

*“While the organization of this and any interaction can be analyzed post hoc into a hierarchical structure of topics and sub-topics, or routines and sub-routines, the coherence that the structure represents is actually achieved moment by moment, as a local, collaborative, sequential accomplishment.”* (Suchman, 94)

Suchman’s contribution in this text is mainly due to her challenge of orthodox cognitive interpretation of mental states and their relationship to resultant actions. Her thesis is primarily epistemological: do we understand action in terms of (and only because of) predefined plans or goals, or are we able to speak about *plans* only because of a framework of action that gives those plans meaning (plans are merely *post hoc* representations of action chains). Drawing heavily from examples that include human-human and human-machine communication, she posits that the process of communication is primarily an *ad hoc* action, and the responses and decisions of the actors are determined by the specific situation at a given point in time, which is impossible to predict beforehand.

She also gives examples of human-machine communication, but as the machine intelligence is severely limited relative to the human actor, the interaction loses much of its *ad hoc* flexibility, and communication is limited to predefined scripts thought out beforehand by the system programmer. Using examples that rely heavily on linguistic interaction between agents, Suchman makes a strong argument for communication as situated action, rather than formal planning.

*We never definitively determine the intent behind and action, in that descriptions at the level of intent are not designed to pick out mental states that stand in some relation of strict causality of action...”* (Suchman, 68)

The harder I looked for a dissenting position in Suchman’s text, the harder it became to find a particular statement with which I disagreed. I chose this line from the introduction of the fifth chapter, because it best represented what I saw as Suchman’s greatest fault; a tendency at overreaching her point.

While it is true that many interactions—particularly interactions involving communication between two or more agents—are effectively described as *in situ* rather than predetermined planning, it seems to border on arrogance to make claims that *all* action is situated action, and that the strict cognitive model of predetermined planning has no place in an analysis of action and mental state.

Herein lies the real problem; Suchman never actually states that position directly (hence my difficulties in finding an appropriate statement). However, the overall tone of the work, and the sum total of her arguments certainly leave the reader with that impression. Perhaps a more balanced view, recognizing the practical effectiveness of a cognitive model in AI research; a few paragraphs on the interaction of the two viewpoints and how they work together to provide a fuller understanding of the field would have been most welcome.