

Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Pilar & Fernández-Amaya, Lucía & de la O Hernández-López, María (eds.). 2019. *Technology mediated service encounters*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. Pp. 247.

Reviewed by Heli Tissari

## 1 Introduction

All readers of this journal are familiar with expectations and challenges related to using new technology. These are also the first topic discussed in the volume *Technology Mediated Service Encounters*. The context is a health centre that has adapted new technology to help nurses explain potty training to parents. In the second chapter, the context is a hospital which uses translation services over the phone. There then follow four chapters on call centres, discussing lengths of calls, interruptions to calls, protocols, politeness, the potential for negotiating deals, and the use of a second language in customer service. Lastly, the book contains three chapters on Internet interactions. The last section begins with online bargaining and moves through customer reviews to what happens in a conversation on a commercial Facebook wall.

All this is also explained in the introductory chapter of the book. Moreover, it briefly tells the readers how this volume relates to previous research, pointing out that the topic of service encounters is not new but that there are not yet so many publications on technology mediated service encounters. This is the research gap that the editors have decided to address. They consider it a strength that the chapters represent various methods and discuss several languages. Lastly, they say that research on technology mediated service encounters has “real life applications and impact” (p. 9).

In the following, I summarize the book section by section. The three sections cover social service, call centres, and e-service encounters.

## 2 Summarising the section on social service

De Wilde, Van Praet & Van Vaerenbergh have studied “Language discordance and technological facilitation in health care service encounters”. In practice, this means the use of a story-board app to explain potty training to parents. The authors want to know how the use of the app impacts service provider and customer satisfaction, whether it influences conversational sequencing and

eye gaze, and whether it helps communication. They compare visits where nurses use the app to visits where they do not, using exchange students to act as parents who are not proficient in Dutch. In brief, they notice that, while one of the studied nurses has learned to use the app very well, another hesitates about what to do, which leads to a different pattern of conversation and eye gazing. While both customers and service providers prefer to use the app, it is clear that more training is needed to make its use really efficient.

The second article similarly discusses problems which arise when participants are not wholly cognizant of how the situation is supposed to work. It is aptly titled “Context and pragmatic meaning in telephone interpreting”. Lázaro Gutiérrez & Cabrera Méndez focus on a telephone conversation during which an interpreter is supposed to help a doctor treat a patient in an emergency room. Fortunately, it is not about life and death, because it takes a long time before contact is established between the interpreter and the doctor, and both have identified their roles. Problems follow even thereafter because the patient does not immediately understand that he can speak his own language to the interpreter; neither does he want to fully comply when he gets the message. The authors consider it a challenge for the interpreters that they can be suddenly invited to various kinds of unpredictable situations, but, again, they suggest that at least part of the problems could be avoided through means of better planning and training.

### **3 Summarising the section on call centres**

The name of Edmonds & Weatherall’s chapter “Managing verbal and embodied conduct in telephone-mediated service encounters” is slightly cryptic, as it refers to something that speakers on the phone have traditionally not been expected to see, the body. At the end of the chapter, they indeed speculate about what kind of phones the callers were using, surmising that speakers would have carried their mobile phones with them to check a meter reading, for example. This is what they refer to when they discuss ‘embodied conduct’. They are interested in what happens when a participant in the conversation has to move somewhere else to fetch information that is needed to continue the call. The outcome is that such activity may create a long silence in the middle of the call that can be avoided if the speaker keeps on explaining what s/he is doing. In the phone calls analysed by Edmonds & Weatherall, it was the clients who needed to multitask, and they may have had

landline telephones which could not be carried with them in order to keep the conversation going.

Hultgren's chapter on the globalization of politeness in call centres introduces a different topic – that of service personnel being trained to follow certain protocols. The gist is that if a similar protocol is used all over the globe, it is unlikely to always agree with the local context. In fact, there are differences on a much smaller scale. Hultgren analyses customer service interactions in Britain and Denmark and notices that the British staff follow the protocol conscientiously, while the Danes do not. The latter experience some of the protocol as unreasonable. A key example is that of providing and using personal names. A Danish informant explains that she feels uncomfortable if a strange person calls her by her first name; she in fact resorts to retaliating by using the customer's name. Interestingly, the Danish conversations are nevertheless no shorter than the British ones.

Revenge is also potentially an issue in Marguez Reiter's article "Navigating commercial constraints in a service call". She analyses a conversation where a salesperson fails to profit from a clever client who attempts to turn the occasion to her advantage. In the beginning of the conversation it seems that the salesperson has the upper hand and that the client is relatively unknowledgeable and innocent, but as the call proceeds, she shows that she has some aces up her sleeve. At some point, her attempt to close the conversation is nevertheless turned down by the salesperson who called her in the first place. Eventually, neither participant gains from this particular conversation.

While Marguez Reiter's negotiators are very skilful speakers of Spanish, Mugford's chapter on second-language English speakers working in a call centre in Mexico that serves U.S. clients introduces customers' doubts concerning language proficiency. It discusses problems encountered by the call centre staff and the ways they report solving them. The key terms *conversationalisation*, *(im)politeness* and *discursive practices* appear in the title of the study. It can be assumed that the Mexican staff would have more conversational resources at their disposal if they used their first language; however, they have developed clever discursive practices to avoid and solve conflicts. If there is a problem, it tends to be the client who is impolite, while the call-centre agents have to remain polite to the extent that they may not have the right to close a conversation even if it gets very heated.

