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## How Do You Like Your Cereal? A Linguistic Analysis of a Service Encounter

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This study investigates customers' responses to the phrase, *How do you like your cereal?*, a question posed by servers at a cereal café. This phrase, along with several variants, abrogates linguistic service encounter norms, and customer response type is heavily influenced by the type and content of the servers' questions. The data indicate that certain types of questions encourage direct orders from customers, whereas other questions, namely *How do you like your cereal?*, provoke disfluencies and confusion among customers. An analysis of how the questions violate linguistic norms is given, along with why customers interpret some questions as requests for information and others as ordering prompts.

## Introduction

Engaging in a service encounter interaction, regardless of whether it is a customer's first or hundredth time entering the establishment, is not generally an awkward or even memorable event. This is not always the case, however, for customers at a new café I will call Cerealland<sup>1</sup>, a restaurant that serves a variety of hot and cold cereal concoctions, smoothies with cereal blended in, and coffee. After entering the café, customers arrive at the ordering counter and servers utter the question, *How do you like your cereal?*

In reaction to the question, customers often show their confusion verbally by producing disfluencies (linguistic hesitations such as *uh* or *um*), or by asking questions regarding the process of ordering and the available options. Not only is the customers' confusion apparent linguistically from an outsider's point of view, but several servers at Cerealland informed me that the phrase, *How do you like your cereal?*, often provokes customer confusion. Attempting to lessen this confusion, many servers even prefer to refrain from asking the question, *How do you like your cereal?*

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<sup>1</sup> Cerealland is a pseudonym; I would like to thank all of the employees affiliated with Cerealland who helped me with this study, as it could not have been realized without their efforts. I would also especially like to thank my editors for their tremendous help and invaluable guidance.

This study examines servers' questions and customers' responses to the server-posed question. Specifically, it focuses on the linguistic responses, or non-responses as is sometimes the case, to variants of the question. Proposals accounting for the variation in customer responses will be provided, along with possible motivations for the differing responses.

### Literature Review

A seminal work on service encounters is Merritt (1976), who investigates verbal interactions between customers and servers. Her definition of "service encounter" is often used by others who study these kinds of interactions: "[A]n instance of face-to-face interaction between a server who is 'officially posted' in some service area and a customer who is present in that service area, that interaction being oriented to the satisfaction of the customer's presumed desire for some service and the server's obligation to provide that service" (1976: 321). Merritt specifically addresses the question, "How is it that some questions seem to be requests for information and others requests for service?" (1976: 323). She documents examples in which servers respond to customers' questions as an actual request for service as opposed to simply a request for information (1976: 337-339). For example:

Customer:	Do you have coffee to go?
Server:	Cream and sugar? (starts to pour coffee)
Customer:	Cream only.
Server:	O.K. (putting cream in)

(Merritt 1976: 339)

Merritt asserts that the server has interpreted the customer's question not simply as a request for information but also as a request for service. She also indicates that the conditional relevance of the adjacency pair enables the interlocutors to make sense of the interaction (1976: 329-339). I will apply this concept of interpreting questions as not only requests for information but also as requests for service to the current research, although in reverse form. I look at customers' responses to servers' questions as an offer of service as opposed to merely a request for information or a greeting.

Several researchers discuss the transaction process of service encounters. Ventola (1983) posits that requesting service and providing service are a customer's focal activities in a service encounter, and she identifies specific stages in a service encounter, originally proposed by Hasan: Greeting, Sale Initiation, Sale Enquiry, Sale Request, Sale Compliance, Sale Purchase, and Closure (Hasan 1978, 1979 as cited in Ventola 1983: 172-177). Lamoureux (1989) also ratifies the above service encounter stages as present in much of his data, though he focuses his study of ser-

vice encounter interactions on the nuanced language employed by customers and servers to achieve their end goals. Traverso's (2001) investigation of service encounter exchanges in Syria uncovers that while the transactions are quite formulaic in nature, they do not follow the traditional request/realization/payment pattern reported of other general service encounter events.

