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Initiation and Response in Service Encounter Closings

INITIATION AND RESPONSE IN SERVICE ENCOUNTER CLOSINGS

Pam Kipers

The purpose of this paper is to describe patterns of initiation and response observed during a study of service encounter closings. It will be argued that some of the rules of speaking¹ that prevail in service encounter closings may differ from those that apply in other closing situations.

Data for this study were collected through the recording and transcription of 102 naturally occurring service encounter closings in a variety of settings: restaurants, retail stores, gas stations, doctor's and dentist's offices, etc. Throughout this paper the person providing the goods or services will be referred to as the service provider and the person receiving them as the service receiver. These terms will be abbreviated S.P. and S.R. in all cited data. A numerical compilation of the data is given in Figure One, Page 14, in order to show the frequency of occurrence of each type of initiation and response.

Schegloff and Sacks (1973) described a conversation as an ordered series composed of an opening, a topical structure and a closing. In their study of telephone conversations, closing was initiated by either the caller or the called at the point at which that party felt that the present topic had been sufficiently discussed and no new one should be

introduced. This closing bid was always responded to either with another closing formula indicating agreement that the conversation should end, or with the introduction of a new topic in an attempt to continue the interaction. Most service encounter closings follow different patterns of initiation and response than those observed in this Schegloff and Sacks study.

In addition, service encounters often do not include opening or topical structure. Although closing is the most commonly occurring element, it is sometimes also omitted. These disparities in structure and in rules for closing initiation and response seem to be due to differences in context and role relationships. In a service encounter, the completion of the transaction at hand usually serves as a signal that closing is in order. That is, once the exchange of goods or money has taken place, both participants are aware that parting is about to occur and that one of them should initiate a closing section or, in certain circumstances, introduce a new topic. The service receiver would feel awkward if he remained in the position of customer or client after the transaction was completed, and the service provider would be uncomfortable with this situation as well.

The question is not, then, if closing should occur at this point, but rather, who will initiate it. This is where role relationship comes into play. Within the service encounter context, each participant seems to play a specific role that carries with it certain rights and obligations for the progress of the interaction. While it was not always possible to say definitively whether the interactants

were exercising a right or fulfilling an obligation, certain specific patterns did emerge.

In the service encounters collected for this study, the service receiver initiated closing only in certain given situations. The majority of these were cases in which s/he felt that thanks were in order for certain special actions undertaken by the service provider. "Thanks" or "thank you", then, was the formula employed, serving as an expression of gratitude by virtue of its primary lexical function, and as a closing initiation due to its position within the service encounter situation. This type of closing initiation occurred in three specific types of environments.

The service receiver initiated closing with "thanks" when the service provider performed a service that required a relatively greater degree of time and effort than was the case in those service encounters where only an exchange of goods and money took place. These special services included haircuts, repairs of various kinds, medical and dental care and the like.

1. The jeweler has just made an on-the-spot repair while the customer waited.
 - S.R. Thanks so much for fixing it. Have a nice day.
 - S.P. You too. Have a Happy New Year.
 - S.R. Thank you. You too.

2. The customer tips the hairdresser after having her hair cut and set.
 - S.R. Thank you.
 - S.P. Oh, thank you.
 - S.R. Bye bye.
 - S.P. Bye bye.

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The service receiver also initiated closing with "thanks/thank you" when the service provider counted out the change from a transaction.

3. At the liquor store. The customer has paid with a twenty dollar bill.
 - S.P. Twelve from twenty leaves eight, and tax--
O.K., that's for you.
 - S.R. Thank you.
 - S.P. Thank you. Have a nice day. Good bye.
4. At the gas station.
 - S.P. Fourteen and one are fifteen and five are twenty.
 - S.R. Thank you very much. Have a nice day.
 - S.P. You, too. Bye.

Finally, the service receiver initiated closing with "thanks/thank you" when merchandise was physically handed over by the service provider.

5. At the liquor store. The clerk hands a bag containing the items purchased to the customer.
 - S.R. Thank you.
 - S.P. Have a good day.
6. A delivery man hands a package to the person who has answered the door.
 - S.R. Thank you.
 - S.P. Have a good day.

