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Service encounter discourse

J. César Félix-Brasdefer & Rosina Márquez Reiter

Abstract

Commercial service encounters are broadly defined as everyday interactions in which some kind of commodity, be it goods, information, or both, is exchanged between a service provider (e.g., clerk, vendor) and a service seeker (e.g., customer). Previous work has focused primarily on transactional and interpersonal aspects of service encounters, including issues of politeness and intracultural variation in face-to-face, telephone, and online contexts. In this chapter, we examine current issues in service encounter discourse. After presenting some key concepts and predominant contexts of service encounters, we provide a critical review of theoretical models used to examine service encounter interaction, address the distinction between interpersonal and transactional talk, and describe some aspects of sociopragmatic variation in service encounter contexts. We end this chapter with methodological issues and future directions.

1. Introduction

We buy everyday products at supermarkets or convenience stores, interact with telephone companies to request or complain about services, and engage in online commerce (e-commerce). Buyers and sellers are offered an array of options regarding the contexts in which they respectively receive and deliver services, including diverse lingua-cultural environments. This includes sales transactions in online environments (e.g., eBay, Amazon) that offer the possibility

of connecting with billions of potential buyers across the world. Service encounters are thus everyday interactions in which some kind of commodity (i.e. goods, information, or both) is exchanged between a service provider (e.g., clerk, vendor) and a service seeker (e.g., customer, visitor) (Ventola, 2005). Research on service encounters has examined different aspects of transactional and non-transactional discourse, particularly concerning face-to-face interactions (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2015, 2017; Márquez Reiter & Placencia, 2005; Márquez Reiter & Stewart, 2008), online environments (e.g., Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2019; Placencia, 2015), intercultural service encounters (e.g., Bailey, 1997; Lee, 2015; Márquez Reiter, 2011; Ramírez-Cruz, 2017), (im)politeness in social media platforms (e.g., Antonopoulou, 2001; Hernández López & Fernández Amaya, 2015; Márquez Reiter, Orthaber & Kádár, 2015; Márquez Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017; Márquez Reiter & Orthaber, 2019), and non-verbal communication (Dorai & Webster, 2015). See Félix-Brasdefer and Placencia's (2020) volume for an overview of service encounter interactions in face-to-face and online environments.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, we provide an overview of key concepts, describe the scope of service encounter discourse, and problematize the transactional vs. interpersonal talk distinction. Second, we describe how service encounter discourse is constructed in three predominant contexts, namely small shops, bars and cafés, and call centers. Third, we describe some instances of sociopragmatic variation, including the effects of globalization in sociocultural service encounter settings. We end this chapter with methodological issues and future directions.

2. Key elements of service encounters

2.1 Towards a multidisciplinary understanding of service encounters

The goal-oriented nature of service encounters has led to qualifying the construction of the talk that emerges in these encounters as institutional. Service encounter discourse has thus been described as a type of institutional (e.g., library front desk; online call center) or quasi-institutional (e.g., small shop or street vendors) talk, which takes place in a particular physical or virtual setting between a service provider and a service seeker who have specific roles and concomitant rights and responsibilities. Service encounter discourse is comprised of the following components: i. *setting* (e.g., telephone transaction at a bank; sales transaction through eBay); ii. orientation toward task/*goal or task-oriented* (the participants in a service encounter show an orientation toward some task/goal that is conventionally related to the setting); iii. *participants' roles* (i.e., each participant is expected to play a specific role, such as service provider or service seeker); iv. *constrained topic* (i.e., the topic of the encounter is constrained by what participants consider to be allowable for the sales transaction) (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 22; see also Félix-Brasdefer, 2017).

Initial research on service-encounter discourse focused on the organizational characteristics that make up the genre of verbal interactions during the face-to-face negotiation of service. For example, Mitchell (1957) analyzed the language of buying and selling in Cyrenaica (Libya) and examined the social actions that occurred in three types of encounters: (i) market sales transactions; (ii) market auctions; and (iii) shop transactions. With regard to market (non-auction) and shop transactions, Mitchell identified five stages: (i) salutation; (ii) inquiry as to the object for sale; (iii) investigation of the object for sale; (iv) bargaining; and (v) conclusion. The author thus showed how service encounters are sequentially organized, how social actions (e.g., requests for service, bargaining) are accomplished, and how each subgenre (market vs. shop transactions) varies with regard to its generic structure.

From a Systemic Functional Linguistics perspective, Halliday and Hasan (1980) and Hasan (1985) looked at the generic structure of service encounters in small shops selling fruit. The authors concluded that the genre of service encounters is defined by these obligatory elements: sale request, sale compliance, sale, purchase, and purchase closure (1985, p. 60). Further, Ventola (1987) examined the conversational structure of service encounters in post offices and small shops, and proposed a generic structure for service encounters with the following elements: greeting, attendance-allocation (e.g., “who’s next?”), service bid (e.g., “can I help you?”), service (e.g., “could I have...”), resolution (i.e., decision to buy or not to buy), handover of goods, payment, closing, and goodbye. In her more recent work, Ventola (2005) argued for an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing service encounters, including the multi-modal analysis of verbal and non-verbal actions.

