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978-1-107-03582-9 - The Language of Service Encounters: A Pragmatic-Discursive Approach

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Excerpt

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Introduction

Service encounters are ubiquitous in social interaction. We buy food products and everyday items in supermarkets, convenience stores, or markets; we order coffee at cafés; we purchase merchandise in department stores; we book flights at a travel agency; or we request information at a bank, a visitor information center, or at a library front-desk. Following Clark (1996), I consider a service encounter a *joint activity*. Service encounters are interactions in which some kind of commodity, be it goods, information, or both, is exchanged between a service provider (e.g. clerk, vendor) and a service seeker (e.g. customer, visitor). The participants in a service encounter may be physically present at a designated public setting, or the transaction can be carried out by telephone, online, in writing via mail, and in face-to-face interactions. In addition to transactional talk, interactions in commercial and non-commercial settings include non-transactional talk that is embedded in the transaction, such as the relational talk of greetings and small talk, and metalinguistic discussions about the product. Politeness practices and face considerations (the need for association or dissociation) play a central role during the negotiation of service in light of the expected sociocultural norms of service providers and service seekers in communities of practice (cf. Bargiela-Chiappini and Haugh 2009; Mills 2003).

In this book I examine the language of service encounters in face-to-face interactions by looking at the negotiation of service that takes place in designated public service settings in the United States and in Mexico. I adopt a pragmatic-discursive approach to examine the social actions that emerge during the negotiation of service (see Chapter 1, Section 1.4). Service encounters include the language employed in both transactional and non-transactional talk. Pragmatic variation will be examined with regard to regional and social (e.g. gender) differences.

It can be argued that all of the service encounters in this book belong to the same genre, as they share structural, functional, and stylistic features. They also share the same communicative purpose, namely, “demanding and giving goods & services” (Ventola 1987: 115). It is the sharing of these aspects

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(specifically, the communicative purpose) that forms the main criterion for the definition of a genre (Swales 1990: 58).

The word *service* derives from the Latin *servitium* to refer to the action and effect of serving; *encounter* alludes to an act of coming upon or meeting with. The term *service encounter* is commonly used to refer to social interaction in commercial and non-commercial settings. It comprises settings at markets, small shops, grocery stores, convenience stores, travel agencies, hair salons, driving schools, library front-desks, bookshops, post offices, print shops, medical, commercial, and government settings, as well as emergency calls, telephone service calls, and self-service technology, such as automated teller machines (ATMs), among others (in Chapter 2 I discuss existing research that employs these terms for the same communicative purpose, seeking and giving service and goods). The focus of this book is limited to service encounters that occur in four designated locations: three in commercial settings (supermarket delicatessens, small stores, and open-air markets) and one in a non-commercial setting (a visitor information center).

The field of study

In this book service encounters are examined from a pragmatic-discursive perspective. The field of pragmatics can be approached from at least two perspectives: the Anglo-American and the Continental or European traditions (Huang 2009). The first is referred to as the “component view,” and it examines the “systematic study of meaning by virtue of, or dependent on, the use of language” (Huang 2009: 341). It is mainly concerned with central topics such as implicature, presupposition, speech acts, deixis, and reference. The second is considered a functional perspective and interfaces with disciplines such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, discourse analysis, pragmatic variation, and other social sciences. This functional perspective is also referred to as “empirical pragmatics.” I embrace the latter view with some modifications.

The term *discourse* is widely used across different disciplines, and the research goals of discourse analysis are variously interpreted. As mentioned in Scollon and Scollon (2001: 60), there are at least four groups of discourse analysts: some focus on the grammatical and logical cohesion among sentences in texts and conversations; a second group is concerned with the processes of interpretation for understanding discourse (or the functional use of language in social contexts); a third group examines discourse that occurs over many years or across many societies, such as the discourse of medicine or the discourse of foreign exchange; finally, a fourth group focuses on the ways in which discourses are used to establish ideological positions in society (see also pp. 106–110). Fairclough (1995) distinguishes two main senses of

discourse: one that focuses on discourse as social action and interaction, and a second that is concerned with discourse as a social construction of reality (post-structuralism social theory) (in Chapter 1, Section 1.2, I further discuss the scope of discourse and discourse types). In this book *discourse* will be analyzed as social action in interaction.