According to Traverso's (2001) data, customers and sellers are not locked into a fixed speech pattern concerning who will initiate the greeting or who will speak in which position. Rather, the speech is organized according to conditional relevance, such that the interlocutor must fill the adjacency pair created by the first speaker, although it does not matter who takes the role of first speaker (Traverso 2001: 426). Merritt (1976) also relies on the concept of adjacency-pairs to interpret her data. An analysis of question-answer adjacency pairs will also be used as a foundation for analyzing research in the current study, with specific focus directed towards how and why customers respond to specific server-posed questions, especially those that are unusual. Although the service provider is almost always the conversation initiator, and the traditional request/realization/payment order is observed, the request stage of the transaction cannot be said to be formulaic in nature, as otherwise customers would not have the difficulties ordering that will be shown in this study.

While a café is not an unusual locale for service-encounter research, an investigation of the linguistic responses to an unusual server-posed question is novel. The current study analyzes a form of interaction not embedded in customers' tacit knowledge concerning linguistic norms of interaction in service encounters. Servers at CerealLand ask customers questions that customers have most likely never heard before, at least not in this domain of interaction, and the data detailing customers' responses to the question show clear-cut evidence that the type of question servers pose directly affects the type of responses customers produce.

### Methodology

The following two research questions guided the study: (1) How do servers interact linguistically with customers? (2) How do customers respond to the servers' verbal initiation?

#### *Setting and Participants*

In the preliminary design phase of this research I found that many of the servers were not asking customers *How do you like your cereal?*, and later almost no servers were using the expression. I asked one of the servers why this was the case, and she said that some did not like asking the question because it produced awkward responses from the customers and made the servers feel uncomfortable. The store manager referred me

to the media relations representative for the company, who informed me that the owners and creators of CerealLand want the servers to use the question to help personalize the experience for the customers and to potentially spark a dialogue between the customers and servers about cereal (CerealLand media relations representative, personal communication, March 16, 2005). The owners were unaware that the servers had ceased asking the question and were interested in understanding more about the reasons for this shift. I was given permission to collect data for about four hours a day, three to four days a week for four weeks, and while I was there the servers who were comfortable asking customers *How do you like your cereal?* would do so.

I quickly ascertained, with the help of the store manager, which servers felt comfortable enough to employ the formula, and I arranged to be at the café at the times when the servers who did pose the question were working. The servers were aware that I was interested in the question, *How do you like your cereal?*, although I never went into detail with them about what I was specifically looking for. I considered whether or not my presence and the servers' knowledge of my purpose would skew the results, in essence the idea of Labov's (1972) "observer's paradox," but I concluded that since I am interested in the customers' responses to the questions, my presence would not prove problematic. It would not have proven feasible to simply collect data in the café without the servers knowing a bit about my purpose since servers at this point in time were not generally using the question, and they needed to employ it during my presence in order for me to collect data.

CerealLand is located on a main thoroughfare on the edge of a large, urban Northeastern university campus in an area heavily trafficked by students and other people associated with the university and with local businesses. Preliminary customer sampling at the outset of the study indicated that most of CerealLand's customers are native speakers of standard American English. In order to limit the scope of this study, I limited my focus to this group.

The ordering area of CerealLand resembles that of an ice cream shop, with all of the cereal toppings on display in small containers behind a glass partition. At one end of the counter customers place their order, and at the other end of the counter they pay for and pick-up their order. On the wall behind the servers and in front of the customers is a large menu detailing the cereal and oatmeal concoctions from which the customers may choose. Alternatively, customers may create any combination of cereals with their choice of toppings. The list of cereal possibilities is to the customer's right when ordering, and the potentially problematic location of this list will be discussed below.

The service encounter activities that Lamoureux (1989) and Ventola (1983) describe: Greeting, Sale Initiation, Sale Enquiry, Sale Request, Sale Compliance, Sale Purchase, and Closure (Ventola 1983: 172), occur in a

slightly different manner at CerealLand due to the physical set-up of the cafe, and different parts of the customer-service interactions are often handled by different servers. Because servers are often allocated specific duties, one server may take a customer's order, another server may prepare the order, and a third may conduct the payment transaction. This means that some linguistic steps, such as *greeting*, may be repeated throughout the ordering procedure. However, as will be discussed, it is only the first server with whom the customer speaks that offers the *How do you like your cereal?* formula.

