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Social deontics: A nano-level approach to human power play

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Abstract
The notion of “deontic rights”—the capacity of an individual to determine action—is described as a tool to analyze human power plays in the turn-by-turn unfolding of social interaction. Drawing on various bodies of literature, the paper portrays the organization of the adjacency-pair sequence as the key locus of negotiation over deontic rights. How such negotiations happen in practice is also considered. Two deontic patterns instantiating themselves in sequential relations—deontic congruence and deontic incongruence—are discussed. Negotiations of deontic rights are suggested to take place specifically in and through three different forms of deontic incongruence, each of which involves a subtle mismatch between the claims of deontic rights of the first speaker and the recipient’s treatment of these claims. These implicit power plays easily escape the eye and are therefore difficult to reflect upon and counteract by the participants themselves, which makes a thorough understanding of these mechanisms important.

KEYWORDS
authority, conversation analysis, deontics, power, sequentiality
INTRODUCTION

Power is at the center of human social life. Considering its common basis in the ideological, economic, military, and political aspects of social reality (Mann, 1986), the status of power as a macro-level social phenomenon is inevitable. Yet, it is the interactional encounters between individuals that constitute the primordial locus where power is constructed, negotiated and maintained. In this paper, I will describe the notion of social deontics as a tool to analyze a specific aspect of human power, namely the capacity of an individual to determine action. Drawing on literature from various domains of inquiry—sociology, social psychology, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and biological anthropology—I aim to develop theoretical and conceptual tools to enhance future empirical research on the subtle nuances of human power play at the level of turn-by-turn sequential unfolding of social interaction. Furthermore, drawing on recent conversation analytic literature, I will consider how such negotiations happen in practice.

In what follows, I will first discuss the notions of dominance, social power, authority, and, most specifically, deontic authority. Next, I will approach the matter of deontics from the perspective of developmental research, arguing for the omnirelevance of deontic concerns to human joint action. This leads to the main argument of the paper, according to which the key locus of negotiation over deontic rights is the normative organization of the “adjacency-pair sequence.” Finally, different patterns of deontic rights, instantiating themselves in and through different sequential relations, will be identified and discussed.

FROM DOMINANCE TO DEONTIC AUTHORITY

The common core to all conceptions of power is the notion of bringing about consequences (Lukes, 1978, p. 634). A powerful agent has the capacity to accomplish actions of its own. At the same time, power is a relationship notion. One celebrated definition comes from Weber (1978, p. 53), who regarded power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.” When considering the instantiations of power in the animal kingdom, the notion may be defined concretely as an ability of an individual to use force to harm another individual (Smuts, 1981). Power underlies the pattern of one individual repeatedly coming out as a winner (and the other as a loser) in agonistic interactions (Drews, 1993). More generally, the notion of power involves the idea that the individual over whom power is exercised would have acted otherwise had power not been exercised (Giddens, 1979, p. 91).

Power plays are often realized through specific embodied displays of dominance, including features such as expansive postures and direct gaze (e.g., Hall, Coats, & Smith LeBeau, 2005). Even congenitally blind individuals produce embodied displays of dominance in respective situations (Tracy & Matsumoto, 2008), which suggests that at least some of this behavior is hardwired in our body and not a result of social learning. Importantly, however, human power plays are not only about dominance as such. The notion of social power (Cartwright, 1959; French & Raven, 1959; Mann, 1986) refers to the idea of getting people to think or act according to one’s desires, in order to have an impact on the world through these people. From this perspective, power is related to what social psychologists have called “social influence” (Eskola, 1961; Forgas & Williams, 2001; Turner, 1991). Social influence can involve enactment of decisions, suppression of issues from becoming “decisionable” in the first place, and
persuading people in terms of their motivations, interests, and beliefs (Lukes, 2005). Social power is thus centrally involved in social agency.

A large consensus among social scientists exists that a central way in which power instantiates itself in the social world is authority—a capacity that certain people seem to have more, and others less (on power as a “disposition concept,”¹ see Eskola, 1961, p. 13). In a traditional social psychological conceptualization, authority is regarded as a sub-set of power. Weber (1964, 1978), for example, distinguished between two types of power: coercion and authority. The former represents a type of power that others are willing to accept because of the threatened or actual use of force. The latter represents a type of power that others are willing to accept because they believe it is legitimate—on the basis of the leader’s charisma, traditional norms, or legal rationality. Another view of this type is held by Turner (2005), who defined authority against two other forms of power: coercion and persuasion. Coercion is triggered precisely by the lack of authority and its use undermines the remaining authority even further (Turner, 2005, p. 12). But just as little as with coercion, authority has to do with persuasion. People with authority have the right to prescribe what should be thought or done, but they do not need to convince others that this particular belief or action is right (Turner, 2005, p. 8). The same idea reverberates in Lukes (1978), who points out that authority is a “shortcut where reason is presumed to lead,” involving the “surrender of private judgment” (p. 639–640). To accept authority is to refrain from examining what one is being told to do or believe. Instead, it is to act or believe on the basis of a second-order reason that requires one to disregard the balance of reasons as one sees it.

