The Language of Service Encounters

Service encounters are ubiquitous in social interaction. We buy food and everyday items in supermarkets, convenience stores, or markets; we purchase merchandise in department stores; or, we request information at a visitor information center. This book offers a comprehensive account of service encounters in commercial and non-commercial settings. Grounded in naturally occurring face-to-face interactions and drawing on a pragmatic-discursive approach, J. César Félix-Brasdefer sets out a framework for the analysis of transactional and relational talk in various contexts in the United States and Mexico. The author analyzes the structure of these interactions on different pragmatic/discourse levels, including the actional (speech acts), sequential, prosodic, stylistic, and organizational levels, with particular attention to variation by gender. This book investigates cross-cultural and intra-lingual pragmatic variation during the negotiation of service. The author provides a broad review of research on service encounters to date, and analyzes characteristics of sales transactions, such as participants' roles, pragmatic and discourse functions of relational talk and address forms, the realization of politeness, and changes in alignment from transactional to relational talk.

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The Language of Service Encounters

A Pragmatic-Discursive Approach

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

I dedicate this book to my family: My wife Terri,
and my Boy Scout, *mi hijo* Gabriel.

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Transcription conventions
(Adapted from Jefferson 2004)

These are the convention transcriptions that were used in the examples.

A. Contiguous utterances

=   Equal signs indicate no breakup or gap. They are placed when there
    is no interval between adjacent utterances and the second utterance
    is linked immediately to the first.

B. Overlaps

[A left bracket indicates the point of overlap onset.
]   A right bracket indicates the point at which two overlapping
    utterances end, if they end simultaneously, or the point at which
    one of them ends during the course of the other. It is also used to
    parse out segments of overlapping utterances.

C. Intervals

( ) Parentheses indicate the time in seconds and, when placed within an
     utterance, mark intervals or pauses in the stream of talk.
−   A dash marks a short untimed pause within an utterance.

D. Characteristics of speech delivery

↑↓   The up and down arrows mark sharp rises or falls in pitch.
:   A colon marks a lengthened syllable or an extension of a sound.
::: More colons prolong a sound or syllable.
word Underlining is used to indicate some form of stress or emphasis,
     either by increased loudness or higher pitch.
.   A period marks a fall in tone.

,   A comma marks continuing intonation.
?   A question mark signals rising intonation.

E.   Other markings

(( ))   Double parentheses are used to mark the transcriber's descriptions of
            events.

Preface

Writing a book can be like running a marathon for the first time. It begins with conceptualizing the idea and making a decision to sign up for the journey (yet without a complete awareness of the sacrifice and discipline the journey will entail). It includes a training plan: researching, planning, writing, revising, and discussing the progress of the project with colleagues, students in seminars, and family. The feedback I received from each of these groups and the methods I used made me rethink my training practices, which ultimately improved the final product. The training plan involves believing in an idea that will be transformed during a long but exciting ride, although at times it may seem that the finish line is unreachable. The idea must also be developed through constant training with short and long bouts of writing, frequent revision, persistent research in order to gain strength over time, and the discipline and mental fortitude to arrive at the finish line with one's own personal record. In fact, some of the ideas presented in this book were cultivated and refined during some of my long-distance runs, which I did in preparation for the 2013 Indianapolis Monumental Marathon, USA. In a way, running a marathon is like writing about face-to-face service encounters (e.g. ordering ham at a delicatessen or asking for information at a visitor center). Like a race with runners and spectators, each encounter is seen as a process and a product between a service provider and a service seeker engaged in social *interaction*. It comprises the negotiation of *joint action* in public service settings, making choices about the transaction, renegotiating the sales transaction, and arriving at a mutual resolution. Service encounters are the result of co-constructed actions, discursive practices, and language use in context.