#### *Data collection methods*

Data were collected in situ. The data-collection instrument consists of a form in which I recorded the initial server-customer verbal interaction. After collecting data on the first two or three occasions, I revised the collection instrument. On the original form, the first slot was marked for the server, and pre-printed on the form under the first server slot was the question, *How do you like your cereal?* I quickly saw that this rigid pattern was not the absolute norm in interactions, and I revised the instrument. I found the final version to be an effective and efficient tool for gathering and comparing data as it almost always provided enough room to transcribe the verbal interaction. There was room in the margins for notes, and it provided a consistent way to record the data. While collecting data at CerealLand, I sat at the end of a long table, which put me about four feet from the cereal-ordering customers. While I was not actively transcribing interactions I read and therefore looked like a regular student doing work, as opposed to someone sitting at the table for research or data-collection purposes.

#### *Data analysis methods*

Conversation analysis is the primary method I used to analyze the data collected for the current research. The conversation analytic approach avoids approaching a linguistic situation with preconceived notions regarding what data will be found and how the data will be categorized and described. It instead values letting the analysis and categorization emerge from the naturally-collected and naturally-occurring data itself. Additionally, all claims are based on actual data samples, as opposed to what one might think would occur, as it has been clearly shown that intuition does not always prove accurate (Levinson 1983: 286-287).

Adjacency pairs make up a considerable portion of talk in service encounters. Upon analyzing the topics *questions*, *answers*, and *coherence*, Merritt turns to Schegloff and Sacks's (1973) notion of adjacency pairs and draws upon their framework when analyzing questions and sequencing patterns in service encounters. Adjacency pairs always include the following: "(1) two utterance length, (2) adjacent positioning of component utterances, (3) different speakers producing each utter-

ance... (4) relative ordering of parts (i.e. first pair parts precede second pair parts), and (5) discriminative relations (i.e. the pair type of which a first pair part is a member is relevant to the selection among second pair parts)" (Schegloff & Sacks 1973: 295-6). Thus, according to this model, when a server asks a customer a question the server has opened an adjacency-pair sequence of question-answer. Upon completion of the server's question, the customer is then expected to produce an utterance, and the server will assume that whatever the customer says is in some way relevant to the preceding question.

This idea of conditional relevance, as proposed by Schegloff (1968), states that once the first part of an adjacency-pair is delivered a second part is both expected and relevant. To return to the situation described above when the server asks the customer a question, based on the idea of conditional relevance, the customer is then expected to respond to the question with information that can be interpreted as a response. As Levinson (1983) intricately details, it is not always the case that the second part of the pair directly follows the first part, yet within the conversation it will be accounted for at some point (306). Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) investigate the constraints upon turn-taking in conversation and propose a detailed account of various rules employed by conversationalists, some of which may be useful in this analysis. One constraint generally found in conversational turn-taking, as described by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson is that the first turn in a sequence generally takes the form of *greeting* (1974: 710). How this constraint may affect customers' interpretations of the servers' questions and their responses will be analyzed in detail following the declaration of results.

### Findings and Discussion

Results will be discussed according to the two questions posed in the methodology section.

#### *How do servers interact linguistically with customers?*

Servers initiate verbal interaction with customers in either one of two ways. They either employ a CerealLand Formula (CF) through which they ask a variant of the question *How do you like your cereal?*, or they do not ask a variant of *How do you like your cereal?*, which is labeled as a CerealLand No-Formula (CNF) question.

*How do you like your cereal?* is not simply a phatic, formulaic greeting. It does not function as a greeting that just any server should offer a customer upon coming into contact because it does not show up in all conversational moments when a greeting is appropriate. It only surfaces when a customer is about to place an order, and it never occurs as the customer is paying. This is true even if the server with whom the customer interacts while paying is not the server who provided the cereal, and

therefore there is a new server-customer interaction. Thus, *How do you like your cereal?* is only asked before the customer orders. Also, if the CF were a formulaic greeting, we might expect customers to complete the adjacency pair and respond with an equally formulaic greeting; however, this is not often the case. The CF functions in the following manner: All customers are supposed to hear it once (it is not given by the server at the cash register, for example), and it is only executed by the person who intends to take the customer's order. If a server greets a customer in the manner of saying hello and informing them that someone will be with them in a moment, the CF is not given.