While it could be argued that the service receiver always initiated closing in the situations described above because s/he had the exclusive right to do so, it seems more likely that s/he acted out of a sense of obligation. That is, the service provider had rendered a type of service that made the service receiver feel that an expression of gratitude was necessary. Since this use of "thanks/thank you" was offered in response to an action that signalled the end of the service encounter, it also served as a closing initiation.

Since only closings were recorded for the purposes of this study, "thanks/thank you" was not observed serving a single purpose as an expression of gratitude within the body of a service encounter. Native speaker intuition, however, would indicate that "thanks/thank you" is used this way. For example, during the course of a restaurant meal, it seems quite natural that the customer would thank the server for bringing a requested glass of water or a second cup of coffee. A comparison of this type of occurrence of "thanks/thank you" with those observed in closings would provide interesting material for a future study.

The remainder of the closings initiated by the service receiver took place in a linguistic environment more closely resembling the conversations described by Schegloff and Sacks. Since they consisted of an opening, a topical structure and a closing, context was again a determinant here. As the nature of these service encounters was relatively more lengthy and complex than is usual, the service being rendered necessitated a more involved interaction between the participants. Here, a wider range of parting and pre-parting formulae were used (well, O.K., alright). The service provider either acknowledged the closing bid or introduced a new topic in which case another closing initiation was offered further on by the service receiver; this process continued until closure was achieved. Another factor in these service encounters was the relatively greater degree of intimacy that existed between the participants. These interactants were at least acquainted with one another, as they had dealt with one

another on previous occasions.

7. Client and husband walk interior decorator to her car. They discuss the insecurity of the parking lot. Client is S.R., husband is S.R.2.
 1. S.R. O.K.!
 2. S.P. O.K. Thank you...(interrupted by S.R.)
 3. S.R. Good night.
 4. S.P. —very much. And I'll talk to you.
 5. S.R. O.K. Bye bye.
 6. S.P. (Begins to walk away, but then turns back to S.R.) Have a wonderful trip.
 7. S.R. Thank you. Thank you very much. We will.
 8. S.P. O.K., we'll talk to you later.
 9. S.R. Bye bye.
 10. S.R.2 Bye bye.
 11. Good night.

8. At the mechanic's garage picking up repaired car. The mechanic makes a lengthy explanation of all the repairs he made. The S.R. is accompanied by his wife.
 1. S.R. Alright. What do we owe you?
 2. S.P. Nothing.
 3. S.R. Oh, no...
 4. S.P. No, no, no, no, no.
 5. The S.P. and the S.R. continue this discussion of whether to pay or not to pay for several minutes, and the S.P. then introduces the topic of mechanical problems in late model cars and his ways of dealing with them. This conversation lasts for another ten minutes until the S.R. initiates closing again.
 11. S.R. Well, thanks, _____. You ready hon? (to wife)
 12. S.P. Yep. The speedometer wasn't quite as bad...
 13. S.R. It's better. She likes it that way.
 14. Wife. It keeps me company. (laughs...S.R. and S.P. laugh, too).
 15. S.P. After you gun it three or four times and get to 45 or 50, then it settles right down.
 16. S.R. Thanks, _____. See you later.
 17. S.P. O.K.

The only significant difference between these closings and those collected by Schegloff and Sacks, then, is that the topical structure was more or less limited to topics having to do with the business at

hand, and they were always initiated by the same party, the service receiver.

Here again, the transaction has been completed, and the point at which one of the interactants should initiate closing is thus clearly marked. Since the service receiver always initiated, it could be surmised that he acted out of obligation dictated by the context. It would seem likely, however, that this obligation would fall equally upon the two participants if the end of the transaction were the only conditioning factor. If this were the case, one would expect an alternation of closing initiations by the two interactants.

It seems more likely, then, that the service receiver's role in such situations accords him the right to initiate closing. This is especially evident in example 8 where the service receiver seems eager to close and makes three bids to do so before closure is finally achieved (lines 1, 11, and 17). The service provider tries to delay closing by countering closing bids with the introduction of new topics, but the service receiver is persistent and finally has his way.

