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Women and Small Talk in Public Settings: Close-Contact Service Encounters

The paper has addressed talk in public settings with the view to delineating the differences between transactional and relational talk and to unravelling the role played by the latter in two types of service encounters that basically involve female participants: an encounter with the dressmaker and a another one with the beautician. Our analysis has shown that in service encounters it is sometimes difficult to draw a clear distinction between small talk and transactional talk, since the overall structure of service encounters reflects the existence of a continuum rather than the discrete units of small talk and task-oriented talk we perceive. We distinguished four broad types of talk in service encounters: (1) phatic exchanges (greetings, partings); (2) transactional talk or task-oriented talk (instructions, requests); transactional-plus-relational talk (non-obligatory comments and task evaluations); (4) relational talk (small talk, anecdotes). The analysis of the data belonging to the fourth type has shown that small talk serves both transactional and interpersonal goals: it allows the opportunity to build up a good, sociable ongoing relationship that will stand the test of time and other captive encounters.

Key words: *Small talk, transactional talk, conversation analysis, service encounters, positive politeness, gender identity*

1. Preliminary remarks

In terms of discourse structure and function, *phatic communion* in casual conversational settings occurs sequentially on the fringes of conversation where it functions as a means of defusing the potential hostility and tensions associated with silence, thereby establishing and maintaining social relationships, on the one hand, and achieving transition into, within or out of more task-oriented talk, on the other hand. However, phatic communion is not restricted to informal conversations among familiars, nor is it uniquely associated with the openings and closings of talk-in-interaction. Whenever interpersonal goals become salient, small talk is frequently embedded, though usually minimalistically, in a wide variety of service encounters ranging from brief buying/selling exchanges at stalls and kiosks (Meritt 1975) or supermarket checkout counters (Kuiper and Flindall 2000) to more extended service encounters (Coupland and McEwen 2000, McCarthy 2000). Thus the aim of this paper is twofold. First it explores some of the ways in which small talk in service encounters serves interpersonal goals. Second it relates the interpersonal function served by small talk to gender showing that certain small talk topics are instrumental in the construction of gendered identities.

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2. Data collection and methodology

The chosen extracts for the present study belong in two sets of audio-recorded data. Both sets are uncontrolled samples of naturally occurring talk-in-interaction in service encounters. The Bucharest set (marked B) comes from the corpus of spoken Romanian established by the Romanian Language Department, Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest[1]. The Constanța set (marked C) is part of an ongoing research project comprising ten hours of both mixed and same-sex interactions gathered over the last six years with a view to exploring the speaking practices of Romanian women and men in both formal and informal settings.

The excerpts[2] in the present paper come from two types of service encounter: a beautician's salon and an encounter with the dressmaker. What the data sets have in common is that they belong to what has been referred to as 'close-contact service encounters': service provider and client are in close proximity in a physically limited space for a defined length of time, becoming thus each other's captive audience (McCarthy 2000). Moreover, in both instances, service provider and client know each other from previous encounters; it is not their first time together (in the beauty session, for instance, service provider and client have known each other for over twenty years) and in both recordings the atmosphere is friendly and informal.

3. Distributional features of small talk in service encounters

Identifying small talk in service encounters is by no means a straightforward task since small talk does not clearly stand out from surrounding transactional talk as one might expect. Therefore the most appropriate approach to conceptualizing small talk in service encounters is in terms of a *continuum* rather than discrete units, with transactional talk and phatic communion interspersed with relational and transactional-plus-relational talk. Although the extremes are relatively easy to identify, many instances of talk during service encounters do not fit neatly into these core categories of transactional talk and phatic communion. Talk may shift along the continuum from transactional talk to talk that although task-oriented has a non-obligatory relational component attached to it. At the other end of the continuum, phatic communion drifts gradually towards relational talk as the content of the exchange relates more closely to the individuals involved. Thus, what we may term small talk in service

[1] For further details on the corpus and its construction see Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu (2002).

[2] The transcription conventions used for transcribing the conversations included in this paper as well as in the corpus on which our research has been based are adopted with some changes from Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson (1996: 461-65). One important difference between these conventions and the ones cited in the present is that capital letters are neither used in the beginning of turns nor for new turn constructional units. Nor are they used at the beginning of proper nouns. Capital letters are used to indicate some form of emphasis. The conversations have been transcribed phonetically. Thus we depart from some of the current spelling rules that apply to the letters **î/â** in medial position. We use the letter a only in such words as *român/românesc/româneşte/România*. Similarly, we use two variants for the verbal forms of *a fi* (to be) in first person singular and plural and in second and third persons plural (sînt/sunt; sîntem/suntem; sînteți/sunteți; sînt/sunt) depending on how our informants pronounce these forms.

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encounters covers a considerable distance along the continuum extending towards transactional talk. In terms of its distribution, small talk is a pervasive feature of close-contact service encounters being not only associated with fringes of encounters but also frequently displacing task-related discourse throughout the encounter[3].