Unlike those authors who see authority as a subset of power, others perceive the relationship between power and authority as more ambiguous and even use these terms somewhat interchangeably (see e.g., Bourdieu, 1992; McGinty, 2001; Leahy, 2005). In addition to the formal legitimation of authority emphasized by Weber, other types of legitimation have also been described (Coleman, 1997; Wilson & Staplenton, 2010). Furthermore, the formal authority of a person may well be challenged or rejected by others (see e.g., Ekberg & LeCouteur, 2015; Kent, 2012; Phillips & Hardy, 1997). The difference between theory and practice concerning who is an authority in a given situation has been captured by the widespread distinction between authority “by the law” (de jure) and authority “by the fact” (de facto) (Peters, 1967). Hence, authority may be best seen as a “form of legitimation that comes to be worked out on an interactional, social, and cultural level” (Wilson & Staplenton, 2010, p. 50). In this reading, the relationship between power and authority appears as inverted in that, rather than authority being a form of power, power is seen as a potential outcome of authority. Power consists of “the linguistic working out of particular authority claims” (Wilson & Staplenton, 2010, p. 50).

Authority is commonly described as having two sides: a person may be an authority (1) in a certain domain of knowledge (“what is”) or (2) he or she may have rights to determine what should be done in a specific field of action (“what ought to be”). These two types of authority have been discussed as “cognitive authority” vs. “administrative authority” (Walton, 1997, pp. 76–77), “epistemic authority” vs. “executive authority” (De George, 1985), and “authority over belief” vs. “authority over conduct” (Lukes, 1978). In this paper, in line with recent conversation-analytic literature (see e.g., Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012), I will make use of Bochenski’s (1974) analogous distinction between epistemic authority and deontic authority. My main focus will be on the latter, conceptualized as a person’s legitimate power to determine action. People’s authoritative capacities in different domains of knowledge (“epistemic rights”; Heritage & Raymond, 2005) will be discussed...
inasmuch as they are intertwined with their capacity to determine action ("deontic rights"; Stevanovic, 2013).

Consistent with the social scientific literature on authority discussed above, deontic authority is here understood as a form of legitimate power. However, instead of analyzing such legitimation on the basis of the formal position of the authoritative person, I will describe how deontic authority is constructed and negotiated locally in interaction. In this sense, the view put forth in this paper is in line with the literature, according to which power consists of “the linguistic working out of particular authority claims” (Wilson & Staplenton, 2010, p. 50). At the same time, however, the traditional social psychological ways to define authority against both coercion and persuasion will be used as a tool to delineate what the “working out” of deontic authority claims means in practice. Deontic authority is based on other people treating someone's power to determine action as legitimate and, thus, for example, an interactionally generated need of an allegedly authoritative person to exert influence on others through coercion or persuasion may serve as a sign of an ongoing power relationship negotiation. It is these types of negotiations, with people treating themselves and each other as more or less “deontically” authoritative, that the overall notion of “social deontics” is meant to capture.

3 | THE ONTOGENY OF SOCIAL DEONTICS

I will now turn to discuss social deontics from the perspective of its ontogeny. Here, the central topic will be the emergence of normativity during the first years of human life. Drawing on recent literature in developmental research, I will argue that this process is founded on the expectations of behavior arising from participatory engagement in early infant-caretaker interaction. These expectations and their possible fulfillment play a major role, not only in enabling smoothness of coordination and intelligibility of action, but also in constructing the participants as deontically more or less authoritative. This leads to social deontics becoming an omnirelevant concern for joint action.

The roots of normativity lie in the human intrinsic motivation to participate in the dynamics of joint action. Human beings are immersed in such dynamics even before birth: in the third trimester of pregnancy, human fetuses have been found to selectively respond to the mother’s touch and vocalizations (Marx & Nagy, 2015; Zoia et al., 2007; Zoia et al., 2013). After the birth, these dynamics are the driving force for the infant’s social development. While infants exhibit an overall preference for positive social expressions, such as smiles (Leppänen & Nelson, 2009), their parents have the propensity to provide mirroring responses just to these types of positive social expressions by the infants (Murray et al., 2016). In this way, the infants’ motivation to become socially engaged is reinforced by the infants developing expectations for the intrinsically rewarding experiences of being smiled at, which leads them to increase their own social expressiveness (Murray et al., 2016, p. 6). Thus, at 2 months, infants accomplish interactional bids through smiles and eye-contact (Rochat, 2001). At 3 months, they start to use vocalizations to actively call others’ attention to themselves, as it were, to initiate joint action (Reddy, 2003). At 4 months, when an adult tries to establish eye contact with the infant, the infant treats it as an invitation to joint action and expects that the adult’s ensuing vocal, facial, and gestural moves will be of concern to him (Brinck, 2008). All this makes evident that the motivation of the human infant to participatorily engage with others is deeply intertwined with behavioral expectations.
How does normativity then introduce itself into the dynamics of early interactions? An important role in this regard is played by the caretaker, who treats the infant as if he or she were a competent interaction participant (Trevarthen, 1979). The caretaker may treat, for example, the infant’s random hand movements as intentional and let them cause a change in the caretaker’s subsequent behavior (Rączaszek-Leonardi, Nomikou, & Rohlfing, 2013). Furthermore, when imitating the vocalizations of the infant, the caretaker may simultaneously engage in exaggerated movements of the head and the face, thus possibly motivating the infant to produce further similar vocalizations (Papoušek & Papoušek, 1989, p. 149; Nomikou & Rohlfing, 2011, p. 126). As a result, jointly created interactional patterns emerge where the infants are gradually able to place their own vocalizations exactly at the right time and even at the right pitch (Malloch, 2000). Hence, regularities emerge from the interaction itself, while these regularities, in turn, constrain the way in which the interaction is expected to unfold (on “participatory sense-making” and the “autonomy of interaction,” see De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). In moving through joint action sequences together with their caretakers, infants learn to know about the effects that their actions have on the unfolding of joint action and they learn to anticipate such effects (Hunnius & Bekkering, 2010). This opens up the way to “situated normativity” (Rietveld, 2008)—to predictable interpersonal routines and practices, which also embody knowledge of how one should behave (Brinck, 2014, p. 745).