There are five variants of the *How do you like your cereal?* formula, including: *How do you like your cereal?*, *How do you like your cereal today?*, *How do you like your cereal usually?*, *How would you like your cereal?*, and *How Ø you like your cereal?* Note that the servers were not presented with a variety of options from which to choose. Instead, the servers produced these variations naturally. Server questions in the CNF group fall into five categories, with two of the categories comprising three different but similar questions each, and one of the categories comprising solely nonverbal cues (see Table 1). These five server question types are the only types that I heard, although many had a pre-sequence such as *Hi! How are you?*, or *Good afternoon*. The data naturally fell into these categories, which were created after the data collection process occurred. There are a few deviations from the categories, such as a server saying *What'll be your destruction?*, but otherwise they fell into the categories listed above.

The rationale behind grouping the questions *What would you like?*; *What can I get for you?*; and *How can I help you?* into one group, and *Can I help you?*; *Do you know what you want?*; and *Are you ready to order?* into another group is that the first group of questions requires a response other than yes or no. However, the second group of questions could elicit either yes, no, or a statement about what the customer desires, depending on whether the customer interprets the question as a pure request for information or as an ordering prompt.

#### *Request functions*

As noted above, Merritt (1976) poses a question regarding the difference between requests for information and requests for service (323). This framework can be used in this study to investigate how the servers' questions are interpreted as either requests for information from the customer or as requests for the customer's order. Questions such as *How are you?*; *Do you know what you want?*; *How can I help you?* could all be answered with a genuine response. Responses could include: *I'm great, thank you*; *Yes, I do know what I want*; *You could help me by providing me with two scoops of cereal*. These answers, though, would seem bizarre in the service encounter context and would violate the communicative competence norms in this community. What makes some questions provoke "real"

Table 1  
Servers Questions and Customer Responses when servers do not use Cereal Formula.

	Hi/ Hello	What would you like?	Can I help you?	(Hi) How are you?	Looks, Nods, Points	Welcome to CerealLand.	Totals:
Direct order	3	4	3	2	5	2	19
Disfluency	1	2	0	3	2	1	9
Hi Direct Order	6	1	0	7	3	1	18
Asks information question	0	0	0	1	2	0	3
Totals:	10	7	3	13	12	4	

answers and others provoke ordering responses? There are several possibilities, and I will attempt to answer them in terms of the CerealLand context in the section concerning customers' responses.

*Three-part lists*

Forty-two of the ninety-four CF questions (45%) are three-part questions, and thirty-eight of the forty-two three part questions (90%) incorporate the phrase Welcome to CerealLand:

Example 1: Server: Hey. How're you doin'? How do you like your cereal?

Example 2: Server: Good morning. Welcome to CerealLand. How would you like your cereal?

Example 3: Server: Hi ladies! Welcome to CerealLand. How do you like your cereal?

Wooffitt (2001) describes the phenomena of three-part lists, saying that "it is as though there is a normative principle underlying people's actions which runs something like: '[I]f doing a list in conversation, try to do it in three parts'" (61). She informs us that when a person is listing something, even if there are not three things to be listed, that speaker will often fill the third slot with a generalized list completer such as "and that type of thing" (60-61). Wooffitt also says that "when you hear someone building a list, you can draw on your culturally available tacit knowledge to project when it should end: at the end of the third item" (61). I will draw upon this linguistic strategy to help explain the servers' question formation when using CF questions to explain why they prefer the three-part list format.

Interestingly, few CNF questions consisted of three parts. Why, then, would servers use this strategy for CF questions? I propose that it has to do with managing an awkward situation. Servers are dealing with a potentially awkward saying, yet they also implicitly know that lists are often given in three parts. Perhaps they format the greeting into a three-part "list" in order to make it sound a bit more normal for customers. Assuming that we may be pre-disposed to preferring to hear things in threes, changing the cereal question into a three-part saying instead of a two-part phrase might make it more recognizable to customers as a linguistically sound structure or question, thus promoting successful ordering.