Merritt’s (1976) work influenced our understanding of service encounters at both the organizational and sequential level. In her analysis of over 1,000 interactions at a self-service convenience store, the author identified four stages in the structure of service encounters: (i) the customer’s presence, which summons the vendor; (ii) the decision stage (e.g. “can I have...”); (iii) the exchange of product and money; and (iv) the closing stage, including the exchange of goodbyes (cf. Ventola, 1987). She examined the data through pragmatic inferences with regard to the assumptions, contextual presuppositions, and appropriateness required during the interpretation of a speech act sequence. Merritt’s (1976) work thus determined the basic activities involved in service encounters.

From a cross-cultural pragmatic perspective, the PIXI project (Pragmatics of Italian/English Cross-Cultural Interaction) looked at bookshop interactions in Southern England and Northern Italy. Its main objective was to identify similarities and differences in the social

practices, pragmalinguistic forms, and structural patterns of bookshop encounters (e.g., openings, closings, request-response sequences, role of laughter, preference/dispreference). Aston (1995) stressed the need for contrastive pragmatics to consider the sequential organization of the discourse as a whole, seen as a process of progressive negotiation, rather than just isolated speech acts — or indeed two or three-part exchanges, as it had been mainly approached thus far. With regard to data analysis, investigators used a mixed methodology that incorporated both quantitative approaches (analysis of recurrent similarities) and qualitative approaches (sequential analysis). Although the focus of the PIXI project was on those activities essential for the service to be accomplished, some aspects of what we term here as “strictly non-essential talk” were examined during the negotiation of service, such as impersonal solidarity and laughter (Aston, 1988; Gavioli, 1995).

Despite their different approaches, researchers coincide in pointing out the primarily goal-oriented nature of the talk or text (e-commerce) that emerges from service encounters and the sequences that are essential for transactions to be effected. These transactions entail (i) the opening, where the participants acknowledge each other’s presence or co-presence (in telephone mediated encounters or those mediated by the internet) and their roles in the relevant setting; (ii) the negotiation of a service request, involving the decision to purchase/request information and the exchange of money; followed by (iii) the closing, which may or may not include a thank-you or goodbye exchange (Antonopoulou, 2001; Haakana & Sorjonen, 2011; Félix-Brasdefer, 2015, Ch. 3), as the closing may be indexed non-verbally (e.g., head nod, hand waving, etc.). This last point may reside in the non-essentiality of verbal goodbyes to coordinate interactional cessation in face-to-face to encounters, especially when compared to telephone encounters. In the latter, participants often orient to their co-presence and physical absence to manage the encounter

in the absence of other non-verbal communicative signs (cf. Márquez Reiter, 2011). Similarly, traditional interpersonally signs, such as laughter, have often been considered to be non-essential for the transaction to be effected. This, as we argue in the next section, denotes a theoretical distinction that is not necessarily empirically demonstrable.

2.2 On the dichotomy between interpersonal and transactional talk

Service encounters are permeated by elements that orient them to the sociability and efficiency with which they are expected to be managed (cf. Márquez Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017; Goodwin, 1996; Goodwin & Frame, 1989). This is particularly evident in the way in which the goal-oriented talk, which is typically constructed in these kinds of encounters, is imbued with features reminiscent of what is generally conceived of as “interpersonal talk.” The presence of interpersonal talk often indicates an existing relationship between the participants, such as in those cases in which the customer has a buying history with the company (cf. Márquez Reiter, 2011), or in which a relationship between the parties, albeit often a temporary one, is sought in pursuit of a sale or the obtaining of a given commodity (Márquez Reiter, 2006). The literature on service encounters have identified many interpersonal elements, such as phatic exchanges (e.g., greetings and partings), small talk, or individualized talk (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015, 2017; Márquez Reiter, 2010; McCarthy, 2000; Placencia & Mancera Rueda, 2011), many of which are representative of the synthetic personalization that characterizes modern customer relationship management (Fairclough, 1989). This synthetic personalization has arguably become increasingly unmarked, especially in the West, as is demonstrated through customers’ self-disclosure in complaint calls (Márquez Reiter, 2005) and interactional closeness for task-oriented purposes (Márquez Reiter, 2006). Synthetic personalization entails the adoption of a personal

footing in interactions with the customer (Goffman, 1981), so that the service encounter more closely resembles a conversation between friends, rather than a business transaction (e.g., Cameron, 2000; Márquez Reiter, 2006). A prime example of this can be found in telemarketing calls.