I view pragmatics as language use in context, with actions that are accomplished and negotiated during the course of social interaction. The definition of pragmatics I adopt is “meaning in interaction,” which reflects a dynamic process “involving the negotiation of meaning between the speaker and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic) and the meaning potential of an utterance” (Thomas 1995: 22). My understanding of pragmatics includes both a social component which embraces sociopragmatics and cultural expectations, and a cognitive component for the interpretation of social actions, be they intentional or not. During the negotiation of service, we communicate both explicitly and implicitly using different types of information or stimuli that service providers and service seekers retrieve from the cognitive context (Wilson and Sperber 2012). This cognitive context might include utterances and non-verbal information such as prosodic information, gesture, and laughter. My understanding of discourse is concerned with the analysis of social action and interaction, with participants (e.g. friends, professor–student, or customer–server) interacting through the negotiation of joint actions in authentic social situations. In the context of service encounters, discourse analysis focuses on the social actions negotiated and accomplished by the server and customer, such as opening the transaction, initiating the request for service, complying (or not) with it, and ending the sales transaction. These interactions are characterized by both transactional and non-transactional talk. Changes in frame (e.g. from business talk to joking) and shifts in footing allow the participants to align their contributions as the interaction progresses (Goffman 1981) (see Chapter 1 and Figure 1 below for the continuum of transactional and relational talk). The participants’ roles and the type of service encounter, whether commercial or non-commercial, also influence the development and outcome of the interaction. Following Kasper (2006), I use a revised version of the term *discursive pragmatics* to refer to the analysis of social action through joint actions that are co-constructed and negotiated according to the sociocultural norms dictated by the members of specific communities of practice (see Chapter 1, Section 1.4, for the description of the pragmatic-discursive approach adopted in this book).

The topic of service encounters is a multidisciplinary field of study. From a sociological angle, Goffman referred to the term *encounter* as a social arrangement or focused gathering “that occurs when persons are in one another’s immediate physical presence” (1961: 17). Unlike service or emergency calls

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over the telephone, in which there is no visual contact between the participants (Márquez Reiter 2008; Zimmerman 1992), Goffman's conceptualization of "encounter" highlights the importance of the physical setting with participants in face-to-face social interaction. It includes "a single visual and cognitive focus of attention; a mutual and preferential openness to verbal communication; a heightened mutual relevance of acts; an eye-to-eye ecological huddle that maximizes each participant's opportunity to perceive the other participants' monitoring of him" (Goffman 1961: 18). The term *focused interaction* is used in situations "when people effectively agree to sustain for a time a single focus of cognitive and visual attention, as in conversation, a board game, or a joint task sustained by a close face-to-face circle of contributors" (p. 7). It is important to note that the relationship between the participants, which can include their degree of familiarity, social power, social distance, and frequency of interaction, may influence the progress of discourse. Broadly speaking, service encounters fit Goffman's definition of *encounter*, as participants (e.g. server provider or service seeker) negotiate service for merchandise or information in face-to-face interactions that may take place in designated settings.

Following Arminen (2005), I assume that service encounters differ from formal institutional interactions in areas such as law, medicine, or military institutions, and from ordinary conversation. Participants in service encounters (clerk and customer) are allowed to deviate from the institutional format of the interaction of a sales transaction, for example, and engage in ordinary conversational forms. The conversational nature of public service encounters is also common in other types of institutional interactions, such as doctor–patient interactions. In this respect, service encounters represent a type of hybrid discourse which includes transactional talk (or business talk) embedded in non-transactional talk (e.g. relational talk such as small talk or phatic exchanges) (in Chapter 1, Section 1.2.1, I discuss additional characteristics of institutional discourse and how it differs from interactions in service encounters, and in Chapter 2, Section 2.3, I address the issue of the symmetric–asymmetric nature of service encounters). In this book service encounters are examined as one type of discourse.

The service encounters analyzed in this book are representative of specific communities of practice where buyers and sellers meet to carry out a sales transaction or service. In service encounters politeness practices and face considerations of association–dissociation have consequences for the outcome of the interaction. According to Wenger, a community of practice comprises a loosely knit group of people who are mutually engaged in a specific task and who have "a shared repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time" (1998: 76). Following Mills, in the context of service encounters buyers and sellers negotiate service based on previous sociocultural expectations and

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“with what they assume are community-of-practice norms for linguistic behaviour” (2003: 3). For instance, members of a particular community of practice (e.g. regular customers at a supermarket delicatessen) share sociocultural expectations with regard to what is considered polite practice when opening and closing a sales transaction, or the degree of politeness expected in the request for service. The presence or absence of non-transactional talk (e.g. small talk) also depends on the sociocultural expectation of a particular community of practice.