*How do customers respond to the servers' verbal initiation?*

Customer responses vary widely depending on whether the server poses a CF or CNF question and also upon the exact semantic realization of the question (see Tables 1 & 2). Customer responses are coded accord-

**Table 2**  
Server Questions and Customer Responses when servers use Cereal Formula

	<i>How do you like your cereal?</i>	<i>How do you like your cereal today?</i>	<i>How do you like your cereal usually?</i>	<i>How would you like your cereal?</i>	<i>How Ø you like your cereal?</i>	Total
Direct Order	14	1	0	13	1	29
Disfluency	25	1	0	7	0	33
Incomprehension of Question	3	0	0	0	0	3
“Good,” then orders	2	0	0	0	0	2
“Hi,” then orders	4	0	0	1	0	5
“Don’t Know” / “Not Sure”	12	0	0	0	0	12
Continues Conversation with Someone Else/ Ignores Question	5	0	0	0	0	5
Answers Question Literally	1	0	3	0	0	4
Other	1	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Totals:</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>94</b>

ing to what they do or say next. For example, the category *direct orders* means that the customer launched directly into the food order after the server posed the question. “*Good,*” *then orders* indicates that the customer responded “good” at the end of the server’s question and then requested the food order.

Customers respond to almost all questions in the CNF group as requests for orders. The questions in this category can generally be glossed as: *Tell me what you want to order.* Customers interpret many of the questions in CF, however, as requests for information. This could be because of semantic differences between question types (such as between the simple present form *do* and the modal *would* in *How do you like your cereal?* versus *How would you like your cereal?*) and also because they know how to respond to formulaic greetings, yet do not know exactly how to linguistically or cognitively manage the much more abstract and unusual *How do you like you cereal?* formula question. The following sections elaborate upon the most common customer response types.

*Direct Orders*

As previously mentioned, *direct order* indicates that the customer launched directly into a statement (sometimes posed as a question) about what she wanted with no disfluencies. I contemplated whether or not responses of the type “*Hi,*” *then orders* and “*Good,*” *then orders* should be included in this category, but I decided to keep them separated. This separation allows us to see if the customers are greeting the servers in any way (some do, yet the majority do not) as well as to consider them part of the same category in terms of directness. I consider direct orders to be the most effective type of service encounter transaction, and that a high number of direct orders signals an ease and efficiency in the ordering process, whereas the lack of direct orders signals a situation that is more difficult to manage.

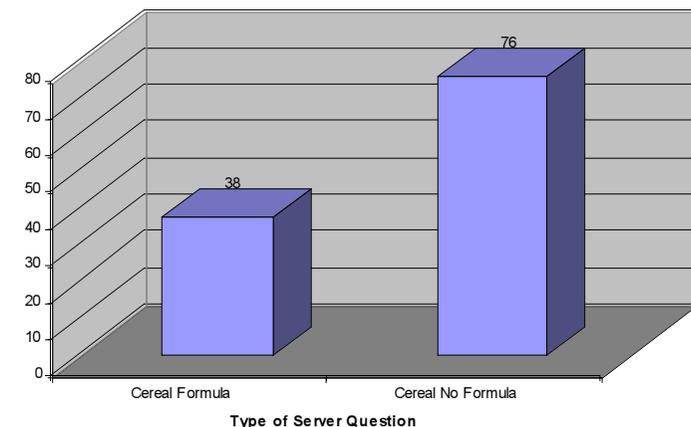
When analyzing and comparing the data, the most notable finding is the difference between direct orders for CF questions and for CNF questions (see Figure 1). Out of 94 customers in the CF group, only 36 people (38%) directly order, whereas 37 out of 49 customers in the CNF group (76%) respond directly. Direct ordering is thus correlated with and prompted by the questions produced by CNF, and specifically *not* with CF questions. Here are some examples of direct orders:

Example 4: *CerealLand Formula*

Server: Good morning. Welcome to CerealLand. How do you like your cereal?  
 Customer: Can I get ... ?

**Figure 1**

**Percent of Direct Order Customer Responses, Out of all Response Types**



Example 5: *CerealLand No Formula*

Server: Hi.  
 Customer: Hi. I'll get a ...

Customers respond with a direct order 76% of the time when servers do not use the CerealLand Formula, as opposed to 38% of the time upon hearing a CerealLand Formula.

*Disfluencies*

When the disfluencies *Um, Uh, Ah* occur, the rate is between one and three times per phrase. In the CNF, the only types of customer responses are direct orders, question asking, and disfluencies (see Figure 2). While there are several more customer responses than these three in the CF, disfluencies are indeed heavily present. Thirty-three of ninety-four customer responses with a CF (35%) are disfluencies, with a full 25 of the 33 disfluencies (76%) occurring after the phrase, *How do you like your cereal?* Compare this with CNF, where there are only nine disfluencies (18%) out of 49 total responses. The following are some examples of disfluencies.

