lane).

Finally, on some signs, we find quasi-literary forms of exposition. A rather common poetic device is personification or animation, that is, assigning human characteristics to objects or animals. In Fig. 30, the police horses speak to the public and address their 'friends' directly. The image of humanoid, smiling horses contributes to this personification, and together, these devices invoke the genre of children's cartoons. By exploiting a genre that is popular among children, the sign implicitly addresses this group of bypassers, and by having the request come directly from the horse's mouth (literally speaking!), it appeals to a form of imagination typical of child culture. Furthermore, the sign is placed rather low on a fence and thus at the eye height of children rather than of adults. In the next Fig. 31, the object of animation is dead objects, namely bicycles. And even though the text does not seem addressed to children, the readers are invited to imagine a ludic, fictional world where bicycles have human emotions and appreciate physical contact. Whether or not such an appeal to imagination is successful as a compliance-gaining device will of course depend on whether or not the audience finds this playful form of expression intriguing or entertaining.



Fig. 30. Dear horse-friend! Be so kind not to give us anything to eat! Fat police horses aren't pretty, you know. By the way, we are treated very well here at the police – and get what we need!



Fig. 31. Bicycles LOVE to stand together. Park your bike here.

Another literary form of exposition is the fictional narrative. There is seldom space enough to present a full narrative on signs such as these, but some signs use fictional characters and events. For instance, in Fig. 32, the text addresses a fictional character, Ingrid, who regularly takes public transportation with a stroller and heavy shopping bags. She is portrayed as an 'everyday hero', who upholds values such as respect for the law in spite of the challenges and hardship of life as a mother without a car. In this way, the text invites the readers to identify with this protagonist and to follow her example in paying her ticket (which in Oslo is not enforced by physical barriers or conductors). In Fig. 33, there are also fictional characters, mister and misses Kvist, who risk a 'sad' fate if car drivers hit the brakes hard in front of the tram. The address term 'herr og fru' (mister and misses) has an archaic ring to it in current Norwegian, and thus invites us to either see the text as an old rhyme or to imagine the couple as elderly. In addition, the text presents itself as a verse, with end rhyme (bilist – trist – Kvist) and a partly regular rhythm, with *dactyl* as the metrical foot. The fictional universe created here invites the readers to feel compassion for the elderly couple and thus contributes to personalizing the harms that car drivers may cause. These fictional narratives thus seek to create identification with story characters and thereby to get the readers to adhere to courses of action that support their interests in the story world, which coincides with the interests of the author in the real world. More generally, common to both humorous and poetic signs is that they seek to move the readers emotionally and thereby to gain their goodwill.



Fig. 32. Thanks a lot, Ingrid, that you always buy a ticket even though you have more than enough with your stroller and heavy shopping bags. All profit from ticket sales goes back to public transportation.



Fig. 33. If you as a car-driver hit the brakes hard it can onboard become very sad for the passengers, mister and misses Kvist.

6. Discussion

This study has identified some general practices used in the formulation of directives on signs in public spaces. It has used the theoretical concepts developed within CA in order to describe how entitlement is displayed and how the signs orient to contingencies. The analysis shows that entitlement may be claimed by signatures indicating the institutional authority of the actor responsible for the sign. Such references to deontic status are not common in everyday conversation. A high degree of entitlement is also claimed by the use of strong deontic modality, such as imperatives, high-grade modal auxiliaries ('must') and nominalizations expressing categorical prohibition ('no smoking'). The deontic stance is often also upgraded by intensifiers of various sorts ('under no circumstances'). The extended use of strong deontic expressions contrasts with what has been found in everyday conversation, where imperatives are associated with requests for action as part of a common commitment to a joint project and thus partly in the interest of the recipient (Rossi, 2012; Zinken and Ogiemann, 2013). In public signage, imperatives are also used in situations which in conversation are typically associated with the use of modal interrogatives, namely when the requested action is not part of a common project, requires much effort from the recipient and the author does not have special grounds to expect compliance (Urbanik and Svennevig, 2019). An example is the request to clean up after oneself in a cafeteria (Fig. 19). We thus find a more extended use of stronger expressions of deontic authority in public signs than what has been reported for everyday conversation.