4. Types of talk in the data

4.1. Transactional talk

The overall structure of both the beautician and dressmaker sessions consists of the stages given in Table 1 below, marked both verbally and non-verbally by both participants:

	The Beautician's	The Dressmaker's
1.	Arrival and checking in for appointment	Arrival and checking in for appointment
2.	Initial discussion with the client	(Initial discussion with the client)
3.	Transactional stage (i.e. core stage): beautifying stage	Transactional stage (i.e. core stage): the fitting stage
4.	(Making another appointment)	(Making another appointment)
5.	Encounter evaluation	Encounter evaluation
6.	Payment	(Payment)
7.	Closure	Closure

Table 1 Transactional stages in close-contact service encounters: the beautician and the dressmaker session

Sometimes these stages do not follow the specified order. Thus making another appointment may follow the payment stage. Moreover, during some encounters some stages may be lacking: this applies to stages given in round brackets. This is particularly true of the dressmaker session, where a fitting session generally extends over several encounters. **Transactional talk** clearly orientates towards these stages as the following extracts illustrate:

Arrival and checking in for appointment
Excerpt 1 (C)

[3] This stands in marked contrast to various types of workplace interactions where small talk tends to occur most typically, though not exclusively, at the boundaries of interaction and of the working day (Holmes 2000).

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1 Client: bună seara sper că n-am întârziat
2 Server: a::: nu este fără zece oricum clienta următoare nu vine aşa că sunt mai liberă

Initial discussion with the client

Excerpt 2 (C)

1 Server: vrei picioare şi braţe
2 Client: da
3 Server : atât
4 Client : atât

Making another appointment

Excerpt 3 (C)

1 Client: doamna mariana
2 Server: da
3 Client da' văd ca fetele s-au trecut da' nu –
4 totuşi mai bine o să sun eu
5 Server: ce?
6 Client: mai bine o să sun văd că s-au trecut deja au început să se treacă (.)
7 Server: păi da' unele vor neapărat şi dacă nu-şi mai găsesc oră ştii
8 Client: da
9 Server: unele au motive să
10 Client: io să: doar să-mi trec numai faţa
11 Server: ce vrei tu
12 Client: adică la asta nu ştiu cum o să-mi crească cînd creşte foarte repede
13 câteodată nu creşte
14 faţa aş vrea s-o trec

Payment

Excerpt 4 (C)

1 Client : cât coastă
2 Server : o sutădouă zeci astăzi

Closure

Excerpt 5 (C)

1 Client : bine adina mersi mult de tot
2 Server : cu plăcere
3 Client : pa te-am pupat
4 Server : pa pa

Transactional stage, i.e. core stage

There are important differences between the two types of encounters in terms of the amount and nature of transactional talk. In part, these differences stem from spatio-temporal constraints. The beautician session can be described as a one-sided language-in-action event in which lengthy pauses are more numerous than in the dressmaker session: the beautician is physically active while the customer is passive and restricted to either lying on the bed or

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performing certain movements when asked to do so. Thus in the beauty session the transactional stage includes local requests and/or instructions issued by the beautician:

Excerpt 6 (C)
1 Server: dă-te aşa
2 mai mult te rog a::şa
Excerpt 7 (C)
1 Server: vino mai încoace

Such instructions may only occasionally be issued by the client as in line 1 in each of the following two excerpts:

Excerpt 8 (C)
1 Client: să nu-mi laşi brazde
Excerpt 9 (C)
1 Client: uite aici mai e o °dungă°
2 Server: nu că aia ți-o las acolo n-ai zis tu că vrei cu dungi? aşa ai zis
3 Client: nu vreau zebră

However, such instructions issued by the client seem to be the exception that proves the rule. It is not surprising that they come from the encounter where both participants belong in the same age group

Our data show the talk throughout the dressmaker's session as being overwhelmingly task-related. This is not surprising since the dressmaker's session is more of a language-in-action for both parties, pauses being not only scarce, but also shorter. Both participants are verbally and mentally active informing and instructing each other. In the dressmaker session examples typical of the task-related transactional talk include explicit and elaborate instructions as to the process of making the particular garment piece. These instructions are bi-directional in the sense of being given by both client and service provider:

Excerpt 10 (B)
1 Server: **ți-i faci aşa ↓mai scurți↑**
2 Client 2: nu nu nu sub: sub: sub gleznă
3 Server: că ei vin mai pană↓
4 Client 2: Da↓ vin **da' vin puțin nu foarte mult vin pană**
5 **o idee aşa↓ deci nu foarte mult**
6 Client 1: **păi nu poate să se-mbrace cu ei p-ormă**
7 Client 2: e::::
8 Client 1: a::: cred că **trebuie să-i pui aicea d-aia ca la bărbați↓ aşa**

Besides these obligatory transactional exchanges, however, long periods of activity take place where strictly speaking no task-oriented transactional talk is required. During the beautician sessions there are several medium-length silences of between 17 and 20 seconds while the server is heating the beeswax or checking its temperature or while she is preparing face pack or massage cream, one long silence of 62 seconds while the client is checking with the appointment book for making another appointment and a number of intermittent silences

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of between 6 and 11 seconds while the facial or wax is being applied or the face is being massaged, occasions where talk would be difficult at least on the part of the client[4]. This intimate tie between language and action has considerable implications for one aspect of the organization of talk in interaction: silence. Our data reveal the silence factor to be particularly important in the distribution and types of relational talk. The amount of non-transactional talk is overwhelming during both sessions.

