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**TEDDY BEAR SAYS: STUDY HARD, DON'T BE LAZY!
EXPLORING THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTION WITH MUNDANE OBJECTS THROUGH
IMAGINARY CONVERSATIONS.**

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Abstract

This article explores the symbolical interaction with mundane objects in the private life of individuals. The paper derives from the following question that was asked in an international diary study: 'Imagine that things could speak, what would they say?'. The main findings can be summarized in two parts: a) when asked to imagine talking objects most of the participants selected mundane domestic objects to speak about private concerns, and b) the participants constructed narratives mostly of scolding and complaining character. The narrative analysis is based on symbolic theory and conversation analysis, and it is argued that material objects can be used in private life as inner 'co-conversationalists' to discuss the morality of conduct of one self. It is suggested that material objects in people's private realm are not only props within interpersonal interaction order, but also tools for inner negotiation as well as for self-regulation.

Keywords: Mundane Objects, Everyday Life, Socio-material Interaction, Inner Conversation, Co-conversationalists, Self-regulation.

Introduction

'A cheap coat makes a cheap man', Veblen (1899/1931, p. 169) once wrote and illustrated the relationship between the symbolical meaning of a cheap coat and a poor man with low social position in society. This way of understanding the cultural and symbolically meanings of material objects within different consumption or gift systems have become established within the so-called structural tradition of social theory (Appadurai, 1986; Bourdieu, 1984; Komter, 2001; Mauss, [1923]1990; McCracken, 1990; Simmel, 1957; Warde, 1997). From such perspective material objects are often understood and treated as representations or mediators of symbolical meaning, providing ways for the individual to signal and symbolize the belonging to collective values, beliefs, and ideas in social groups and society. Thus, material objects have for many decades been used by structural oriented sociologists as representations and methodological tools to study collective meaning and structural phenomenon in societies. However, a cheap coat is not just a significant symbol within interpersonal situations and public life, it is also an object that the owner use and interact with. Or as Kalthoff & Roehl (2011, p. 453) writes: "the house does not stand merely for a symbolic representation of cognitive dispositions, but rather prefigures the action of the people living in it." For action-oriented researchers, material objects are viewed and treated as inter-actants (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dant, 1999; Dittmar, 1992; Goffman, 1959; Miller, 1998; Pels, Hetherington and Vandenberghe, 2002; Preda 1999; Tian and Belk, 2005; Turkle, 2011), and considered playing an active role in the constitution and managing of the social fabric of everyday life of the individual, providing the self with a stable and familiar environment through the tactile acts of touching and grasping (Cohen, 1989; Cook, 1993; de Laguna, 1946; Harré, 2002; Hewitt, 1979; Joas, 1985, 1996; Lipman, 1956; McCarthy, 1984; Rosenthal and Bourgeois, 1991). It is within this interactionistic tradition

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present study position itself with a distinct pragmatist interest in 'living with things' (Dant, 1999), treating material objects as 'actants' (Ashmore, Wooffitt, and Harding, 1994), 'active social entities' (Preda, 1999) in 'active partnerships' (Turkle, 2011). The common denominator in such notions is the understanding of material objects as playing an active role in the construction and managing of the social order and identity of the individual. Scholars have discussed the attachment to specific objects, e.g. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) speaks of 'valued material possessions', Wallendorf and Arnould (1988) speaks of 'favorite things', and Belk (1988) of 'loved objects'. The common denominator of these formulations is that they emphasize 'the idea that object preference is built up after purchase through a dialectic process in which meaning and affect are transferred between individuals and objects over time' (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988, p. 543).

Based on an action-oriented perspective of the role of material objects in everyday life, this paper focus on what García-Montes, Caballero, and Pérez-Álvarez (2006, p. 78) call the dialectical relationship between the self and material objects. This relationship can be described in metaphoric terms as a socio-material 'dialog' between human and object. One example is Dant and Bowles (2002, p. 23) study of how car technicians and cars interact during repair: '...[T]he reason for retaining the idea of 'talk' to describe the material interaction of human bodies and the bodies of artificial objects is because there is a flow of interaction that is not determined solely by the human but is also shaped by the reciprocity of the object.'. In this paper, the dialectical relationship or 'dialog' between human and object is not physically performed but rather symbolically. Instead of observing human material interaction with material objects, this study asks of the participants to take the role of specific objects and engage in inner conversation with them (Mead, [1932]2002, p. 137).

