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The construction of requests in transactional settings: A discursive approach

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Introduction

This paper seeks to highlight the complexity and the negotiated character of request sequences in transactional settings. In contrast with received knowledge in classic pragmatic research, I will argue that performing requests in service encounters does not come down to the production of single speech acts, but consists in complex and co-constructed discourse processes. Drawing on authentic examples recently collected in a department store in Geneva, I will try to show that request sequences play a crucial role in client assistant communication, and that the successful outcome of the whole encounter is in part determined by the interactants discursive ability to frame a shared representation of a transactional topic. Aligning myself with certain psycho-social perspectives on discourse analysis, I will propose that a fine-grained description of text and talk produced by workers be regarded as a powerful means for analyzing complex professional practices.

In order to do so, I will mention some theoretical and methodological contributions regarding discourse analysis and workplace studies, before turning to a more detailed analysis of service encounters in general, and request sequences in particular.


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Discourse practices and the new work order

The “discursive turn” in workplace studies

The structure of our modern societies is currently undergoing significant changes. The globalization of the economy as well as the rapid development of technologies have for instance deeply reorganized the domain of services as well as that of the industry, so that it is now quite common to refer to such a post-taylorian organization of work as “the new work order” (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996).

In a largely service-oriented economy, the “human factor” is often considered as becoming a key element in the construction of efficient and competitive managerial strategies. Indeed, from the perspective of the enterprise, the emergence of a new work order has clearly contributed to redefine the abilities expected from the part of the workers. For instance, according to various authors (Clot 1999; Kergoat et al. 1998), modern workplaces require much more than a strict accomplishment of predefined tasks. In addition to particular skills associated with all sorts of new work practices (ex. coping with communication technologies), workers are now expected to be more and more flexible, creative and capable of coordinating their own tasks with other partners.

In various ways, such profound changes in the organization of the enterprise have had a very interesting impact on discourse practices. As mentioned by Boulet (1995, 1998) and others, it seems that the emergence of a new work order is associated with the growing importance of language use in the workplace. In a context dominated by highly powerful technologies, the transmission of information plays a crucial role, and even the physical transformations of goods become more and more mediated by symbolic means (ex. screens, computers, robots, etc.). Consequently, as noted by Gunnarsson, Linell and Nordhagen (1997: 1), it is not only the traditional academic professions, such as teachers, doctors or lawyers, that rely on writing and speaking skills: “language has become one of the most important tools of...”

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In response to the growing influence of communication on the functioning of various institutional settings, workplace studies have recently begun to question the specific role of discourse practices in the construction of professional tasks (see Boden 1994; Sarangi and Roberts 1999). Accomplishing what has sometimes been referred to as a “discursive turn”, they have progressively taken into account the linguistic implications of acting in the workplace. From the perspective of professionals, such a reorientation of the domain of analysis has incontestably led to new methodological and theoretical needs: faced with the necessity to account for the complexity of semiotic realities, workplace studies are progressively turning towards language sciences in order to include a fine-grained description of talk, text and interaction.

The “action turn” in discourse analysis

If such a rapprochement between workplace studies and linguistic research has been possible, it is above all because of the deep transformations that have taken place within the field of language sciences as a whole. Without going into a detailed historical presentation of those transformations (see Roulet, Filliettaz and Grobet 2001: chap. 1), it is useful to mention that most of the disciplines belonging to what has sometimes been referred to as “macro-pragmatics” (Mey 1993) or “social discourse analysis” (Van Dijk 1997a and b) do not restrict their scope to the description of linguistic systems, but aim to account for the complexity of situated discourse practices. More specifically, the growing development of currents of thought such as for instance conversational analysis, critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995), mediated discourse analysis (Scollon 2001), interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1999), modular discourse analysis (Roulet, Filliettaz and Grobet 2001; Filliettaz and Roulet forthcoming), to quote a few, attest that contemporary linguistic research is deeply concerned with the description of actual language use occurring in everyday life or in work-related settings.

Despite significant nuances between the various disciplines mentioned above, a set of epistemological and theoretical orientations may be considered as common features amongst linguists studying text or talk in the workplace.
For instance, it seems noteworthy that recent trends in discourse analysis have clearly contributed to clarifying the conceptual domain of social action. As mentioned by van Dijk (1997a and b), Scollon (2000, 2001) and others, actual language use should be described not only as abstract semiotic forms, but also in terms of the social actions accomplished by agents belonging to specific sociocultural communities.

