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## **Linguistic Aspects in Asymmetrical Institutional Interaction – Call Center Case**

In institutional communications, the roles of participants were determined by institutional frame, and distribution of interactional power was asymmetrical. This work investigates by a case study if interaction between the call center operators and clients can have asymmetrical features. Turn taking organization, overall structural organization of the interaction, sequence organization, turn design, lexical choice, epistemological and other forms of asymmetry were considered. Interruption, enforcing explicitness, controlling topic and formulation were marked in analyzed interactions for instrumental achieving of domination.

*Key words:*

asymmetry,  
institutional talk,  
discourse analysis,  
conversation  
analysis, call center,  
power, interaction

### **1. Asymmetrical Institutional Communications and their Place in Contemporary Research of Language**

Roles of participants in institutional communications are defined by the norms of that institution. Such are communications between patient and doctor, judge and defendant, teacher and pupil, journalist and interviewee, etc. Unlike everyday conversation in institutional communications there is no structure in which everyone can do everything. Turn taking is predefined and determines contribution in interaction. Power of interaction is distributed unequally/asymmetrically. Collocutors that are more powerful dominate over shift alterations, their duration and theme of conversation.

*Sociolinguistics, pragmalinguistics, ethnomethodology or (critical) analysis of discourse?*

Central theme of sociolinguistics has been the relationship of social structure and linguistics and communicational selections of speaker since the early sixties of the last century. The study of language in its use inseparably of the social community and taking into account other anthropological and cultural factors were

developed in ethnography of communication of Dell Hymes (Hymes 1974) and interactive sociolinguistics of John Gumperz (Gumperz 1982). Institutional communications are interlaced also with researches of pragmalinguistics since the “linguistic pragmatics researches all kinds of linguistics use; its adequacy, as well as mutual understanding of speakers” (Stević 1997, 7). Instruments of Sacks and Schegloff are starting points for analysis of institutional interactions, already developed within ethnomethodology, since the structure of conversation, aspects of sequence and turn taking are the basic aspects of every communicational exchange. We cannot differentiate completely the analysis of conversation from the discourse analysis researching complexes greater than sentence, and linguistic forms are researched by relating them with goals or functions they perform, where the functional aspect (context, linguistic action, participants, mutual relations and similar) precedes the structural aspect (Stević 1997, 7). Asymmetry in distribution of power, inequality of communicational rights and obligations and relation between interaction power and linguistic selection of collocutors in “unequal encounter” (Fairclough 2001, 36) are researched also through the prism of critical discourse analysis.

Regarding the institutional interactions, communications at court (Atkinson and Drew 1979), newspaper interviews (Greatbatch 1988, 401–430; Heritage and Greatbatch 1991, 93–137), classroom interactions (McHoul 1978, 183–213) and context of therapy counseling (Peräkylä, 1995) were researched the most intensely. A common thing in these researches is that they were limited firstly to researching the organization of turn taking, i.e. limited ways for words takeover.

## **2. Case Study: Interaction Between Operators and Clients in Call Center**

### *2.1. Previous researches*

During the last several years, especially with moving organizational units of multinational companies to newly industrialized countries like India, Philippines and South Africa, the communication between an operator in the call center and a client has become an interesting research field in sociology, economics, information technologies (Forey and Hood 2008, 389–409), etc. Verbal competence of employees and neutralization of foreign accent of employees (Cowie 2007, 331–345) are being researched within the applied linguistics, as well as the recognition of problematic phases in the interaction (Forey and Lockwood 2007, 308–326). Regarding the applied methods, there are two approaches. A method based on corpus linguistics researches frequencies and distribution of a specific linguistic phenomenon (Svenja et al. 2004, 9–28), while the ethno methodologists examine particulate utterances in distinctive local context (Stević 1997, 18).

### *2.2. Context, subject and goal of research*

Belgrade company “Beogas” deals with gas installations and gas distribution to households, industrial and administrative clients in several municipalities in Belgrade. There is a modern call center within the marketing and sales department

for direct telephone conversation between operators of the company and clients regarding gas installations or claims.

Our intention is to establish if the interaction in the call center can have attributes of asymmetrical institutional interaction and which linguistic phenomena influence the asymmetry (e.g. interruption, enforcing explicitness, topic control, formulation).

The scientific goal of the research is scientific description and scientific typology in the sense of establishing typical structures of such type of communication. Regarding the type, it is a verificatory research, since the goal is to check if asymmetrical structure of institutional interaction can be applied to interaction at call center.

The social goal of research is denoting social obstacles that are put in communication in front of a client who is trying to obtain missing information at the call center. Such researches may have the key role in entrepreneurship, i.e. in marketing and organization of a company, since they describe behavior and satisfaction of both clients and employees.

### *2.3. Methodological procedure*

Communication at the call center is being recorder by special software. The company has renounced to us for the needs of our research all recordings in the period from 10 to 19 April 2010. In this period, 438 communications were recorded in total duration of 1.180 minutes and 47 seconds, average duration is 162.15 seconds. In all reproduced interactions, we recorded at least one of the linguistic phenomena that indicate asymmetry in communication, which we shall show in the examples that follow. On this occasion, we shall illustrate researched phenomena at the local level in terms of ethnomethodology. Therefore, the presented interactions are chosen randomly.