Normativity thus emerges as a practical skill that is based on participatory engagement, but its development is a gradual and extended process that continues into adolescence (Brinck, 2014, 2015). Structured, multimodal routines in infant-caregiver interaction provide the starting point for this development (Fantasia, Fasulo, Costall, & López, 2014; Rączaszek-Leonardi, Nomikou, & Rohlfing, 2013; Reddy, Liebal, Hicks, Jonnalagadda, & Chintalapuri, 2013). Over time, some of these early routines develop into more conventionalized ones (Bruner, 1985). By constraining interactions in less idiosyncratic ways, more complex forms of joint action—for example, ones with several participants not previously known to each other—become possible (Rączaszek-Leonardi, Nomikou, & Rohlfing, 2013, p. 216). Furthermore, in order to avoid a breakdown of intersubjectivity during problems of interaction, certain widely accepted metalevel routines, such as repair (Corrin, 2010; Forrester & Cherington, 2009), are needed (Brinck, Reddy, & Zahavu, 2017, p. 140). In addition, children learn to respect the different types of constitutive rules that structure the institutional reality of the social world. Such learning may be first observed in the context of children’s rule games and some features of their pretend play (Searle, 2010, p. 57). Although constitutive rules themselves are not norms—they do not imply “oughtness” in any obvious way (Brinck, 2015, p. 705; Millikan, 2014)—they “provide the background for the kinds of social norms that govern institutional reality” (Brinck, 2015, p. 702). At the same time as the constitutive rules open up a space of possibilities for action and activities in the given context, this space, in turn, has “deontic properties that concern what can or may be done and, sometimes, what ought to be done” (Brinck, 2015, p. 705). Hence, for example, a suggestion such as Let’s play Doctor! assigns quite specific rights and responsibilities to the players involved.

Normativity is not only about expectations and their fulfillment but also about the moral enforcement of that fulfillment: if an expectation is violated it becomes accountable. Existing evidence suggests that a thorough reflexive understanding of accountability also develops gradually over the years. Considering the basic interaction norm according to which questions should be responded to, Stivers, Sidnell, and Bergen (2018) found that already 4–8-year-old children already exhibited adult-like frequency and timing in their responses to questions. Yet, when their responses were late, absent or dispreferred, the children did not display a
consistent orientation to these failures; unlike adults, they rarely used mitigations, turn prefaces such as *Uh* and *Well*, or accounts for delays. Since children later evidently come to rely on the same norms as adults to organize social interactions, Stivers and colleagues suggested—with reference to Dunbar (2003)—that the development of a more nuanced, reflexive understanding of accountable interactional practices “is motivated by the fact that these norms facilitate the management of their social relationships in highly efficient and effective ways” (p. 27). Ultimately—and most importantly from the perspective of this paper—the degree to which each participant fulfills (or frustrates) the expectations created by his or her co-participant in interaction is constitutive of who the two participants are to each other.

Inasmuch as social interaction is constitutive of the participants’ relationship, it is also constitutive of the participants’ *selves*. This idea is also at the core of the pragmatist theory of Mead (1934), who suggested that the self emerges from social interactions and is thus fundamentally social. As such, self is dependent on all the interactional practices by which people may negotiate their specific self-understandings in subtle ways. Drawing on Goffman (1959, 1967), it may also be argued that a person’s (social) self is truly vulnerable to interaction: one basically needs to accept that one’s self is in the hands of others, where it needs to be interactionally constituted over and over again (Rawls, 1987). Here, I argue that one aspect by which one’s self is particularly vulnerable to interaction is one’s right to determine action. This specific vulnerability is what I will henceforth refer to as *deontic concern*.

There is some evidence suggesting that by the age of 4–5 years children may already be sensitive to deontic concerns. Such concerns are apparent in the children’s noncompliant responses to parental control, which indicate their growth as autonomous agents (Kuczynski & Kochanska, 1990). Deontic concerns can, however, be visible even in the children’s compliant responses to parental directives. In her study on parental directives during family meal-time conversations, Kent (2012) observed children to engage in complex compliant responses, consisting of an embodied display of incipient compliance followed by a verbal turn resisting the directive or reformulating the ongoing action as self-motivated. It was argued that such multi-component responses enabled the children to “maintain autonomy over their own conduct without openly resisting the directive and provoking an even more forceful social control act” (Kent, 2012, p. 726). Analogous maneuvers have also been observed in adult interactions (e.g., Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012)—something that will be discussed in more detail further below.

In this paper, I argue that the recognition of one’s implicit claims of deontic authority are at stake every time behavioral expectations arise in interactional encounters. It is these expectations and their more or less complete fulfillment that construes the participants as deontically more or less authoritative in relation to each other. Such normative expectations are always bound to concrete situations and local interaction contexts. At the same time, though, there are also between-individual differences in what could be rightfully expected of a participant on the basis of his or her broader role or status in a relationship or community and in the degree to which he or she may act as a source of specific expectations for his or her co-participants. Property rights, for instance, imply that what each person has the right to do can vary both from one person to another and from one object to another (Rossano, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2011). These rights therefore constitute a set of social facts associated with asymmetries of deontic authority. Importantly, participation in pretend play activities where children may enact asymmetric social positions such as buying and selling allow them to practice “social deontics” in relationship constellations that would otherwise be out of their reach (see e.g., Gillespie, 2006; Griswold, 2007).
To summarize the discussion thus far, the notion of deontics was described as a tool to analyze a specific aspect of human social power: the capacity of an individual to determine action. Then, drawing on developmental research, I discussed the expectations of behavior arising from participatory engagement in early infant-caretaker interaction and which underlie the development of situated normativity. Since these expectations and their more or less complete fulfillment play a major role, not only in enabling smoothness of coordination and intelligibility of action, but also in construing the participants as deontically more or less authoritative, this aspect of the participants’ social selves was argued to be constantly vulnerable to what happens in interaction. These insights open up an avenue to consider how human social power operates at the “nano level” of the turn-by-turn sequential unfolding of interaction.