Everyday life research focus is about peoples' practices, their actions, habits, and 'doing' of everyday life in relation to people but also to material objects, as well as to animals. However, while interactionism emphasize how human actors use, interpret and transform material objects, it sometimes neglects the role of objects as inter-actants with capability of transforming human actors and actions (Kalthoff and Roehl, 2011, p. 466f). In this study, the focus is on the inner (symbolic) speech act with objects, and based on the findings I argue that material objects can be acted upon in a social and creative manner, and as such be used to cultivate and regulate individual action.

About the study

In 2010, a research team at Ericsson, an international telecom company, initiated an explorative photo diary study as part of a larger research program with the aim of exploring the meanings and potential values of future interconnected things augmented by embedded data-, computation-, sensor-, location-, communication- and interaction capabilities. As in-house researcher, I was invited into the project in order to contribute with a sociological perspective.

The diary study was conducted in Tokyo, Japan, in spring 2010, in San Jose, USA, in autumn 2010, and in Beijing, China, in spring 2011. 14 participants between the ages of 18 to 50 years old were recruited from each of the three countries, i.e. the total sample consists of 42 participants. The participants were assembled to reflect what can be understood as a middle-class segment living and working in contemporary urban settlements, including individuals with different age, gender, occupation, and family situation. The participants were given probing kits including a pen, paper, post its and a booklet. The booklet described 26 tasks that the participants completed during two weeks; they were asked questions about environmental issues and power consumption, understandings of technical and social networks, and identity and relationships towards humans as well as material objects. The tasks were designed in line with the larger scope of the company's research program. This paper builds exclusively on one of the tasks:

Imagine that things could speak, what would they say? Find 2-3 things that you think should say something and write what the objects say on a speech-bubble sticker and stick

it on to the object. Take one picture of each thing with a sticker on it. Describe what each object is, what it say and why.

It should be clarified – as described in the task above – that the participants submitted photos along together with their written answers. Most of these photos are taken in the participants' homes, sometimes in intimate settings or revealing private space; in order to maintain anonymity of the individuals all photos have been excluded in this paper. Even if the photos would be part of the analysis they could, however, only be of assistance by providing clues to cultural meaning of different objects, they reveal nothing or little about the interaction between participant (photographer) and object.

Previous research regarding human-object-relationships has often been conducted with help of qualitative methods such as interviews and observations, as well as with quantitative survey methods (Martinez and Ames, 1997; Miller, 2008; Riggins, 1994). In Csikszentmihalyi and Rockberg-Halton's (1981, p. x) study over 300 people were interviewed – children and adults – living in a major metropolitan area in US. The interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes, where they could 'see and discuss the things that were part of their everyday lives'. Methodologically, their study aimed at discovers generational differences in the interaction with material objects, and patterns of differentiations between different families. It is a descriptive study 'in which people were requested to tell what objects were "special" to them and why.' (Csikszentmihalyi and Rockberg-Halton, 1981, p. x). In Tian and Belk's (2005, p. 298f) study, 20 people received a camera along with instructions to think about the one's material objects in the workplace take photographs of those objects that were important and of personal value for them. The study participants' own photographs were later presented to them, and discussed, as part of an interview. Another well-renowned example is Wallendorf and Arnold's (1988) cross-cultural inquiry, involving 300 respondents from US, and 45 study participants from the Niger Republic, three methods of data collection were employed: interviews, photographs, and surveys. In practice this meant that participants were asked questions about their favorite objects – through interviews and self-report surveys – and were photographed with their favorite objects. Most research involving socio-material relationships focus on 'special' objects, a notion whose meaning can be compared to similar notions such as 'cherished' objects (Csikszentmihalyi and Rockberg-Halton, 1981), 'valued material possessions' (Belk, 1988), and 'favorite' objects (Wallendorf and Arnold, 1988), in other words unique objects that are of extraordinary meaning or value (symbolical, emotional, economical) to the owner. In the same way as my scholarly interest in everyday life research is not delimited to extraordinary occasions and rituals, my scholarly interest in the material world is not delimited to extraordinary objects. In order to avoid excluding certain types of objects when studying symbolical, socio-material, interaction in the everyday life of individuals, the survey question was not designed to target 'special' or 'favorite' objects, but rather make use of the wider category of 'objects'.