Polite and impolite practices are negotiated between service providers and service seekers. According to Mills, politeness can only be examined “within particular communities of practice and should be seen as negotiations with assumed norms” (2003: 109). Politeness emerges during the negotiation of service between the service provider and service seeker, their sociocultural expectations, and according to “negotiations of assumed norms” (p. 109) within specific communities of practice. My conceptualization of im/polite behavior, face, and facework is in light of the postmodern view of politeness that examines polite or impolite practices from a pragmatic-discursive perspective (Bargiela-Chiappini and Haugh 2009; Culpeper 2011; Watts 2003). In particular, I follow Spencer-Oatey’s (2000) notion of rapport management (the management of harmony–disharmony among people) in the analysis of transactional and non-transactional talk (see Chapters 3 to 8). In service encounters rapport management is negotiated throughout the interaction using polite or impolite practices, and according to face orientations (our involvement with, or autonomy from, others) (Scollon and Scollon 2001). In Chapter 1 (Section 1.3.12) I describe my understanding of the postmodern view of im/politeness that I will use to interpret social interaction in service encounters.

I view im/politeness as both a joint activity and a social phenomenon that manifests itself through communicative and non-communicative actions, and according to the sociocultural norms and cultural expectations of particular communities of practice. In designated settings participants engage in relational work to negotiate a sales transaction (exchange of goods) in order to achieve a common communicative purpose: “demanding and giving goods & services” (Ventola 1987: 115). Polite behavior may be seen as marked when it is perceived as social behavior in excess (i.e. positive marked behavior) (Locher and Watts 2005; Watts 2003), or as appropriate behavior, which may be seen as a sociocultural expectation in some cultures, or as a polite practice in others (e.g. Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2006). However, as noted by Mills (2003), the issue of what is appropriate is open to debate and often contested among members of the same community of practice.

Finally, I consider service encounters a particular genre with regard to their overall discourse structure and the goals and roles of the participants during the interaction. According to O’Donnell, the definition of genre implies dynamic

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variation possibilities; specifically, “a genre is defined ... by the set of discourse-forming strategies that it regularly uses, the way in which they can combine, and the order of dominance between them” (2000: 118) (see Chapter 1, Section 1.3.3, for a discussion on genre in service encounters). Although the physical setting is not a constitutive feature of service encounters, in this book service encounters are the result of face-to-face interactions that take place at designated settings, such as small shops, in-store delicatessens, open-air markets, or a visitor information center. The interactions in service encounters analyzed in this book display both the transactional (e.g. sales transaction or a request for information) and the social function, which includes instances of relational talk such as small talk, jokes, laughter, or metalinguistic comments.

Following Fried (2010), I examine variation from both the local perspective within a single language (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) and the global one across languages (Chapter 3). Given the variety of service encounters analyzed in different regions in the United States and Mexico, variation at the pragmatic level will be examined with regard to gender and regional differences (see Chapter 1, Section 1.4, for definitions of different types of pragmatic variation, including variation at the micro-social and macro-social levels). I also examine prosodic variation (Chapter 6, Section 6.4.5), stylistic variation with regard to changes in footing from transactional to non-transactional talk (Chapter 7), as well as stylistic variation with regard to choice of address forms, including alternation and pragmatic variation in pronominal use (Chapter 8).

Background notions: language use, social action, and context

In this section I review three concepts that are fundamental for the understanding of service encounters from a pragmatic-discursive perspective: language use, social action, and context. These concepts will guide the analysis and discussion of the data in Chapters 3–8.

Language use

We use language to accomplish action in social interaction in a wide variety of contexts. Reference to the meaning of language and how words are used to refer to or describe entities of the world date back to Plato’s (427–347 BC) philosophical discussions of the *Cratylus*. The meaning of language has been approached from different interdisciplinary fields that attempt to explain language use in social interaction. For example, from an ethnographic perspective, Malinowski’s (1923, 1965 [1935]) initial observations of primitive languages such as the Trobriand culture, a Melanesian community in New

Guinea, showed that the meaning of language is embedded in the culture and in the context of situation where the utterances are performed. He postulated two functions of language, namely, language as a mode of action and as phatic communion. He noted that “the main function of language is not to express thought, not to duplicate mental processes, but rather to play an active pragmatic part in human behavior” (1935: 7). In his view, utterances are attached to their context and to action, or what people are doing through the exchange of words or exchange of information. The second function, phatic communion, is used to fulfill a social function, such as small talk, greetings, or farewells (cf. Coupland, Coupland, and Robinson [1992] for a revised notion of discourse and social functions of small talk as a result of extended *how-are-you* sequences as non-phatic exchanges).