4.2. Transactional-plus-relational talk

Before turning from task-oriented transactional talk to the nature and function of non-transactional or relational talk, it is worth noting that transactional events may be accompanied by non-obligatory non-transactional comments as in the following excerpts taken from the beautician session:

Excerpt 11 (C)
(while the beeswax is being applied)
1 Client: **a:::h ce pişcă pişcă rău**
2 Server: asta-i şi ideea să (se) prindă

Excerpt 12 (C)
1 Client: **ai schimbat ceara ai pus d-aia caldă**
2 Server: nu tot aia e e tot aceeaşi
3 Client: **da' de ce pişcă aşa**

Similarly, even the most overtly transactional or task-related talk may occasionally drift towards interpersonal discourse.

Excerpt 13 (C)
1 Server: nişte comedoane ( )
2 **nu sunt ale tale**
3 Client: nu sunt ale mele
4 Server: **nu de vârstă**
5 **mănânci prea repede te grăbeşti poate**
6 Client: da
7 Server: **tenu' tău e foarte bun**
8 Client: câte ceva tre' să
9Server: **şi depinde şi de anumite perioade ale să- lunii- respective**
10 Client: da
11 Server: **sau premenopauza**
12 **la tine nu e cazu' da' la unele cliente**
13 Client: da înainte de ci**[**clu
14 Server: **[pe ciclu la tine**

[4] This is in keeping with recent research showing that talk in interaction where language is primarily in the service of physical activities regularly displays long silences (Carter and McCarthy 1997) which otherwise would be unacceptable in casual conversation.

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15 a sângerat nu sînt colectate

In the beauty session from which excerpt 13 is taken the beautician and the client have known each other for over twenty years. This long-lasting relationship is manifest in the linguistic strategies employed by both participants. Task-related talk extends over lines 1 and 15. In line (1) it deviates from its expected course and shifts to relational talk in line (2). This insertion by the beautician of an extended turn of interpersonal discourse into task-related talk enables her to acknowledge this relationship by asserting familiarity with her client's lifestyle**.** This sense of familiarity and involvement is achieved through the use of details (*'mănânci prea mult', 'te grăbeşti', 'tenul tău e foarte bun', ' depinde de unele perioade….premonopauza ...la unele cliente… ciclu la tine'*) which evoke scenes/aspects of her interlocutor's lifestyle. The client, on the other hand, seems equally interested in asserting her involvement in the conversation and the relationship. The positive politeness strategies that she uses allows her to claim common opinions (e.g. the slightly varied allo-repetition in line 3 and the minimal responses as indicators of agreement in lines 6 and 10 show acceptance of the server's utterance) and to signal her sympathy for and cooperation with her interlocutor by jointly and cooperatively constructing the same turn in line 13. These interactional strategies send a meta-message of involvement by showing the interlocutors as willing to take part in the conversation and therefore in the relationship.

As in the beauty salon, the encounter with the dressmaker shows participants as breaking out of the transactional by employing non-obligatory comments on relevant features of the situation should the opportunity present itself. This provides for occasional interactional moments during an otherwise task-related conversational flow as in excerpt 14 where the participants discuss the possibility of taking in a pair of trousers. In line 11 Client 2 breaks the transactional flow by supplying a non-obligatory comment.

Excerpt 14 (B)

1 Client 2: şi-ai mei ăia care nu mai îmi sunt buni
2 ăia care mi i-ai luat tu pană aşa sunt din spandex **[**sînt
3 Client 1: **[**da
4 Client 2: da' nu ştiu dacă pot fi strâmtați
5 Client 1: e::: na! CE nu poți să-i strâmtezi tănțica dacă-s **[**largi?
6 Server: **[**din spandex?
7 Client 1: sînt d-ăia pană aşa
8 Client 2: pufoşi aşa
9 Client 1: da uite exact ca materialu-ăsta
10 Client 2: cam aşa că nu mai stau pe mine ăia pică
11 Client 1: **sunt după timpu când era şi ea grăsană**

During the session, occasional evaluations of relevant features of the event take place. In extract 15, which is a continuation of excerpt 14, client 1 supplies a positive evaluation of a certain type fabric in line 1, which the server agrees on by providing a slightly-varied repetition in line 2 and appending to it a question that elicits a personal account from client 3 (lines 5, 9 and 13). This personal account which occupies a fuzzy territory between the *transactional* and the *relational* allow the four participants in the interchange to break out of transactional mode into relational talk and step into their role of

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co-experiencers of fashion, thereby consolidating the relational level. Yet this should not be taken to mean that relational talk is free-for-all, with no restraint on the topics addressed. The chosen topics bear some direct or indirect relevance to their gendered identities as women concerned with fashion and physical appearance.

