

Lesson 15

Reading Material

Service encounters

A **service encounter** is the term used to describe a wide range of conversations whose principal purpose is transactional. These, therefore, are conversations where people want to get things done.

Activity

Read the following transcription. Decide what is happening here.

Text: Eating out

ELIZABETH: um is that coleslaw in the middle there?	ELIZABETH: can I have a cup of coffee as well?
ASSISTANT: it is yes	ASSISTANT: with milk?
ELIZABETH: I'll have that then please (1)	ELIZABETH: please yes (3) I do (.) I do like scones (.) it's my treat on Friday to have a scone (3) thank you (.) we'll come back for pudding shall we?
JENNY: I'll have a bread roll please (.) got to have bread haven't I?	JENNY: yeah
ELIZABETH: (laughs) (2) that's lovely thank you	
...	

Commentary

This is obviously a transaction that's taking place in a café or restaurant of some sort. In fact, the conversation takes place between two women in their thirties, going to lunch together. Brown and Yule (1983) have described conversation as being either transactional – language used to exchange goods or services – or interactional – language used for socialising – and the language in this conversation is obviously used for transactional purposes. In this case, that means the language is used to ensure that the customers, Elizabeth and Jenny, get the food and drink they want from the assistant. This kind of transaction, where requests for service are made by one person to another, has been called a service encounter. Eija Ventola (1987) identified the elements that are obligatory in a service encounter as being:

- Ⓐ an offer of service;
- Ⓑ a request for service;
- Ⓒ a transaction;
- Ⓓ a salutation.

Can you find these elements in the above transcription? They are fairly easy to find. The assistant confirms coleslaw is on offer. She is then asked for it, 'I'll have that then please', and a transaction takes place. The end of the transaction is marked by the words 'thank you', in the phrase 'that's lovely thank you'. Although this is transactional language, the speakers still use the politeness features of 'please' and 'thank you' to interact and to show respect for the individuals concerned in the transaction. At the end of the conversation, too, Elizabeth's final utterance shows an interesting mixture of language. Even while a transaction is taking place, Elizabeth uses language in an interactional way to pass on personal information when she says 'I do (.) I do like scones (.) it's my treat on a Friday to have a scone'.

Activity

The following transcription is of a conversation that took place between a housewife in her forties and a door-to-door salesman, probably in his early twenties. The salesman has called at the door with a bag full of household goods, such as dusters and dishcloths. He is displaying the goods to the housewife in an attempt to sell them to her. She is investigating what he has to offer before agreeing to purchase something. Read the transcription and answer the following questions:

- 1 What questions does the housewife ask and why?
- 2 What examples of ellipsis and context-dependent language can you find? Why are they present?
- 3 How are discourse markers used here?
- 4 What signals the completion of the transaction?
- 5 What features of dialect can you find?

Text: The door-to-door salesman

SALESMAN: anyway, there's yellow dusters er dishcloths um oven gloves is like them ones and them ones er there's demist pads (.) there's gentlemen's socks er Ken Dodd tickle sticks um

HOUSEWIFE: it's a weird assortment of things in't it?

SALESMAN: yeah there's hankies (.) well there's men's and then there's ladies' hankies as well right we got super scissors you can use these for flowers for cutting food and they've got like a wire stripper on as well

HOUSEWIFE: yeah

SALESMAN: um (4) then (.) also (.) this is like (.) got all sorts of different bits in (.) if you have an accident

HOUSEWIFE: yeah

SALESMAN: but (.) uh (.) it's not very optimistic is it if (.) I mean I suppose it's always there if you need them (.) uh (.) anyway there's chamois leathers like different types sponge mitts

HOUSEWIFE: it's a what?

SALESMAN: sponge mitts that goes on your hands for washing stuff and then super chamois (.) uh (.) them are reduced from marked price them ones

HOUSEWIFE: how much are they then?

SALESMAN: uh supposed to be eight ninety nine but they're two quid off (.) you can put them in washer

HOUSEWIFE: they'll still be six ninety nine wouldn't they?

SALESMAN: yeah

HOUSEWIFE: yeah okay (*inaudible*)

SALESMAN: um (.) and then we got dishcloths (.) floor and

HOUSEWIFE: how much is the sponge mitts?