Malinowski’s ethnographic observations of primitive languages provided the foundation for the meaning of language from a pragmatic perspective, especially for language viewed as social action. Malinowski’s initial ideas of the meaning of language and the concept of the context of situation were further refined by Firth (1935, 1950) from a sociological perspective. Firth noted that the meaning of a language is functional and, as in Malinowski’s work, its meaning is embedded in the culture. He proposed a semantic function (1935: 27) in which the meaning of a word or a sentence is determined by a particular context of situation.

Formal typologies of the functions of language were proposed by functionalist and semantic philosophers of language. From a semiotic point of view, Bühler (1990) showed that language is used for three main purposes: representative function (describing states of the world), expressive function (oriented toward speaker attitudes or states of the mind), and appeal function (oriented toward the hearer; action oriented). These functions were influenced by Socratic philosophy, which views language as an instrument. Specifically, in his dialogue about language, Plato noted that the function of a name is to instruct (“a name is a tool/instrument” [1937: 177]). Later, Bühler’s tripartite model of language functions was complemented by Jakobson’s (1960) typology of six language functions, of which the first three are similar to Bühler’s (referential, emotive, and conative). The additional functions of language in Jakobson’s model include the following: the poetic function (focus on the message), the phatic function (similar to Malinowski’s phatic communion, which focuses on the social function of language), and the metalinguistic function, which focuses on the relation between the code and the situation, as in “what do you mean by *conative*?” It should be noted that the conative function includes actions on the part of the speaker, such as the use of vocatives (in Chapter 8 I examine the social and discourse functions of forms of address). Each of the language functions in Jakobson’s typology should be analyzed with a model of six “constitutive factors in any speech event” (1960:

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353), namely, the addresser (expressive), the addressee (conative), the message (poetic), the context (referential), contact (phatic), and the metalingual or the metalinguistic function (code). Another contribution of Jakobson's typology is that each utterance may express more than one function, thus accounting for the multi-functionality of language.

Language use has also been analyzed from semantic and discursive perspectives. From a semantic perspective, Lyons (1995: 44) proposed a dichotomous function of language, namely, descriptive (or propositional) and non-descriptive (or social-expressive) functions. While the former refers to referential meaning about statements that can be characterized as true or false, the latter refers to meaning that speakers express regarding their attitudes, emotions, or feelings. From a systemic functionalist perspective, Halliday (1970, 1978) proposed three functions of language: ideational (cognitive meaning or propositional content of sentences), interpersonal (mood and modality, and maintaining and establishing social relations), and textual (how the grammatical and intonational structures of sentences refer to the texts and the situation). And Brown and Yule (1983) proposed a functional dichotomy of language: the transactional function (expressing propositional information) and the interactional function (which includes some aspects of Malinowski's phatic function). Finally, in his analysis of relational talk in institutional settings, Koester (2004) distinguished between transactional and relational functions to refer to the referential and phatic (or social) functions.

In the context of service encounters, we use language to negotiate service (e.g. to make a request for service or information) and to create an interpersonal dimension during the demanding and giving of goods and services. In this book I orient my study to the analysis of transactional and relational talk. The transactional function (Brown and Yule, 1983: 1) alludes to Bühler's representative, Jakobson's referential, or Halliday's ideational function, whereas the relational function refers to Malinowski's phatic communion, Bühler's expressive, Jakobson's emotive, Halliday's interpersonal function, or Brown and Yule's interactional function. The transactional dimension is used to accomplish actions through instrumental or business talk, such as making a request for service or a request for information. In contrast, the relational function allows us to maintain and establish social relationships with others in greetings or small talk, to agree or disagree with the service offered by the service provider, to talk about the qualities of a product, to make an assessment of the service received, or to express a comment that is outside of the transactional task. Both functions, transactional and relational talk, are fundamental to the negotiation of service. And although transactional talk is a constitutive component of service encounters, relational talk creates and maintains the interpersonal relations between the participants, enhances discourse flow, and secures a positive outcome to the interaction.