Excerpt 15 (B)

1 Client 1: cred că spandexu se poartă extraordinar de bine
2 Server: spandexu-ăsta să ştiţi că se poartă foarte bine **[**nu ştiu
3 Client 2: **[**păi da ↓ **[**da' nu
4 Server: **[nu-i aşa că vă-mpăcaţi bine cu el**
5 Client 3: **de doi ani am fusta aceasta**
6 Client 2: atuncea a apărut span**[**dexu
7 Client 3: **[**da
8 Client 2: atuncea a fost în vogă
9 Client 3: da. dar **aşa de bine am purtat-o şi m-am simţit asa de bi[ne**
10 Client 1: **[**da'
11 nu se şifonează↓ nu↑
12 Client 3: nu
13 **o speli şi nici n-o [calci**
14 Client 1: **[**EXTRAordinar

In terms of the conversational strategies employed, it is worth noting that all participants show a preference for such positive-politeness strategies as repetitions that ratifies listenership and signals agreement with the interlocutor (line 2), supportive overlapping talk (lines 2 and 3; lines 3 and 4; lines 6 and 7; lines 9 and 10; lines 13 and 14) which is an important contributing factor to achieving cooperation and interpersonal involvement in talk-in-interaction or extreme case formulations (lines 9 and 14) which intensify interest in the conversation and the relationship. Elsewhere (Hornoiu 2003) we have shown that these interactional strategies occur with great frequency in Romanian women's conversational style and are instrumental in the pursuit of rapport and intimacy in relationships.

Encounter evaluation

An *encounter evaluation* typically occurs at the end of the session. Ordinarily, this type of transactional talk is supplied by the client, but the server might be expected to contribute in some way. Its function is to satisfy both parties' *positive face*, by describing the encounter as successful, free of problems. For illustrative purposes, consider excerpts 16 and 17.

Excerpt 16 (C)

1 Client: io mă uit după dungi adina
2 **a :::h ce bine arăt**

Excerpt 17 (B)

1 Server: aşa şi cu guleraşu' ăla

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2 Client: **şi uite că vine frumos**
3 Server: **vine bine aşa**

This encounter evaluation, in addition to conventionally signalling the closing of the core stage, also marks participants' orientation towards expressing varying degrees of enthusiasms for the outcome of the encounter which will consolidate a good, ongoing service relationship between them occupying thus a fuzzy place between transactional and relational talk. Both sessions then close after payment with phatic exchanges.

Excerpt 18 (C)
1 Client: mulțumesc la revedere sănătate
2 Server: la revedere mulțumesc şi eu

Ordinarily, in such phatic exchanges the client expresses her concern about the service provider's workload referring to how many other customers the server has to deal with before finishing work.

Excerpt 19 (C)
1 Client: **tu pân' la ce oră stai aicea astăzi?**
2 Server: o să stau pînă mai tîrziu
3 Client: **mai ai cliente**
4 Server: mhm
5 Client: **şi-ți pare rău?**

Such manifestations of concern, however, appear not be confined to the closing sequence. They may equally occur at the beginning of the session as a continuation of the greeting sequence, as extract 20 shows, where it marks transition to relational topics.

Excerpt 20 (B)
1 Client 1: **şi nu eşti aglomerată la ora asta?**
2 Server: a::: aşa aşa. aşa # da' nici nu mai ştiu ce să mai zic.
3 am fost aşa de amețită azi toată ziua
4 n-am fost în stare să fac nimica nu ştiu de ce (naibii)

Irrespective of their location, they seem to have become a ritualisation of concern for the service provider in such situations.

The excerpts so far show the transactional and phatic components in both types of encounters as being additionally marked by orientation towards the ongoing client-server relationship. This orientation seems to be characteristic of 'captive audience' encounters as opposed to encounters of shorter duration (e.g. shops) where boundary marking of the phases of the encounter tends to be more business-like. I have also noted that both data sets involve participants who are not transacting service for the first time. This distinction between long-term and zero-history relationships (King and Sereno 1984:271) is an important factor in how

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relational meaning is co-constructed by participants in talk, and this would certainly seem to be relevant here[5].

4.3. Relational topics

When neither phatic nor transactional talk is not required, or when silence does not fill any parts of the session, conversational space is given over to casual conversation. The topics are initiated by each participant; in both sessions, however, they revolve mostly around and the family of the service provider; the client asks the server a lot about herself but returns relatively little about her own life. This may be, to a certain extent, more than personal reticence: the service provider is often physically in a better position to engage in conversation, while the client may be discomforted for extended periods, e.g. when her face is being massaged or facial is being applied. Personal reticence, however, may be an explanation that should not be dismissed out of hand since in the session where both the client and the beautician belong in the same age group the former is more willing to contribute to this kind of personal disclosure.

Our analysis of the relational topics introduced by both participants reveals that they fall into the following broad categories: (i) they report noticings regarding the immediate local environment; (ii) they include requests for news updates; (iii) they include one's plans for future activities. In another study (Hornoiu 2004) we have analysed the relational topics falling in the first category. In what follows, we will focus on the last two categories: **requests for news updates** and **plans for future activities.**

These topics are recognizably *small talk* in so far as they have a strong sense of being current or proximate either temporally or spatially. At a grammatical level, this sense of being current or proximate is reflected in the consistent use of present tense and directly quoted speech when past events are reported thus rendering the past event or activity in question as newsworthy because of its immediacy and proximateness[6]. Moreover, the use of a variety of deictic and elliptical references invokes a further sense of being proximate (Brown and Levinson 1987): the closeness of the relationships between the participants themselves the shared knowledge required for establishing the correct identity of the referent.