Although the participants were completely free to choose any kind of object to resolve the given task. They could have chosen a flower in the garden, or a tree in the forest. But they did not. They, without exception, chose domestic, or in-door, objects, and most of them mundane objects at that. The simple reason for the participants to choose domestic objects for the task, might be that the home is the place where they engaged in the task put forth to them. When the study participants were asked to imagine talking things, they thought of the objects that they had closest at hand in the situation of solving the task.

Which objects talk?

The first step in analyzing the data consisted of grouping the objects that the participants mentioned in the survey. Similar to Csikszentmihalyi and Rockberg-Holton (1981, p. 268ff.) the grouping process started by formulating the main objects and inductively draw the categories of objects named by the participants. Some categories are grosser than others, and in several instances I have combined two related categories, e.g. 'furniture' and 'interior', or 'food' and 'drink'. The purpose for coding the mentioned objects in this way is not to generate an absolute and definite scheme over the objects but rather to draw out categories that can

characterize different general kinds of objects in order to create a meaningful and operational overview of the objects.

Figure 1. Categories of objects mentioned in the narratives, with examples of objects and quotes.

Object categories	Example objects (n=91)	Example quotes
Electric devices	Fridge, laundry machine, electric fan, humidifier, lamp	"The fridge says: 'Remember to close my door, I am afraid of the heat!'"
Digital devices	TV, computer, mobile phone, remote control	TV says: "Why don't you turn me on anymore"
Furniture and interior	Sofa, toilet, bed, door lock	Sofa says: "recharge and get back up and take care of business"
In-door plants	Orchid plant, palm tree	In-door palm tree says: "You must be tired"
Figurines and toys	Doll, robot, porcelain dog	"Doll says: Relax! Relax!"
Music instruments	Banjo, guitar	Banjo says: "Nice to meet you"
Exercise equipments	Pull-up bar, yoga mat, bike	Pull-up bar says: "Use me and I will make you more healthy"
Work equipments	White board, stapler	"White board says: Wash me!"
Food and drink	Candy, fruit, food, wine	"The fruit shouts at me: 'eat us, not that candy bar!'"
Clothes and bags	Bag, shoes, socks	Football bag says: "I don't belong in the front hallway"
Art and literature	Painting, book	Cookbook says: "I'm under utilized. Actually use ME"

Digital devices in general are frequently chosen by the participants. One possible explanation is that even though all material objects have the potential of evoke action (Turkle, 2007), technology (information and communication technology in particular) can be said to invite to action in a pushy way, meaning they call for our attention in very active ways, for example through push notifications and sound and light alerts (Turkle, 2011). A computer can perform a lot of tasks and even call for our attention by performing programmed and scheduled tasks; a sofa or a pair of shoes are not nearly as pushy.

Although not part of the focus of the study, it can be worth noting the existence of gendered differences in the empirical material. Not surprisingly, female participants have a greater tendency to refer to objects often associated to the stereotypical feminine domain of home and family (e.g. son's gym bag, baby's nose plucker, and stroller), and the male participants have a tendency to refer to objects associated to the stereotypical masculine domain of work and sport (e.g. Pull-up bar, picture of football team, and TV).

Despite the great variety of objects in the narratives, one observation is that the list includes very few objects that can be considered 'special' to the individual, meaning unique objects with attached personal value and meaning (Czikszenmihalyi and Rockberg-Holton, 1981, p. 56). Examples of mundane objects from the study can be a White board who the participants are imagining saying: 'Wash me'; or a lamp saying 'Remember to turn me off!'. In neither of these narratives there are any indication that the specific white board or the distinct lamp should be of any personal significance to the narrators. In the present study, however, most objects do not fit this category definition. In fact, I have only managed to identify a small number of objects that could be understood as of extraordinary meaning to the participants, for example a snow globe from the participants' sister: 'This is a snow globe my sister gave me when I was in junior high. It used to sit in my room, but I have tucked it away on a shelf and never look at it anymore.' The snow globe can be interpreted as representing the social linkage to and personal history to a specific family member (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988). Another special object is a wooden fish - a souvenir - bought in Jamaica, representing personal memories of the journey: "'fish have feelings too!'. this is a wooden fish i got in Jamaica... it has personality and when i walk by, i think of funny things it might say, this is one of them...'.