Example 6: *CerealLand Formula*

Server: Welcome to CerealLand. How do you like your cereal?  
 Customer: Um, I'll, um, Reese's and ...

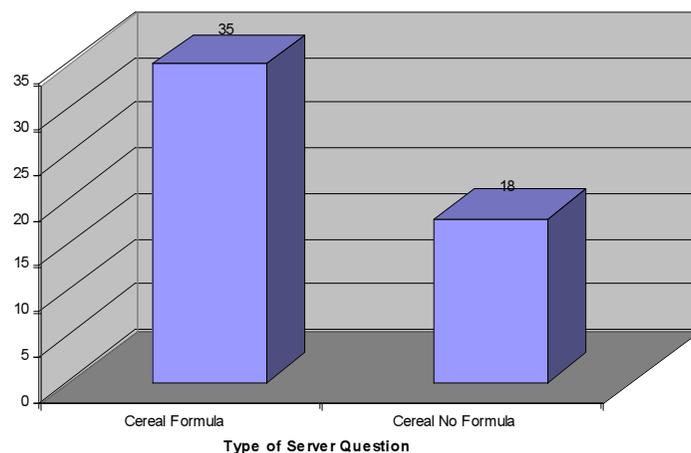
Example 7: *CerealLand No Formula*

Server: [looks at her]  
 Customer: Um, I'll get two scoops of ...

As seen in Figure 2, 35% of the customer-produced disfluencies occur after a CF question, as opposed to 18% disfluency-production after a CNF question.

Figure 2

Percent of Customer-Produced Onset Disfluencies



The production of disfluencies such as *um* is not entirely understood, whether in terms of why speakers produce them or how listeners understand them (Christenfeld et al. 1991: 2). Several researchers have suggested that they serve a “floor-keeping function,” reserving the speaker’s speech turn while formulating what she wants to say (Christenfeld et al. 1991: 2).

Rochester (1973) has investigated pauses in spontaneous speech and notes that researchers often classify pauses into two categories: silent pauses (SPs) and filled pauses (FPs) (64). During data collection I noted when customers produced a filled pause after a server’s question, although as I was not videotaping or tape-recording I was not able to judge pause lengths. Nonetheless, as noted above, filled pauses occurred frequently from customers who were asked *How do you like your cereal?* and much less frequently for all other response types.

Rochester (1973) reviews the literature regarding SPs and FPs. He notes that studies suggest that SPs and FPs increase with the level of abstract thinking required by the subjects. Additionally, both reaction times and frequency of SPs may be influenced by a respondent’s “pre-dispositional anxiety” or “situational anxiety.” While there is not conclusive evidence in terms of anxiety and the production of FPs, Rochester does note that “there may be an analogous relation between anxiety and FPs” (1973: 73). Because the production of disfluencies is regarded as indication of a potentially more taxing or stressful situation, I consider them as evidence of a less successful ordering transaction.

*Literal Answers to Questions*

There are four examples in which customers answer the cereal question literally<sup>2</sup>, and three of these are in response to the question *How do you like your cereal usually?* A server who sometimes uses this expression told me that she often adds usually so that “it is easier for the customer to understand.” According to the data she does not actually add usually very often, but the effect it has on the customers is interesting in that it solicits genuine answers about how people prefer their cereal. In terms of serving as an ordering prompt, it is not highly successful because ultimately the servers need to know what the customer wants *right then*, but in terms of creating a conversation with the customers about cereal it *is* successful, and this is one effect the owners desired to create in the first place. The following is an example of this response type:

Example 8:

Server: Hello. Welcome to CerealLand. How do you usually like your cereal?  
 Customer: I usually have the two scoops of Reese’s Puffs.

<sup>2</sup> Older customers responded literally to cereal-asking questions more often than younger customers.

### Other Customer Response Types

The majority of the other customer response types (see Tables 1 & 2) are self-explanatory, although I will clarify a few points here. In the category *Looks/Nods/Points*, the servers provide non-verbal cues to the customers that signal that they are ready to serve the customer. In light of CerealLand's strong motivation to create an excellent customer-service greeting, it is noteworthy that *not* speaking to a customer generated more direct responses (eight out of twelve responses, or 67%) than a crafted question (twenty out of 67 responses, or 30%).