4.3.1. News updates

A category of small talk topics includes topics which arise in response to enquiries about *news-updates*. They have a sense of being proximate in so far as they invite the interlocutor to report on the current 'state of affairs' regarding something they talked about last time they met or to report some event which has recently occurred. These requests for news-updates are

[5] This distinction also accounts for the much richer relational data found in studies such as Ylanne-McEwen (1997), where the extended travel agency encounters depended for their success in no small part on the achievement and maintenance of a satisfactory relationship between server and customer.

[6] Cf. Tannen (1989)

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triggered by other-attentive enquiries: they are solicitous and as such they are instrumental in building positive relationships. These enquiries and the news-updates they elicit are other-attentive to two issues: what is known about the other's schedule (people visiting, trips) and problems (particularly concerning health) experienced by the interlocutor or significant others. Such news updates generally take the form of more or less extended anecdotes and stories and are therefore instrumental in the construction of one's social identity[7]. The elicitation of detail by the client is interpreted as an expression of interest and commitment. Likewise telling and sharing details about one's personal life is at the centre of the pursuit and confirmation of rapport and intimacy in relationships (Tannen 1989). This is particularly true of the session where the two participants have known each other for almost twenty years: the beautician engages in extended stories about her husband's health, or her son and daughter-in-law's happy marriage, about her grandson's academic success or her granddaughter's cooking talent. Excerpts 21 and 22 illustrate some of these stories.

Excerpt 21 (C)

1 Client: şi felicia ce face? a fost ziua ei duminică
2 Server: felicia da pe 23 a împlinit şi ea patruzeci şi trei de ani si restu-
3 lucrează da' ea lunea şi joia îşi ia liber că lucrează mai târziu
4 cum lucram io pe vremuri şi se chinuie cu ceara
5 că ba le-o dă o firma mai bună alta mai puțin bună
6 clientele care mai întârzie care
7 (3)
8 vin la timp [...]
9 Server: cosmin a terminat toate zece examenele şi a luat numai nouă şi zece
10 ce n-a facut în anu' unu şi doi
11 Client: da
12 Server: şi şi-a facut mărțişoare să le dea cadou colo colo şi el
13 să nu mai dea bani pe ele
14 Client: şi george?
15 Server: george nu se simte bine cu sănătatea a făcut tratament şi fizioterapica
16 a făcut şi reflexo
17 în londra a făcut crize şi a trebuit să-şi facă **[**injecție cu voltaren
18 Client: **[**m::::
19 Sever: şi acum mai are nişte câteva şedinte de fizioterapie (cu) pauza de zece zile
20 şi să continue mai continua cîteva
21 (2)
22 pe douăş'patru martie tre' să plece
23 Client: e acasă el
24 Server: e acasă de o lună şi ceva
25 Client: nu se plictiseşte acasă
26 Server: e nu:: mai face şi el

[7] There is a great deal of research on the use of narrative in the presentation of self both from a psychological perspective and from a more socio-cultural viewpoint. For a valuable review of the characteristics of different approaches, see Schiffrin (1996).

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27 Client: da: v-ajuta
28 Server: pe felicia ei acolo-n casă fac menaju' că până vine felicia seara
29 ce s-o mai aştepți pe felicia să pregătească masa să:
30 mai uşurează pe căn- cătălina că ea se pricepe la gătit
31 şi cosmin face piața
32 Client: cătălina găteşte da?
33 Server: cătălina găte::şte
34 (2)
35 ce nu ştie mai face felicia mai complicat joia şi lunea
36 în rest cartofi la cuptor cartofi prăjiți ouă ochiuri grătar
37 Client: e şi astea dacă vii şi le găseşti gata făcute contează
38 Server: e:: da' ea nu poate la opt şi jumătate să aştepte toți nemâncații să vină felicia să pregătească

Excerpt 22 (C)

1 Server: era mândră că de ziua ei i-a luat cosmin o pereche de cercei de argint mari aşa
2 Client: a::::h
3 Server: cînd i-am văzut la (.) ureche zic io nu port aşa şi era numai cu argint
4 da' verigheta lor este combinație de aur cu aur alb
5 Client: mhm ce frumoasă
6 Server: şi merge şi la argint şi la aur da şi avea o groază de brățări pe mână
7 'cerceii ăia mari mi-a luat cosmin de ziua mea'
8 că pe nouă februarie a fost ziua lu' cătălina pe cinşpe a lu' cosmin şi acum pe
9 douăştrei a lu' felicia da şi:::
10 (4)
11 îi luase a venit c-o seară înainte naşa de cununie a lor şi i-a adus o bluză
12 foarte frumoasă cu fir prin ea aşa
13 (4) au facut la clubu' unde lucrează cosmin au serbat amîndoi pe:::: sîmbătă
14 pe paişpe
15 Client: de velăntain
16 Server: da au făcut platouri reci
17 le-am făcut io un tort de fructe le-am dat

