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“Talk to the hand”. Complaints to a public transport company.

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Abstract

This paper examines the construction of complaints in service calls to a Slovenian public transport service company. The findings reveal that the construction of complaints unfolds in a step by step manner over several turns. That the complaints are explicitly initiated in the opening sections of the calls, when customers proffer the reason for the call, and before customers' details are established, is indicative of their high priority. After the facts and details of the complaints are discussed, the agent either offers, or does not offer, a solution; and, at this point, the call is brought to a close. Face manifestations were observed throughout the complaint sequences, as evidenced by the incidence of extreme case formulations, negative observations, threats, insults and non-affiliation with the complainant. The findings also suggest that the ways in which institutional agents manage the complaints reflects company's business practices affected by numerous bureaucratic barriers.

Keywords: Complaints; customer-service; face-work strategies; institutional interaction.

1. Introduction

Complaints about service provision are ubiquitous, whether they are manifested directly to the service provider or to a third party. Managing service complaints is a potentially delicate matter as admission of fault or blame by the organisation can, at least in some cultures, result in financial and legal costs, such as those related to customer compensation and litigation. Besides the financial and legal implications that service complaints may involve, institutional agents have to deal interpersonally with dissatisfied or angry customers and they are often provided with few, if any, resources to appease them; this is precisely the case with the agents in the calls examined in this study.

The goals of the participants of these calls, that is, of the institutional agents working at the call centre of a Slovenian transport service company and of its customers, do not coincide with one another. On the one hand, customers want to obtain compensation or some sort of remedial action (Goffman, 1976) for the inconvenience experienced; on the other hand, the agents may not always have the authority or competence to satisfy these customer demands so, in most cases, they are compelled to forward the complaint to a particular department for further inspection.

The public transport company where the data for this study were gathered has a very long history. Apart from the more traditional face-to-face over the counter passenger transport services, the company also operationalises some of its services via a call centre. One department of the call centre is responsible for providing transport information and the other for dealing with complaints. Recently, the call centre has been equipped with state-of-the-art technology, for example, the automatic answering machine and a voice-mail function. Thus, data from the voice mail system and recorded conversations can be accessed through a user interface which automatically records and saves all content in digital form. The data can then be accessed and forwarded to supervisors, among others (Uršič, 2009). The recent move towards modernisation of this company is also evidenced in the advertising of special offers on Facebook, where people can enquire about itineraries or comment on aspects of the company's services. The company is state owned, with a highly bureaucratised corporate structure, which is frequently criticised as inefficient, as is the case with many public, state-owned companies and institutions in Slovenia. On the one hand, there is the technological obsolescence and inflexibility of the company. On the other, there is a multitude of regulations which, instead of being completely revamped and modernised, have been continuously added to and 'botched up'. The company also enjoys a monopoly that offers cheap forms of public transport. Given that the product they offer is poor relative to some other transport services on the market and given too that national resources are in general constrained, the company and the wider public are aware that it is skating on thin ice and that a complete restructuring is only a matter of time. The agents have, thus, the difficult job of acting as representatives of a "modern", yet rigid and bureaucratised, business system that simply cannot provide them with complete autonomy in their work.

The participants of the calls examined here, are a complainant, for example, the customer who telephones the company, and the complaint recipient, that is, the institutional agent who takes the calls and talks to the complainants.¹ Naturally, complainants expect their side of the story to be taken into account and balanced against the company's business policy so that a solution can be offered. Customers can lodge their complaints by telephoning the company's call centre and speaking to the agent in charge of dealing with complaints or with any other pressing issues, such as lost or stolen tickets; by sending an e-mail to the same praise and complaints department; or by writing down their comments in a book of praise and complaints found at every train station nationwide. According to the company, the book is reviewed on a daily basis by the Head of Personnel of a particular train station.² In those cases where a child, say, a secondary school pupil, or a young adult, as in a university student, is involved in the complaint, it is customary for the next of kin to lodge the complaint³, as is the case in Conversation 1 below.

To our knowledge, no previous research has been conducted into complaints, either in written or spoken form in Slovenian, and the body of research into language use in institutional contexts (cf. Novak, 1980, on the use of Slovenian in administration, and Kalin Golob, 2003, on the functional features of memorandums in Slovenian) is relatively small. It is hoped that this examination of complaints that employ authentic, natural spoken data will provide knowledge about the construction of complaints in contemporary Slovenia. Given the nature of the complaining activity, the vulnerability of one or both of the participants' face is likely to be manifested. Therefore, this article also explores the ways in which face is interactionally manifested, thereby providing the first treatment of face in Slovenian.

2. Complaints

Trosborg (1995: 311) defines a complaint as an illocutionary act in which the complainant expresses disapproval, negative feelings, and so on, towards the state of affairs described in the proposition, in this case, the complainable, and for which he or she holds the complaint recipient responsible, either directly or indirectly. Complaints can be classified as indirect, in which case the complainant complains to the addressee about an absent party, something or someone, and as direct, when the target of the complaint is also the recipient (Pomerantz, 1986); this is the case of the complaints examined in this article, where the telephone agent becomes the complaint recipient by virtue of his or her role as institutional representative. Broadly speaking, to complain is to report, directly to someone who is responsible for the complainable action, a particular problem that has already occurred, or to report it indirectly to a third party; the aim of the complaint is to express a sense of dissatisfaction or unfairness. In this respect, complaints are retrospective acts as the complainant centres on a negative experience of a past action or event (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1993; Trosborg, 1995). However, complaints may also be seen as prospective acts in that, by wishing to receive some rectification or remedial action (financial, tangible or intangible),⁴ the complainant attempts to influence the behaviour of others (Trosborg, 1995).

Conversation analysts have shown that unlike other activities which are typically structured by the turn-by-turn organisation of talk, complaining generally encompasses extended sequences similar to other long sequences, such as troubles- and story-tellings (Sacks et al., 1974; Traverso, 2009), and during which a problem that is discussed typically expresses moral judgments (Drew, 1998). In a setting where complaints are being managed professionally, like the ones examined here, complainants aim not only to pass a moral judgement but also to make, either implicitly or explicitly, a request for repair (Márquez-Reiter, 2005). Through stories, tellers communicate their stance toward what they are reporting (Stivers, 2008) with a view to getting the listener to affiliate with the complaint. Complaints have thus been found to be jointly constructed as participants take on the roles of story-tellers and story-recipients (Heinemann, 2009: 2441). In more problematic cases of disaffiliative responses, however, the lack of affiliation of the story-recipient towards the story-teller has been reported to trigger the storyteller's expansion and the re-doing of displays of affectivity (Selting, 2010: 271). Affectivity (anger, frustration, disappointment, blame), whether explicitly mentioned by the complainant or not, may also be inferred from the prosodic

¹ According to the company, there is only one person employed to deal with complaints over the telephone.

² 60 percent of complaints are lodged via e-mail, 20 percent over the telephone and 20 percent are written down in the book of praise and complaints at stations (Uršič, 2011).

³ While this behaviour may sound odd in other cultures, it reflects the importance of close family ties in Slovenia (Ule and Kuhar, 2008).

⁴ For Stauss and Seidel (2004: 103), tangible compensation entails exchange and/or repair; whereas intangible compensation refers to an explanation or apology.

features, such as tone of voice, speed of voice, intonation or voice rhythm, of the complaint and can play a very important role in an interaction (Schwarz-Friesel, 2007). Solomon (2003) argues that emotions are intense evaluative judgements by virtue of which an angry person, for example, can evaluate the perceived offence based on appropriateness or inappropriateness to a specific situation.

Studies of complaints in institutional settings (Laforest, 2009; Ruusuvuori and Lindfors, 2009; Traverso, 2009; Vöge, 2010) have shown that complaint sequences tend to be longer and to develop step by step, and that the boundaries between adjacency pairs appear to be fluid. More specifically, Heinemann (2009) and Ruusuvuori and Lindfors (2009) studies of indirect complaints in health care settings have shown that health professionals ward off complaints about their colleagues, but at the same time embrace complaints about their clients or competing forms of health care (homoeopathy vs. general practice). Complaints were found to be designed as discreet and embedded in the problem presentation so as to account for the reason to see a doctor or for the choice of treatment. Although patients did not force doctors into affiliating with their complaint about previous treatments, this strategy revealed that the main institutional activity is in fact accompanied by other implicit projects had they been noticed and elaborated by the recipient (Ruusuvuori and Lindfors, 2009). In studying direct complaints in calls to the ambulance emergency service, Monzoni (2009) found that the social roles of the interactants influence how a complaint is received by the co-participants. By examining negatively framed questions, she showed that complaints were typically responded to with not-at-fault denials, which means that complaint targets admitted that the complained-of-action had taken place, but will at the same time, refused to be held responsible for its occurrence and instead either shifted responsibility to third parties or made a relevant distinction between the responsibility of the institution and their own responsibility (Monzoni, 2009: 2470).