Telemarketing calls are unrequested calls from a salesperson that attempt to sell a product to a prospective customer who may not be remotely interested. The prospective customer's name is typically one of many on a list through which the salesperson works in the hope of striking gold and obtaining a sale. Given the unsolicited and essentially intrusive nature of these calls (e.g., Lakoff, 2005), which are characteristic of the postmodern blurring of the private-public boundaries (Habermas, 1989), and more recently, of the invasion of individual privacy (i.e., unsolicited calls to mobile telephones), salespersons adopt what is generally known as a "warm approach". A warm approach minimizes the chances of obtaining an unwelcome response. It entails an effort to establish some sort of "intimacy" with the prospective customer, such as anticipating the customer's needs based on their service history, and typically features synthetic personalization strategies (Fairclough, 1989). This is observed in the presence of strictly non-essential activities for the transaction to be effected, such as "how-are-you" exchanges and the engagement in small talk--that is, the presence of activities that have been traditionally associated with interpersonal rather than goal-oriented talk. Interpersonal talk is thus intimately related to goal-oriented talk and should not be understood separately. Besides the presence of activities that are, strictly speaking, not necessary for the transaction to be effected, interpersonal-oriented talk also often emerges within transactional talk as the service provider balances efficiency and sociability to enhance the chances of obtaining his or her goal. Typical

examples can be found in service telephone calls, when the customers are asked to wait in line while the call agent does a product search, as shown in interaction (1) below.

Example (1) was taken from a small corpus of English calls collected by the second author in 2011 as part of an ethnographic study of communication at an outsourced call center specializing in time-shares. The conversation/exchange in question has not been previously examined. It is used here to illustrate that the boundaries of transactional and non-transactional talk are not clear-cut.

Following the opening sequence and confirmation of the reason for the call, the telephone agent and the customer engage in the negotiation of the business exchange (see Section 2.1 ‘Key elements’); in this case, the agent is helping to choose the right holiday accommodation for the customer based on her needs.

- 32 Customer: How deep is the pool,
33 Service provider: Um (.) let me check for you Susan
(4.0)
34 Service provider: they’re great for doing exercise on holiday (.) aren’t they
35 Customer: = I’m more of a paddler
36 Service provider: Oh (.) would you prefer a hotel with a pool with a shallow end then,
37 Customer: No that’s fine (.) it’s for the children <it’s best if they can’t touch the bottom>
38 Service provider: =that’s right (0.2) I actually taught my children how to swim in a Olympic size pool
39 Customer: Were [you able to
40 Service provider: [here it is] it’s a shallow end (.) close to a meter and then it goes onto two me[ters]
41 Customer: [that’s perfect]
42 Service provider: You’ll be able to touch the bottom while they do lengths hhh
43 Customer: =Hh That’s handy hh
44 Service provider: Is there anything else you’d like to know about the facilities Susan,

Example (1) contains features that are generally associated with interpersonally-oriented talk, such as the use of vocatives; in this case the service provider addresses the customer by first name (lines 33, 44) and attempts at engaging in small talk (lines 34-35; 42-43). These strategies, however, are part and parcel of the goal-oriented activities that they are helping to construct (i.e., a product search and an offer of assistance aimed at progressing the service encounter from the business exchange to the closing sequence).

If we look at the example more closely, we will notice that during the business exchange, the customer requests further details about the time-share facilities (i.e., the size of the pool, line 32). The service provider thus proceeds to check the relevant information on the system (line 33). Four seconds into the search, he initiates interpersonal talk to indicate co-presence and attentiveness to the customer. The topic is still, however, related to the information search (line 34). The tag question (... “aren’t they?”) proffered by the service provider inferentially conveys his interpretation that the customer is interested in accommodation that features a swimming pool rather than a splashing pool. Note the customer’s Wh- question rather than a yes-no interrogative, such as “Is the pool deep?”. Likewise, earlier in the conversation, the ages of the customer’s children (i.e., 14 and 15 years old) and the need for accommodation with a pool had been established. The likelihood of no-swimmers in the family is thus high. The customer immediately reacts (notice the latch in line 35) by specifying that she is not a strong swimmer. The service provider orients to this as new information (notice the presence of “Oh” in its initial position (Heritage, 1998)), and proceeds to determine the customer’s pool preference. Later, in lines 38-39, he initiates further interpersonally-oriented talk while doing the relevant search. The customer attempts to engage in this talk until the service provider, in a non-competitive overlap, announces that the right product has been found, and the customer

acknowledges her satisfaction. The service provider then proceeds to produce an upshot of the requested product in line with the customer's needs followed by laughter (hhh, line 42). The customer immediately reacts with laughter followed by an expression that summarizes her swimming ability relative to that of her children in a humorous manner. From this point on, the service provider engages in unambiguous task-oriented talk.

Example (1) illustrates that interpersonal and transactional talk are on a continuum. The elements of what is usually termed "interpersonal talk" are servicing the overarching business at hand and, in some cases, also help to avoid the gaps that would ensue while searching for relevant information. It then follows that any attempt at differentiating between interpersonal and transactional talk would have to take into account the activities that they help to construct and the participants' agendas.

3. Contexts of service encounters

In this section, we offer a selective account of research in service encounter interactions in three contexts: small shops, bars and cafs, and call centers (telephone service encounters).