I would like to commend Mugford for his choice of topic as it acknowledges the value of Mexican call center workers that is otherwise

overlooked, violating their quintessential right to be respected for their contributions. This in essence allows the professionalism of his subjects as well as their unique perspective to become apparent. This reminds me of an article by Chouliaraki (2011) where she underlines that solidarity should consist of bringing to the fore the people who actually suffer from a wrong, and their experience and reports, rather than of the commentator's views from the outside.

#### **4 Summarising the section on e-service encounters**

Placencia's chapter deals with refusals of offers on a website called Mercado Libre Ecuador. More specifically, its focus is twofold: sometimes the prospective buyers bargain, and sometimes they barter. Both are somewhat surprising as these behaviours are not encouraged by the website management. Placencia discovers that sellers respond differently if potential buyers offer a lower-than-suggested price than if they offer something other than money in return for the sales item. A buyer trying to barter is more likely to receive an explicit refusal than one trying to bargain, whose request is more likely to be met by an implicit refusal, such as a counter-offer. Placencia is also interested in the extent to which sellers' responses include supportive moves, such as affiliative address terms and apologies. They are most likely to contain greetings and least likely to include a signature.

Ren's study on intensification in online consumer reviews takes us to another continent, China. He has counted occurrences of the following in Kindle book reviews: preceding intensifiers, postpositional intensifiers, expletive/taboo words, metaphors, repetitions and emphasis by means of punctuation. While explaining these matters he also explains expressions and habits that may appear strange to writers operating with other languages. One of these is the trend to write the same sentence three times to emphasize it, a habit which has become viral in China since 2015 although commentators disagree about why. Ren observes that the choice of intensifier depends on whether the review is negative or positive, although most of the frequent intensifiers look rather "innocent" on the surface – words that can be translated as 'very' and 'too', for example.

In the last chapter of the book, Bou-Franch analyses "relational practices on commercial Facebook wall interactions". She has collected a reference corpus of 10 wall interactions from the Facebook page of an American

store and chosen one to focus on. This interaction mainly consists of customers' responses to a post by the store, but also contains some comments by representatives of the store. The majority of the customers' posts are supportive of the store and its products, but a number of them are unsupportive, creating a dynamic that Bou-Franch is interested in, especially since the unsupportive posts begin with the appearance of a criticism not related to the particular product that is advertised. She thus reports what happens when a customer begins to criticize the store for an issue unrelated to the advertisement and is backed by like-minded people.

## 5 Discussion

The editors of this volume have clearly chosen a topic that interests many linguists beyond its authors. Much is happening right now. For example, Chatwin & McEvoy (2019) describe how they plan to use recordings of video conferences from a carer support initiative called Empowered Carers to analyse conversations between customers and support workers. An equally recent article by Bloch & Leydon (2019) reviews helpline practices and points out practical applications of conversation analysis. More generally, service encounters have also been of interest, for example, to Choi et al. (2019), who have compared literal and figurative language styles in interactions between humans, humans and robots, and humans and service kiosks.

Considering that this kind of research seems to be mushrooming at present, it is important for linguists interested in it to read this volume. It can be used as an introduction to technology mediated service encounters, or as a valuable series of current snapshots.

However, since further research is going on at the moment, there will probably soon be a need to publish more volumes on the topic. One can, for example, review and categorise new studies to see how much research has been conducted on a more specific topic such as healthcare apps and which specific topics are the most popular. It might then be reasonable within a couple of years to edit further volumes on more specific topics. One such topic could be healthcare; another could be problem navigation; and so on. For example, one could compare the negotiation of commercial constraints (as discussed by Marguez Reiter in this volume) with skilful suppression of complaints (Kevoe-Feldman 2018). More popularized approaches can also be envisioned: someone could share insights concerning technology mediated

service encounters in a book directed at laypeople.

To continue with laypeople in the sense of people who are not professional linguists, I discussed many of the ideas presented in this volume with a friend who works in the public sector in Finland, answering phone calls. She could relate to the contents of the book in various ways. For example, she told me that she and colleagues always provide the name of their employer and their own name when they respond to a call, but otherwise they do not follow a fixed protocol. She also told me that an experienced adviser is able to listen to the customer so as to tailor the conversation to that specific person's needs and to talk to them in a way that they can understand. Such an adviser will explain to the customer if s/he needs time to find and process information, so that no awkward silences occur on the phone. I feel that my conversation with her was ripe with potential ideas for further studies.

It thus appears that the authors of the book are right: it is useful for researchers to interact with people who perform technology mediated service encounters. As the editors of the book suggest, this can certainly have “real life applications and impact” (p. 9). They and their chosen authors have succeeded in choosing topics that have real life relevance. What therefore strikes me as a reader is that it is indeed important that linguists who study such practical issues discuss their findings with people who can profit from them, be it service providers or recipients – even the general public.

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**Contact information:**

Heli Tissari  
Department of English  
Stockholm University  
e-mail: heli(dot)tissari(at)helsinki(dot)fi