In a similar vein, though working primarily from a speech act perspective, Márquez-Reiter (2005) investigated the pragmatic strategies employed by Uruguayan caregiver service providers and their customers. She showed that the callers (clients or their next of kin) construct their complaints by giving 'factual' and socio-emotional accounts of their personal circumstances to appeal to the call-taker's sense of solidarity and to increase, thus, their chances of achieving their transactional goal. In a primarily transactional setting, a form of relational communication, *desahogo*, was observed. This took the form of a type of a socioemotional account, a form of self-disclosure, through which callers volunteer rather private information about themselves or their next of kin or both. This occurred most frequently at a point in the interactions when callers realise that their goal is unattainable, thus it reflects a need to be listened to even if they sense that a solution to their problems will not be found. The behaviour of the call-takers, however, was found to be non-affiliative and depersonalised, reflected in the discursive asymmetry deliberately created by them in order to de-legitimise the callers' claims (Márquez-Reiter, 2005: 510) and deny them any remedial action.

The non-affiliative behaviour of institutional representatives should not come as surprise in these settings, given the financial repercussions that an admission of fault might bring. In customer service encounters, institutional representatives are trained not to affiliate with customers' complaints, despite the fact that the complaints may be rightfully brought to the attention of the company. One of the rules of behaviour for the direct conversation with complainants as posited by Stauss and Seidel (2004: 94) is that, while showing sensitiveness toward the customer, employees should avoid admissions of guilt or assignments of guilt to other employees in the company. In this respect, agents are constrained by institutional restrictions and orient their behaviour to them, as evidenced in their refusal to affiliate with the complaint, and as is the case in the conversational excerpts examined here.

Complaints and their impact on business operations have also been studied extensively from a consumer research and customer relationship management viewpoint (Stauss and Seidel, 2004; East, 2000), where their influence on customer service quality and company success was investigated and the rules of behaviour in complaint management were laid down. The rules of behaviour for the direct conversation with complainants are thus presented in five typical phases of a complaint conversation: the greeting phase, the aggression-reduction phase, conflict-settlement phase, the problem-solution phase and the conclusive phase. Although they provide some useful tips on the way complaints should be managed, they are too general and vague and may serve only as guidelines for the agents. In other words, each complaint is different and calls for a tailored approach that develops throughout the interaction, that is, from the opening to the closing of the conversation.

Complaints as face-threatening acts

Complaints include expressions of disapproval, criticism, and displays of (uncontrolled) negative emotions so, for Brown and Levinson (1987), they are face-threatening in as much as such expressions and emotions threaten or challenge the hearer's or addressee's positive or negative face wants. However, in complaint service encounters, like the ones examined here, callers play the role of (dissatisfied) customers and, as such, assume they are entitled to lodge complaints to the institutional representatives, who are expected to deal with them because of their ascribed role. In this setting, therefore, the agents have to save their own personal face from what they regard as personal attacks and, above all the face of their customers. Complaints are thus conflictive in that they may threaten the participants' social equilibrium' (Leech, 1983) particularly when the complaints are direct. According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 61), complaints are face-threatening acts (FTAs) that jeopardise the negative face, the want to be independent and free from imposition, and the positive face (the want to be approved of and liked), of the addressee and, to a certain extent, the positive and negative face of the complainant, who may not wish to be seen as a person who troubles people with their problems (Márquez-Reiter, 2005: 484). A complaint threatens, therefore, the complaint recipient's positive face in that it indicates that the complainant's expectations have not been met; this may be articulated through criticism, expressions of emotions or even insults. The complaint recipient's negative face may be threatened in those cases where the complainant issues orders or threats. By the same token, the complainant's positive face wants may be threatened in the case of uncontrolled emotions, or if the complaint is warded off or ignored as, for instance, when the agent refuses to affiliate with it (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 65-68).

In this study, Brown and Levinson's (1987) distinction between positive and negative face is applied to examine relevant service complaints, where, it becomes clear, verbal attacks against the institutional representative are frequent. It is important to note that the participants have not met prior to the telephone encounters analysed and that it is highly unlikely that they will meet again in the future so the building of a relationship is beyond their remit or interest. Brown and Levinson's theory (1987) assumes that interlocutors will co-operate in maintaining each other's face, that is, by using indirect, mitigating devices. In settings where complaints are dealt with professionally, however, the agent must assume that face-threats to their institutional face will be made, just as the customers are likely to assume that, in the light of their grievances, they have the right to threaten the agent's institutional face. The institutional face here is the professional persona through which the company presents itself to the public. This face is on loan to the agent from the company and may be withdrawn, should the agent not conduct herself "in a way that is worthy of it" (Goffman, 1967: 10). Apart from protecting his or her own institutional face, the agent's job is to maintain, too, the face of his or her work-colleagues towards whom a complaint may be directed as, in so doing, he or she is helping to protect that of the institution.

Given the nature of the setting investigated, Brown and Levinson's dualistic face model facilitates the analysis of these primarily task-oriented interactions as the complainant is not concerned about what the agent may think of him or her nor interested in forming and sustaining a relationship (Arundale, 2006); rather, his or her main goal is to find a solution to the trouble and/or obtain remedial action. The company, however, has the primary objective of maintaining a positive image. The role of the institutional agent is thus to achieve this objective and, above all, to save the face of the company and, moreover, to do this with no financial cost to the company or as little as possible. Although Arundale's Face Constituting Theory (2006, 2009, 2010), where the analytical focus has moved to the relationship between the participants, offers a real alternative to Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, the latter sits better with an interactional approach such as the one taken here, allowing us to examine how face may be threatened, saved or maintained, rather than how participants interpret their relationship with each other (Arundale, 2006, 2009, 2010). Namely, their range of interpretations of each other's utterances is much smaller or fixed given that these are primarily transactional interactions between disappointed customers (complainants) with more or less clear intentions and the representative of a highly bureaucratized company that enjoys a monopoly⁵, and not interactions in which the maintenance of good business relations is important (cf. Chang and Haugh, 2011), therefore, the relational aspect is not necessarily salient. In these temporary, non-recurring interactions, the relationship between the customer and the company is, in a sense, influenced by the participants' potentially conflicting and threatening goals (i.e. to complain about a service and to deal with complaints, respectively) and by the way in which the company primarily manages customer relationships (i.e. via the operationalization of a call centre and/or by electronic communication).

The complaints examined in this study are communicated verbally through the telephone channel directly to the department of the call centre which deals specifically with praise and complaints. In this

⁵ Therefore, the roles they adopted are not entirely symmetrical.

institutional context, complaining about the service received is targeted at the institutional representative, the complaint recipient, and is always made explicit. According to Brown and Levinson's distinction between positive and negative face, by complaining to the company representative about an employee who is reputedly responsible for a perceived offence, or by expressing disapproval and criticism about the service received, the complainant threatens the agent's institutional positive face, as it indicates that the complainant's wishes or expectations did not correspond to the services received. Similarly, trying to get the agent to agree with the complaint threatens the complainant's positive face as the agent might, for instance, index disaffiliation with the caller's complaint in order to disagree with or potentially reject it. Frequently, complaints about a past event require the complainant to engage in details which may impinge on their negative face wants, namely, the need for privacy and distance from others, as is the case in Conversation 2, when the customer discloses sensitive information about her travel.

This study examines two telephone conversations where the customers lodge a complaint, that is, they express negative feelings, discontent, anger or even frustration, to an institutional representative. The complaints are directed at the service received or at the past behaviour of a person who carried out, or participated in, the service. The complainants feel that the service provided by the company has in some way failed to meet his or her expectations as a customer.

3. Background and methodology

The two calls examined here were recorded, in October 2009, by the transport company as part of their quality control procedures and in the context of their service modernisation, whereby recordings can, in theory, be used to make the company accountable. Both calls reported were chosen from a corpus of twenty complaint calls (approximately five hours of data), in which customers, their travel companions, and their next of kin or both (see Conversation 1 below) telephone the praise and complaints department of the call centre, to articulate their dissatisfaction with the service received. Although they are not as numerous, some calls are also placed by the agents to follow up a complaint previously lodged by a customer. Permission was granted by the company to use the recordings, provided the names of the customers remain undisclosed. In view of this, pseudonyms are used for all participants and names of places have been altered. The conversational excerpts analysed represent two complaint calls and provide a glimpse of the activities that participants engage in to complain, in Slovenian, about services received. To the best of our knowledge, this aspect of Slovenian pragmatics has not yet received any attention.