3.1 *Small shops*

Francophone researchers made significant contributions through their data collected in bakeries, butcher shops, jewelry stores, and at newspaper stands. For example, Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Traverso (2008) investigated politeness practices and sequential organization (e.g. openings, closings, request-response sequence) in small shops. They defined commercial encounters as "one type of social situation that is characterized by regulations of different orders (of what we can and cannot buy, where, when, etc.), and for which there exist specific places:

commercial sites” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni & Traverso, 2008, p. 24). The authors proposed the following levels of analysis (Kerbrat-Orecchioni & Traverso, 2008, pp. 15-23):

- (i) The organization of interactions in commercial settings:
 - a. overall organization (top-down approach);
 - b. sequential organization (e.g., structural elements of the request-response sequence);
 - c. micro-analysis of sequential interactions (bottom-up approach);
- (ii) The transactional component;
- (iii) Multi-modal analysis (*La dimension praxique*) (gesture; audio- and video-taped data);
- (iv) The roles of the participants; and
- (v) The relational level (e.g., small talk, humor, jokes, polite behavior).

This model aims at examining different aspects of the transactional and non-transactional elements that permeate service encounter talk. It takes both a top-down approach, looking at the overall organization of the encounter (generic structure), and a bottom-up approach, analyzing the sequential structure of social actions (e.g., openings and closings, request-response sequence). Further, Filliettaz (2004) examined service encounters in bookshops and small stores in Geneva from a multi-modal perspective. In his multimodal approach to service encounter discourse, Filliettaz (2004) examined the complex realization of gesture, action, and setting. Specifically, he looked at the impact of nonverbal behavior during the construction of the negotiation of service using audio-taped face-to-face interactions, complemented with field-note data to gather information on nonverbal cues during the interaction. He focused on how gesture (e.g., hand movements) and speech co-occur both during the negotiation and in the successful

outcome of the transaction. His analysis underscores the importance of the multimodal negotiation of service encounters of “nonverbal actions [that] are deeply interwoven with communicative process” (Filliettaz, 2004, p. 98).

Francophone discourse analysts examined politeness practices, the sequential structure of actions (e.g., openings and requests), and the organizational structure of service encounters in small shops (e.g., Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2001, 2004, 2006). Research has looked at the participants’ roles, pragmatic variation of the request for service, and the presence or absence of internal modifiers. For example, Traverso’s work (2001, 2006, 2007) made important contributions to contrastive pragmatics by focusing on two different lingua-cultures: that of France and that of Syria. Traverso’s work, in line with that of the authors we cite in this chapter, has helped to further attest the usefulness of the service encounter arena to examine an array of linguistic pragmatic features, ranging from politeness orientations to activity formation.

Service encounters have also been analyzed, among others, in Finnish (e.g., Haakana & Sorjonen, 2011; Isosävi & Lappalainen, 2015), Turkish (e.g., Bayyurt & Bayraktaroğlu, 2001), Greek (Antonopoulou, 2001; Sifianou & Tzanne, 2018), French (Kerbrat-Orechionni 2006; and most extensively in varieties of Spanish following the sociopragmatic variation venture within contrastive pragmatics at the time, the diversity of the Spanish language and its global remit (Márquez Reiter & Placencia, 2005; Márquez Reiter, 2002; Placencia, 1998). Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2004) analyzed 56 audio-taped interactions (clothing and accessory shops) in lower-middle class shopping areas in Montevideo and in Quito. The different ways of offering and requesting service, including the negotiation of the exchange and the closings, were interpreted as orientations to interactional closeness (Montevideans) and respectful distance (Quiteños) and reported as statistically significant. The results of their study were further

corroborated by Placencia's (2005) analysis of intra-lingual pragmatic variation in small shop interactions in Quito and Madrid. Although customer requests reflected an overall preference for direct requests internal modification of the request (e.g., diminutives and politeness markers), was more frequent in Ecuadorian Spanish. Similarly, in a contrastive study of service encounters at household appliances stores in Montevideo and Edinburgh, Márquez Reiter and Stewart (2008) report a tendency towards interactional closeness by Montevideans. Montevidean service providers engaged in proactive selling strategies, such as offering unsolicited products and information, with a higher level of personal involvement (Tannen, 1984) relative to their counterparts in Edinburgh. In both cities, service providers engaged in interpersonal talk in pursuit of their goal. From a pragmatic variational perspective, Félix-Brasdefer and Yates (2020) looked at intra-lingual pragmatic variation during the negotiation of service in corner stores in three regions, namely Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and Seville. Results showed differences with regard to the type of request for service: Mexicans showed a preference for assertion statements (e.g., *Me da...* 'you give me...'), Spaniards favored imperatives (e.g., *Ponme una barra de pan* 'You give me a loaf of bread'), and Argentines predominantly selected ellipticals (e.g., *Un pancho* 'one hot dog'). At the stylistic level, the second person informal pronoun (T) was more frequent among Spanish and Argentine buyers and sellers, while the formal address form (V) predominated among Mexican customers irrespective of age and gender differences.