From the perspective of such an "action turn" (Vervaat 1997), discourse practices are not seen any more as decontextualized linguistic structures, but they are inextricably linked with the social practices in which they are embedded. Consequently, analyzing language use implies the recognition of a complex and "dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it" (Wodak 1997: 173): on the one hand, talk is shaped by social action in the sense that it is interpreted and described in relation to specific contexts. And on the other hand, it shapes that context by coordinating joint projects (Clark 1996), aligning identities and roles (Zimmerman 1998, Hall, Sarangi and Stemkouck 1999, Burgess 2001, Burg and Fillietruz forthcoming), reproducing ideologies (van Dijk 1998), transforming social representations (van Dijk 1990) or even organizing mental structures (Harre and Gillet 1994). It is in this sense that texts or talks may be seen as empirical expressions of psycho-social realities that go far beyond the construction of lexico-syntactic structures.

As they have stressed the dynamic and constitutive role of discourse practices in structuring areas of social life, discourse analysts progressively proposed what can be seen as a "thick description" of language use, namely a description that "reaches down to the level of fine-grained linguistic analysis and up and out to broader ethnographic description and wider political and ideological accounts" (Sarangi and Roberts 1999: 1). In various ways, such a broad approach to language use has clearly contributed to redefine the position of the linguist not only as an academician, but also as a potential partner of the enterprise. In contrast with traditional application from theory to practice, new forms of applied linguistics are currently being developed, in which the discourse analyst is not only doing research on work-related settings, but takes part in a joint problematization involving other professionals. From this perspective, action-related research clearly implies more than a mere application of discourse tools to the description of work-related settings: it consists in what Sarangi and Roberts (1999: 473) call a "practical relevance".

In what follows, I would like to illustrate some aspects of the interplay between discourse realities and professional practices. In order to do so, I will focus on the analysis of a specific work-related setting – that of service encounters – and sketch a description of one of its most relevant discursive episodes, namely the negotiation of requests.

A discursive analysis of service encounters

The selling of goods or the provision of a service in public settings cannot be regarded in themselves as new work practices. Nevertheless, they consist in the performance of a vast array of specific tasks, most of them being mediated by talk or text. Assuming the position of a shop assistant, for instance, requires an ability to advise clients, to facilitate their choices, to coordinate with other colleagues, to place phone calls, to find specific information in catalogues or other various semiotic supports. Usually, most of the "frontstage" or "backstage" activities the assistants engage in are being carried out through communicational means. From this standpoint, public service encounters turn out to be a very relevant domain of investigation for the questions under analysis in this conference, since they may help to illustrate the importance of discursive practices in the construction of professional skills and abilities.

Moreover, in a highly competitive economic context, the constant improvement of "service quality" plays a vital role, and presupposes a detailed account of the complex tasks assumed by shop assistants, as well as a "thick description" of the discourse practices they are engaged in.

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3 We now have a first impression of a crucial dimension of discourse analysis, namely the fact that discourse should be studied not only as form, meaning and mental process, but also as complex structures and hierarchies of interaction and social practice and their functions in context, society and culture." (van Dijk 1997b: 6).

4 Scollon (2000: 5) mentions a "principle of social action" stating that "Discourse is best conceived as a matter of social actions, not as systems of representation or thought or values".

5 Sarangi and Roberts (1999: 473) refer to a taxonomy distinguishing "research on", "research for" and "research with".
Quite surprisingly, when we consider the empirical data analyzed by discourse analysis in a work-oriented perspective, it clearly appears that the domain of public service encounters has been given little attention. Of course, there have been significant contributions to the description of client-server communication in different disciplinary fields like conversational analysis (Aston 1988, Ylänne-McEwen 1996) or systemic linguistics (Ventola 1987), and these publications constitute a significant source of new insights for the analysis of service encounters taking place in bookshops, travel agencies or post offices. But in fact, they result in isolated approaches, in comparison with the large amount of research that has been carried out on education, social care, law, media or health institutions.

To sum up, it seems that the complexity of service encounters has been largely underestimated (see Aston 1988), and that a comprehensive look at the discourse practices engaging professional sellers or assistants could inform in the end a better description of the actions taking place in transactional settings.