These conversational exchanges are exchanges between women and the intimacy being constructed here through story telling revolves around stereotypically gendered themes. These stories are often used by conversationalists to construct or reinforce a particular a particular kind of gendered identity for both the narrator and the protagonists. The gender identity constructed here is to certain extent a conservative one: an identity conforming to the beliefs existing in a patriarchal society[8], beliefs about the way women and men should behave. This

[8] Recent research on gender has shown that post-communist Romanian society, although characterised by gender-related egalitarianism at the level of official ideology, is marked by traditional patriarchal attitudes and practices in the private sphere and by patriarchal authority in terms of the state-citizen relationships (Pasti 2003). Moreover, recent public opinion polls and increasing tendencies towards

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mirrors Andrei's point (1978) that there is overwhelming societal pressure to accept particular gender roles:

> 'Noi nu ne creştem copiii cum vrem, ci aşa cum ne impune obiceiul, tradiția, opinia publică, societatea cu structura ei dintr-un moment dat' (Andrei 1978 : 219)

The question that arises is what do such stories aim to accomplish? At one level they are intended to bring the interlocutor up-to-date on what the narrator and significant others have been doing. At another level they are components in a complex answer to the client's enquiry. At yet another level during these stories, the service provider constructs conservative or normative gender identities for herself, her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter. According to Barometrul de gen (the Gender Barometer) 2000, in contemporary Romanian society the proportion of women who have internalized and accepted patriarchy is roughly similar to that of men[9]**.** She represents her daughter-in-law as a 'good' mother and 'loving' wife who is concerned for her family's comfort and well-being and therefore works long/unsocial hours to supplement her family income[10], but at the same time she manages to take two days off to look after her family's needs. Consider the most obvious relevant sections of the stories/narratives:

Excerpt 23 (C)

- (felicia) lucrează da' ea lunea şi joia îşi ia liber că lucrează mai târziu cum lucram io pe vremuri şi se chinuie cu ceara că ba le-o dă o firma mai bună alta mai puțin bună
- (o ajuta) pe felicia acolo-n casă fac menaju' că până vine felicia seara ce s-o mai astepți pe felicia să pregătească masa
- (ce e mai complicat) face Felicia joia şi lunea
- e:: da' ea nu poate la opt şi jumătate să aştepte toți nemâncații să vina felicia să pregătească
- era mândră că de ziua ei i-a luat cosmin o pereche de cercei de argint mari aşa

While the message is easily inferred from the first four utterances, it is not quite so obvious form the last. In fact, this utterance indicates that Cosmin's love for his mother is a reflection of the latter's good qualities. The server also constructs her own gender identity as a good understanding mother(-in-law) and grandmother:

Excerpt 24 (C)

---

left-wing conservatism show that a paternalist state is still favoured in contemporary Romanian society (Miroiu 2004).

[9] Romanian mass-media do not portray a less patriarchal society. Television shows with and about women are confined to aspects of the private sphere whereas shows with and about people (i.e. men) focus on aspects of the public sphere and issues of general interest. Commercials endlessly perpetuate the image of the woman who brings up her children and does all the cleaning and cooking to keep her man around the house or the woman who beautifies herself to win over the man for whom she will wash, clean and cook to keep him around the house.

[10] More often than not, female professionals depend on their husbands' incomes since their own incomes are inadequate (Pasti 2003).

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- până vine felicia seara ce s-o mai aştepţi pe felicia să pregătească masa
- le-am facut io un tort de fructe le-am dat

Similarly, the service provider constructs for her grand-daughter a gender identity that conforms to the rather conservative norms of Romanian society. The granddaughter is portrayed as being perfectly able to look after her father and brother and run the household showing that in the traditional Romanian family, which is characterised by a spirit of partnership only to limited extent[11], the performance of the housewife role in adulthood is prefaced by a long period of apprenticeship. This is most obvious in the following three utterances:

Excerpt 25 (C)

- Cătălina se pricepe la gătit
- cătălina găteşte (….) cartofi la cuptor cartofi prăjiţi oua ochiuri grătar
- ea nu poate la opt şi jumătate să astepte toţi nemâncaţii să vină felicia să pregătească

These extracts describe a state of affairs frequently encountered in Romanian society: girls are socialized into appropriate 'feminine' behaviour which presupposes, among other things, taking care of the male members of their families[12]. In the socialization of boys, freedom of choice and independence are valued twice as much as in the case of girls who are orientated towards obedience and hard work[13].

At least one rather different feminine identity gets voiced throughout these news-updates. It is the identity of several mutual female acquaintances who identify themselves more readily with the role of a modern woman with a full-time job, a woman who is very careful about her physical appearance and who regularly undergo beautifying treatments[14].

Excerpt 26 (C)

1 Client: da camelia ce bine arată nu ?
2 Server: da camelia arată foarte bine
3 'să ştiţi că chiar nu m-am dus decît de vreo două ori'
4 la o colegă a ei care a făcut cosmetică
5 da' nevoită că mă duceam acolo la coafor şi dacă nu mai puteam să vin
6 de când lucrez la bancă termin tot la şapte opt seară
7 ştiam ca sâmbăta dumneavoastră nu lucraţi
8 şi cînd mi-am adus aminte
9 cînd a mai vrut ea să mai vină din nou auzise că sunt bolnavă şi nu mai lucrez
10 Client: şi auraş?