Further, service encounters have also been analyzed at the subnational level in corner stores: Placencia (2008) looked at pragmatic variation in two regions of Ecuador (Quito and Manta). The study employed Spencer-Oatey's (2000) classification of discourse domains: illocutionary (requests), discourse (openings and closings), stylistic (variation in T/V address forms), and participatory domains (turn-taking/relational talk). With regard to the illocutionary

level, although both groups used direct requests (e.g., imperatives, elliptical), imperative requests predominated among the Quiteño customers. Internal modification of the request was more frequent and varied in the Quiteño data than in the Manteño data, such as diminutives, politeness forms, lexical downgrading, and hedges (e.g., *Regáleme un pancito por favor* ‘Give me bread^{DIM} for free please’). At the discourse domain, openings in the form of greeting or greeting exchanges were more frequent among the Quiteño customers and almost completely absent among the Manteño customers. Placencia concluded that Quiteños show an orientation for an interpersonal style (e.g., phatic exchanges, longer greeting sequences) more frequently than Manteños, who are more task-oriented and less concerned about the interpersonal demands of the interaction. Félix-Brasdefer (2015) examined subnational variation in two Mexican regions, central (Mexico City) and Northern Mexico (Guanajuato). With regard to the pragmalinguistic realization of the request for service, while customers from both regions predominantly selected assertions (e.g., *Me da...* ‘you give me...’), ellipticals were preferred by customers from the Northern region (e.g., *Medio kilo de jamón* ‘half a kilo of ham’), and implicit requests predominated among customers of Mexico City. Bataller (2020) looked at regional variation (request for service and pronominal address) in two Colombian regions: Cartagena de Indias (Caribbean Coast) and Bucaramanga (Easter Andean Region). Overall, while customers from both regions preferred direct strategies, customers from Cartagena were more direct than the Bucaramanga customers, as shown by their frequent use of imperatives and elliptical requests. At the stylistic level, customers from Cartagena were more informal with a preference for the informal address pronoun (*tú* ‘you’) and casual terms to express affiliation, while customers from Bucaramanga preferred the formal pronominal form (*usted* ‘you formal’) and the use of formal address terms, such as (*Doña* ‘Ma’am’).

Two recent studies analyzed the selection of pronominal address in small shops in Central America, Costa Rica (Murillo Medrano, 2020) and Nicaragua (Michno, 2020). Murillo Medrano (2020) looked at variation in the use of personal pronouns and vocatives in Costa Rican service encounter interactions in grocery stores and call centers, considering gender, the participants' role, the goal of the transaction, and the context and its relation with (im)politeness strategies. In both settings, the singular formal address form *usted* predominates over *vos*, along with high levels of deference and respect. The type of setting conditioned the orientation of the transaction: while in call centers the interactions were more deferent gave more attention to transactional talk, customers in grocery stores showed an orientation to interpersonal talk by means of solidarity markers, such as colloquial address forms and a preference of informal markers between male speakers. Michno (2020) examined pragmatic variation according to gender during service encounters in a rural Nicaraguan community. Results showed that address form selection by both vendor and customer was primarily conditioned by customer gender; female customers were more likely to use *usted* with a male service provider, while males were more likely to use *vos*. Females were also more likely than males to use *usted* and to opt for employing more direct requests, such as assertions and commands.

3.2 *Cafés and bars*

The transactional and interpersonal dimension of service encounter interactions has also been analyzed in cafés and bars. Fink and Félix-Brasdefer (2015) examined the realization of politeness and pragmalinguistic variation in requests for service among male and female clients at a US café. In their study, the following actions were used to build rapport on the part of the client: a preference for conventionally indirect requests (more frequent among female clients),

the politeness marker ‘please’, and the predominant use of greeting formulas. The authors concluded that female clients appeared more polite than males because of the high indices of conventional indirectness in female requests, and that the gender of the interlocutor determined request production.

Three studies examined the realization of service between customers and baristas in Starbucks cafés. Taylor (2015) looked at pragmalinguistic variation of request forms in 820 Starbucks café service encounters in the northwestern United States. Results showed that both participant gender and the modality of the interaction affect the request forms produced in Starbucks service encounters. Customer gender greatly influenced request forms in face-to-face encounters, and yet this difference disappeared in drive-through encounters where both male and female customers most frequently employed conventional indirect requests. The author concluded that the visual impact of the participant gender in a face-to-face encounter renders gender-based variation null in drive-through encounters due to the lack of the face-to-face contact with the barista. Although Taylor’s work focused on service requests and their pragmalinguistic formulation, the synthetic personalization that accompanies coffee consumption at Starbucks (e.g., inquiring the customer’s name and writing it on a personalized disposable coffee cup) is a classic example of both the continuum between interpersonal and transactional talk as well as the way in which talk is regulated via prescribed rules of interaction (cf. Márquez Reiter, 1998, on ordering food at a traditional Montevidean bar). Further, using posts from different blogs, Isosävi and Lappalainen (2015) looked at the issue of globalization, specifically in how multinational companies, such as Starbucks or IKEA, adopt first names when addressing customers in Finland and France, a practice typical of synthetic personalization (see section 2.2). According to the authors, in these social contexts, first names are associated with America and

Americans because these practices break the norms of politeness of non-US countries. Thus, globalization is helping to change discursive practices in certain sociocultural settings.