The use of O.K. and alright in examples 7 and 8 conforms to the patterns observed by Merritt (1980), as they sometimes marked the transition from one phase of the service encounter to another (example 7, line 1 and example 8, line 1), and at other times expressed agreement with what had gone before (example 7, lines 5 and 8). In some cases, they seemed to do both at the same time as in the last line of example 8. "O.K.!" here expresses agreement with the previous

utterance and also marks the transition from the end of the interaction to the actual parting of the participants. The use of "O.K.!" as a transition marker was also observed in the closings initiated by the service provider as will be seen below.

The closings initiated by the service provider always occurred at the point at which the transaction had been completed and the service receiver was preparing to depart (see examples 9 through 20, below). This could be interpreted to mean that the service provider is obligated to initiate closing in these cases because the service receiver is about to leave without having done so. This would indicate that the service provider, by virtue of his role within this context, bears more responsibility for the maintenance and progress of the interaction than does the service receiver; i.e., the service provider must initiate closing whenever the service receiver does not. Fishman (1978) found a similar phenomenon in conversations between intimate heterosexual couples. Women within this context did more of the "work" necessary to the maintenance of the interaction than the men did. Fishman attributed this disparity of responsibility to women's role vis a vis men in such conversational situations.

As shown in Figure 1, the closing initiations of the service receiver were always responded to. This was not the case when the service provider initiated. This would seem to indicate that the service provider was always obligated to respond to the closing initiations of the service receiver whereas the opposite was not true. Whether the service receiver responded or not seemed to be conditioned

by the formulaic content of the initiation. Reference to Figure 1 will provide actual number of occurrences of response to each type of closing initiation in order to facilitate comparison.

"Thanks/thank you" was the closing initiation which most often failed to elicit a spoken response.² It was replied to in some instances, but more often it was ignored.

9. At a vendor's booth at the flower show. The customer is picking up the merchandise off the counter and preparing to leave.
S.P. Thanks.
S.R. I'll..eh..see you next year, I guess.
S.P. Hope so.
10. At the grocery store. Customer is loading groceries into cart.
S.P. Thank you very much.. and thank you for bagging.
S.R. no response
11. At the drive-in window at the bank. The teller puts envelope in the tray to return it to the customer.
S.P. Thanks.
S.R. no response

Conversely, "Have a nice day" (good evening, happy holiday, etc.) and "Take it easy" or "Take care" were responded to verbally every time they occurred. This suggests that these directives made the hearer feel obliged to reply in a way that the expressive "thanks" did not.

12. At a restaurant take-out counter. Customer picks up food and prepares to leave.
S.P. Have a nice day.
S.R. Thank you.
13. At the liquor store. Customer puts away change and picks up parcel.
S.P. Take it easy, now.
S.R. You, too.

Clark and French (1981), in their study of routine telephone inquiries

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to Stanford University switchboard operators, found that the parting expression "goodbye" was used more often when something within the conversation, for example a request for personal information, a self-corrected error by the operator, or a sense of gratitude on the part of the caller for information given, made the interactants feel that they had become more closely acquainted. Perhaps the service receiver here felt that the expressions "Have a ____./Take____." were more personal than "thanks" and thus was more inclined to respond out of a greater sense of personal identification with the service provider.

When "thanks" and "Have a ____./ Take it easy" were used together by the service provider as a closing initiation, they were responded to half the time, the other half not. Response, or lack thereof, may have depended upon which part of these closing initiations the hearer focussed on. That is, if s/he heard "thanks", which always occurred first, and reacted to that formula alone without taking into account the rest of the utterance, s/he may have treated these closings in the same way as "thanks" alone. That is, perhaps first position tended to frame the utterance and override whatever followed. Another possible explanation is that the service receiver focused on either "thanks" or "Have a ____/Take it easy", and responded accordingly.