In the data, two types of complaints have been identified, *pritožba* and *reklamacija*, both translated into English as complaint. The Dictionary of Standard Slovenian (1998) defines *pritožba* as “a (written) statement in which discontent or dissatisfaction, resulting from the inappropriateness or inadequateness of something, is expressed to some person (in charge)”; whereas *reklamacija* is defined as “a report or statement against a manufacturer or retailer to the effect that something (a product or a service) does not have the desired qualities” (*ibid*) and can be used only in an institutional or business context. Hence, *pritožba* is not necessarily *reklamacija*, whereas *reklamacija* is always *pritožba*. If someone complains, it means that their expectations regarding something have not been met. For this reason, and with a view to changing the unfavourable situation, they communicate their discontent to someone who, they believe, is responsible for the unsatisfactory state of affairs. While both expressions are used with the same meaning as complaint in English, at the semantic level, the term *reklamacija* also incorporates the connotation or implication of a request in as much as, in this case, some remedial action in the form of compensation (refund, credit, and so on) would be appropriate. The implied request can also be made explicit by the complainant, as evidenced in Conversation 1 line 4 below. Here the complainant explains that he is telephoning to make a *reklamacija* rather than *pritožba*.

In a recent article published in the company's magazine, the new and modernised call centre of the company is promoted and advertised, with the aim of improving quality and providing a user-friendly public railway transport service (Uršič, 2009). In this way, the company, which is state owned and offers a public service, can measure customer (dis)satisfaction on an annual basis. This is also in line with Article 17 of the Decree on General Administrative Operations (UUP or Decree, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia nos. 20/2005, 106/2005, 30/2005, 86/2006, 32/2007, 63/2007), which stipulates that, as of 2001, the public administration bodies must assess customer satisfaction by carrying out opinion polls on an annual basis. Moreover, as the company is a public sector company, issues arising from complaints must be studied and appropriate corrective measures taken for each individual case. Furthermore, Article 15 of the same Decree also states that each public administration body must provide a book of praise and complaints for their customers and this should be reviewed on a weekly basis.

Accordingly, passengers can file their complaints in writing by filling in a special form and handing it in at the corresponding railway station, by writing their comments in a book of praise and complaints, by sending an e-mail, fax or a letter of complaint directly to the company, or orally by calling the company's call centre. In December 2009, the rights and obligations of passengers were published on the company's website in an updated form and have, since then, been promoted through posters displayed at train stations nationwide. As this study focuses on the telephone service complaints, the next paragraph sheds light on the call centre context.

From 2009 and up until now, there has been one person employed in the praise and complaints department of the call centre, and she is directly responsible for receiving customer complaints. The equipment used displays the telephone number of the caller, provided the number is not withheld, and records the conversations. Thus, the institutional agent does not need to write down the complainant's details or what he or she is saying and can, in theory at any rate, focus fully on the contents of the telephone conversation. The caller, in this case the customer who telephones the call centre, is first greeted by an automated answer to the summons (Schegloff, 2007), which also informs them that their call is being recorded. In the case of calls made to the praise and complaints department, the automated answer to the summons represents the first contact the customer has with the company and this, then, works as the first sequence in an episode of interaction (Schegloff, 2007). If the institutional agents are occupied or unavailable, the voice-mail function is automatically initiated, allowing the caller, in this case the customer or his or her representative, to leave a message instead. All data from the voice mail system, recorded conversations and other data, can be accessed through a user interface which enables the content of each call to be automatically recorded and saved in digital form. The programme should thus enable the centralised management of queries and of data management, for example, the forwarding of data to supervisors, informing customers of the outcome of their query, and so on (Uršič, 2009).

The analysis draws on Goffman's (1967) notion of face and on Brown and Levinson's (1987) distinction between positive and negative face, as discussed above, and incorporates techniques from Conversation Analysis into what is best described as interaction analysis (cf. Márquez Reiter, 2011).

4. Discussion

The data for this study consists of two calls received in the first week of October 2009 to the company's call centre. This particular department, which deals with complaints, is legally bound to respond to each and every request lodged.

In settings where the interlocutors do not know each other, they are likely to choose linguistic means which reflect the appropriate degree of formality and social distance between them. The call centre department investigated in this study is a state institution where it is expected that generally applicable rules, including those relevant to forms of address, will be observed. Accordingly, both agent and caller are likely to choose the formal form of address *vi* (third person plural) in preference to the informal form *ti* (second person singular). The call centre is located in the capital city of Ljubljana; the language used by the agent is mostly standard Slovenian tinged with aspects of a local dialect. Although grammatically it is considered incorrect, the use, in this dialect, of the non-standard form (*polvikanje*) – a hybrid of the formal and informal forms of address, which comprises the plural pronoun and singular verb – is widespread and can be heard frequently in interviews and public media despite heavy criticisms of its use. The main distinction lies in the fact that in formal forms of address, the gender of the addressee is hidden, whereas the non-standard hybrid form provides gender information, as well as number, in the verb ending (*če boste kontaktirala* - "If you contact": *you* is in plural, the verb, *contact*, is in singular feminine). This may help to explain its widespread use as it gives participants the feeling that their relationship is less formal and that their identities, at least their gender ones, are being taken into account. At the same time, it could be argued that the agent uses the hybrid form of address so as to reduce the social distance between the speakers by being slightly informal to show solidarity in this conflictive situation.

The analysis first starts by examining where in the telephone conversations complaints are projected or initiated and what strategies are used to warn the institutional agent that a complaint is forthcoming. Bearing in mind that this department of call centre deals primarily with complaints as praise calls are rare, it follows that complaints are the main goal of most of the calls made or received. All calls from the corpus are made either by the complainants to the call centre or, in rare cases, by the agent to a customer who had lodged a complaint prior to the returned call. In the case of calls being made to the call centre, complaints are initiated in the opening section of the call when the callers proffer their reason for the call, as illustrated in Conversation 1 below. In the case of the agent returning a call, a complaint is introduced

immediately after the answerer identifies the reason for the call, as observed in Conversation 2 below. Often, complaints regarding a service require involvement of other company units. In such cases, complaints are forwarded to the relevant departments and, in collaboration with them, a reply is produced and subsequently forwarded to the complainant.

Conversation 1

In Conversation 1, a father is calling the call centre on behalf of his son to complain about his son being charged for a printed receipt for a monthly-fare ticket in order to apply for a scholarship.

Following a summons-specific answer by the agent at line 1, the caller, at line 2, greets the agent uttering *Dobe::r dan* and immediately provides his self-identification, revealing his full name and location. Although *dober dan* is not an uncommon greeting, it signals a rather large social distance between interlocutors. It is a formal greeting commonly used in institutional settings. People who know each other do not use *dober dan* to greet one another. The agent also responds with *dober dan* at line 3. And at line 4, at the first available opportunity, the caller issues his complaint.