In the field of conversation analysis, the relationship between interaction and social structure has been a frequent topic of inquiry (see e.g., Boden & Zimmerman, 1991; Heritage & Clayman, 2010). More specifically, with reference to power, conversation analysts have examined how power becomes legitimized in different mundane and institutional environments, such as various medical settings (e.g., Boyd, 1998; Peräkylä, 1998), classrooms (e.g., Macbeth, 1991; Mehan, 1979), courts (e.g., Atkinson & Drew, 1979), and news interviews (e.g., Clayman, 2017). In these studies, the power asymmetries apparent in the participants’ conduct have been commonly discussed with reference to how the structures of ordinary conversation are modified in different institutional settings.

In comparison to the literature above, the study of deontic authority or deontic rights operates on a more context-independent level (for a parallel approach to epistemics, see e.g., Heritage & Raymond, 2005). Here, a person’s deontic authority is potentially at stake every time his or her behavior makes relevant compliant, responsive behavior from another person. From this perspective, deontic authority is deeply interwoven with the basic inference processes underlying all human communication (see e.g., Scott-Phillips, 2015). Since the inferences about what a person means with his or her communicative behaviors are guided by the participants’ considerations of what can be called their mutual “common ground” (Clark, 1996; Stalnaker, 2002)—the set of knowledge, beliefs and suppositions (concerning both the material and social world) that the participants believe they share—these inferences are also guided by the extent to which the recipient assesses the communicating person as powerful in relation to him- or herself. This mechanism explains why, for example, a head nod by a king can have drastic consequences while a similar head gesture provided by, say, a playing child might be taken to mean “nothing.” From this perspective, someone’s deontic authority in a certain domain of action is nothing but a potential part of the participants’ common ground. I emphasize: “a potential part,” since, as pointed out above, authority is not primarily about someone claiming authority but about others accepting that person as an authority, which makes a person’s authority always open to negotiation.

The deontic facet of the participants’ social relationship in a particular setting is thus a constitutive feature of the actions implemented within that setting. This matter can be clarified by using the distinction between stance and status, which was first introduced by Heritage (2012) with reference to epistemics. The notion of deontic stance refers to participants’ publicly displayed implicit claims of how authoritative they are in certain domains of action relative to their co-participants, while the term deontic status denotes the relative position of power that a participant is considered to have or not to have, irrespective of what he or she publicly claims (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2014). As pointed out by Tomasello (2008, p. 79), in all human
communication, the relationship between the participants’ overt conduct and common ground is complementary: “as more can be assumed to be shared between communicator and recipient, less needs to be overtly expressed.” Tomasello (2008, p. 79) has suggested that “if enough is shared in common ground, the overt expression of either motive or referent may be totally eliminated without diminishing the message at all.” It is thus the complementarity and the relative weight of deontic stances and deontic statuses that constitutes a fundamental mechanism by which people may negotiate their deontic rights.

Given that a person’s deontic authority is primarily a matter of how his or her utterances and other interactional behaviors are treated by his or her co-participants, then the key locus of negotiation over deontic authority is the normative organization of the “adjacency-pair sequence” (Schegloff, 2007). Adjacency pair is a central concept in conversation analysis and it refers to a dynamic relationship between two interactional turns. On the one hand, turns make relevant certain types of next turns and these next turns get their “meaning” in relation to the prior turns. On the other hand, these next turns are what ultimately define what the prior turns were doing—a question is a question precisely because it gets an answer (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973; Schegloff, 2007, pp. 20–21). What binds the first pair parts (initiating actions) and second pair parts (responsive actions) of an adjacency pair together into a coherent sequence is the so-called “conditional relevance” of the second upon the completion of the first (Schegloff, 2007, pp. 20–21). The sequence is held together by the mechanism of accountability: should a sufficiently adequate responsive action be missing, an account for the omission or failure will be required (Heritage, 1984, pp. 245–253).

While the notion of conditional relevance refers to utterances or actions and their relationship with one another (Schegloff, 2010, p. 39), the idea of social deontics revolves around the very individual actors who produce these utterances or actions. Thus, from the perspective of deontics, the main interest is not (only) in what happens at the surface level of the initiative and responsive actions, but what happens at the implicit level of the participants’ (power) relationship. It may be argued that, inasmuch as “social actors impose on cointeractants the normative obligation to perform a particular type-fitted response at the first possible opportunity” (Stivers & Rossano, 2010, p. 5), they also implicitly claim the right to do so. The recipients, in turn, may fully accept these constraints or try to resist them, or—as will be discussed below—they may comply with the constraints and yet, simultaneously, challenge the first speakers’ implicit claims of the right to place such constraints (see also the earlier-mentioned study by Kent, 2012). In this way, the sequential relations of actions accomplished in interactional settings are a locus of subtle negotiations of power—a basic idea that draws heavily on the ethnomethodological notion of the constitution of social realities in and through interaction (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984).