Neither have I found any objects that could be seen as special in relation to work life (Hamilton, 2013), i.e. certain tools of the trade associated to significant and prestigious tasks, performed only by certain qualified employees. Most objects in the study are understood as of mundane character, meaning things that are more or less non-persistent, replaceable, and that are used in the everyday life without any particular personal sentiments or personal meaning attached to them. Thus, in this article I use the notion of 'special' objects to indicate objects that are used by the participants as extraordinary and non-replaceable objects, and 'mundane' objects to indicate the kind of objects that we use in our daily life without investing personal or emotional energy and meaning into them.

What do the objects say?

Having accounted for the type of material objects in the participants' narratives, this section focuses on what the material objects said when the participants gave them an imaginary voice. When asked to imagine talking things, none of the participants from the three countries had any trouble what so ever imagining that things could speak. On the contrary, they imagined very vividly, demonstrating the unproblematic nature of pretending that material objects can speak. The total number of mentioned objects in the study was 91, almost equally divided between the participants from the three countries (US: n=30; China: n=32; Japan: n=29). Looking at the actors in the narratives – who the object addresses – it is clear that the main character is the master of the object. When asked to imagine talking things, the participants imagined that the things they selected spoke of, or to, themselves. In fact, the narratives are predominately (9 out of 10) about the self. Speaking with Mead ([1932]2002, p. 137, [1938]1972, p. 188), this would imply that when asked to imagine talking objects, the participants take the role of the object and looks upon herself from the perspective of the object, and engages in inner, self-reflexive conversation on different topics. More specifically, four themes, or rather, domains of everyday life can be identified in the narratives: a) the home, b) the work, c) the body, and d) consumption.

a) In line with previous research about the meaning of domestic objects (Czikszentmihalyi and Rockberg-Halton, 1981, p. 127ff), the home is a recurrent topic in the narratives. For hard-working citizens, the home is naturally dedicated to leisure and the art of relaxing, for example: '...it's my backrest that sits next to my bed. It reminds me that I bought it in order to be comfortable while reading or watching tv in bed.'. Souvenirs can remind us of who we were when we took the vacation and evoke images of ourselves in relation to other places and people (Nippert-Eng, 1995, 2010). According to the same logic, objects of comfort speak of relaxation, for example a sofa who says: 'I know I'm an unworthy thing, but in a sunny afternoon after a long winter you can enjoy your life with me.' However, objects of comfort can also speak about self-discipline and activity; another sofa says:

I think our couch is inspiring us to get up and do stuff rather than promoting laziness. Don't get me wrong, we can relax with the best of them, but only enough to recharge and get back up and take care of business!

In fact, most of the narratives are about self-discipline in one way or other, involving stories about trying to uphold good habits, for example regarding house rules:

This is my son's football bag and it is currently in the front entry way. The note says 'I don't belong in the front hallway'. If it could say that every time he walked by I am sure I would have a much cleaner entryway!

b) Work is also a topic in the narratives, though less frequently observed. Most of the work-related narratives involves complaints about working too much. Perhaps more interesting is the talking work place objects, for example a dirty White board saying: 'Wash me'. The White boards' request of being cleaned can of course be interpreted as a normative appeal to uphold good standards at work – especially in the public region of a meeting room – but it is at the same time a request that can be associated to an action (cleaning) that is performed in-between two front stage performances. In other words, it is possible to interpret these work-related narratives as belong to a kind of 'private' dimension at work.

c) Many of the participants' narratives relate to their own body and health. Only one narrative could be interpreted as somewhat encouraging in this regard: 'This is my pullup bar. This is what it says to me as I walk by it on a daily basis. "Use me and it will make you more healthy."' The rest of the answers regarding the bodily self are of scolding character, for example:

The fruit shouts at me 'eat us, not that candy bar!!' but as you can see in the picture, the fruit is getting old and about to pass away, and soon it will be in the garbage because I chose to eat some garbage instead of this good for you fruit! I'm trying to lose weight, but that flesh continues to cry out for candy and chips! It's a tough battle and the bulge is winning!