SALESMAN: ah three ninety-nine

HOUSEWIFE: they're not very cheap then are they?

SALESMAN: I don't know love cos I don't

HOUSEWIFE: and how much is this thing here?

SALESMAN: um cheaper them (.) them are two ninety-nine

HOUSEWIFE: oh (.) I don't know

SALESMAN: you can use (.) them like for (.) in well wet and dry as well

HOUSEWIFE: for what?

SALESMAN: wet and dry (.) you can use them for taking condensation off and like putting soap on

HOUSEWIFE: okay I'll buy one of those thank you

Commentary

The housewife basically asks questions for different reasons. First, she asks questions when she needs information: 'it's a what?' and 'for what?' indicate that she hasn't understood something the salesman has said. 'It's a what?' indicates that she hasn't understood his term 'sponge mitts'. 'For what?' means she hasn't understood how they can be used wet and dry and needs an explanation. Obviously, there are questions, too, that ask for simple information about price, such as 'how much is the sponge mitts?'

Some questions seem to stem almost from a desire to draw some conclusions and pull together what information has been given. 'How much are they then?' comes after a declaration that the chamois have been reduced. The tag question, 'they're not very cheap then are they?', goes one stage further. It draws a not very flattering conclusion – that the sponge mitts are not cheap and stresses this with the word 'then'.

In fact, three times in the conversation, tag questions appear after negative evaluation: 'it's a weird assortment of things isn't it?', 'they'll still be six ninety-nine wouldn't they?', and, as already mentioned, 'they're not very cheap then are they?' The tag question appears to be used, therefore, as a device to soften the challenge of a negative statement.

Much of the conversation is concerned with pointing out and explaining what items the salesman has on offer. Because the items are obviously on display to both parties, there is a lot of deictic language such as 'them ones' and 'this'. The hardest part of the transcription to understand is the section 'this is like (.) got all sorts of different bits in (.) if you have an accident'. The vague language, 'all sorts of different bits', isn't clear, though the word 'this' obviously shows the salesman pointing to what, in fact, is an emergency medical kit.

It could be argued that 'then' mentioned previously acts as an discourse marker, showing a conclusion or summary. There is a series of other discourse markers, such as 'anyway', 'well', 'right' and 'and then'. 'Well', 'and then' and 'right' are used to separate out the individual items that the salesman has on offer, in, for example, the utterance 'well there's men's and then there's ladies' hankies as well right we got super scissors . . .'. After talking about the medical kit, 'anyway' marks a return from this discussion to the proper business of the conversation which is to introduce and sell the items in his bag.

The end of the transaction is obvious. The housewife's speech has already overlapped the salesman's several times as she increasingly seems to be impatient to bring the conversation to its end. The final utterance starts with an 'okay' which signals her decision, 'I'll buy one of these'.

'Thank you' is a final, polite way of closing the deal.

Many grammatical features show that the salesman is not just using colloquial language, but is also speaking in dialect. 'Them', for example, appears in 'them ones', and 'them are two ninety-nine', instead of the more standard 'those'. The term of address 'love' also reflects a common way of addressing strangers in that area.

Summary

- ⊗ A service encounter means a transaction takes place.
- ⊗ Ellipsis and deictic language are usually present.
- ⊗ Discourse markers organise the structure.

Learning encounters

We have already looked briefly at this particular conversation genre in Unit three on structure. The main characteristics for this genre are:

- ⊗ The teacher takes most turns.
- ⊗ The teacher's turns are longer than the students'.
- ⊗ The structure is based on adjacency triplets or exchanges (initiation, response and feedback).
- ⊗ Discourse markers are used by the teacher to signpost the structure of the conversation.
- ⊗ The teacher reformulates, summarises and evaluates what the students say.
- ⊗ The students' answers are usually short and elliptical.
- ⊗ The teacher uses 'known answer' or 'display' questions (i.e. questions to which they already know the answer).

Activity

Two transcriptions follow: one of a politics lesson, one of a philosophy lesson. Both lessons took place in two separate A-level classes in a sixth form college. The classes are mixed, but the gender of the student has not been indicated in the first transcription. The teacher in the politics lesson is female and in her early forties. The teacher in the second transcription is male, in his early thirties. Examine the two transcriptions for the features of the genre and use your answers to compare and contrast the way the two lessons work.