Global issues

The results I'm presenting here are part of a larger research project currently being carried out in the department of linguistics at the University of Geneva, and supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation. This two-year project is devoted to a systematic analysis of service encounters and develops a broad discourse analytical approach for the description of verbal interactions taking place in transactional settings.

More specifically, the issues under analysis can be summarized through the following questions:

- What sorts of underlying expectations are framing service encounters and how are these expectations related to discourse realities? In a very broad sense, such a perspective assumes the socio-historical nature of human "practices" and focuses on the complex set of knowledge implicated in language use: knowledge about social events (what is a service encounter?), knowledge about role identities (what kind of contribution is expected from an assistant or a client?), knowledge about objects or abstract notions (what is a book, a fuse or a backpack?), etc. (see van Dijk 2001).

- How are these schematic underlying expectations negotiated in specific situated interactions? How are assistants and clients constructing a rational interactional space that gives meaning to their reciprocal commitment (Fillitétaz 2001)? How are they conducting joint projects and coordinating their participatory actions in order to perform the various episodes expected in such transactions (e.g., making contact – identifying a need – satisfying the need – ending the encounter).

- To what extent are such joint actions mediated by discourse practices? In what sense do conversational processes enable or facilitate the negotiation of service encounters? How can a fine-grained analysis of semiotic realities inform a comprehensive description of complex professional practices?

The set of questions mentioned above are but a few examples that illustrate the "thick description" we aim at when we are to consider the organization of talk in transactional settings. They make it explicit that in order to describe discourse mediated practices such as service encounters, special attention should be paid not only to language and textual features, but also to the psychological and social factors that are shaping verbal interactions.

The data

The data used in my analysis is extracted from a large corpus of service encounters that were audio-recorded in a department store in Geneva during the spring of 2001. One of the aims of this data collection was to gather sufficient empirical evidence in order to understand how assistants and clients are coordinating their actions in the context of encounters referring to goods associated with complex technical knowledge. This is the reason why I focused on three specific settings: a) the sports department b) the electronic department c) the do-it-yourself and gardening department.

In the shopping center I had access to, these three sections were located in separate places, and each one was managed by distinct teams of workers. Apart from the managers, two main groups of professionals were basically working in such places: cashiers, who were posted at the exit of each store:
and assistants, whose tasks were considerably more complex, since they had to stow goods on the display shelves as well as to advise clients or help them to find their way inside the store. Assistants had participated in specific training programs and were experts in the technical domain they were responsible for. Moreover, inside each department, assistants presented complementary abilities and developed expertise in various technical subdomains. For instance, in the do-it-yourself department, one assistant was specifically in charge of painting goods; another was responsible for the gardening section; and two others had special skills in electricity.

While they interacted with clients, assistants were frequently moving from a place to another, which raised technical constraints for data collection. In order to allow place shifting, a light recording device was used, consisting of a pocket-MiniDisc and a microphone fixed on the assistants’ shirt. Additional notes resulting from detailed participant observation enabled to capture non-verbal information and to enrich data collection.

With the consent of the participants, I audio-recorded about 35 hours of assistants-clients interaction between May and July 2001, which corresponds to a corpus of more than 350 complete service encounters in French. Each recording session lasted about 75 minutes, during which the assistant was asked to do his job freely.

As shown in the table below, equal attention was paid to each section of the store, and a plurality of assistants was involved:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Number of MiniDiscs</th>
<th>Number of Assistants</th>
<th>Number of encounters</th>
<th>ex. goods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports Department</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>walking boots, sports clothes, running shoes, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Department</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>Hi-Fi, computers, household appliances, telephones, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do-it-yourself + Gardening Department</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>painting goods, gardening tools, tapis, hardware, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By now, the MiniDiscs have been transferred on CD-ROMs and their content is currently being systematically transcribed.

Negotiating requests in transactional settings

In this paper, I will narrow down my interest on specific episodes of service encounters, namely request sequences. Strongly mediated by semiotic means, such episodes constitute very interesting discourse practices for observing how language use helps social actors to coordinate their joint projects in work-related settings.

In fact, requests play a crucial role in the construction of service encounters. Most of the encounters between assistants and customers revolve around one or more customer requests – for specific goods, information or advice – and such discourse practices seem to be part of the underlying expectations framing transactional settings.

Moreover, negotiating requests helps the interacting agents framing a joint project, circumscribing a domain of background knowledge and aligning interrelated role identities like “being a client” – “being an assistant”. From this perspective, such discourse practices function as critical episodes in framing social activities in general, and service encounters in particular.