And after having eaten garbage, the floss gives a verbal beating:

I never floss. I keep a thing of floss on my counter as you see here, just to remind me to floss and yet I never floss! I put a calendar notify in my outlook to remind me daily to floss and still I never floss. The floss stares and me as if to say "when is the last time you used me?"

d) Interestingly, there is a lack of positive emotional expressions in relation to consumption, and plenty of negative expressions which all seems to be related to the non-use of domestic things. For example:

This is the electric fan bought last summer. It says: "Sell me or pick me up, don't throw me here waiting to be dusty!" I use it for two weeks after buying it, and I bought an air conditioner later since I can't bear the hot whether. Thus the fan stayed there unused.

Narratives like this one signal guilt for bad investments and over-consumptions. In the same way over-consumption of electricity that generates a lot of reprimanding narratives: 'The fridge says "Do not frequently open the refrigerator and save electricity", in order to live a low-carbon life and save electricity.'

In everyday practice, material ordering of the social world can take the form of rules at home or at work (Nippert-Eng, 1995), and play an active role in the constitution and managing of the order in interpersonal relationships (Csikszentmihaly and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Goffman, 1959; Pinch, 2010; Tian and Belk, 2005 Wallendorf and Arnould, 1988), as well as in creating and maintaining individual habits and sense of self (Mead, [1932]2002, [1938]1972; McCarthy, 1984; Pels et al., 2002; Turkle, 2007, 2011). In the narratives in this study, four domains – broadly defined – have been identified. These domains can be interpreted as reflecting topics and aspects that are of particular importance to educated, working, middle-class people that are living in urban, cosmopolitan, settlements regardless of nationality or ethnicity.

Why do the mundane objects complain so much?

Notable visible in the participants' answers are the many narrative examples of reprimanding and regulating attitude of the objects in relation to their personal habits and actions. As the narrative which the articles' title is built on, "This gray teddy bear with its hands on its waist, it looks high and mighty, seems to be saying: "study hard, don't be lazy!"". It has been argued (Miller, 2008: 296) that material and social routines, which give order and meaning to the life of the individual, may also, be a comfort to her. However, in present study narratives about objects of comfort are scarce; instead, many objects in the narratives seem to be of nuisance to the participants, evaluating, judging, scolding and complaining, and the apparent question must be asked: Why do the mundane objects complain so much?

Attempting to answer this question, or at least suggest a plausible explanation to the attitudes of the objects in the narratives, I turn to the field of conversation analysis which focus on principles which people use to interact with each other by means of language (Drew and Heritage, 1992; Psathas, 1995; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007), including openings and closings, turn-taking, sequential organization, assessments, topic shift, and topic development and management (Bublitz, 1988; Jefferson, 1988; Pomerantz, 1978, 1984; Sacks et al., 1974). Despite the irregularity of adopting a conversation analysis approach to the study of socio-material

relationships, let's keep in mind that non-human objects too are symbolically incorporated in and active parts of the generalized other (Mead, [1934]1967, p. 154) and can as such be regarded as a symbols with which the participants can engage in inner conversation. Treated as inner conversations, the use of conversation analysis – thought with obvious limited scope – can be, as I will show, useful to assess the attitude of the objects in the narratives. Specifically, I will use two notions from conversation analysis: complains and compliments.

The first notion – complaints – overlaps and contrasts with a range of relevant alternatives such as criticize, (be)moan, accuse, and denigrate. Complaining refers to an expressive behavior whereby dissatisfaction is articulated to some target(s) (Alicke et al., 1992; Dersley and Wootton, 2000). Edwards (2005, p. 7) argues that complaints 'elude formal definition', and are best understood as a normative category with recurrent features that people recognize (that they are negative, that they involve some grievance, that agency and culpability are involved) and roles that are adopted (a complainer, a complaint object, a recipient). Scholars have identified different strategies of complaints (Jefferson, 1988; Olshtain and Vainbakh, 1987), for example 'safe complaints' (Sacks, 1992, p. 599f), or complaints of third parties (Drew, 1998). Pomerantz (1978) and Schegloff (2005) have both described different ways through which blame and complaint can be laid at the door of the immediate recipient. In this paper I use the notion of complaints in a wide sense, as a speech-act that in one way or another serves to make a miss-crediting statement of one's actions or habits.