A= Agent

C = Complainant

- 1 A Prosi:m
2 C Em (.) dober dan želim (.) Janez Novak pri telefonu iz Kranja
3 A Dober dan
4 C Sem: poklical na centralo oziroma na podjetje pa so mi svetoval naj tole: številko pokličem (.) čeprav ni pohvala (.) ni pritožba (.) je pa reklamacija.
5 (1)
6
7 A °°uh huh°°
8 C Erm pogledajte (.) sin je potreboval za stipendijo (1) višino:: mesečne vozovnice: hhhh: iz Kranja do Ljubljane (1) in so mu ta podatek ki izvira iz vaše tarife↑ zaračunal pet evrov in jih je tud mogu plačat. (1) Takšna (.) takšen znesek ni le oderušk ampak je tud nesramno visok. ((mirno in neodobravajoče))
9
10 (2)
11
12 A °°uh huh°°
13 (2)
14 C ((Zakašlja)) sem reku da se bom obrnu na vas (.) torej pričakujemo eno pojasnilo zaka:j je to tko visoka cena (0.5) za to storitev (.) sicer se bom pa potem kasnej če ne bom zadovoljen z odgovorom tut obrnil na pristojne inšpekcije al kogarkoli (.) kr tko pa ne morem dovolit (.) da si kr vsak zmišljuje za v bistvu nč dela zaračunat tko visok znesek (.) kot je v konkretnem primeru zaračunan blo pet evrov za potrdilo o ceni (.) gor piše na računu K štiriindvajset A (.) to meni sicer nič ne pomen.
15
16
17
18
19 A Uh huh
20 (2)
21 A Erm (.) glejte (.) bom jaz erm:: samo govorila z eno kolegico (.) a ne (.) ki več ve o tem (.) pa vam bom potem dala pojasnilo vas pokličem po telefonu↑ (.) ali vas vam napišem kr mogoče po elektronski pošti:
22
[...]
23 C Je pa blo to zaračunan tridesetga devetga to se prav dans ob devet štiriinpetdeseti uri na postaji v Kranju↑ (1) piše pa gor potrdilo o ceni K:: pomišljaj štiriindvajst a: (.) številka tega potrdila je 3520 erm:: zne::sek ki je bil pa zaračunan je pa pe::t evrov.
24
25 A Uh huh
26 C Torej to je za eno uro dela:: ki ga zaračuna en dohter.
27 (1)
28 A Uh huh in to je blo potem erm:: vozovnica pa bi bla recimo izdana (.) želeli ste potrdilo za kakšno relacijo?
29 C Za mesečno [vozovnjico za relacijo Kranj-Ljubljana.
30
31 A [uh huh] Uh huh
32 (2)
33 C A se vam ne zdi (.) da je to previsok?
34 A Em (.) glejte mi smo se že o tem že večkrat še nazaj pogovarjal (.) kaj se tega tiče (.) mislim (.) da je to ena taka enotna cena em:: zaradi tega ne glede na to v bistvu kolk potem stane ena vozo[vnica]
35
36 [sej ni] važn kolk vozovnica stane ampak a veste=
37 A =Ja
38 C Pet evrov je pa prehudo (.) ne (.) za izpisek iz vaše tarife
39 A Ja ja ((ravnodušno))
40 C Kr tolk je (.) ne
41 A Uh huh
42 C Pet evrov se mi zdi pa tko hudo in lejte (1) verjetn z vašim odgovorm ne bom bil zadovoljen (.) verjetn da ne (.) ne?
43 A Uh huh
44 C In se bom potem obrnu tud na inšpekcijo in seveda tud na novinarje in še na m-marsikoga

66 A Uh huh
 67 C Zato bi prosu (.) da o tem seznante vaše nadrejene
 68 A Uh huh
 69 C In naj oni to potuhtajo (.) kaj bodo nardil
 70 A Uh huh
 71 C Ker pet evrov za eno potrdilo je pa res ode:ruško (.) glede na to da gre za državno podjetje (.) poleg tega da
 72 plačamo usluge (.) financirajo tudi iz davkov (.) ki jih pač odvajamo državljeni (.) ne?
 73 A Uh huh
 74 (2)
 75 C Saj me zastopte.
 76 A Ja ja (.) v redu gospod (.) glejte: bomo vam mi dali odgovor (.) a ne (.) erm::: upam da čim prej (.) no bomo se
 77 potrudl (.) da čim prej
 78 C Ja ja hvala lepa
 79 A Hvala tudi vam (.) nasvidenje
 80 C Srečno

Translation

1 A Hello:
 2 C Em (.) good afternoon (.) Janez Novak from Kranj speaking
 3 A Good afternoon
 4 C I: rang the company's headquarters and they told me to telephone thi:s number (.) although this is not a
 5 compliment (.) a complaint (.) but a reklamacija
 6 (1)
 7 A °°uh huh°°
 8 C Erm look (.) my son needed for his scholarship (1) the pri::ce of a monthly ti:cket hhhh: from Kranj to
 9 Ljubljana (1) and for this data which is taken from your tariff↑ he was charged five Euros and also had to pay
 10 them (1) Such (.) such an amount is not only usurious but unheard-of expensive. ((calm and disapprovingly))
 11 (2)
 12 A °°uh huh°°
 13 (2)
 14 C ((Cough)) I said I will turn to you (.) so we expect an explanation why: the price for this service (.) is so high
 15 (0.5) or I will if I am not satisfied with your answer later also turn to relevant inspectorates or anyone (.)
 16 because I cannot let anyone (.) to just make up such a high amount for basically having done no work (.) as is
 17 the case in point where a charge of five Euros was made for a receipt (.) it says on the receipt K twenty four A
 18 (.) this doesn't mean anything to me.
 19 A Uh huh
 20 (2)
 21 Erm (.) look (.) I will just erm:: speak with a colleague (.) right (.) who knows more about this (.) and I will
 22 then give you an explanation or I will call you on the phone↑ (.) or should I just reply in an ema:il maybe
 [...]
 43 C This was charged on thirtieth ninth that is today at nine fifty four at the station in Kranj↑ (1) it says on it a
 44 receipt about the price K:: dash twenty four a: (.) the number of the receipt is 3520 er:: the amou::nt charged
 45 was fi::ve Euros.
 46 A uh huh
 47 C This is actually for an hour of wo::rk that a doctor charges.
 48 (1)
 49 A Uh huh and that was then erm:: the ticket would be issued (.) you wanted an excerpt for what route?
 50 C For a monthly [ticke]t for the route Kranj-Ljubljana
 51 A [uh huh]
 52 (2)
 53 C Don't you think (.) that this is too expensive?
 54 A Em (.) look we have talked about this many times in the past (.) concerning this (.) I believe (.) this is such a
 55 defined price em:: that is why regardless of this actually how much is then the
 56 f[are]
 57 C [it doe]sn't matter how much the fare is but you know=
 58 A =yes
 59 C Five Euros is too much (.) right (.) for a printed receipt from your tariff
 60 A Yes yes ((nonchalant manner))
 61 C Cause that's how much it is (.) right
 62 A Uh huh
 63 C Five Euros is so bad and look (1) I probably won't be satisfied with your answer (.) probably not (.) right?
 64 A Uh huh
 65 C And I will then also turn to an inspectorate and also the media and m-many others
 66 A Uh huh
 67 C So I would like to ask you (.) to inform your supervisors about this
 68 A Uh huh
 69 C And they should figure out (.) what they will do
 70 A Uh huh

71 C Because five Euros for a single receipt is truly usurious (.) bearing in mind that this is a state owned company
 72 (.) that we pay for your services (.) finance from taxes that are paid by the citizens (.) right?
 73 A Uh huh
 74 (2)
 75 C You get me right.
 76 A Yes yes (.) okay sir (.) look (.) we will send you an explanation (.) right (.) erm:::: I hope as soon as possible
 77 (.) we will try to reply (.) well as soon as possible
 78 C Yes yes thank you very much
 79 A Thank you (.) goodbye
 80 C Goodbye

At line 4, the caller first reveals that he has already contacted the company's headquarters and was instructed to contact directly the compliments and complaints department, the official section for compliments and complaints (Uršič, 2009). Once the task of identification is achieved and the participants can proceed to the business at hand, the caller offers, at the anchor position, the reason for the call, in this case a *reklamacija* concerning the cost of obtaining a receipt. That the caller uses the term *reklamacija* rather than a complaint (*pritožba*) or a compliment (*pohvala*) at lines 4-5 results from his initial contact with the company's headquarters, where he was advised to directly contact the *Section for compliments and complaints*⁶ (see line 4) indicating that it is neither of the two. This is made evident, when he utters "although" ("although this is not a compliment, a complaint, but a *reklamacija*"). By explicitly categorizing his complaint as *reklamacija*, he aims to emphasize the urgency of the matter and his perceived entitlement to immediate reimbursement by the company. It also reflects institutionality as, in everyday talk, the complaint activity of *reklamacija* or *pritožba* would not be possible. That the reason for the call was proffered at the first available opportunity demonstrates the task-oriented nature of the call, that is, the complainant's wish to receive reimbursement for the service that his son had to pay for. This is also evidenced in the packaging of the complaint when the caller makes explicit the fact that he is telephoning to make a *reklamacija* and not to lodge a complaint or praise the company for its service. In addition, the use of reported speech (Holt, 1996) at line 4 gives further weight to the claim (*reklamacija*) as the caller has allegedly been referred by the company's headquarters. This thus shows that he might be within his rights to make the claim and that he is following the due process.

A short pause at line 6 signals the uncertainty of both speakers as to who should take over the conversational floor as observed at line 7 by the agent uttering *uh huh* in softer speech. In doing so, he gives the caller a "go-ahead" response (Schegloff, 2007) and allows the complainant to introduce the troublesome issue. She thus accepts the opening of a complaint sequence. The caller continues and gives an explanation of the complainable at lines 8-10, where he summarises briefly what actually happened, thus implicitly demanding remedial action by expressing his belief that accessing ticket information should be a free service and that they should pay him back the five Euros his son had to spend. What's more, five Euros to him sounds like an extortionate amount of money given that, as far as he knows, nobody had to do any work to produce it. What follows at lines 9-10 is the continuation of the complainable with heightened affectivity. He does this by criticising the company for charging way too much for a specific service, using adjectives such as *usurious* and *unheard-of expensive* to intensify his negative stance and express anger and criticism. By qualifying the action as *usurious* and unbelievably expensive, he implies that this institution, which the agent represents, behaves in an irregular manner, taking advantage of its customers' needs. Through criticism, he threatens the agent's positive institutional face, the want to be approved of. Through lexical means, the complainant explicitly expresses his emotions of anger. Having heard the reason for the complaint, the institutional agent pauses for two seconds before responding to the complainant's utterances with a minimal acknowledgment *uh huh* (line 12); this also functions as a continuer, allowing the complainant to develop the complaint even further.