Finally, Downey Barlett (2005) looked at the transactional nature of service encounters of novice and expert buyers when buying coffee in three different Starbucks cafés in Hawaii (168 audio-taped interactions), including the sequential structure of beginnings, request-response-sequences, and endings. The author looked at the interactional features of buyers and baristas (e.g., Barista: Can I help you ma'am?; Customer: Can I try an iced Macadamia latte?; Barista: Did you want that blended or on the rocks?; Customer: Blended). Although the organization of the turn-taking structure of these interactions is symmetric with little overlap or interruption, some differences were observed; short interactions and succinct orders predominated with regular customers, while longer interactions occurred with novice customers who did not know the expected conventional expressions used by expert customers as part of the acculturation process that the Starbucks experience entails: "A double shot 2% mocha latte, please, with whip."

A few studies have examined the negotiation of service in bars. Placencia and Mancera Rueda (2011) looked at the realization of rapport-building talk in bars in Seville, Spain. The data included 140 interactions, including bars frequently visited by customers (70) and bars where the customer and the bartender had infrequent interaction (70). Although the requests for service were direct and mitigated (e.g., *Dame un cafélito para llevar cuando tú puedas* 'Give me a coffee^{DIM} to go when you can'), the data showed that during the negotiation of service, both the customer and the bartender engaged in individualized creative forms expressing humor and teasing activities, such as *piropos*, or flirting. Further, Bataller (2015) compared the norms of interaction in Spanish bars in Valencia (Valencian Spanish) and near Granada (Andalusian

Spanish). With regard to the request for service, customers from both regions showed a preference for direct requests; those from Valencia employed elliptical requests, while customers in the Granada region selected both elliptical constructions and imperatives (e.g., *Échame un vasito de vino blanco* ‘Pour me a little glass of white wine’). Finally, in a more recent study, Padilla Cruz (2020) examined interpersonal aspects of humor to promote rapport between the customer and the bartenders in Seville, Spain. The author found that the manifestation of humor was conditioned by the age of the participants and the type of setting. These findings offer further evidence of the empirical inseparability of interpersonal and transactional talk that characterize service provision.

3.3 Call centers: Service encounters over the telephone

International companies with a global remit need to connect at a local level. One way in which they do so is by offering their services via the telephone. Telephone mediated service exchanges are institutional, synchronous, real-time encounters that involve a degree of planning by the service provider or the customer. The proliferation and establishment of call centers around the world has mainly revolved around similarities in language and culture and low operational costs. These factors, among others, would make a location attractive. Staff, especially telephone agents, are typically locally procured and trained in culturally appropriate ways so as to manage efficiency and sociability. This would, at least in theory, make it possible for participants who may not share cultural assumptions or values to (re)negotiate their relations and identities. While multinational companies are aware of the need to fit in in diverse linguistic-cultural markets and modify their communicative practices on the local level, their efforts at doing so are typically characterized by minimum expenditure. This is illustrated in the way in

which multinational companies seek service provision standardization across the various locales in which they operate with only partially customized aspects to avoid formulating differences in procedures that are resonant with local expectations. One such example can be found in the in-house rules for opening calls in which greetings, despite their non-essential nature for the transaction to take place, have been found (Márquez Reiter, 2010, 2011). In her analyses of service calls across and within different varieties of Latin American Spanish, Márquez Reiter (2005, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2019) reported an overwhelming presence of greeting exchanges in the opening calls. The author argued that the presence of greeting exchanges indicates an orientation to interpersonal connectedness, that is, an aspect of the sociability with which these encounters need to be managed in the lingua-cultures examined in these studies. Yet another example can be observed in the presence of offers of assistance such as *How can I help you?* Despite the fact that they constitute a pragmatically redundant element, they are, nonetheless, pervasive. The presence of greetings and offers of assistance is illustrative of the way in which multinational companies partially customize aspects of the service in order to attend to local expectations while maintaining their identity and avoiding incurring any extra costs.

When telephoning a customer or a company, call initiators “have to relate to the preparation of presence from the situation of absence given that the encounter is carried out at a distance” (Márquez Reiter, 2011, p. 2). This is especially relevant in the case of telephone agents making a call rather than receiving it. Telephone agents, particularly those in outsourced call centers, have to schedule calls, taking into account the time difference between the place where the call is made and the corner of the world where the customer is in, the normal working hours in the customer’s respective country, and the agenda of the call, while all the while calibrating the need for efficiency and sociability.

Interactions between telephone agents and customers at call centers have received significant scholarly attention, especially by discourse analysts interested in the feminization of the workforce (e.g., Cameron, 2000, 2008), where discursive features that have been associated with the language of females have been adopted to personalize service provision, thus becoming conventionalized and unmarked. Call center interactions have also received attention by scholars interested in the management of multilingualism (e.g., Dûchene, 2009; Márquez Reiter & Martín Rojo, 2010) and critical sociolinguists (e.g., Budach, Roy, & Heller, 2003) interested in shedding light on the way in which the management and commodification (Heller, 2003) of language practices is ideologically and contextually conditioned by a service-based economy. Interactions at call centers have also been examined by applied linguists interested in the linguistic patterns and communication problems that emerge, especially at outsourced call centers where agents whose first language is not English communicate in English with English-speaking customers and receive relevant training to this end (e.g., Forey & Lockwood, 2007; Friginal, 2009; Lockwood et al., 2009).