Attention to the genre of service encounters – economic activities negotiated between a seller and a buyer – dates back to the Middle Ages, and probably earlier.[1] These encounters were analyzed from a diachronic perspective using data from literary sales dialogues in French comic dramas in Late Medieval

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[1] See Lebsanft (1999) (and references therein) for a historical overview of service encounters in the Middle Ages.

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French by looking at bargaining practices in markets (Lebsanft 1999) and in fifteenth-century French commercial relations (Collingwood 1993). The sequential structure of sales talk was also examined in French and English between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries (Becker 2002). In the twentieth century, Mitchell (1957), adopting Malinowski's (1923) notion of context of situation, focused on the language of buying and selling in Cyrenaica (Libya), and examined the organizational structure of three types of encounters: (i) market sales transactions; (ii) market auctions; and (iii) shop transactions. In this book I focus on the synchronic dimension of the service encounter genre by looking at the language of transactional and non-transactional talk from a pragmatic-discursive perspective.

For several years, the research set forth in this book has formed the basis of conference presentations, colloquia, and seminars that I have conducted in the United States and abroad. I am grateful for the many kind comments, insightful questions, and feedback I received from my audiences. I am also thankful for the discerning and detailed comments from the anonymous reviewers at Cambridge University Press; their feedback made me rethink and revise several sections of this book. I also want to express my sincere gratitude to the wonderful and efficient editorial staff at Cambridge University Press for their professionalism and timely responses from the beginning of the review process to the proofing stage and the final production of this book. In particular, thanks to Helen Barton, Jacqueline French, Sarah Green, and Christina Sarigiannidou.

The writing of this book was made possible by support provided by Indiana University (Bloomington) through various generous grants from the Office of the Vice President for International Affairs, Office of the Vice Provost for Research, and the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. I am also indebted to the *Institute for Advanced Study* at Indiana University where I spent one semester as a Residential Fellow (Spring 2011) writing the first chapters of this book. Special thanks to the Department of Spanish and Portuguese for supporting this project in different stages.

Many people have been involved in different stages of the realization of this book. First, my gratitude goes to those who gave permission to collect data in the service encounter settings analyzed in this book: the vendors and owners of small shops and the open-air market, the staff of the visitor information center, and the managers of the supermarket delicatessens. In particular, thanks to David Rondini for his good sense of humor and support during the data collection process. Thanks to my research assistants in Mexico and the United States who helped in the transcription and analysis of the data. Thanks to Sam Tett for her careful reading of earlier versions of the manuscript. Rachel Beltzhoover, Andrew Johns, Christine White and Dannie Huang were three diligent asssistants that helped in data transcription. Connor Riley drew the

sketches of the service encounter settings. In particular, I want to express my sincere gratitude to Maureen Taylor for her willingness, graciousness, insightful questions, and detailed reading of the manuscript. Her friendship and passion for linguistics make our conversations fun, *gracias Morenita!* I am also thankful to my father-in-law who was genuinely interested in the development and content of this book. Even though he did not get to see the final outcome, I know he would have been proud to see this publication. Thanks, Al.

Finally, I am grateful to my wife and my son for their patience, encouragement, love, and support throughout the writing of this book. My Boy Scout Gabriel was my inspiration for this book: he is curious, creative, energetic, and an excellent negotiator – thus, my passion for sales transactions! I must confess that he helped in the organization and editing of the table of contents! Thanks to my wife, Terri, for listening to me talk about several sections of this book, for her invaluable feedback, her careful reading of some of the chapters, and for her moral support and encouragement during the data collection in the United States and Mexico. I often turned to her for advice when I needed clarification about the organization of the book, or discussion about some of the examples. I offer my apologies for not spending much time with Terri and Gabriel during the actual writing of the book.

Chapter 5 is a revised version from Félix-Brasdefer (2012a), which is included here with the permission of John Benjamins. Preliminary versions of these chapters were presented at various conferences in the United States and abroad, but those talks did not form part of the conference proceedings or any other publication. I am responsible for any omissions in this book.