Entitlement to perform the directive may also be claimed by the use of accounts invoking external sources of authority and legitimacy. The analysis has shown that such accounts claim entitlement either by reference to pre-existing rules, norms or conventions, or by reference to future benefits to the recipients or third parties. The first type of accounts is associated with strengthening the author's deontic authority in that it grounds the directive in more general and socially established norms. The second type does not in the same way boost the deontic authority of the author but instead grounds the obligation or necessity to act in the recipients' sense of responsibility, empathy or considerateness.

The analysis has also shown how signs seek compliance by establishing affiliation. Some express appreciation or use personal forms of address and in-group markers. By using these practices in the impersonal context of anonymous authors addressing a general public, the signs symbolically reduce the social distance between the parties and thereby evoke a logic of

solidarity and cooperativeness. Especially commercial actors have an interest in maintaining a good relationship with customers in order to secure a positive image and lay the ground for future transactions. One practice instantiating the more personal tone and a service-minded attitude is conveying the directive by thanking the interlocutor for doing the desired action ('Thank you for not smoking'). This is a practice that seems generic to signs and is not attested in conversation. Another contrast with directives in conversation is the scarcity of modal interrogatives oriented to the recipients' ability to perform the action ('Can/could you...'). The practices found on the signs thus seem more oriented towards the recipients' willingness to comply than to their ability. This may reveal an important difference between the two forms of communication. Lack of ability to perform the requested action is a less face-threatening reason for resisting or rejecting a request than lack of willingness. The personal context of face-to-face conversation may thus have developed conventional request practices that offer the participants methods for rejecting a request without threatening the social relation between the parties. In the impersonal context of public signage, by contrast, such face-saving practices are less used.

Finally, the analysis has identified some (but certainly not all) rhetorical devices used in order to counteract the recipients' potential unwillingness to comply and instead create a positive attitude towards the author or the directive. Positive framing seeks to do this by focusing on the possibilities and opportunities rather than the restrictions and prohibitions. Humor and poetic devices seek to do it by giving the recipients an emotionally or aesthetically pleasant experience. These rhetorically 'embellished' directives are the class that differs most from what is found in conversation. Here it becomes tangible how the time to plan and design written messages makes a difference for how directives are formulated.

In addition to these empirical findings on how directives are expressed in public signage, the study also contributes theoretically to the field of CA by showing how action formation may be studied in written texts. The lack of co-presence and interaction between the author and the addressee has consequences for how directives are formulated and calls for different methods of analysis. As a fixed and non-negotiable text, the utterance must to a larger extent 'speak for itself', meaning that it will strive for clarity and a strong deontic stance. This does not, however, mean that they are context-independent, but the relevant context used by addressees in order to interpret them will be material and 'geographical' rather than verbal and sequential. The study shows how the placement of signs relative to various objects, locations and the addressees have important semiotic functions in conveying the relevant meaning.

In addition, the study aims to contribute to the field of Linguistic Landscape studies by placing pragmatic phenomena such as action formation on the agenda. After two decades of sociolinguistic studies that have mainly focused on language forms, it is time to start investigating more in detail the meaning of signs and their status as social actions. The current study aims to take the first steps in this direction, but there is a vast amount of other actions worthy of study, such as warnings, informings and invitations. Also more in-depth investigation of linguistic and cultural variation in more focused, comparative data sets is needed in future research. Researchers in pragmatics are hereby invited to enter the field and start investigating how to do things with signs.

Funding

This work was partly financed by the Research Council of Norway through its Centres of Excellence funding scheme, project number 223265.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Pawel Urbanik for useful comments on a preliminary draft of the article, and to numerous friends and colleagues for sending me photos of signs.