Transcription is made according to the model of Jefferson (see Enclosure) and the data are analyzed according to the method of conversation analysis.

### *2.4. Hypothetical frame*

General hypothesis is that the communication between the operator of the call center and clients of the company “Beogas” may have features of asymmetrical institutional interaction. Heritage quotes the following six items that should be investigated in order to establish if an interaction has the features of the institutional interaction:

a) **Turn taking organization** – a determinant feature of institutional interaction is the possibility of sanctioning collocutor’s contribution.

b) **Overall structural organization of interaction** – the map of interaction in the sense of typical phases or sections (Heritage 2004, 164–166). Possible structure of institutional interaction is: opening, denoting the problem, solving and closing (Heritage 2004, 168).

c) **Sequence organization** – if there are actions that redirect communication, how sequence, themes are controlled and similar.

d) **Turn design** – what action is performed by speech and what aids are chosen to perform this action (Drew and Heritage 1992, 3–65).

e) **Lexical choice**

f) **Epistemological and other forms of asymmetry** – Asymmetry is *differentia specifica* of institutional interactions regarding the other forms of communication<sup>1</sup>.

For instrumental achieving the power in discourse, Fairclough (Fairclough 2001, 113–114) especially quotes:

a) **Interruption** of the collocutor as the reflex of power of the more powerful participant

b) **Enforcing explicitness** – unambiguous meaning is requested from the inferior participant, most frequently by an additional question.

c) **Controlling topic** – more superior participants in interaction are often in situation to determine the nature and purpose of interaction at the beginning and/or to prevent contributions<sup>2</sup> that are not relevant for the theme.

d) **Formulation** – reformulation of already said or formulation of the one that is anticipated that the other participant will say, aiming to check understanding or to obtain control over the contribution of another participant.

## 2.5. Obtained data and discussion

### Interaction 1

1 Operator: Hallo ↑ (.)

2 Client: Good afternoon ↑ (.)

3 Operator: Good afternoon ↓ (.)

4 Client: Here is one of your clients and I need your help (.)//

5 Operator: // speak =

6 Client: = some claims regarding the invoice approximately =

7 Operator: Speak out, Sir

8 Client: Jovana Ducica 10 ://

9 Operator: // What it is about so that we know what to see ↓

10 Client: Well (.) the invoice for consumed (.) gas ↓=

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<sup>1</sup> Heritage (2004:175) mentions the following types of asymmetry: asymmetry of participation in interaction, asymmetry corresponding to interactive and institutional knowhow (what is routine for more powerful participant, it is a unique experience for less powerful participant), epistemological caution and asymmetry in knowledge (more powerful participants avoid to take a firm position in the form of personal opinion, but they rather talk on behalf of the profession i.e. institution) and the right for accessing the knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> Contribution: usually corresponds to statement or turn; it may be interpreted also as “more emphasized”, “noticed” or “accepted” (the referred) statement (Stevic 1997, 217).

- 11 Operator: Very well (.)  
 12 Client: You understand //  
 13 Operator: // No, no, I understand the invoice, just tell me what is wrong with the invoice so  
 14 that I know (.) in which direction to as it is said /.../

This interaction confirms the structure of Heritage: opening, problem initiation, disposal and closing (Heritage, 2004: 168). Turn-taking organization starts and conducts the operator. The operator organizes and conducts turn-taking, client complains about his problem, operator is just to give a solution to the client, and since it is an extract, only words of farewell are missing.

Operator has started the interaction by answering the telephone call with introductory intonation (line 1) that after client's response (line 2) has collapsed even in the following operator's turn (line 3). Before the client has managed to speak out why he called, the operator interrupted him directly several times (line 5, 9, 13) or indirectly, by answering with close turns (line 7, 11). For interruption and overlapping the operator uses imperative even twice (line 5, 7) and in one place so-called *continuer* "Well" (line 11). These are at the same time the actions by which the operator limits the contribution of the client and/or redirects communication (line 9, 13). Operator's need to define the theme dominates in this interaction (line 9, 11, 13). He achieves that by guiding the client to explicitness (line 9, 13). Operator's interruption (line 5, 9, 13), answering in close turns (line 7, 11), use of imperative (line 5, 7, 13), guiding to explicitness (line 9, 13) we can explain as the reflection of operator's interactive impatience and the need to dominate in the interaction. Even in such a short extract, there are indications of epistemological asymmetry. Operator's turn "What it is all about so that **I know** what to look for" (line 9), is interesting for lexical selection and use of the verb TO KNOW, and the structure of the sentence itself leads to an impression that the operator ("what to look for") solves a series of different problems and according to that a series of solutions are available for him. The same is confirmed also in the lines 13 and 14: "No, no, I understand that it is invoice, just tell me what is with the invoice so that **I know** in which direction what is said".