In order to illustrate the complex semiotic organization of request sequences and their substantial contribution to the construction of professional practices, I will now turn to a detailed analysis of one particular excerpt from my corpus.

The excerpt transcribed here refers to a section of service encounter recorded in the do-it-yourself department in July 2001. It is extracted from a four minutes long interaction between a 30-years-old male client (C) and a 25-years-old female assistant (A). After having successfully negotiated a first transactional topic, the client initiates a second request:

Corpus Geneva-2001: M-B-1, transaction Nbre 13 (1'35")

... sinon il me faudrait encore .c rh C'est des sortes d'ampoules dans lesquelles on met les fusibles . pour c rh ben pour qu'ils tiennent . c rh : I would also need . cr: they are some kinds of bulbs where you insert the fuses . so that they er stay in place . cr: :

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7 I use the following transcription notations: (.) (.) indicate appropriately timed pauses; (;) indicate that the syllable is lengthened, and underlining indicates overlapping talk.
Requests as complex discourse practices

The first point that should be mentioned here is the considerable discursive complexity associated with the construction of the client’s request. As shown by the transcript, determining the object of transaction cannot be satisfied by an isolated directive speech act performed by a single speaker. Rather, such a determination results from various discursive contributions from both interactants. The client tries to enrich his initial request (C1) by performing additional comments and explanations (C2, C3, C4). Similarly, the assistant tries to circumscribe the client’s needs by requesting additional information (A1) and initiating clarification sequences.

(A2). As a result, eight turns at talk are being produced until the request appears as sufficiently specified and reaches an acceptable “pragmatic completeness”. This example therefore emblematically illustrates the necessity of conceptualizing requests not only as specific subtypes of speech acts, but also as complex discourse practices jointly negotiated by the interacting agents.

Framing requests

Another interesting phenomenon about this short excerpt is that despite considerable effort devoted to the construction of a detailed representation of the transactional topic, we have the intuition as analysts that there is something “falling” in that section of the encounter. Indeed, the perception we get from the excerpt above is that participants feel rather ill at ease and come against serious difficulties in conducting this request sequence. The client is obviously unable to express an accessible representation of the object he refers to. And similarly, the assistant has little complementary information to offer in order to help him specify his request. Consequently, the interacting agents seem to face problems in framing the discourse practice they are engaged in.

But in order to present evidence for such an intuitive perception, one has to turn to a detailed description of the discursive contributions presented by the client and the assistant. I will now carry out such an analysis and illustrate how a fine-grained study of talk may inform a description of the rather unusual way this particular request sequence is being initiated and conducted.

Properties of the client’s talk

If we analyze carefully the discursive contribution of the client to the request sequence, it is obvious that it clearly manifests traces of uncertainty. This effect of uncertainty can be characterized at various levels of discourse organization.

Hesitation markers

The client’s talk entails a wide set of hesitation markers that range from syntactic cues to prosodic phenomena. At a linguistic level, it is noteworthy that many syntactic units are not being completed by the client. As shown
In the following example, a certain number of propositions are interrupted and reformulated without reaching syntactic completeness:

C3: euh oui mais là il y a le le ça c’est carrément le fusible. / c’est juste le . / je l’ai pris là / non je l’ai pas pris . / euh: on met un petit fusible dedans <mhm> les fusibles ils sont où d’ailleurs / je vais en acheter aussi err par but here there is / that’s really the whole fuse / it’s just the / I took it with me / , no I didn’t / er: you insert a small fuse in it <mhm> and the fuse where are they by the way / I will need to buy some as well

As indicated by the underlined portions of talk, the client often omits to specify complements to verbs or other syntactic constituents. And the frequency of such linguistic phenomena contributes to reinforce an effect of uncertainty in framing the request.

Prosodic elements like pauses and gap fillers tend to confirm this analysis. These cues seem particularly present in the first turn taken by the client:

C1: sinon il me faudrait encore , euh: c’est des sortes d’ampoules dans lesquelles on met les fusibles . pour euh ben pour qu’ils tiennent , euh: I would also need, er: they are some kinds of bulbs where you insert the fuses , so that they er stay in place err:

The frequent pauses (indicated by points) and fillers like “er: “ can be seen as hesitation markers and tend to reinforce the effect of uncertainty manifested in the client’s talk.