14. At the grocery store. Clerk hands receipt to customer.
S.P. Thanks. Have a nice day.
S.R. You, too.
15. At the copy center. Customer picks up copies and prepares to leave.
S.P. Thank you very much. Have a nice day.
S.R. no response

The similarity to patterns for the use of "O.K./alright" as observed by Merritt was mentioned above in the section on service receiver initiated closings. The use of these formulae as a sign of transition to the closing segment of an interaction were very frequent in the closings initiated by the service provider. In the data collected for this study, they always were used in combination with some other element. As was the case with the closings initiated with "Have a ___/Take it easy", they always were responded to by the service receiver. Evidently the presence of "O.K./alright" drew the service receiver's attention to the fact that the interaction had come to the closing stage, and s/he felt moved to participate in the parting exchange.

16. At the hairdresser's. Receptionist/cashier and customer. Change has been handed back and the customer puts it away and gets out her car keys.
 - S.P. O.K. _____.
 - S.R. Thank you.
 - S.P. Thank you.
 - S.R. Thank you.
 - S.P. You're welcome.
 - S.R. You, too.
17. At the copy center. Customer picks up copies and turns to leave.
 - S.P. O.K. Take care, now.
 - S.R. Have a good day.
18. At the doctor's office. Receptionist and patient. The next appointment has been made, and the patient gets ready to leave.
 - S.P. Alright, have a nice day.
 - S.R. You, too.

"Bye bye" with another formula occurred three times and always received a reply. Perhaps "bye bye", the very first parting formula

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learned by so many speakers of American English in infancy, is so ingrained in the consciousness of the individual as a closing marker that it automatically engenders a response. Another possibility is that through association with childhood, "bye bye" may imply a greater degree of intimacy between the parties.

19. At the art supply store. Customer picks up parcel and prepares to leave.
S.P. Bye bye. Have a nice day.
S.R. Bye bye.
20. At the gift shop. Customer picks up purchase and turns to leave.
S.P. Bye bye. Take care, now.
S.R. Thanks. Bye bye.

Although the service provider usually felt responsible for initiating closing whenever the service receiver did not, certain circumstances seemed to suspend the rules usually operant in service encounter closings. At times, when the place of business of the service provider was very busy, with a long line of people waiting in line to be served, no closing was initiated by either party.

21. At a busy ticket booth at the flower show.
S.R. One adult.
Money, ticket and change are exchanged and the customer moves on to be replaced by the next in line.
22. A busy express line in the supermarket.
S.P. Coupons?
S.R. No.
S.P. Twenty-six seventy-five.
Customer, who has bagged her own groceries, hands over money. Clerk hands back change without counting it out, and the customer walks away.

A closing was always initiated when the place of business was not busy, while it was sometimes present and at other times absent when

busy conditions prevailed. This points to context as a determining element along with cooperation between the interactants out of joint recognition of the dictates of the busy situation.

In summary, the rules of speaking that govern initiation of and response to closings in service encounters differ from those that prevail in other closing situations. The factors that affect these rules are the context of the service encounter itself and the cooperation of the parties involved through mutual understanding of the rights and obligations inherent in their respective roles within the service encounter situation. The often complex interdependence of these factors sometimes made it difficult to pinpoint the controlling element or combination of elements with any great degree of certainty. Further, more narrowly focused study is needed in order to better understand the influence of each specific factor or combination of factors in any given situation.

FIGURE 1

Total number of closings including 0	102
Initiated by the service receiver	36
With "thanks" for special services rendered	14
With "thanks" for change counted out	8
With "thanks" for parcel handed over	8
With pre-closing/parting formulae other than "thanks"	6
Responded to by the service provider	36
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Initiated by the service provider	58
With "thanks"	18
Responded to by the service receiver (R)	5
Not responded to by the service receiver (NR)	13
With "Have a ___/Take ___."	14
Response	14
No Response	0
With "thanks/Have a ___/Take ___"	8
Response	4
No Response	4
With "O.K./alright" and another closing formula	15
Response	15
No Response	0
With "bye bye" and another closing formula	3
Response	3
No Response	0
<hr/>	
Closing not initiated by either party	8

1. The term "rules of speaking" is intended here in the technical sense suggested by Hymes (1972).

2. In the course of recording and observing these particular service encounter closings, I noted that there sometimes was a non-verbal response--a nod or a smile--on the part of the service receiver. However, since I was not always at a vantage point that allowed me a view of the faces of both participants, I was not able to record such gestural responses with any degree of regularity.

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