The second notion – compliments – are examples of speech acts that notice and attend to the hearer's interests, wants, needs, and goods (Golato, 2002, 2005). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), complimenting is a positive politeness strategy aiming to praise the addressee for a past or present action. A frequent denotation is Holmes's (1988, p. 446) definition: 'A compliment is a polite speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some "good" (possession, characteristics, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and hearer.' She defines a compliment as a speech act that is accomplished either explicitly or implicitly to express admiration or approval for some good of the addressee. In the present study, the definition of a compliment draws on the work of Holmes (1988) who defines it as the act of attributing credit.

In order to assess the crediting and miss crediting attitude of the objects expressed in the narratives, I have constructed an analytical spectrum, running from one oppositional end (compliments) to another (complaints).

Figure 2. Observed number of narratives along a complementing and complaining spectrum, with example quotes.

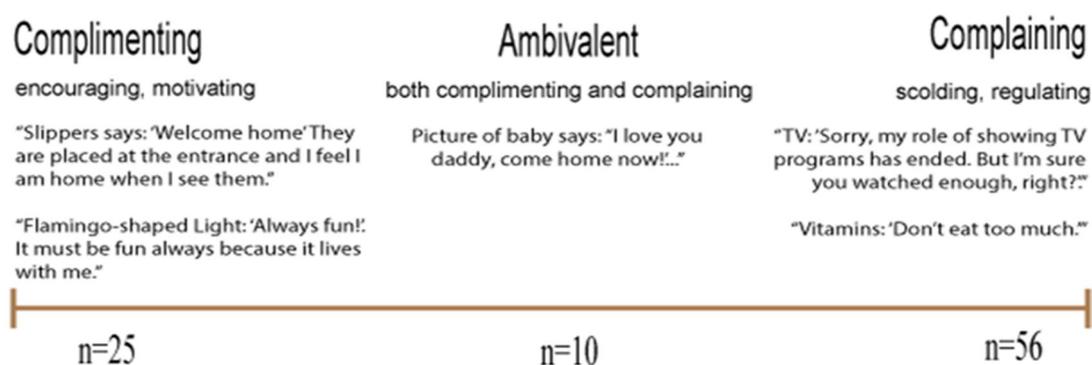


Figure two illustrate how the narratives fits within such a spectrum. 25 examples of encouraging and motivating narratives are observed, for example one participant who imagines her Slippers saying: "'Welcome home" They are placed at the entrance and I feel I am home when I see them'. On the other, complaining, side of the spectrum as many as 56 narratives of scolding and regulating objects are identified, for example, TV says: 'Sorry, my role of showing TV programs has ended. But I'm sure you watched enough, right?'. As visible in figure two, 10

narratives are coded as ambivalent. This is a third – in-between – category with narratives that gives account of mixing both complaints and compliments. For example the illustrated quote in full:

This is the most current picture of my baby. I have it on my desk and I look at it all day long. Looking in her eyes I just hear her saying 'I love you daddy, come home now!' I see that picture and it makes me feel like nothing else matters except God and family and all this 40+ hour a week nonsense is so earthly and not worth it. Then I remember that I want to keep her in a nice home with nice clothes, and food to eat and so I press on further!

It is in the narratives of the ambivalent character the most comprehensive inner conversations is found, illustrating how the participants argue and debate with themselves, juggling and valuating different arguments when conversing with the particular object. Another example: 'My QQ [Chinese chat service] says that, it is worthier chatting on QQ for half an hour than studying literature for 10 years. I'm sure it may think like this.' In this narrative, the participant is negotiating and trying to convince herself that chatting with friends is equally learning as participate in formal education, probably fully aware that it is not.