## 5 DEONTIC PATTERNS IN SEQUENTIAL RELATIONS

Treating the normative organization of the adjacency-pair sequence as the central locus of negotiation over deontic rights, I will now consider how this negotiation happens in practice. Drawing on previous studies by myself (Stevanovic, 2011; Stevanovic, 2012a; Stevanovic, 2012b; Stevanovic, 2013a; Stevanovic, 2013b; Stevanovic, 2015; Stevanovic, 2017; Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012; Stevanovic & Monzoni, 2016) and others (Couper-Kuhlen & Etelämäki, 2015; Ekberg & LeCouteur, 2015; Heritage, 2013; Ishino & Okada, 2017; Keevallik, 2017; Kent, 2012; Landmark, Gulbrandsen, & Svennevig, 2015; Lindström & Weatherall, 2015; Stivers...
et al., 2017; Svennevig & Djordjilovic, 2015; Toerien, 2017), I will discuss three different patterns of managing deontic concerns in and through sequential relations. Arguably, deontic concerns are a potential part of all adjacency pairs, but they are particularly relevant in those sequences where future actions are at issue. The initiating actions in such sequences may be characterized as directives, proposals, or announcements, which in turn make relevant displays of compliance, agreement, or acceptance as preferred responsive actions.

In my discussion of the deontic patterns in sequential relations, I will deal separately with the instances of what have been termed “deontic congruence” and “deontic incongruence” (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012; Heritage, 2013; on epistemic congruence and incongruence, see Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011; Hayano, 2011). In line with earlier literature on the topic (see e.g., Stivers et al., 2011; Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012), the notions of congruence and incongruence are here used to describe the relationship between two adjacent utterances produced by two different participants. Here the two notions refer to the level of implicit (dis) agreement or (in) compatibility in the participants' displayed epistemic or deontic rights.6

5.1 | Deontic congruence

People may design their initiating actions in ways that suggest a more or less symmetrical relative distribution of deontic rights between the participants. There are many linguistic resources available for this purpose, which have been described in conversation-analytic studies (for a review, see e.g., Stevanovic & Svennevig, 2015). As an example, we may think of someone wanting to get a spouse to stop humming. In principle, the person could say one of the following utterances:

a. Shut up!
b. Would you please be quiet?
c. I’m sorry, I can’t hear the radio weather report.

Each of these utterances conveys a request for (non-)action, but they have very different forms. While the imperatively framed request (a) involves a blunt claim of deontic authority, the interrogative format (b) conveys a somewhat mitigated deontic stance: the recipient’s “quietness” is presented as something that is contingent on the recipient’s choice to comply. Then again, by formulating the request as a declarative (c), the speaker claims a rather weak deontic stance: it is up to the recipient to sort out the implications that the speaker’s utterance has on the recipient’s actions. (Stevanovic, 2013a.)

Of course, deontic rights are not only about people trying to get others to do things, but also about people being able to determine their own doings—an issue that becomes particularly relevant in the context of planning. Thus, when people talk about future actions, there is another way of putting together a deontic gradient, which may be exemplified by the following utterances.

d. I’ll submit my dissertation now.
e. Do you think I could submit my dissertation now?
f. When do you think I could submit my dissertation?

In (d), where the speaker’s utterance is a declarative statement, the decision about the nominated action is presented as already established. Thus, when said by a graduate student to his
supervisor, the utterance conveys a strong deontic stance—in a domain that does not tradition-
ally belong to the student’s sole jurisdiction. In (e), by contrast, where the utterance has the
form of a polar question, the realization of the speaker’s plan is presented as contingent on
the recipient. Therefore, the utterance conveys a weaker deontic stance in the matter. The
speaker’s deontic stance is even weaker in (f), where the speaker produces a “wh”-question; it
is the recipient who is invited first to articulate the appropriate plan for the first speaker. Nota-
bly, the declarative statement in (d) does not involve any specific linguistic characteristics that,
as such, could be associated with a strong deontic stance. Instead, such an interpretation is pos-
sible only because of certain contextual considerations having to do with the relationship
between the speaker and the recipient. If the same utterance by the student had been directed,
for example, to his mother, the utterance might not have had any strong deontic implications
(Stevanovic, 2013).

In the instances of deontic congruence, we may observe a consistency between the first
speaker’s deontic status and the deontic stance that is encoded in his or her turn. The existence
of such a consistency (or lack thereof) becomes apparent in the recipient’s deontically congruent
treatment of the first speaker’s turn. This happens, for example, when blunt commands, such as
in (a), or announcements of one’s own plans, such as in (d), are responded to with “completion
tokens,” such as “okay” or “alright” (Schegloff, 2007, p. 7), by which the recipient establishes
the first speaker’s deontic authority over him or her in the matter at hand. Then again, more
or less polite requests, such as in (b) and (c), bids for advice, such as in (e) and (f), or proposals
for joint action, indicate that the realization of some action is contingent upon the recipient’s
views. Therefore, the deontically congruent way of responding to such initiating actions is to
provide a more substantial acceptance, such as “Oh, that’s a great idea.”

Heritage (2013) has suggested that there may be a “preference” (p. 570) for the speaker’s
publicly displayed deontic stance to be in alignment with his or her deontic status. Accord-
ing to Heritage (2013), such a preference could, at least in part, account for the maintenance
of social hierarchy. Individual actors design their turns so as to keep their public claims of
deontic status in alignment with how powerful they can be thought to be by others. The
hierarchy is then maintained by these turns most likely invoking the kinds of responses that
validate the first speakers’ deontic claims and preserve the distribution of deontic rights
suggested.

5.2 | Deontic incongruence

While the deontically congruent treatment of prior turns is common, it is not inevitable. The
next turns may also deal with the prior turns, not in their own terms, but in the ways that
are more liable for the intentions of the subsequent speakers. Participants may blur, conceal
or otherwise refrain from displaying their true appreciation of the interactional import of the
earlier talk and “avoid taking up and dealing with what they perfectly well know is accom-
plished or implicated by prior talk so as to influence the direction of talk towards some desired
objective” (Heritage, 1984, p. 260). Hence, the recipients may refuse to acknowledge the deontic
claims of the first speakers and thus treat their turns differently from what the speakers may
have intended.