In addition, the different ways in which sociability and efficiency are managed in telephone mediated service encounters coupled with the formalized nature of service encounters with rule-bound structures have also attracted the attention of (im)politeness scholars. Varcasia (2013) examined requests and their responses in British English, Italian and German at an array of local companies –from pharmacies to fruit and vegetable suppliers– and reported a preference for brevity in the responses. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2005) analyzed requests by Greek customers to an airline company, finding that more complex response types were preferred. Specifically, she found that telephone agents offered more information than that requested by the customer. Although not addressed by Economidou-Kogetsidis, the difference observed in the

results also reveal the different contexts where the data came from, such as small shops that are not necessarily subject to the exigencies of the new economy, versus large airline companies. Thus, communication in local shops is primarily oriented towards efficiency, whereas the training that airline agents are likely to receive enhances customer experience by calibrating efficiency and sociability, particularly in light of the various possibilities that may be available in terms of flights.

4. Globalization and sociopragmatic variation

The impact of globalization has affected the way we negotiate service for the exchange of goods or information in a variety of sociocultural contexts. According to Blommaert (2010), globalization concerns "the intensified flows of capital, goods, people, images and discourses around the world" (p. 13). It includes the technological advances and interconnectedness of people around the world in a variety of sociocultural settings. Thus, the expansion of multinational companies (e.g., Starbucks, IKEA) to cultures that do not share the same sociocultural expectations (e.g., politeness norms, informality and deference) has influenced discursive practices and the ways in which people perceive and engage in transactional and interpersonal talk.

Globalization has also impacted our understanding of sociopragmatic variation. Sociopragmatics focuses on the study of discourse in a variety of sociocultural contexts. According to Márquez Reiter and Placencia (2004), sociopragmatics examines meaning in interaction; specifically, the aim of sociopragmatics is to "uncover the cultural norms which underlie the interactional features of a given social group in a given social context; that is to say, to make interactants' implicit sociocultural knowledge and values explicit" (p. 192). More

importantly, the factors that influence discursive practices may include the kind of store in which the encounter takes place (e.g., national or multinational stores, call centers, or open-air markets), the location of the site (a store in a rural vs. an urban community), the situation, and the degree of familiarity or lack thereof between the interlocutors (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; Félix-Brasdefer & Placencia, 2020).

Sifianou and Tzanne (2018) examined sociocultural discursive practices during the negotiation of service in three face-to-face service-encounter settings in Greece (total of 579 encounters): multinational chain stores (Benetton, Starbucks), Greek chain stores (Hondos Center, Plaisio), and independently owned local shops. Formality (74%) predominated across the three settings by means of the deferential V form used in offers of assistance, interrogatives, and imperatives. On the other hand, informality (26%) was realized by means of the diminutive and the informal pronoun of address T-form, and first names accompanied by formal V forms. T-forms, common in the small shops, were used by young employees to address a person of similar age or an older employee addressing a young customer. According to the authors, although service providers in Starbucks cafés prefer an informal style through referring to the customer by first name, this practice is viewed as inappropriate in the Greek socio-cultural context. The authors claim that “there seems to be no global adherence to a given script and thus interlocutors may change and reconstruct imported global discourse practices in ways that seem more appropriate for the specific socio-cultural context” (Sifianou & Tzanne, 2018, p. 167). Similar conclusions were reached by Isosävi & Lappalainen (2015) in Finnish and French Starbucks cafés. Bayyurt and Bayraktaroğlu (2001) analyzed variation of pronominal forms and vocatives in Turkish service encounters using a Discourse Completion Test with six situations. The selection of address forms varied according to the setting (e.g., open market, local shops, kiosks,

and two stores of high reputation and even higher price points), the degree of social distance between the seller and the buyer, and the socioeconomic level of the buyers. For example, the highest occurrence of pronouns and vocatives took place at the local grocery store and were less frequent at the fashion shop (higher socioeconomic level). Sociopragmatic variation was conditioned by the socioeconomic level of the shoppers and their degree of familiarity with the service providers: the familiar pronoun *T (Sen)* , was more frequent in the local shops, while the *V form (siz)* was the preferred form in the more affluent sites, such as in reputable supermarkets and fashion shops.

5. Computer-Mediated Discourse: Online service encounters in a global world

Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) studies language use in online interaction. In these interactions, participants interact through verbal language that is either typed on a keyboard and read on a computer screen, as is the norm for email, chat, Facebook, or negotiated through live video and audio (e.g., Skype). In their model of CMDA, Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) proposed four domains of language: structure, meaning, interaction, and social behavior. Of these, two (meaning and interaction) can be applied to the negotiation of online service. Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015) regard one or more ordered speech acts (e.g., a clarification question or a series of speech acts in an e-mail message) to be at the level of meaning. At the interactive level, sequences of speech acts are negotiated by means of “‘interactive exchanges’” by two or more participants (e.g., Skype [spoken discourse] or chat [written discourse]).