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Background

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Social action

The word *social* is derived from the Latinate word *socius*, meaning “partner,” “associate,” or “companion.” The concept of action has been approached from various interdisciplinary fields, including philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and recent models of discourse analysis. The concept of language as a medium of action was initially conceptualized in Plato’s *Cratylus* (1937). In his dialogue about language, Plato noted that speaking is “a sort of action,” and the act of naming something represents one example of this action, that is, by saying something, we perform certain actions such as naming something or giving information about the world. The notion of action should include not only speakers performing isolated actions but also hearers recognizing those actions during a joint activity, such as a request for information and compliance with that request.

The idea of language as a mode of action was later investigated by Malinowski during his observations of social interactions among speakers of a primitive language (Trobriand culture) (1923), and also of “human speech in general,” applied to any language (1935: 8). Taking a pragmatic perspective on the character of language, Malinowski observed that people perform *verbal acts*,¹ or social actions, such as exchanging gifts, digging, eating, or sleeping. Most importantly, these verbal acts are embedded in a context of situation and, according to Malinowski, are significant types of human behavior. Further, from a sociological angle, Firth (1935) referred to language functions as “socially determined action” that occurs in conversation. He proposed different types of actions that can be performed through language, such as “the language of agreement, encouragement, endorsement . . . wishing, blessing, cursing, boasting, [and] the language of challenge and appeal” (p. 31). Firth’s work motivates the analysis of social action in conversation, as he observed that the study of conversation represents the “key to a better understanding of what language really is and how it works” (p. 32). In this book I examine social action in face-to-face service encounters in both transactional and non-transactional talk.

The notion of action was also studied among philosophers who were concerned with issues of the meaning of language and society. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein observed that the concept of meaning is related to the way in which language functions in communication. Words are not isolated entities, but rather actions used with different functions. Further,

¹ As I will explain in Chapter 1, the notion of *verbal act* not only mirrors Austin’s (1962) notion of *speech act* and Wittgenstein’s (1958) concept of *language-games* but, more importantly, also represents a communicative act with a speaker and an interlocutor engaged in joint conversational activity (Clark 1996).

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he noted that sentences are instruments that have roles in what he called “language-games.” He stated that “the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (1958: 11, original emphasis). He further observed that “language-games” have multiple functions or actions, such as giving orders and obeying them, describing, reporting, or speculating about an event, asking thanking, cursing, greeting, praying, etc.² According to Austin, the notion of action is reflected in the “performance of an illocutionary act” (1962: 117), which includes the securing of an uptake (e.g. an invitation–response sequence).

Following general tenets of speech act theory and Wittgenstein’s concept of “language-games,” Levinson proposed the notion of *activity type* to refer to actions as “verbal contributions” (1992: 71) that occur in social interaction. Specifically, the underlying idea of action within the “activity-type” framework is oriented toward a sociocultural context in social interactions where actions are accomplished (with specified participant roles and constraints of the situation). It is important to note that the notion of action under Levinson’s framework is linked to activity types in the following ways: the social circumstances, the discourse structure of the interaction, the participants’ roles and expectations, and the inferences that must be drawn from the activity, such as a question–answer format in classrooms, radio show interviews, and court cases. Clark (1996) used the term *joint activity* to refer to language as social action with participation of at least two interlocutors (e.g. a sales transaction). Clark’s notion of joint activity assumes that both interlocutors share *common ground* for the successful negotiation of the interaction.

Habermas (1987) adopts a pragmatic and discursive approach to the analysis of meaning through communicative acts. He noted that communication is multi-functional in that it is accomplished through *reaching understanding*, *coordinating action*, and *socializing actors* (p. 63). Habermas’ view of social action goes beyond the theory of speech acts proposed by Austin and Searle (see Chapter 1, Section 1.3.1, for a review of speech act theory). It includes communicative acts (social actions) that are coordinated by participants in mutual interaction, along with (joint) actions that are embedded in cultural knowledge, and in situated and appropriate contexts.

In this book I follow Clark’s (1996) notion of joint actions and joint activity in spoken discourse. The concept of social action will be used to refer to joint

² Albeit controversial, it can be inferred that Wittgenstein’s concept of “language-games” represents the inception of the theory of speech acts developed in the mid-1950s with the seminal work on speech acts by J. L. Austin and John Searle, two language philosophers who were concerned with meaning, use, and action (see Chapter 1, Section 1.3.1, for a review of speech act theory).