In what follows, I will describe three different forms of deontic incongruence, each of which
involves a subtle mismatch between the first speaker’s publicly displayed deontic stance and the
recipient’s subsequent treatment of the deontic claims in the first speaker’s turn. Negotiations of
deontic rights are argued to take place specifically in and through these patterns of mismatch.
These implicit power plays easily escape the eye and are therefore difficult to reflect upon and counteract by the participants themselves, which makes a thorough understanding of these mechanisms even more important.

5.2.1 | Second-position upgrading incongruence

A stereotypical case of deontic incongruence involves a first speaker making a claim of more deontic rights in relation to the recipient than the recipient is willing to validate. As a result, the recipient slightly manipulates the relationship between the first and the second turn to his or her advantage. Such second-position upgrading incongruences are a tool for the recipients to claim for themselves a greater share of deontic rights than what was originally offered to them by the first speakers.

The instances of second-position upgrading deontic incongruence may take different forms depending on the initiating action. For example, as has been described by Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012), the first speaker may make a proposal about some action (e.g., Would it be good if we did X?), while the recipient may consider the action as something that he or she alone will decide about. The recipient may then, for example, respond by announcing a decision (e.g., I'll do X), which could even match with the content of the first speaker’s proposal but still emphasize the independence of the recipient as a decision maker in this domain of action. Another example of second-position upgrading deontic incongruence involves the first speaker announcing a unilateral decision about an action that the recipient feels belongs also to his or her domain of jurisdiction. If the recipient then responds by praising or otherwise positively evaluating the first speakers’ plan, the recipient indicates that he or she actually has a word to say in the decision (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012, pp. 311–313). No matter how positive such an evaluation might be, it still serves as a vital demonstration that no “surrender of private judgement” (Lukes, 1978, pp. 639–640) is occurring.

In her study on offer sequences in mother-daughter interaction, Keevallik (2017) described yet another type of second-position upgrading deontic incongruence. In her data, a mother used my-side offers in the first person (e.g., Tomorrow I'll start looking for your skates), by which she displayed a relatively high level of deontic authority in the matter at hand in relation to her daughter. In making such offers to her daughter, the mother could effectively construct herself as the one who is in control of her daughter’s life, while the daughter did not seem to be willing to accept such deontic claims by the mother. Keevallik (2017) showed that one possibility for the daughter to challenge her mother’s deontic authority was to answer to the mother’s offers with imperatively formatted turns (e.g., Do that!). Even if such command-like turns by the daughter do de facto constitute the acceptance of the offer by the mother, these turns still proclaim that the one who is to decide upon the matter at hand is the daughter.

Second-position upgrading deontic incongruence can also be accomplished through a skilled interplay between verbal and embodied resources. In the previously-discussed study on adult-child interactions, Kent (2012) showed how children were capable of reframing their compliance with adult directives as self-motivated behavior by using a combination of embodied compliance and verbal reformulation of action. An analogous pattern was also observed by Stevanovic and Monzoni (2016), who examined the distribution of labor between embodied and verbal resources in the accomplishment of joint activities with material objects (e.g., cleaning up cookie crumbs from a dress). The authors argued that, in such activity contexts, the default way of accomplishing a change in the participants’ ongoing activity is
through embodied behavior alone. One reason to use verbal utterances, however, was the possibility to boost one's deontic status in the face of one's embodied compliance with an activity change initiated by the co-participant. Verbal utterances allowed the recipients to claim the capacity to determine action even in the face of relatively self-evident courses of collaborative embodied action.

Of course, to upgrade one's deontic standing, it is always possible for a recipient to issue an open challenge to the first speaker. The recipient could reject the first speaker's idea and accuse the first speaker of intruding into the recipient's deontic territory. This strategy would certainly work to undermine the first speaker's deontic claims. However, the ultimate outcomes of such antagonist exchanges would be unpredictable: the first speaker could strike back. In contrast, if the recipient responds in a seemingly cooperative way, it will be very difficult for the first speaker to confront the recipient over his or her deontically incongruent responses. Instead, at least for the moment, the first speaker is left to accept the reformulated distribution of deontic rights between the participants.

5.2.2 | Epistemic-deontic incongruence

Another form of deontic incongruence makes use of the matter that turns at talk are often ambiguous as to whether their main import is of epistemic or deontic nature. This ambiguity has been shown to serve various interactional aims. For example, in doctor-patient interaction, a delicate balance between whether an assertion by a doctor is to be understood as an informing or a recommendation may help the doctor to minimize the pressure on the patient to accept a treatment (Toerien, 2017). Similarly, when in a workplace meeting a proposal is framed as a mere “thought,” the recipient has more freedom to decide whether to treat the proposal as an invitation to joint decision making than would have been the case without such framing (Stevanovic, 2013b). As will be argued below, the ambiguity between the epistemic and deontic implications of an utterance can also aid the negotiation of deontic rights by enabling a recipient to treat a deontically implicative turn by the previous speaker, strategically, in an epistemic way.

Research on doctor-patient interaction has shed light on the various ways in which patients may resist doctors' actions by recasting deontic matters into epistemic ones. Thus, for example, in response to a doctor pursuing a patient's commitment to a proposed treatment, the patient might refrain from the responsibility to respond by appealing to a lack of knowledge, while such displays of epistemic subordination might actually be a way for the patients to promote their own action plans (Landmark, Gulbrandsen, & Svennevig, 2015). Then again, sometimes patients do display knowledgeable and even resort to medical information to resist the type of treatment suggested by the doctor. Lindström and Weatherall (2015) showed that on such occasions doctors tend to explicitly emphasize the ultimate deontic authority of the patients to refuse a treatment—a strategic move that then allows the doctors to continue pushing their agenda, as it were, on “purely epistemic” grounds.