**Topical approximation and stagnation**

In addition to linguistic and prosodic hesitation markers, the discursive contribution of the client is characterized by a rather unclear definition of the topical anchorage point. In fact the client encounters serious difficulties in defining the object he is attempting to refer to.

This difficulty is perceptible first in the circumslocutions he uses in order to present his request. Instead of detailed and technical terms, he uses complex and vague expressions like (they are some kinds of bulbs where you insert the fuses so that they er stay in place).

This effect of vagueness is linguistically reinforced, first by frequent modal expressions such as “sortes de ...” (sorts of kinds of), and second by lexical items that bear little informational content: “sortes de trucs” (sorts of things).

And finally, it should be mentioned that such a topical approximation is coupled with an effect of informational stagnation. Despite four successive attempts to achieve a detailed delimitation of the transactional object, the client basically repeats the same propositions:

C1: […] c’est des sortes d’ampoules dans lesquelles on met les fusibles . pour euh ben pour qu’ils tiennent , euh: they are some kinds of bulbs where you insert the fuses so that they er stay in place err:

C2: […] on a on un fusible dans une sorte je sais pas comment ça s’appelle on visse dedans it’s a fuse in a sort of I don’t know what it’s called you screw it in

C3: […] on met un petit fusible dedans you insert a small fuse in it

C4: […] on met ça dans les . <causal> des sortes de trucs à visser quoi these ones you put them into <causal> the kind of things you screw in

Indeed, if one compares these four successive expressions referring to the topic, it is noteworthy that very little new information enables the assistant to enrich a conceptual representation of the needed object.

**Metadiscursive comments**

Metadiscursive information obviously also play an important role in the perception of uncertainty manifested in the client’s contribution. At different occasions in his explanations, and particularly in his second and forth turns, the client performs side comments that explicitly indicate the difficulties he is going through:

C2 + C4: […] je sais pas comment ça s’appelle I don’t know what it’s called

**Praxeological interruptions**

As pointed earlier, interruptions are expressed on a linguistic level through syntactic incompleteness, and on a textual one through metadiscursive side comments. But in other occasions, interruptions also affect the praxeological structure of discourse organization, namely the level concerned with the construction of episodes composing joint projects. This point can be first illustrated in the client’s third turn, when he suddenly seems to abandon his explanation strategy and checks if he has taken the needed item with him:

C3: euh oui mais là il y a le le ça c’est carrément le fusible . c’est juste le . je l’ai pris là non je l’ai pas pris . euh: on met un petit fusible dedans <mhm> les fusibles ils sont où d’ailleurs je vais en acheter aussi
Another interruption can be identified in this same turn, when the client asks for the fuses and seems to reorient his request towards another transactional topic. Even if such praxeological interruptions only affect momentarily the negotiation of the joint project and never reorient its deep goals, it should be mentioned that they slow down the construction of the request sequence and reinforce the effect of uncertainty manifested in the client’s participation.

Obviously, these various linguistic, textual and situational properties of the client’s talk deeply affect the way this particular request sequence is being initiated and conducted. Therefore, a fine-grained discursive analysis confirms that the client is hard pressed to take topic control and fails to make his request sufficiently accessible.

Properties of the assistant’s talk

At this point, it is also crucially important to take into account the assistant’s contribution to the joint construction of the request sequence, and to observe carefully how she responds to the difficulties manifested by the client.

Interactional disengagement

Despite the performance of numerous back-channel signals, the assistant is hard pressed to take an active part in the interactional process. She produces for instance very short turns in comparison with her interlocutor, and sometimes voluntarily leaves the floor to the client. This effect of interactional disengagement is particularly visible at the end of the client’s first turn, when the speech-exchange process seems to face certain difficulties:

C1: sinon il me faudrait encore. euh: c’est des sortes d’amphoules dans lesquelles on met les fusibles, pour eux ben pour qu’ils tiennent. euh::: I would also need. er: they are some kinds of bulbs where you insert the fuse. so thus they or stay in place. er::<br>
A1: mais mais quais<br>yeah yeah yeah

If we look carefully at the end of the client’s turn, it appears that a possible transition point is clearly signaled by the speaker. Indeed, the syntactic completeness coupled with prosodic cues like the low pitch, the short pause and the filler “euh:” seem to indicate that the client is willing to leave the floor to the next speaker. But as indicated in the transcript, the assistant doesn’t really take in charge the next turn. Rather, she produces continuers (yeah yeah yeah) and invites the client to carry on with his explanations.