## Interaction 2

- 1 Client: /.../ There is an item here interest for March twothousandten (.) it is not  
 2 clear to me what it : is since I paid invoice for March before due date =  
 3 Operator: = you mean for February (.)  
 4 Client: yes, I mean that one. But it is written here interest for March so I assume//  
 5 Operator: // it refers to  
 6 invoice for February since we cannot collect interest for March in March =  
 7 Client: = it is written here interest for March two thousand and ten: under item five //  
 8 Operator: // SIR ↑, interest

9 for MARCH / for March we shall collect if you do not pay (.) meaning//  
 10 Client: // do you HEAR what  
 11 I am saying to you? Meaning I received the invoice//  
 12 Operator: // OK  
 13 Client: and under your item five, it is written interest for March twothousandten: interest rate.  
 14 That is the reason for my calling //  
 15 Operator: //yes, yes, that is interest for the previous month  
 16 Client: // OK//  
 17 Operator: // that is collected with  
 18 invoice for March which is yes//  
 19 Client: // OK//  
 20 Operator: // also logical And now tell me something else? /.../

An extract of a longer interaction has been presented, so that we cannot see the beginning and opening with the voice of operator. The topic was defined by the client, but epistemological power i.e. knowledge is on the side of the operator. Already in the second presented turn (line 3), operator was “correcting” the client, not allowing him to explain his presumption (line 5). After the client continued to explain the fact what was written in his invoice, the operator started offensively with “Sir,...” (line 8 and 9), but the client also struggled for his attitude and attention “Do you hear me...” (line 7 and 8), and operator reacted self-confidently interrupting him with “OK” (*continuer*) in order to inform the client that he understood what he was talking about and finally explained since the operator had access to the knowledge. In the final operator’s explanation, we notice that the client used the same mechanism of overlapping by repeating the same *continuer*. Operator’s selection of lexicality is also interesting, reasoning his knowledge “That is yes and logical” (line 18 and 19). At the end of this extract one can get an impression that the operator has made point with his knowledge and that with his question “And now, tell me, something else?” as if he wanted to skip to the following subject since the previous was successfully depleted.

### Interaction 3

1 Operator: Beoga:s  
 2 Client: Good afternoon ↑  
 3 Operator: Good afternoon ↓ may I help you  
 4 Client: Here is (.) Maja (.) Vljajic. The following interests me (.) since my invoice has arrived //  
 5 Operator: // can you hold  
 6 just for a second, Maja?  
 7 Client: OK /.../

This very short extract shows how the operator manages the dynamics of interaction at every moment. Communication almost has not started at all. The operator has answered the call, the client managed to introduce herself (line 4) and start the explanation for her call (line 4), but at the same moment the operator interrupted her (line 5) and put on hold in order to answer back later again. The operator

addressed the client formally (line 3), but already in the next turn he showed inconsistency in that polite form and unexpectedly addressed the client by her first name instead of e.g. Missis/Miss Vlajic (line 6).

### 3. Conclusion

Roles of participants in institutional interactions are determined by nature and purpose of the institution. To have power in interaction does not mean necessary quantitative domination, but surely means control over the interaction sequence, domination over the subject and accomplishment of more significant contribution in the long-term.

In case study, we researched if the telephone communication between an operator and a client in call center can have features of asymmetrical institutional interaction. It is confirmed that all the conversations from our corpus have the structure that Heritage (Heritage, 2004, 164–166) indicates as the possible structure in asymmetrical institutional interactions. Each communication is opened with the voice of operator, initiation of problem follows – a client explains the reason for his call (claim regarding invoice, asking information on his debit or inquires how to install gas connection), then follows a solution/consequence/disposal – the operator explains his “knowledge” and closing – words of farewell.

In several randomly selected cases, we recorded interruption, controlling topic, correction, formulation and enforcement of explicitness. We also noticed that the knowledge and information are on the side of operator. Interaction in a call center may have elements of asymmetry, which should be further investigated.

With this goal, it is possible to combine the approach of discourse analysis with predefined schemes, conversation analysis that approaches the communication at local level, methods of corpus linguistics that would research frequency and distribution of linguistic features that are interesting for us, but also inquiry of participants regarding the perception of the referred linguistic phenomena.

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### Enclosure: Encoding system for recordings of spoken material

We have applied a simplified and adopted system of Jefferson in the transcription of the examples (Jefferson, 1984).

→	indicates the phenomenon in conversation that is researched
=	connecting two consecutive turns, tightly joined elements, without any pause
:	prolonged syllable or sound
//	beginning of overlapping speaker
/	self-correction
CAP	capital letters stand for louder speech, emphasis on that element of turn
((description))	non-verbal behavior
((XXX))	incomprehensible words
((? word))	possible interpretation of incomprehensible word
(.)	short pause
(..)	pause from one to three seconds
(...)	pause longer than three seconds
?	interrogative intonation
↓	descending intonation
↑	ascending intonation
/.../	discourse fragment not shown completely