Instances of epistemic-deontic incongruences are common in the context of collaborative planning, where future actions are regularly discussed but where the status of the discussed actions as “future facts” is under negotiation. Sometimes a first speaker may refer to some action or event as an already established fact (e.g., The meeting starts at eight o'clock), while the actualization of that fact is contingent on the recipient acknowledging his or her obligations toward the first speaker (e.g., Okay, I'll come to open the door). It is thus up to the recipient to recognize whether that type of an assertion constitutes an order and a claim of high deontic
status in relation to the recipient or whether it is just “innocent” informing, which may be responded to accordingly (e.g., Oh, then you’ll need to wake up early in the morning). On such occasions, a mismatch between a clearly deontic assertion and a clearly epistemic response may cause an ironic effect, by which the first speaker’s implicit deontic claims may be framed as ridiculous and unjustified. However, subtler epistemic-deontic incongruences are possible, too. In our study on dyadic planning meetings at work (see Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012), we described a pattern where an announcement of a unilaterally made decision (e.g., We’ll do X!) is responded to with a mere information receipt, such as mm or I see, instead of with a compliance token, such as okay or alright. We demonstrated that a lack of substantial verbal compliance could result in the first speaker pursuing a more adequate response from the recipient by providing an elaborate account for the decision. In this way, the first speaker may be brought to act like a person who cannot simply announce actions but must rely on his or her abilities of persuasion (cf. Turner, 2005; Lukes, 1978, pp. 639–640)—something that works to equalize the participants’ relationship in the matter at hand.

Epistemic-deontic incongruences are also frequent in the context of joint decision-making, where an overt rejection of a proposal could be taken to imply a superior deontic status of the recipient in relation to that of the first speaker. Instead of rejecting the proposal, the recipient may focus on the epistemic issues related to the content of the proposal without yet furthering the sequence towards a commitment to joint action (Stevanovic, 2012). Thus, for example, in response to a proposal concerning joint evening activities (e.g., We could go and eat at restaurant X), the recipient may display his or her knowledge about the proposed matter (e.g., the geographical location of the restaurant) but then let the topic die without it ever becoming a matter of actual decision making. In this way, albeit causing a de facto rejection of the proposal in the form of a “non-decision” (Lukes, 2005), the recipient may refrain from claiming for him or herself the deontic status of a person who could unproblematically reject his or her co-participant’s ideas.

5.2.3 | First-position downgrading incongruence

As pointed out above, the term deontic status refers to the deontic rights that a certain person has in a certain domain, irrespective of whether he or she momentarily claims these rights or not. Hence, yet another form of deontic incongruence involves the first speaker publicly displaying a low deontic stance while yet relying on his or her high deontic status to get things done in the interaction. In these instances, the recipients treat the first speakers’ turns as more authoritative than the deontic stance encoded in the turn would make relevant. This is what happens, for example, when a conditional declarative utterance about the speaker’s own inclinations, such as “I would do X” (see West, 1990, p. 96), is treated as an order when produced by a highly authoritative person. In this vein, in their study on interaction in organizational meetings, Svennevig and Djordjilovic (2015) described managers’ ways of giving their work task assignments for their employees in a form that highlighted the desirability of some action merely from the manager’s subjective perspective, instead of emphasizing the necessity of that action from the objective perspective of the company. However, the managers did not seem to risk the employee compliance in any way.

Overall, in the instances of first-position downgrading deontic incongruences, many different types of declarative utterances as first turns are typical. Thus, for example, as shown by Lindström (2005) in her study on the interaction between senior citizens and their home help providers in Sweden, a declarative statement of incapability (e.g., There is a lemon extract bottle
there in the door up there but I can’t open it is all that is needed for a senior citizen to make a request for action for his or her home help provider since the latter “is supposed to assist with tasks that the senior citizen is unable to manage on her own” (p. 222). Couper-Kuhlen and Etelämäki (2015) examined Finnish requests and proposals in the form of declaratives with modal verbs and zero-person forms (e.g., It would be good to do X), which leave the agent of the requested action unspecified. The authors showed that, in some cases, the recipients of such turns nominated themselves directly as the targeted agents by using person-marked forms (e.g., I’ll do X). When this happened, the recipients arguably gave the previous turn a directive interpretation and thus construed the participants’ deontic authority relationship in the domain in question as asymmetric. In other cases, however, the recipients treated the previous turn as an invitation to participate in the judgment of the mentioned action (e.g. Yeah, it would be good (to do X)). In this case, the recipients displayed the understanding that the participants “have equal rights in determining whether the action should happen at all” (Couper-Kuhlen & Etelämäki, 2015, p. 23).

First-position downgrading deontic incongruences are thus essentially a matter of action formation and action recognition (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2014). At the same time, however, the displays of apparently low deontic status, which simultaneously provide the recipients with a possibility to establish the first speakers’ authoritative deontic status, work as a way for the first speakers, in unclear situations, to test and get confirmation (or disconfirmation) of their deontic statuses. The first-position downgrading deontic incongruences constitute a way for the first speaker to avoid accountability for having launched an action or action sequence that may not be warranted by his or her deontic status. Of course, from the perspective of research methodology, there may be no conclusive evidence to assess whether or not an utterance was intended by the speaker to be interpreted in one or another way, since individuals are normally very keen on hiding intentions, for example by means of “requestive hinting” (Haugh, 2017; Weizman, 1989). Though, sometimes the precise ways in which the first speakers subsequently react to the compliant responses provided by their recipients may be indicative of the type of deontic authority relationship that the first speakers were probing.