At lines 14-15, the complainant continues first by uttering a direct request using the inclusive *we* "we expect an explanation why the price for this service is so high". The reason the caller uses *we* instead of *I* may lie in the fact that, as a father, he is also the head of the family, and as such is normally responsible for its finances. In addition, the use of "we" gives more weight to the complaint in as much as it indicates that more than one person is involved.

At lines 15-16, the complainant explicitly utters a conditional verbal threat, which in its essence is an implicit challenge to the agent's capacity to provide an answer, i.e. an explanation and ideally a refund. "A verbal threat constitutes a linguistic strategy that is used to manipulate, or even coerce, the addressee into (not) doing something which has an undesirable outcome for him/her" (Limberg, 2009: 1378). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), threats are intrinsically face-threatening acts, posing a threat to

⁶ This is the official name of the department.

both positive and negative face. At lines 15-16, therefore, the explicit threat may be interpreted as one which is posed to the agent's negative face, it can, however, be understood as complainant's implicit attempt to challenge the company's rigorous regulations by attacking the agent's professional face. At the same time, this "strategy" also threatens the complainant's positive face as it is neither reacted to nor complied with so there is the risk that the complainant's goal will not be achieved. Furthermore, at lines 16-17, the complainant, on asserting that he simply cannot countenance that companies charge such amounts of money without having done any work for it, creates an agent-versus-customers situation where the customers have to endure the unfairness of the company. What follows in lines 23-42, which is not included in the analysis, is a provision of personal contact information by the complainant so that the agent can inform him via email about the outcome of his complaint upon discussing the issue with her superior (see lines 21- 22).

At line 43, the complainant provides detailed information about the receipt and how much it was charged including exactly when and where this took place. In doing so, he uses the passive voice, distancing or removing his son from the subject of the topic with the objective to emphasize his own role as a father. At line 47, he further manifests his outrage about the price of the service by using the strategy of contrast, in this case, with doctors, who are traditionally respected members of society with a highly regarded role in the community. In arguing that the cost of the service rendered by the company corresponds to what a doctor charges for an hour's work, the complainant displays further heightening of his affectivity. This strategy may be viewed as a persuasive strategy to get the agent to align with the complaint as, in the eyes of the general public, doctors' services are very expensive. It would then follow that charging the same as a doctor for a receipt is extortionate. By the same token, this argument may be perceived as an offence, in as much as it suggests that the service provided is worth very little. At line 53, after a pause of approximately two seconds, the complainant re-designs his question, which the agent has so far ignored, as a request for confirmation of his belief, thus seeking affiliation. In the case of a *yes/no interrogative* (Schegloff, 2007), "yes", here, would be the preferred response as it manifests affiliation with the complainant, whereas "no" would be a dispreferred response and might call for the agent's detailed explanation or personal opinion regarding the complainable. Instead, the agent produces a non-conforming format (Schegloff, 2007: 79) which does not include a "no" yet it still disaligns with the customer's question. Although the caller's complaint is explicit, the agent's response is neutral, as she transforms a "no" into a general and neutral statement, thus disaligning with the issue posed in the question and attempting to maintain a positive face, which further angers the complainant. Taking into account that it is expected from the agent that her answers and justifications be neutrally framed, at lines 54-55 she starts producing an explanation regarding this sensitive information, explaining that complaints regarding this issue have been lodged in the past "Em, look we have talked about this many times in the past" and she attempts to explain that the price for this service is fixed and that there is nothing she can do. This statement explains her reaction at lines 11-13, when the caller introduces the topic of the complaint. The pauses at lines 11 and 13 indicate the agent's realization about the type of a complaint, which arguably influenced her subsequent defensive behaviour. The tokens *Em, look* and *em::* signal the agent's reservation rather than disagreement with the complainable. The agent shows that she is subordinated to authority in more ways than one. She is aware of the fact that, given that this is a public transport company regulated by the state, the price is predefined with a regulation that will probably not be amended in the near future. Although she might agree with the customer and might also understand his anger, her role as an institutional representative restrains her from affiliating with the complainant. Thus, the only recourse she has is defensive behaviour, in order to avoid conflict at any price. She resorts, therefore, to the use of acknowledgements in soft speech and with reservation or procrastination by claiming she needs to talk to a colleague who is more experienced (see lines 21-22). Arguably, her own face might also be threatened as, with her reaction to the caller's complaint, she is running the risk of further angering the caller. Her lack of affiliation and a poor explanation leads the caller to expand and repeat displays of affectivity (Selting, 2010) as he repeats the statement regarding the amount charged for the service five times, at lines 17, 45, 59, 63 and 71. Here, the company acts as a monopoly, given that, on the one hand, it offers the cheapest transport services for students and, on the other hand, it charges five Euros for a receipt without which students cannot obtain subsidized train tickets from the very same company. The agent is thus placed in an unfavourable position, as she is left with nothing with which to defend the company or appease the customer. For this reason, she resorts to the strategies discussed above, hoping that the customer's emotions will eventually pass, as there is nothing else she can do.

To protect his positive face in the event that the agent will fail to provide remedial action, at lines 63, the complainant already explicitly predicts that he, most likely, will not be satisfied with the explanation from the company; hence, he issues another threat at line 65, thus escalating his original threat by

invoking the media. Threatening companies and customer services with the media has become a frequent strategy in the past few years in Slovenia, as some commercial as well as national television stations have started broadcasting special shows where people who have received unfair treatment can tell their stories to the wider public. At the same time, the complainant instructs the agent to inform her supervisors about the complainable at lines 67 and 69. In addition, at lines 71-72, he expresses more anger and hostile emotions, criticising the company for being state-owned and thus financed with tax-payers' money. These outbursts are a reaction to the agent's responses (lines 21-22 and 54-55), with which the agent tentatively or almost implicitly already told the complainant what she is actually able to do. The fact that the complainant continues shows that he does not consider it enough. However, being obliged to respond to the complainant's assessments, the agent keeps her responses *uh huh* to the minimum throughout the conversation (see for example lines 51, 62, 64, 66, 68, 70, 73). The cumulative effect of the agent's acknowledgement tokens impinges on the caller's affectivity, which is heightened and intensified through repetition of the extortionate nature of the service charge, comparison with doctors' fees, and even verbal threats. By presenting the facts in this way, he attempts to evoke a preferred response from the agent, who fails to co-participate with the activity in progress (Schegloff, 2007: 193). This may also be viewed as the agent's reaction to the complainant's lack of face concerns. Culpeper (1996: 354) argues that, during face attacks, one of the options for the addressees is to remain silent and not to defend their face. In this case, the nature of the customer service setting is such that it restricts the agent's options for defending her professional and personal face, thus showing the double bind in which the agent works. The minimal responses *uh huh* are thus the only means she has to save her own face and especially the caller's face, given that he cannot be satisfied with what she is able to offer him.

Her role is thus reduced to mere listening to complaints, giving her very little power to solve them independently in view of the highly bureaucratised company structure. In a setting where complaints are managed professionally, pauses resulting from criticism, accusations, blame and verbal threats are frequent. At first, the complainant may have perceived these pauses in terms of allocation of the conversational floor (Sacks et al, 1974) by the agent. However, as soon as the caller notices that the agent refuses to align, let alone affiliate, he tries to strengthen his claims by repeating them several times in an attempt to get a satisfactory outcome, i.e. reimbursement.

At line 76, the agent makes a move to bring the conversation finally to a close by uttering "yes yes, okay Sir, look". According to Schegloff and Sacks (1973), the closing sequence, which normally extends over four turns, may be initiated with pre-closing tokens, such as *okay*. These are normally followed by a *terminal exchange*, whereby each participant contributes one of such pre-closings pairs and a final greeting, for example, *bye-bye*; this sequence is observed at lines 78-80. After the pre-closing, the agent proposes an arrangement, seen here as a last possible topic. The caller agrees and utters the first pair part of a thank you. This is responded to by the agent before the participants exchange goodbyes.⁷

Although the call resembles a monologue by the complainant, it becomes evident as the conversation unfolds that lack of co-operation by the agent seems to be the only possible strategy with which she will threaten the customer's face the least given that there she has absolutely no means to repair the complainable.