---

[11] In contemporary Romanian society 80% of household chores and the raising of children is left up to the wife whereas only in 5% of Romanian families household chores are jointly completed by both partners (Barometrul de gen, 2000).

[12] Cf. Stanciulescu (1998)

[13] See *Barometrul de gen (2000)*

[14] This type of woman, promoted mainly by mass-media, is referred to in gender studies as 'the Barbie doll' – an independent career woman with sex appeal and access to beautifying techniques.

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11 Server: auraş acuma nu mai vrea să piardă
12 că toate fetele au lăudat-o ca arată foarte bine

These extracts show how gender identity is constantly being constructing and people may reinforce existing societal norms at one point, but challenge and contest them at others. In extracts 21 and 22, on this particular occasion the service provider constructs a predominantly conservative identity not only for herself but also for her daughter-in-law and granddaughter. Although we may safely assume that in other respects their gendered identities may not conform to the rather conservative norms of Romanian society, on this occasion she takes the traditional roles of 'good mother', 'good daughter' and 'good wife' very seriously, and likes others to recognise and appreciate the extent to which she and other female members of her family meet society's prescriptions in these two areas.

Occasionally such news-updates are instigated by the news-teller without prompting. The excerpt below is reproduced here in its entirety:

Excerpt 27 (C)

1 Client: io nu m-am epilat de cînd ai de cînd am venit aici ultima oară
2 SP: mhm
3 (5)
4 Client: a::: şi cu ceara chestia e că ăia aveau
5 da' ştii de care aveau din alea mici aşa de lumânări
6 SP: aha
7 Client: şi::: era cinşpe mii bucata şi io am întrebat-o pe mirela şi-am zis
8 mă ar trebui să luăm câte din ale ar trebui să luăm ca să
9 SP: erau chiar lumânare cre' ca aşa mici
10 Client: nu erau lumânări lumânări
11 arătau ca nişte:: ştii cum sunt formele alea de prăjituri a::
12 SP: da
13 Client: sunt nişte forme dacă faci şarlotă sau budincă din aia
14 e::h aşa erau şi alea cică erau lumînări
15 ăia încercau să mă convingă nu domnişoară că oricum dacă vreți vă aduc mai
16 multe sau ceva de genu' ăsta
17 SP: da am rezolvat într-un fel deocamdată am făcut rost
18 (5)
19 Client: şi eram sigură că la noi aşa o să fie
20 oricum se uita lumea cam chiorâş la mine când am spus că am nevoie
21 de mai mult
22 SP: ceară de albine
23 Client: mhm da
24 cât de multă făcea
25 MU::ltă ((laughing)) zic un kilogram am nevoie
26 (2)
26 SP: aşa am pățit eu când am lucrat odată cam un an jumate la tarabă-n piață ştii
27 mi-am pus anunț la tarabă acolo că vreau sacâz ştii
28 caut sacâz cumpăr sacâz nu ştiu ce-am scris
29 şi vine şi mă-ntreabă cât sacâz vrei?

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30 şi avea şi el uite atâtica
31 Client: ((laughing))
32 SP: păi io vreau vreo zece kilograme douăzeci depinde de preţ
33 a::::h da' pentru ce-ţi trebuie ţie că mă gîndeam că ai aparat pistol d-ăla de lipit
34 şi n-ai sacâz
35 ştii că se mai foloseşte la electricieni la (decapat) le folosesc ei

Following a piece of personal information concerning the last time she had her leg hair removed which is not topicalised and a five-second inactive pause in line 3, the client starts relating a story about the difficulties she encountered while trying to get some beeswax (lines 4-17); a second long pause (line 18) is then broken by the client with a retrospective comment on the lapsed topic (lines 19-25), which the server matches with an account of a similar experience (lines 26-35)[15].The service provider's account fills a much shorter pause this time (line 26). Thus the excerpt shows both participants as working hard to fill inactive embarrassing **silences.**

At times such news-updates may be designed as a continuation of a noticing about the immediate local environment. Excerpt 28 is a case in point.

Excerpt 28 (B)

1 Client 1: CE material e ăsta ↓ span**[**dex?
2 Client 2: **[**spandex
3 SP: **[**spandex e ↓ da
4 Client 1: nina vrea să-şi facă pantaloni.
5 Client 2: da. pică bine
6 Client 1: ţi-a zis ↑ ţi-a zis ↑
7 SP: mi-a zis că-i trebuie pantaloni ↓ da' nu mi-a zis că-şi ia spandex
8 Client 1: păi a probat acuma-ntr-o zi ↓ nu ştiu cine-a adus ↓ de-a gata aşa ↓
9 da' d-ăia subţirei. s-a-mbrăcat şi vai şi-a defilat p-acolo zice ↓ îmi stă bine
10 zic ↓ EXTRAordinar de bine
11 ia să-mi fac eu pentru toamnă

In the above excerpt the news-update is supplied, without prompting, by client 1 in line (4) as a continuation of a noticing about an aspect of the immediate local environment in line 1. After seeking confirmation (line 6) as to whether the other party is familiar with this piece of news, client 1 moves on to telling the story in lines 8-11. Because such enquiries about news-updates refer back to events both participants are familiar with, the majority of deictic and elliptical references are to be found in this type of topics. The shared knowledge lying behind the use and interpretation of such references, in addition to the closeness which is invoked by the use of other-attentive enquiries which are finely tuned to the detail of the other's life, help to foster a sense of relational proximity hence intimacy. This sense of proximity is also

[15] This is in line with Lindelfeld's (1990) finding that market traders only give personal information as an act of matching personal information provided by customers.