As there are, however, enough theoretical reasons to assume that first-position downgrading deontic incongruences exist, it is fruitful to consider their consequences for human power relations. Indeed, such an assumption opens up another “meta” way to consider the negotiation and maintenance of certain power relations. Given that a person with a high deontic status may rely on others understanding the deontic meaning of his or her utterances without having to explicate that meaning, we may ask: what kinds of power relations are maintained by recommendations to be found in the most celebrated guides to relationships, such as John Gray’s (1992) Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus?

Women often think they are asking for support when they are not. When she needs support, a woman may present the problem but not directly ask for his support. She expects him to offer his support and neglects directly to ask for it. (Gray, 1992, p. 165)

While there are situations where a person’s deontic status is not validated by the recipient in the way that the speaker has expected, we may also see how urging people to claim an explicit deontic stance may function as an effective way for others to refrain from recognizing these people’s deontic statuses voluntarily. Urging people to claim an explicit deontic stance takes from them the feeling of having deontic rights without needing to claim them. Thereby, the central question is whether someone’s deontic status is treated as high enough to overrule his or her
(possibly weak and mitigated) deontic stance or whether the deontic stance is to be taken merely at its face value. Because both options are equally supported by the formal organization of interaction, a recipient may indeed get away with either response option without having to account for his or her possible failure (cf. Heritage, 1984, pp. 245–253). This feature of deontic negotiations adds to their overall implicitness and invisibility.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

While the common core of all conceptions of power is the notion of bringing about consequences (see Lukes, 1978, pp. 634–635; Weber, 1964, p. 152), this paper has highlighted another facet of power struggles. This facet is not about the choice between competing plans for future action, but about subtle differences in how these actions are discussed in the turn-by-turn sequential unfolding of interaction. Essentially, these power struggles are about our capacity to maintain our views about ourselves as individuals who have control over their lives and who may participate in decisions about collective endeavors.

The experience of being powerful is associated with several highly positive, psychological and physiological outcomes (see e.g., Marmot, 2004; Sapolsky, 2005; Smith, Jostmann, Galinsky, & van Dijk, 2008). The subtle negotiations of deontic rights also play a significant role in such experiences. In the instances of second-person upgrading incongruence and epistemic-deontic incongruence, the recipients engage in interactional work to claim and establish for themselves a higher deontic status than what was originally offered to them. In the instances of first-position downgrading incongruence, in contrast, it is left in the hands of the recipient to boost (or not boost) the first speaker’s deontic status. While, overall, empirical research literature on the experiential consequences of different turn-by-turn interactional patterns is scarce (see, however, Peräkylä et al., 2015; Stevanovic et al., 2017), the experiential consequences of the different forms of deontic incongruence discussed here would be a particularly interesting topic for future empirical research. Indeed, a deeper understanding of the negotiations of social power in real life would necessitate a thorough understanding of the types of nano-experiences associated with these different interactional patterns.

This paper has highlighted people’s remarkable skills in recasting the inevitable aspects of their social environment as “their own”—that is, as something that they themselves have control over. As pointed out by Leach (1962), “in all viable systems, there must be an area where the individual is free to make choices so as to manipulate the system to his advantage” (p. 133). As suggested in this paper, this also holds for the negotiations of power within the system of turn-by-turn sequential relations.

ENDNOTES

1 In this respect, the concept of power is seen quite differently, for example, in the Foucauldian tradition, where the researchers are interested in how language and discourse are ideologically shaped by relations of power in society (e.g., Foucault, 1980; McHoul & Grace, 1993; Miller & Rose, 2008; Vrecko, 2009).

2 A similar situational normative dimension can also be perceived in adult interactions (Brinck, Reddy, & Zahavu, 2017, p. 140; Hodges & Fowler 2010), for example, in the rhythmic closings of telephone conversation (see Auer, 1990; De Jaegher, Peräkylä, & Stevanovic, 2016) and in many other “interaction rituals” (Collins, 2004; Goffman, 1967).

3 In contrast to this view, there is an important body of experimental research (Rakoczy, Brosche, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2009; Rakoczy, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2008) showing that, at around 3 years of age, children intervene in third-party violations of (constitutive) rules in a game, which has led researchers to conclude that, by this age, children have learned to understand norms in a more general manner.
Although in the present argument the terms “self” and “social self” are used interchangeably, this has not been the case, for instance, for William James (1981), who saw the social self as just one component of the self, the other components being what he called the material self, the spiritual self, and the pure ego.

I use the term “deontic rights” somewhat interchangeably with the notion of “deontic authority.” However, one advantage of using the term “deontic rights” over the notion of “deontic authority” is that it does not presuppose an asymmetrical relationship between the two participants, as is inevitably the case in a relationship of authority. The term “deontic rights” is therefore particularly useful when describing those relationship constellations where the participants rights to determine action are more or less equal—or, at least, negotiable.

Notably, Heritage (2013) has used the same notions also to describe the compatibility of (epistemic or deontic) status and stance within a single utterance. These two different uses of the notions are in no way contradictory, but in fact complement each other: it is ultimately the next turn that makes it visible whether the recipient treats the stance displayed in the prior turn as legitimate or not—that is, whether it is compatible with the prior speaker’s status (as judged by the recipient). Likewise, incongruence between the first and second turns presupposes that, from the second speaker’s perspective, the status and stance in the first turn have been incompatible.

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