The difference between the subcategories *Incomprehension of Question* and *Don't know/Not sure* is that for *Incomprehension of Question* the customers actually state that they do not understand the question or ask to have it repeated. Interestingly, when this occurs the servers do not paraphrase or explain the question; instead, they repeat it exactly as it was delivered the first time. For example:

#### Example 9:

Server: Hi. How do you like your cereal?  
 Customer: What?  
 Server: How do you like your cereal?  
 Customer: What does that mean?  
 Server: We have a list of cereals on the board there.  
 Customer: Oh, no, can I just get.....

Also, it is interesting that two customers responded "Good" and then directly ordered, yet the server did not ask them how they were doing.

#### Example 10:

Server: Hi, Welcome to CerealLand. How do you like your cereal?  
 Customer: Good. Let's see. Um, how about a Banana Brown Betty?

This indicates that the customers perceived the server's speech in that ordering situation to be a greeting (which often includes asking how someone is), and they completed what they perceived to be an adjacency pair with a response.

### Modals

Isolating the question, *How do you like your cereal?*, from the other possible variations within the CF also shows significant results in relation to direct orders. Fourteen of sixty-seven customers (21%) who were asked *How do you like your cereal?* gave a direct order, whereas fourteen of twenty-one customers (67%) who were asked *How would you like your cereal?* directly ordered. The semantic and syntactic distinctions between *do* and *would* in this linguistic expression are crucial. *Would* is an auxiliary modal and is used in this context in a way that may signal obligation or

certainty. The expression, *How would you like your cereal?*, presupposes to a certain extent a tacit agreement that the customer will indeed order some cereal. It is therefore easier for a customer to gloss the phrase as *What would you like to order?*, which, as evidenced by the CNF, is a very normal question and one to which it is easy to respond. Also, the simple present *do* in this example connotes an habitual action or an habitual liking, thus the question asks customers to comment on their general cereal-eating habits, when in reality the server needs to find out what the customer wants to eat at the moment of ordering, regardless of what the customer might normally eat.

### Conclusions

As the data show, customers are much more likely to respond in a direct manner and not produce disfluencies when the servers pose a CerealLand No-Formula question. When servers do pose a CerealLand Formula question, customers are more likely to respond in a direct manner when servers employ the modal *would* and ask *How would you like your cereal?* as opposed to the other documented variants.

Since *How do you like your cereal?* is a foreign phrase to first-time customers (who are likely expecting a formulaic greeting ritual), many may be waiting for a third part of the phrase to clarify what the server means, and upon only hearing two parts they are somewhat thrown off. To account for this, servers often turn *How do you like your cereal?* into a three-part phrase, perhaps normalizing the effects of the odd question a bit for the customers. Also, the simple present form *do* functions differently linguistically than the modal *would*, and customers respond with a direct order more often when servers ask *How would you like your cereal?* as opposed to *How do you like your cereal?*, which signals that the use of *do* may seem odd to many customers.

As discussed above, research also shows that abstract thinking can cause an increase in filled pauses, and assessing the abstractness of all the server-posed questions in the CF and CNF groups, *How do you like your cereal?* may well be the most abstract question. If we accept that *How do you like your cereal?* is the most abstract of the servers' questions and that it causes the most abstract thinking and reasoning on the customers' part, we see why there are more disfluencies in response to this question. I correlated direct orders with linguistic success and disfluencies with a sense of uncertainty and linguistic faltering, and according to past research (Rochester 1973) disfluencies may even signal customers' anxiety. That silent pauses (SPs) are more frequent in higher-anxiety situations gives credence to the possibility that the same might be true for filled pauses (FPs). If the increase of FPs in response to *How do you like your cereal?* is indeed an indication that the customer is experiencing a certain level of anxiety, continuing use of this expression and provoking anxiety in cus-

tomers would certainly seem contrary to Cerealland's customer-service goals. Rephrasing Cerealland's "cereal formula" to pattern after more recognizable or formulaic greetings would aid customers in decoding utterance meaning and would likely lessen the production of disfluencies.

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