These levels of language can be applied to the analysis of the emerging genre of e-service encounters. Placencia (2015) examined the negotiation process of online service among native speakers of Spanish with regard to the address forms used during the online transaction. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2015) provided a programmatic agenda for the analysis of e-service encounters. Finally, Zahler (2016) offered a contrastive analysis of online personalads with regard to the speech act strategies used to request a personal encounter among users in Mexico City and London. The negotiation of e-service presents a rich research field since many current consumers prefer sales transactions conducted through internet sites such as *ebay*, *Vivastreet*, and as many department stores also offer online sales.

E-service encounters have been broadly defined as web-based services or interactive services that are delivered through online technology, such as a website. Given the emerging field of computer-mediated communication and the various ways to negotiate the online delivery of services, researchers focus on the discourse structure of the e-service encounter genre in modalities such as eBay, Amazon, Craigslist, Facebook, and of online sales in the context of internet retailing, particularly in Latin America, investigating sites such as Mercado Libre Ecuador and Argentina (Placencia, 2015; Powell & Placencia, 2020). Rowley (2006) offers a critical overview of e-service encounters in commercial and non-commercial settings. According to Rowley (2006), e-service is defined as deeds, efforts or performances whose delivery is mediated by information technology (including the Web, information kiosks and mobile devices). Such e-service includes the service element of e-tailing (“electronic retailing”), customer and service, and service delivery. Current research in e-service encounters includes the negotiation of meaning through online service in a variety of online environments; such research includes studies on including commercial and non-commercial interactions in web-mediated

service encounters SEs (e.g., Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2020), online buying and selling in a Mexican market through Facebook (Merino Hernández, 2020), e-commerce and selection of forms of address in Ecuadorian (Placencia, 2015) and Argentinean markets (Powell and Placencia, 2020), the negotiation of service through hyperlinks (Stommel & te Molder, 2015), and requests for service through personal ads in *Vivastreet* (Zahler, 2016). In these studies, Herring and Androutsopoulos' (2015) Computer-Mediated Discourse model is the predominant framework utilized to examine the e-service encounter discourse.

6. Methodological considerations

For the analysis of service encounter interactions, researchers predominantly rely on authentic data in face-to-face interactions and in online environments. Although audio-recorded methods predominate in the literature, video recording should also be considered to examine non-verbal actions during the negotiation of service. This is especially relevant when considering that various activities, such as the exchange of goodbyes we discussed earlier (Section 2.2) or the exchange of money, do not always require verbal communication and frequently (if not always) consist of non-verbal communicative elements (see also Antonopoulou, 2001). This, in turn, will not only help us to gain a more encompassing picture of how service encounters unfold, but will also provide evidence as to the applicability of the models that have been put forward and discussed above.

In addition to audio-recorded data, researchers should consider data triangulation to account for the unavoidable sources of error inherent to in the methods used (Márquez Reiter & Placencia, 2005; Schneider, 2018). One way of doing this is to conduct post-performance interviews to better establish the perception of service on the part of both the clerk and the

customer, or by playing the audio back to gauge the participants' or others' evaluations of service. Further, an ethnographic approach can help to identify discrepancies between what people say they do and what they actually do, as well as reveal unarticulated phenomena. Ethnography, despite being rarely used in service encounter research (cf. Márquez Reiter, 2011), offers a self-reflective element that is virtually absent in extant research on the subject. An ethnographically informed approach employed by Duranti (1997) allows the researcher's personal experience to describe and critique the very practices and experiences that the participants engage in or report having engaged in. Ethnography also accounts for the researcher's presence from a critical stance and helps to develop a 'thick' description of the lived experience of parties to commercial encounters. This, in turn, offers the potential to inform marketing and customer service research, thus giving pragmatic knowledge a practical applicability to service encounters.

7. Conclusion

This chapter offered an account of general topics related to service encounter interactions. Since the discourse of service encounters depends heavily on the research site, we reviewed the literature in three contexts, namely small stores, bars and cafés, and call centers. In addition to the negotiation of service in verbal interactions, we examined the discursive structure of online service encounters. We also looked at two types of talk that are embedded in service encounter interactions, namely transactional and interpersonal talk. Although most research has focused on the negotiation of the sales transaction (see Félix-Brasdefer, 2015, Chapter 2; Félix-Brasdefer & Placencia, 2020), the interpersonal dimension of talk reinforces the interpersonal links between the participants in many different ways and ensures a mutual agreement. Further,

the integrative approach to analyzing service encounters allows the researcher to examine different dimensions of service encounter interactions, including the analysis of transactional and interpersonal talk. The structure of service encounter discourse can be analyzed from both a top-down (generic structure) and bottom-up perspective (sequential structure and the organization of turn-taking). This model opens the door to examining pragmatic variation, including macro- (e.g., region, age, gender, socioeconomic class) and micro-social factors (e.g., situation, social power and distance) that impact communicative language use across languages and across varieties of a language (Schneider, 2020).

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