References

- Blommaert, Jan, 2013. *Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscapes*. Multilingual Matters, Clevedon.
- Brown, Penelope, Levinson, Stephen, 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Clayman, Steven, Heritage, John, 2014. Benefactors and beneficiaries: benefactive status and stance in the management of offers and requests. In: Drew, P., Couper-Kuhlen, E. (Eds.), *Requesting in Social Interaction*. John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 51–82.
- Craven, Alexandra, Potter, Jonathan, 2010. Directives: entitlement and contingency in action. *Discourse Stud.* 12 (4), 419–442. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445610370126>.
- Curl, Traci, Drew, Paul, 2008. Contingency and action: a comparison of two forms of requesting. *Res. Lang. Soc. Interact.* 41 (2), 129–153. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08351810802028613>.
- Drew, Paul, Couper-Kuhlen, Elizabeth, 2014. Requesting - from speech act to recruitment. In: Drew, P., Couper-Kuhlen, E. (Eds.), *Requesting in Social Interaction*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, pp. 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1075/slsi.26.01dre>.
- Entman, Robert M., 1993. Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *J. Commun.* 43 (4), 51–58.
- Fretheim, Thorstein, 2005. Politeness in Norway: how can you be polite and sincere. In: Hickey, Leo, Stewart, Miranda (Eds.), *Politeness in Europe*. Multilingual Matters.
- Ferenčík, Milan, 2018. Im/politeness on the move: a study of regulatory discourse practices in Slovakia's centre of tourism. *J. Pragmat.* 134, 183–198.
- Goffman, Erving, 1979. Footing. *Semiotica* 25 (1–2), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1515/semi.1979.25.1-2.1>.
- Heritage, John C., 1988. Explanations as accounts: a conversation analytic perspective. In: Antaki, Charles (Ed.), *Analysing Everyday Explanation: A Casebook of Methods*. Sage, London, pp. 127–144.
- Lakoff, Robin, 1985. *Talking Power: The Politics of Language*. Basic Books, New York.
- Levinson, Stephen C., 2013. Action formation and ascription. In: Sidnell, Jack, Stivers, Tanya (Eds.), *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis*. John Wiley, Oxford, pp. 103–130.
- Olson, David R., 1996. *The World on Paper: the Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading*. Cambridge University Press.

- Palmer, Frank R., 2001. *Mood and Modality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Peck, Amiena, Stroud, Christopher, 2015. Skinscapes. *Linguistic Landscape* 1 (1–2), 133–151.
- Robinson, Jeffrey D., 2016. Accountability in social interaction. In: Robinson, Jeffrey D. (Ed.), *Accountability in Social Interaction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Rossi, Giovanni, 2012. Bilateral and unilateral requests: the use of imperatives and Mi X? Interrogatives in Italian. *Discourse Process* 49 (5), 426–458. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163853X.2012.684136>.
- Rossi, Giovanni, 2018. Composite social actions: the case of factual declaratives in everyday interaction. *Res. Lang. Soc. Interact.* 51 (4), 379–397.
- Schegloff, Emanuel, 2007. *Sequence Organization in Interaction: A Primer in Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Scollon, Ron, Scollon, Suzie W., 2003. *Discourses in Place: Language in the Material World*. Routledge, London.
- Scott, Marvin B., Lyman, Stanford M., 1968. Accounts. *American Sociological Review*, pp. 46–62.
- Shohamy, E., Ben-Rafael, E., 2015. Introduction: linguistic landscape, a new journal. *Linguistic Landscape* 1 (1/2), 1–5.
- Stevanovic, Melissa, Peräkylä, Anssi, 2012. Deontic authority in interaction: the right to announce, propose, and decide. *Res. Lang. Soc. Interact.* 45 (3), 297–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08351813.2012.699260>.
- Terkourafi, Marina, 2015. Conventionalization: a new agenda for im/politeness research. *J. Pragmat.* 86, 11–18.
- Thurlow, Crispin, Goncalves, Kelly, 2019. X-scapes. *New horizons in linguistic landscapes*. *Linguistic Landscape* 5 (2), 111–114.
- Urbanik, Pawel, Svennevig, Jan, 2019. Managing contingencies in requests: the role of negation in Norwegian interrogative directives. *J. Pragmat.* 139, 109–125.
- Zinken, Jörg, Ogiemann, Eva, 2013. Responsibility and action: invariants and diversity in requests for objects in British English and Polish interaction. *Res. Lang. Soc. Interact.* 46 (3), 256–276.

Jan Svennevig is Professor of Language and Communication at Agder University and *MultiLing – Center for Research on Multilingualism in Society across the Lifespan*, University of Oslo, Norway. His research deals with workplace interaction, L2 conversations, pragmatic particles and communication in dementia. Recent publications include “Managing contingencies in requests: The role of negation in Norwegian interrogative requests” (*Journal of Pragmatics*, 2019, with P. Urbanik), “Pre-empting understanding problems in L1/L2 conversations: Evidence of effectiveness from simulated emergency calls” (*Applied Linguistics*, 2019, with J. Gerwing, B. U. Jensen and M. Allison), and “Accounting for forgetfulness in dementia interaction” (*Linguistics Vanguard*, 2019, with A. M. Landmark).