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reinforced by the use of directly quoted speech and present tenses when past events are being narrated.

4.3.2. Plans for future activities

Another category of small talk topics involves the participants' describing their personal plans for proximate activities in the immediate future. One essential difference between *oh*-prefaced environmental noticings and other types of reports lies in the fact that only *oh*-prefaced noticings can be inserted in a sequentially disjunctive position, in the middle of an opening or closing sequence, for instance, or within an adjacency pair. Ordinarily in my data they occur without prompting and they are designed as a continuation of other types of small talk topics such as weather talk or news-updates in excerpt 30 or to task-related talk as in excerpt 29:

Excerpt 29 (C)
1 Client: să nu-mi laşi brazde pe picioare că **s-ar putea să port fustă in weekendu' ăsta undeva**
2 SP: (i-auzi)
3 Client: **s-ar putea să mă duc la teatru**
4 SP: spune cu voce tare un' te duci s-audă şi (gagiu')
5 Client: nu spun cu voce tare spun cu juma' de gură
6 **el mi-a promis că mă duce la teatru da' las' că vedem acuş'**
7 SP: îţi arată el teatru acasă
Excerpt 30 (C)
1 SP: a::h ce rece e
2 Client: am impresia că m-am îmbrăcat cam subţire şi nu e aşa cald afară precum pare
3 (3)
4 **mâine mă duc iar la bucureşti**
5 **de acum te-ai obişnuit dacă mă vezi pe aicea tre' să mă duc la bucureşti**
6 SP: a: şa:: io sunt biletu' vostru de voie de a pleca
7 Client: al meu cel puţin că mirela n-a mai plecat de cinci luni da' al meu eşti sigur
8 că am vorbit şi cu grasu' la telefon şi am zis că mă duc să mă jupă

Like weather talk or news-updates, descriptions of future activities are immediately visible as small talk, to the extent to which the activities they report are totally mundane, inconsequential and familiar involving recurrent favoured themes and tales of entirely routine activities. In excerpt 30 the imperative is to fill in an inactive silence at line 3, but the participants eschew other options in favour of a topic which functions as a bridge into intimate and self-revealing talk thereby enabling them to advance their personal knowledge of each other. Engaging in such trivial topics seems to invoke the immutability and continuity of the relationship and it may occasion subsequent talk on that topic, or it may be swiftly dropped.

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5. Concluding remarks

This paper has addressed talk in public settings with the view to *delineating* the differences between **transactional** and **relational talk** and to unravelling the role played by the latter in two types of service encounters that basically involve female participants: *an encounter with the dressmaker* and a another one *with the beautician*. Our analysis of the data enabled us to distinguish four broad types of talk in service encounters: (1) *phatic exchanges* (greetings, partings); (2) *transactional talk* or task-oriented talk (instructions, requests); *transactional-plus-relational talk* (non-obligatory comments and task evaluations); (4) *relational talk* (small talk, anecdotes).

It is only in the second type (i.e. transactional talk) that participants focus predominantly on task demands, and even here, they do not hesitate to reinforce the relational component should the opportunity arise. In the third type, transactional-plus-relational talk, it is difficult to draw the dividing line between task-oriented discourse and non-obligatory comments and accounts.

Another issue that this paper addressed was the *functions* of small talk in close-contact service encounters. At the beginning of an interaction, small talk assists the transition from phatic exchanges to task-oriented talk. At the end of an interaction, it provides a means of finishing on a positive note, referring, although in passing, to the personal component of the relationship. Throughout the interaction, small talk is a useful undemanding means of filling inactive silences that may seem threatening and awkward, of expressing and reinforcing solidarity.

Although being a fundamentally social kind of talk, small talk serves both transactional and interpersonal goals: it allows the opportunity to build up a good, sociable ongoing relationship that will stand the test of time and other captive encounters. This feature renders small talk multifunctional. Some social and/or physical aspects of the speech event, such as belonging in the same age-group, a long-lasting relationship or the location of the encounter in the service provider's house, seem to favour a longer and more elaborate relational component. Whether consciously or not participants seem to know that successful business is built around good personal relationships and they do not seem miss any opportunity to consolidate the relational level.

Paying attention to the positive face of others is one means of constructing an identity that is perceived as predominantly feminine not only in western cultures, but in the Romanian culture as well (Hornoiu 2003). The excerpts analysed in this paper lend support to the widely held view that women tend to 'mix business with talk about their personal lives and expect other women to do so' (Tannen 1994). Some of the excerpts analysed in this paper as illustrating topics that are recognizably small talk have also been examined elsewhere (Hornoiu 2005) from another perspective: their role in the construction of a gendered identity.

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