Indexical reference

But after the client’s second attempt to frame an accessible representation of the transactional topic, the assistant starts playing a more conductive role in the interactional process. By initiating a clarification sequence (is it some kind of stuff like that?), she tries to help him identify the object he is referring to. But it is interesting to note that her clarification request consists in a distinct strategy from the perspective of the construction of reference: whereas the client proceeds to an abstract explanation whose referential domain is distinct from the universe in which the discourse takes place (a sort of bulb, a fuse, etc.), the assistant mentions elements that are accessible in the interactants’ immediate environment. On the lexical level, the structuring function of the immediate environment in the construction of reference can be emblematized illustrated by the frequency of indexical expressions in the assistant’s second turn:

A2: c’est c’est ce genre- là comme ça?<br>is it some kind of stuff like that?

Praxeological reorientation

In the final step of the construction of this brief sequence, the assistant explicitly admits her limited competence in the technical sub-domain concerned by the client’s request:

A4: OK je vais je vais aller chercher mon collègue qui est doué en électricité parce que moi c’est plutôt OK. I’m going to ask my colleague who knows about electricity because I’m more

In doing so, she confesses her trouble and initiates another praxeological reorientation: rather than responding to the client’s request by herself, she turns towards a colleague and therefore delays the satisfactory outcome of the transactional episode.

Taking into account the assistant’s discursive contribution to the service encounter can lead to a better understanding of the rather unusual way this request sequence is being carried out. Indeed, a close look at the properties
of the assistant’s talk seems to indicate that she tries to conduct “supportive strategies” without being completely successful. In fact, she fails to find comprehensive solutions and she is unable to assume the role of advisor associated with her situated identity.

To sum up, it appears that the perception of “failure” we get from this particular request sequence is linked with a problem of framing and identity alignment. As confirmed by a detailed discursive analysis, a mismatch seems to occur between the underlying expectations associated with distinct and interdependent role identities (being a client – being an assistant) and the actual discursive contributions presented by the interacting agents in the present example.

Concluding comments

In the present paper, I aimed to describe requests as complex and co-constructed discourse sequences. In doing so, I illustrated how social practices associated with underlying constraints and expectations are being jointly negotiated in transactional settings, and how discourse helps agents to shape institutionalized positional roles.

What does this analysis of service encounters and request sequences bring to the general issues discussed in the present conference? In order to answer that complex question, I will consider in turn the contributions of the illustration above to discourse analysis first, and finally to the domain of workplace studies.

From a discourse analytical perspective, this case study emblematistically illustrates that theories of discourse need to examine semiotic realities in the light of the social practices in which they take place. But obviously, such a “thick description” implies more than a fine-grained linguistic analysis coupled with broader ethnographic considerations. Rather, carrying out a “thick description” of discourse practices requires an in-depth approach to the domain of social actions. From the perspective of theories of action, the description of this particular request sequence points to the complexity of interactive social practices. Mediated by general cultural expectations, but necessarily negotiated in specific situations, joint actions do not come down to predetermined sets of scripted conducts. Nor should they be described satisfactorily as strictly emergent processes. Rather, they can be best analyzed as a combination of both typified social knowledge and interpersonal negotiation. Following Gumperz’s remarks on “interactional sociolinguistics”, it appears that beyond deep theoretical divisions and a clear-cut delimitation between “habitus-oriented” research and more constructivist approaches, new ways of describing joint actions should be developed, that focus on communicative practices as “the real world site where societal and interactive forces merge” (Gumperz 1999: 454).

And finally, from the perspective of workplace studies, the empirically oriented analysis I proposed has contributed to highlight the complexity of one specific professional practice and the vast array of abilities required by the individuals who take part in service encounters. As I tried to illustrate, the complexity of the tasks assumed by assistants results from the large amount of technical knowledge they are supposed to have with the clients, and from the necessity they face to adapt properly to the role identities framed by their interlocutors. If we consider that professional and client identities are constructed through acts attending to discourse practices, it appears that a detailed analysis of talk constitutes a substantial methodological cue for understanding the functioning of professional settings. This is what I attempted to point out in this case study, by describing how discourse structure itself relates to the interaction process and how it affects the ways agents are framing context.

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