Conversation 2

The second conversation comprises a complaint call regarding a service for an international trip from Slovenia to Germany. A complaint had already been filed – prior to the actual call examined here. Whether this complaint had been lodged in writing or by telephone is not known. Nevertheless, owing to the fact that previous communication regarding this telephone conversation does in fact exist, the call from the company is thus the second part in an inter-, as opposed to an intra-interactive sequence, that is, the second communicative encounter across interactions over a period of time. This is also apparent in the opening, contents and in the management of the call.

A = Agent

C = Complainant

⁷ Unfortunately, we did not gain access to the written explanation that the agent had promised to send to the complainant; nor in fact do we know if he received one. Despite the fact that no explicit request or demand for a refund is lodged by the complainant in this conversation, it is treated here as *reklamacija* because, as the subsequent analysis will show, the request is implicitly packaged within a request for an explanation.

1 C ↑Pros::m
2 A Dobe::r dan
3 C (0.5)>Dober dan<
4 A (.) Agent? pri telefonu (.) kličem iz ((ime podjetja)) bi lahko prosm dobila
5 go[spo::da:]
6 C <[JA (.)GA PA] NI doma zdle pride tam okol še:stih >
7 A Aha::↓ (.) No potem pa nč potem bom pa jutrn dopol
8 [v dopoldanskem času]
9 C [Ja če drgač sem] jaz z njemu potovala
10 A (0.5) Aha↑ vi ste tut z njim potovala.=
11 C =Ja:
12 A Aha.
13 C >To je blo noro.<
14 A Ja:: glejte o::n mi je zdaj tko povedal a ne (.) kaj se je zgodi::l (.) da: ne kako je blo na vla::ku (.) kako je
15 bilo ko sta šla vidva [tja] oziroma(.) a ne
16 C [Ja.]
17 A Er:: in:: kako je blo tam (.)kako so sprevodniki delal z njimi ne (.) ampak gle::jte ne to::: so pač bli::
18 avstrijski uslužbenci a ne [erm:]
19 C [JA SA]M POSLUŠTE (0.5) er je bla tut gospa k je v Lublan karto kupila (.) midva
20 sma jo sicer u Postojni kupila (.) je bla gospa k je bla v Lublan k je v Lublan kupila karto in je rekla da so jih
21 opozoril da bojo verjetn mogl kakšn er:: k: da bojo verjetn mogl prestopit (.) in da se bo čakal. Za kva nam to
22 sprevodnik ni povedal na vla:ku k smo stal pol ure na postaji že.
23 A Uh huh (.) uh huh
24 C <NOBE::DN NAS NI OBVESTU AMA NČ Hhhhh AVSTRI::JC SE JE DRU NA NAS (.) RAUS RAUS
25 GREMO DOL (1.5) ZEJ PA: pol jih ni zastopil nemšk>
26 A °Uh huh°
27 C >Pojma niso mel za kva se sploh gre za kva mormo dol< (.) <nobe::den nam ni razložu nč > (1) čakal smo
28 eno uro pa pol pol so nas nabutal gor na na vlak (.) Ja ko:: živi:::no.
29 A °Uh huh°
30 C Kr to to me je najbolj motil (.) ko se oni peljejo na morje pole:t (0.5) pa k morjo majhn čakati u kolon s tem
31 da jim naši nosijo vodo:: (.) po avtocesti (.) oni so pa z nam takle delal (.) to je sramota (.) Gospa: tam na
32 postaji (.) Hhh starejša gospa k je po moje že komaj stala od tega >kufre gor kufre dol (.) kufre sem kufre
33 tja< (1) je falila: (.) er: u vagon noter je stopila vme:s si je olupla nogo kri je bla po celmu peronu:: (0.5)
34 Kri je bla po vla::ku (0.5) sprevodnik se je drl GRE::MO k je bil to (.) me:stni vlak za v München (.) ni bil
35 (.) ce e al kak C al kk se jim reče
[.....]
44 C >Se je drl da mormo gor (.) gospa ni vedla °k: k° (2) čist je bla zbegana erm tam okol osemdeset let (.)
45 dobr veste da včasih človek zase ne ve ne pa s težkimi kufri (.) pa ji pa sta ji načelnik tam stal pa ne:: da bi
46 skoču pa vsaj prvo pomoč prnesu (1) ko ži-vi:::na<
47 A Ja ja glejte gospa saj jaz vas razumem da je blo (.) re:s neprijetno (.) sploh kar opisujete ampa::k: glejte (.)
48 v bistvu:: erm:: v bistvu najslabše je blo z avstrijskimi sprevodniki a ne ↓(2) erm oni so se v bistvu tko
49 obnašali a ne (.) neprimerno in tko naprej a ne ((zakašlja)) tako: da:: v bistvu ta pritožba se bolj nanaša
50 na:: avstri na avstrijsko:: podjetje v bistvu ne tolko na nas. (1) Na nas? kolko sem vas jaz razumela le to::
51 em ker niste bli obvešče::ni erm da:: boste mogl prestopat (.) a ne. Zdaj pa v Avstriji že nekaj časa ne
52 delajo a ne
[...]
89 C Ma ne ve::: se kdo pije (.) kdo plača no↓ (.) važn da ti pošten karto plačaš pol se pa ti jebi čist (.) pardon
90 izrazu <a boš pršu a ne boš a boš dobr potoval (.) a ne boš> va:::žn da ti vozovnico plačaš. (2)
91 [Tako]
92 A [Erm::] glejte gospa jas se vam opravičujem v našem imenu erm:: na postajo bomo erm bom jaz poklicala
93 in bom:: vprašala to blagajničarko. Vi ste kdaj kupovali vozovnico? Štiriindvajsetega ste potovali?
[...]
194 A Men je re::s žal a ne da je tut do tega prišlo se bomo pa pozanimali in tudi bom:: erm jas erm v bistvu
195 opozorila tiste ki sodelujejo s tem podjetjem da naj pravočasno obvestijo a ne naše podjetje ČE erm ni blo
196 pravočasno [obveščeno a ne]
197 C [Midva sva z dop]usta (.) mene ne briga več (1) A je prav?
198 A °V redu gospa °
199 C Ja no (.) tak je=
200 A =Hvala [za klic nasvidenje]
201 C [Hvala lepa adi:::jo]

TRANSLATION

1 C ↑Hello::
2 A Hello::
3 C (0.5)>Hello<
4 A (.)Call centre agent? speaking (.) I'm calling from ((name of the company)) could I please speak to

5 Mi[:ste::r]

6 C <[YES(.)BUT HE] IS NOT home right now he'll be back around si:x >

7 A Oh::↓ (.) Well okay then I'll try tomorrow mor

8 [in the morning]

9 C [Yes well cause I] was travelling with him

10 A (0.5) Oh↑ you were also travelling with him.=

11 C =Ye:s

12 A Oh.

13 C >That was mad.<

14 A Ye::s look he:: told me the following right(.)what happe::ned(.)a:nd what it was like on the tra::in (.) what

15 it was like when you went [there] or (.)right

16 C [Yes]

17 A Err:: a:::nd what it was like there (.) how the train guards were treating them right (.) but loo::k right the:::ese

18 we:::re actually Austrian employees right [erm]

19 C [YES B]UT LISTEN (0.5) er there was also a lady who bought a

20 ticket in Ljubljana (.) we actually bought it at Postojna (.) a lady who was in Ljubljana bought the ticket in

21 Ljubljana said they were warned that they might have to er:: th change trains (.) and erm wait. why didn't

22 the train guard tell us on the tra::in while we were already waiting for half hour at a station.

23 A Uh huh (.) uh huh

24 C <NOQ::NE NOTIFIED US ABOUT ABSOLUTELY ANYTHING Hhhhh THE AU::STRIAN GUY

25 SCREAMED AT US (..) RAUS RAUS GET OFF (1.5) NO:W half of the people didn't understand German>

26 A °Uh huh°

27 C >They had no idea what was going on and why we should get off< (.) <no::one told us anything > (1) we

28 were waiting an hour and a half and then they pushed us back on on the train (.) As if we were:: a:::nimals.

29 A °Uh huh°

30 C Cause this this bothered me mostly (.) when they drive to the coast in the su::mmer (0.5) and cause they are

31 stuck in traffic for a little bit although our people give them wa::ter (.) on the motorway (.) they treated us in

32 such a way (.) it's a disgrace (.) a lady at the station (.) Hhh an older lady who could barely stand from

33 moving the suitcases >up and down (.) from here to there< (1) she ste:pped (.) er: into the ga:p and pulled

34 the skin off her leg there was blood all over the pla::tform. (0.5) Blood was on the tra::in (0.5) the train

35 guard screamed LET'S GO:: it was (.)a local train (.) it wasn't a (.) CE or what C or what they are called

[...]

