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"The Strike of a Hammer: Institutional Talk and 'Multi-Modal' Interaction"

One of the important contributions of conversation analysis over the past couple of decades has been to our understanding of language use and talk at work and the ways in which institutional activities are accomplished in and through social interaction. Studies have focused in particular on turn design and turn organisation in professional-client encounters especially in health care and the public services. Economic behaviour and transactions have received less attention, and save for some important exceptions, such activities that rest upon multi-party and multi-modal interaction have remained relatively underexplored. In this regard, it is interesting to note that there is burgeoning body of ethnographic research that addresses the social organisation of markets involving complex multi-party transactions and yet the interaction order that underpins these transactions is largely disregarded. In this paper, we examine the organisation and operation of one such market, and address the determination of value and the highly contingent, interactional accomplishment of price and exchange.

We focus in particular on the use of a seemingly mundane artefact within the operation of the market for fine art and antiques, a hammer, and explore the ways in which its deployment and articulation serves to transact goods worth many thousands, in some cases, millions of dollars. We consider, how the strike of the hammer, forms part of a complex interactional arrangement, that selectively discriminates participants, whilst maximizing successive opportunities to buy goods, and explore the ways in which its articulation can be used to encourage, persuade and even cajole buyers. The paper is concerned with exploring the interplay of the visible, the material and talk, and addressing the ways in which particular organisational events, are accomplished in and through action, in some cases turns and sequences of turns, that rest upon the embodied and embedded articulation of activity.