From the perspective of Conversation analysis, any consideration of the accountability or responsibility of social conduct brings directly into focus moral dimensions of language use: in the situations in which we report our own or others' conduct, our descriptions are themselves accountable phenomena through which we recognizably display an action's (im)propriety, (in)correctness, (un)suitability, (in)appropriateness, (in)justice, (dis)honesty, and so forth (Drew, 1998: 295). According to Drew (1998), ordinary conversations often hold explicit or implicit accounts of moral work – providing a basis for confronting and evaluating the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of whatever is being reported. In this study, the co-conversationalist is a material object – acted upon as an other speaking with the voice of the self. The narratives illustrate how the participant converses with herself, from the point of view of the object. Put in Meads ([1932]2002, p. 135ff) terminology: When the participant takes the role of the objects she reach for the inside of the object, and evoke certain symbolical meanings, values, and norms, that she has – through interaction – come to associate the objects with. As seen in the narratives, when given a voice, the objects start reminding and reprimanding the participant in regard to certain actions and habits. Like the fridge who says "'Do not frequently open the refrigerator and save electricity", in order to live a low-carbon life and save electricity.' Or as the electric fan, bought last summer but never used, says according to one participant: 'Sell me or pick me up, don't throw me here waiting to be dusty!'. The first participant engages in inner conversation with a fridge about personal habits and environmental issues, and the second with an electric fan about over-consumption. Both narratives illustrate how the participant is reprimanding herself about her immoral behavior – wasting natural resources and money – according an internal moral script of what is understood as good and bad behavior. As parts of the generalized other (Mead [1934]1967, p. 195f), the objects in this study are acted upon as symbolical others, as co-conversationalists with which the subject engage in inner conversation – debating and evaluating the morality of the conduct of the participants. The participants' tendency to use material objects to scold themselves are in this way understood as a self-imposed and self-regulating act, in which the participant enforces certain norms and moral upon herself.

As speech acts, both compliments and complaints are hereby understood as important tools for negotiating and calibrating the inner moral compass of the self. Both notions are important as motivators for the individual to act in certain ways: compliments to reaffirm certain actions and habits of the individual, and complaints to disapprove of certain actions that does not answer to the internalized script of normal and collectively approved actions, such as wasting food, electricity or to leave early from work simply to spend some time with one's child.

Conclusion

In this paper the dialectical relationship between human and material object have been explored through the study of inner, symbolical, conversations with material objects. This paper builds exclusively on the following question: "Imagine that things could speak, what would

they say?“. When answering this question, all participants chose domestic objects, and most of them mundane objects at that. The participants' choice to select mundane objects points to an often neglected aspect within everyday life research, namely the importance and contribution of mundane objects – in contrast to special, or favorite, objects – in the practice and doing of everyday life of individuals.

When accounting for the content of the narratives, four domains of everyday life have been identified: a) the home, b) the work, c) the body, and d) consumption. These domains can be interpreted as topics, or aspects, of particular importance for the middle-class individuals in this study who lives and work in urban, cosmopolitan, settlements.

More importantly are the many narrative examples of reprimanding and regulating – but also complimenting and affirmative – attitude of the objects in relation to the participants' personal habits and actions. As speech acts, both compliments and complaints are understood as important tools for negotiating and calibrating the inner moral compass of the self. Both notions are important as motivators for the individual to act in certain ways: compliments to reaffirm certain actions and habits of the individual, and complaints to disapprove of certain actions that does not answer to the internalized script of normal and collectively approved actions.

Based on the findings of the study, the article argues that material objects can be acted upon as social objects used to evaluate and negotiate norms and moral conduct of one self. By inspire and motivate to behave in certain ways, and condemn when not, mundane objects can be said to play an active part in individuals' inner dialogue with herself regarding the cultivation and regulation of her actions, habits, and sense of self.

According to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis, the front region refers to the place and situation where the individual perform in front of a particular set of audience. These performances deliver impressions to others and information is exchanged to confirm identity. The setting for the performance includes the scenery, props, and location in which the interaction takes place. From dramaturgical point of view, it might be said that the material objects in this study are not used as props but rather acted upon by the participants as a nonhuman audience. Moreover, while the human audience in Goffman's work is present in the front region, the nonhuman audience in this study is located in the back region. Listening to Goffman (1959), the back region can be understood as the domain of the authentic, private self, where individuals can behave in ways that perhaps might not meet the expectations or acceptance of other people. But also the private and most exclusively personal self finds stability through interaction and negotiation with both human and nonhuman agents, which would imply that even when totally alone, the material objects are there, evoking, pushing us to respond and to act upon them. And as suggested in this study, talking with material objects can involve both self-reflective and self-evaluative actions in relation to internalized societal norms and values.

In this way, the article contributes to the understanding of socio-material relationships in everyday life by the investigation of the role that objects can play in the ongoing pragmatic doing of the self. In particular, the article explore the role in material objects when alone and one is apart from other people. By studying how material objects are acted upon in private we can help open up the black box of the private realm of individuals in which material objects are not merely important props within interpersonal interaction order, but also imperative inter-actants and tools for inner conversation and moral work.

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