44 C >He was screaming to get on (.) the lady didn't know °k: k° (2) she was so confused erm around eighty years (.)

45 you know well that s:ometimes a person doesn't know about themselves let alone carry heavy suitcases (.) and

46 they and they the stationmaster stood there and wou::ldn't even fetch first aid (1) like a:::nimals<

47 A Yes yes look Missus I do understand that it was (.) re:ally unpleasant (.) especially what you are describing

48 bu:::t look (.) actually:: erm:: actually the worst experience was with the Austrian train guards right ↓ (2)

49 erm they actually behaved so right (.) inappropriately and so on right ((cough)) so: tha:::t actually this

50 complaint refers to:: Austr to Au::strian company actually not so much to us (1). It refers to us? as far as I

51 understood only:: em cause you weren't info::rmed erm tha:::t you'll have to change trains (.) right. Now in

52 Austria construction work has been taking place for a while now right

[...]

89 C No one kno::ws who's drinking (.) who's buying ↓ (.) as long as you buy your ticket and then fuck off (.) excuse

90 my expression (.) <will you arrive or not will you have a nice journey (.) or not> as lo:::ng as you pay for the ticket (2)

91 [There]

92 A [Erm::] look Missus I apologize on behalf of our company erm:: at the station we will erm I will call there

93 and wi::ll ask at the ticket office. When did you buy your ticket? You travelled on the twenty-fourth?

[...]

194 A I'm re:ally sorry that this happened and we wi::ll try to find out and I will erm I erm actually will warn

195 everyone who works with this company to inform us in time, right, our company IF erm this hasn't

196 happened on time [been informed right]

197 C [We're back from va]cation (.) I don't care anymore. (1) Alright?

198 A °Okay Missus. °

199 C Yes well (.) that's how it is=

200 A =Thanks [for your call goodbye]

201 C [Thank you very much bye:::]

Here, the institutional agent is calling the complainant to provide the views of the company regarding the incident that had been reported prior to this call. However, the called (Sacks, 1992), that is, the customer who had lodged the original complaint, appears not to be home. Instead, the caller, that is, the institutional agent learns from the answerer (Sacks, 1992), the called's wife, that she had been travelling with the called when the incident occurred (lines 9-12). At this juncture, the answerer becomes 'the called' by virtue of the fact that she was also travelling at the time and was thus also affected by the service provided. She claims, therefore, to be an incumbent of the customer-service provider category (Pomerantz and Mandelbaum, 2005) and, as such, entitled to certain rights and to have the complainable explained.

Starting at line 3, the answerer pauses for approximately half a second before responding to the agent's greeting *Dobe::r dan*. As already explained in Conversation 1, *dober dan* is not an uncommon greeting

but it is a formal greeting commonly used in institutional settings. The 0.5 pause thus signals the answerer's realisation that this is not an everyday call, but possibly an institutional call. This is reflected by the second pair part of the greeting at line 3, where the answerer replies using *dober dan*, too. Further evidence of the institutional framework is found at line 4, where the agent provides her full professional identification, her surname and the name of the company, upon which the answerer, volunteers information as to the time when the called can be contacted again, at this stage probably already aware of what exactly the call is about, as the agent had given a greeting commonly heard in institutional settings and, at line 4, a complete form of organisational identification. Nevertheless, further support for the inferential framework underlining institutionality can be found in the answer provided by the agent at line 7-8, namely, that she will call again tomorrow. On hearing this, the answerer, who knows that in Slovenia, civil servants do not normally work after 4 p.m., realises the reason for the call even though the agent has still not stipulated it. It is then that the answerer adopts the identity of customer. The 0.5 second pause at line 10 reflects the agent's realisation that the answerer is also a customer and the particle *aha*, the "oh-preface", as termed by Heritage (1998), uttered with rising intonation might reflect a change in the agent's state of mind (Heritage, 1984, 1998; Schegloff, 2007). According to Heritage (1984), the free-standing particle *oh* is a "change-of-state token", when change is produced in its recipient from non-knowing to now-knowing. Similarly, Stivers (2008: 53) also asserts that the token *oh* displays informedness and is a change-of-state response. "The change-of-state token acknowledges the information provided and claims to now have realized something that was previously opaque" (Stivers, 2008: 47). The change of state-of-mind occurs because the agent suddenly realises that she is in fact talking to a customer with rights.

At line 10, this is further confirmed by the agent in her reformulation of the answerer's previous turn: "vi ste tut z njim potovala" ("you were also travelling with him"). Here, the agent uses a special non-standard (colloquial) use of the singular verb following the plural *vi* (polvikanje)⁸. She may do so to signal a somewhat friendlier and less formal attitude while, at the same time, continuing to be respectful. At line 11, the customer then confirms, in a latched utterance, that this is so and, at line 12, the agent produces yet another *aha* (*oh*) with falling intonation. This time, however, *oh* functions as an acknowledgment or continuer (Schegloff, 2007) of change in the roles adopted, offering the answerer, who has now become the called, an opportunity to express the complainable. She immediately grabs this opportunity, at line 13, where she describes what had happened as *mad*. Added to this, are the suprasegmental features, such as, her tone of voice, which has become rushed, and the emphasis on the word "mad". These help to convey escalated affect.

At lines 14 and 15 evidence that previous communication regarding the incident had taken place finally emerges when the agent summarises what the husband had told her ("Yes look, he told me the following right, what happened, and what it was like on the train, what it was like when you went there or, right"). At lines 17-18, however, the called's claim "ampak glejte ne to so pač bli avstrijski sprevozniki a ne" ("but look right, these were actually Austrian train guards right") may be viewed as a softener to the complaint, in as much as the agent is Slovenian, not Austrian, and thus not personally accountable for the mess. Based on the husband's description of what happened in Austria, the agent attempts to explain that the unpleasant incident was the Austrian company's fault and not the fault of her company: "and what it was like in Villach, how the train guards were treating them right, but look right, these were actually Austrian train guards...". This action could be characterised as an outright denial (Dersley and Wooton, 2000), as the agent explicitly and immediately denies their accountability in the alleged incident. By saying this, she attempts to delay, or even block, the complaint to be developed at the next turn. Nevertheless, the called reworks the complaint at lines 19-22, shifting the emphasis to the delay and to a lack of information. The customer's response is characterised, at line 19, by loudness when she raises her tone of voice considerably to compete with the caller for the floor (Schegloff, 2007). She then makes a 0.5 pause and changes the topic of the conversation by focussing on the negligence of the staff, namely, the person selling the tickets and the train guard. They, she asserts, failed to inform them that, owing to construction works in Austria, there was the possibility they might have to change trains on this direct train to Munich. Moreover, the called then repeatedly and explicitly stresses the fact that one lady travelling from the capital Ljubljana had indeed been informed of construction works. While making her

⁸ (P/V) is an additional non-standard use of the singular verb following the plural *vi* ("polvikanje"). Although grammatically incorrect, this form has become widespread, to signal a somewhat friendlier and less formal attitude: *Če boste kontaktirala*. ("If you contact": you is plural, the verb *contact* is in singular feminine) It can be said that this form is used when someone is trying to get close to someone despite their social distance.

claims, she uses reported speech and negative observations as a way of providing further substantiation for her claims. At line 24, she uses extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986), in as much as she repeats that they were simply not informed about *anything* (“no one told us anything, no one notified us about absolutely anything, they had no idea what was going on”); at this point, her voice becomes even louder and she starts speaking much more slowly. Extreme case formulations index the speaker’s stance or attitude towards something when he or she is saying more than mere accuracy would require (Pomerantz, 1986; Edwards, 2000). In this case, the customer gets very emotional as she goes on to describe the situation using direct speech “the Austrian guy screamed at us RAUS RAUS get off” (lines 24-25). She then pauses and adds, “half of the people didn’t understand German”. At lines 27-28, her description of the event intensifies even further as angry emotions come to the fore when she recalls how they were treated like *animals* by the Austrians, and she lengthens the word *animals* to intensify its effect.

During the story-telling, the agent no longer blocks the development of the complaint; instead, she uses common mid-telling response tokens *uh huh* at lines 23, 26 and 29 to signal that the called’s turn is still in progress (Stivers, 2008). In this way, she gives the called the opportunity to express the complainable, and, at the same time, gives her the impression that she is being listened to. The agent thus co-constructs the complaint by attempting to show herself as an empathic story-recipient.

All this becomes somewhat frustrating for the customer who, at lines 30-31, had compared their situation with that of the Austrian tourists who, prior to the introduction of toll stickers on Slovenia’s congested roads, had to wait for hours at toll boots during the summer season: “Cause this this bothered me mostly. When they drive to the seaside in the summer and cause they are stuck in traffic for a little bit, although our people give them water on the motorway, they treated us in such a way, it’s a disgrace”. At line 31, the complainant starts telling a story about an unpleasant event that happened to an older woman at a particular station, who hurt herself badly because the train guards yelled at the platform to rush the passengers to suddenly and unexpectedly change trains, who then failed to offer any medical assistance. In providing this information, she is attempting to make the agent realise just what it was like to experience the actual event being reported by intensifying the negative description of events. At line 47, the agent tries to explain to the called that that specific event is not the fault of her company, but that of the Austrian company and that she cannot do much to help or to remedy the situation. Although the called realises that what had happened cannot be altered, she still feels that the company is at least partly accountable for the incident but, as yet, she does not explicitly state how the situation could be solved. The caller, that is the agent, fails to acknowledge any company accountability⁹ and instead shifts responsibility to a third party. Although the agent seems to be sympathising with the elderly couple, she does this by distancing her own persona and adopting a purely institutional role, making the apology a non-apology, as shown at lines 47-50, given that she does not have the competence to do anything else. At lines 50-51, she then admits that their only fault is that the company did not provide timely information regarding their itinerary. At this point, the caller’s response changes from an “outright denial” to a “not-at-fault-denial” (Dersley and Wootton, 2000) as she admits that the company was to some degree involved in the incident.

The extent of the complainant’s frustration is further manifested, when she poses a threat, at line 89, to the agent’s positive face; she curses “What matters is that you’ve bought your ticket and then fuck off, excuse my expression”, utters an insult to express her annoyance with, and criticism of, the company. However, to attenuate the impact of the expletive, she subsequently apologises for using such a strong swear word. At different points in the conversation, see, for example, lines 92-93, the agent asks questions about something different, thus starting a new subject and diverting, much to the irritation of the customer, the conversation away from the complainable. From the structure and analysis of this conversation, it is clear that the called, with her haphazard story and her tendency to switch from one topic to another, was completely unprepared for the agent’s call. With her long turns, use of extreme case formulations, reported speech, and so on, she endeavours, nevertheless, to demonstrate that the matter is worth complaining about.

In this last excerpt, the complainant ends the conversation with yet another face-threat by refusing to accept the apology from the agent: “We’re back from vacation, I don’t care anymore. Alright?” and ending the conversation with “Yes well, that’s how it is” (line 197). She threatens the agent’s positive face in that she brings the conversation to a close in a rather abrupt way, which may cause embarrassment to the agent. Instances of face were manifested immediately after the answerer had adopted the identity of

⁹ On the company’s website under the section “Passenger rights”, it is stated that no compensation can be offered for delays caused during international trips if they occurred abroad. At the same time, in the section “Minimal quality standards” of the same document, the company promises to provide real-time information to all passenger regarding delays and other changes.

customer but all she got in return from the agent was a non-apology (lines 92, 194) and the shifting of responsibility (lines 17-18, 48-50) so as to avoid the loss of the positive face the agent wants to maintain. Manifestations of face further emerged as the agent deviated from the topic of the complaint (line 93) fishing for new information concerning the time and the place when the ticket was purchased in order to soften the weight of the complaint and, at the same time, avoid offering any compensation or plausible explanation. That, nowhere in this conversation, the agent referred to the Passenger Rights Charter, which was only recently published online and advertised at stations nationwide, reflects the company's lack of interest in managing complaints satisfactorily, which results in their poor business practice¹⁰. By citing the charter, the agent could have explained to the called that it is explicitly stated therein that, in case of international services, the company is not accountable for delays or for customer services performed abroad. However, a modern transport company which operates internationally should also co-operate with relevant foreign transport companies at the customer-service level.

CONCLUSION

From a linguistic viewpoint, constructions of complaints may differ in different cultures. From the economic viewpoint, however, they project a company's failure to meet customers' expectations and, at the same time, highlight low quality services. It is only by complaining that customers can make their dissatisfaction clear to the company. Likewise, companies cannot make their lack of interest in customer satisfaction any clearer than by their reluctant or lax reactions to complaints. Managing complaints is a very unpleasant task, especially if the hands of the employee are partly, or entirely, "tied" thus leaving him or her with nothing to appease the customer as was demonstrated in the examples above, in which it became clear, how difficult her job of saving professional face and above all the face of the customer really is.

Complaint management experts (Stauss and Seidel, 2004: 105) assert that complaint dissatisfaction is at its highest when the complainant's perspective is blatantly disregarded in the complaint processing and the customer is put off with just an apology, as was the case in the second example of this study. Customers who, in the first instance, are listened to with what appears to be an understanding ear are, in the end, dissatisfied, or even very dissatisfied, with the complaint situation when they realise that, rather than being provided with a solution, they were simply being given the opportunity to let off steam.

The foregoing analysis has shown that face is highly salient and that expectations and assumptions about facework are complex and influenced by the context and the roles adopted by the interlocutors, i.e. complainant vs. institutional agent dealing with complaints. In the foregoing examples, it was observed that complaints were made explicit almost from the outset by the complainants, that is in the opening when the customer proffers the reason for the call. In both calls, and especially in the second one, the construction of complaints unfolds in a step-by-step manner and over several turns. Moreover, the complaints develop in long sequences and are structured within activities such as stories to convey the sense of distastefulness and annoyance felt. Knowing what to expect from the callers, the agents adopt a purely institutional role, which works in the interest of the organisation and presumably in their interests too, as they can personally excuse themselves for any offence committed. In these interactions, considerations of face were observed throughout the complaint sequences in both calls. In the first call, face concerns were observed as the agent refused to affiliate with the customer's complaint, disregarding every attempt the customer made, during the unfolding of the complaint, to get her to do so. In conducting herself, thus, the agent avoids the loss of positive face on the part of the company. Face manifestations were further found in the use of elements and structures such as extreme case formulations, negative observations, expressions of disapproval, criticism, insults, and verbal threats, commonly found in complaints and employed here by the complainants in both calls. With the more aggressive caller, the agent was found to resort to strategies such as defensiveness (use of acknowledgement tokens), the use of procrastination tactics (information-seeking questions), and avoidance strategies (citing the need to contact a more experienced work-colleague, refusing to make any promises or justifications, and by using linguistic means to distance herself from the caller). With the less aggressive caller, on the other hand, she strives to take on the role of an understanding person and shifts responsibility to third parties. Her main objective is to calm down the angry customer or, by being a passive listener of the complaint, to allow the customer to let off steam in the hope they will eventually relinquish the complaint. In comparing both calls it becomes evident that the first caller was prepared for the confrontation with the company's agent, as his purpose, i.e. to receive remedial action, was clearly articulated from the start. The purpose of the

¹⁰ Given that the company is state-owned, its annual financial losses are borne by the state.

second complainant, however, remains unclear throughout the conversation. This may be due to the fact that the agent's call represents a follow-up of the lodged complaint, and may thus not have been expected. Nonetheless, it was interesting to observe how the father, who was not the customer who actually experienced the problem, convincingly adopted the role of the complainant, as did the called's wife from Conversation 2.

Saving the face of the company, and one's own face, too, is very stressful, as the agent must in conflict situations put her own face at stake so as to maintain the customer's positive and negative face. This is a paradox, as the employees are a vital part of the company. Knowing that the customer is right, and is rightfully angry, but that she cannot do anything to remedy the situation except to be polite and avoid threatening assessments only increases the agent's stress. The interactions thus seem to create an illusion for both parties that something is going on, although both eventually realise that it is a continuous status-quo, that a solution will not be offered. It becomes obvious that the company has the power. The company ought to be aware of the conflictive role the employees have to play in the call centre and react accordingly by giving the call agents more autonomy in their work.

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Transcription symbols

[]	overlapping speech
(1.5)	numbers in brackets indicate pause length in seconds
(.)	micropause
:	lengthening of the sound of preceding letter
-	word cut-off
.	falling or final intonation
?	rising or question intonation
=	latching utterances
<u>Underlining</u>	contrastive stress or emphasis
CAPS	indicates volume of speech
°°	markedly softer speech
Hhh	in-breathing
↑↓	sharp falling/rising intonation
> <	talk is compressed or rushed
< >	talk is markedly slowed or drawn out
()	blank space in brackets indicates uncertainty about the speech
(())	described phenomenon, for instance ((cough))
[. . .]	talk omitted from the data segment

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