

## Talking or Typing? – Using Conversation Analysis for Distinguishing the Role of Media in Service Encounters

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### ABSTRACT

Communication between suppliers and customers often needs to be handled by the use of different media. It is a challenge to determine which media to use for a certain communicational purpose. In this paper three different situations are identified in which different media would be suitable to use in each situation. These situations are derived from ongoing conversations in a B2B setting and analysed with conversation analysis. The paper results in a distinction between the three basic categories of conversations in which the choice of media plays an essential role; Typing, Talking/Typing and Talking. A thorough analysis of conversations increase the knowledge about which interactions that could be transferred to a SST and which interactions that should be handled on an inter-personal level.

**Keywords:** service encounters, inter-personal interaction, e-interaction, conversation analysis

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been frustrated when sending an e-mail or talking to customer service representatives and thought that there must be a more efficient way to handle this communication? When contacting a company you often (but not always) have the option of choosing between different ways of communication. You may be offered e-mail, an Internet-based interface or maybe voice-to-voice interaction with someone in the customer service department. Which one to choose all depends on the purpose with the communication. Companies face the same dilemma when trying to offer the best service available to their customers. Is there a way to maximize the efficiency in communication and still keep customers happy? Guiding customers away from talking to customer service representatives to more automated interaction is a way to save money but it also increases the risk of frustrated and unhappy customers. The purpose of this paper is to propose and demonstrate a way to study voice-to-voice encounters in order for companies to increase the knowledge about when to use information technology and when to use personnel in their interaction with customers. The research question is how to get a deep understanding of buyer-seller interaction as a basis for well-founded decisions of which media to choose in a particular interaction situation.

### 2. CHALLENGES IN SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

A customer's evaluation of a service often depends on the evaluation of specific interactions with the firm – the service encounters [1]. As Surprenant and Solomon we regard the service encounter as the time-frame

during which a customer directly interacts with service providers [2]. Encounters may take place face-to-face, over the phone, through the mail or even over the Internet [3]. This interaction is a critical determinant of the customer's satisfaction with the service [4]. Pfeffer argue that the contact employees can be the source of differentiation and competitive advantage for companies [5]. However as different tools for communication become more sophisticated the use of self-service technologies (SST) has increased in favour of inter-personal contacts. More and more companies also strive and hope to eventually replace after-sale service and thus their customer service departments with SST such as e-service technology. De Ruyter et al. define e-service as “[...] an interactive, content-centred and Internet-based customer service, driven by the customer and integrated with related organizational customer support processes and technologies with the goal of strengthening the customer-service provider relationship” [6, p. 186]. The tendency that companies are radically reconfiguring the ways they interact with customers, is called the “front-office revolution” by Rayport et al. [7]. There are however also risks with replacing inter-personal contacts. Dabholkar argues that SST has a disadvantage due to a lack of human involvement when an error occurs; a lack of personal relations; and decreased possibilities of additional sales [8]. Lindberg-Repo and Grönroos believe that there even is a risk of less loyal customers [9]. A balance between SST and inter-personal contacts seem to be appropriate. However, how can companies find this balance and thus which contacts with customers should be handled through technology and which should be handled through inter-personal contacts? As Rayport et al. mention: “The strategic question facing companies is how to effectively distribute relationship building roles between humans and machines in a way that capitalizes

on the strengths of each” [7, p. 68]. We argue that companies that plan to increase their use of e-service technology need to examine their present contact patterns with customers. One approach when creating requirements for SST is to study and analyse language actions, inspired by speech act theory [c.f. 10] and communicative action theory [c.f. 11], issued by seller and buyer. The language action tradition has however been criticised as using pre-defined patterns as analytical instruments. The criticsers mean that such an approach would not reveal what actually happens in the interaction. Criticisers, as e.g. Goldkuhl [12], mean that conversation analysis (CA) could work as a theoretical foundation in order to become more inductive and empirically driven in the analysis and design of interaction patterns. In this paper we want to further investigate the potential in using CA as an approach for studying communicative interaction between customers and customer service representatives.

### 3. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

Our study can be classified as qualitative research. Denzin and Lincoln describe this approach as an activity that locates the observer in the world and consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible [13]. We use ethnomethodology as a source of inspiration when studying conversations between customer service representatives and the customers. This is a naturalistic view with a purpose of understanding how social order is created and shaped through conversation and interaction [14]. Ethnomethodology is the study of the methods that people use in their everyday life in order to shape and maintain social order [15]. The ethnomethodological ”tool” used to analyse the conversations is conversation analysis (CA). CA is based on an attempt to describe people’s methods for producing orderly social interaction [16]. Boden describes how CA can give an detailed insight about interaction: “[...] through a turn-by-turn analysis of organizational talk, it is possible to gain insight not only into how everyday business gets done at the level of talk, but also the interactional and organizational business that is accomplished through that talk” [17]. In our study the focus is on institutional and work practice related talk in a buyer-seller context. Two important concepts in CA that we use to initially analyse the conversations are turn taking and adjacency pairs. Turn-taking is that persons take turns in talking and adjacency pairs are two communicative actions, a first and a second, that together represent an exchange of words and thus are produced by two speakers. We argue that a study of actual conversations between customers and customer service representatives can contribute to a deeper understanding of this kind of interaction. An important stand in CA is also that a researcher does not speculate about intentions. Heritage describes that “[...] there is a strong bias against a priori speculation about the orientations and motives of speakers and in favour

of detailed examination of conversationalists’ actual actions. Thus the empirical conduct of speakers is treated as the central resource out of which analysis may develop” [18, p. 243]. The empirical basis for this paper consists of about 80 tape recorded telephone conversations between customers and customer service representatives in two multinational industrial companies (B2B) in the building industry (BIAB) and chemical industry (CIAB). The customer service representatives are located in two Swedish subsidiaries. The customers usually have long-term contracts with the selling company and call the customer service to place sub-orders within the frame of these contracts. Each conversation has been transcribed and analysed according to CA.

### 4. CATEGORIES OF CONVERSATIONS

In the article we present three different conversations represented in the empirical material. The three conversations all together illustrate different situations that are important to consider when thinking about which media to use for interaction with customers. The first conversation represents a buying situation where the customer (a wholesaler), Monica (M), calls Anna (A) who works in the customer service department at BIAB:

- 1 A BIAB, Anna
- 2 M Hello, Monica, A-Company.
- 3 A Hello Monica.
- 4 M I would like to order 3810646 [Product number], RK-products [Product name]
- 5 A Hm : : ((Anna makes a note in her notebook))
- 6 M Four items to our central warehouse
- 7 A Hm : : ((Anna makes a note in her notebook))
- 8 M The customer number is 186-2795475
- 9 A Yes. ((Anna makes a note in her notebook))
- 10 M And then you send it to our central warehouse.
- 11 A Sure, we arrange that.
- 12 M Good. Thank you for that.
- 13 A Okay. Thank you. Bye.

This is a short conversation where the customer (Monica) right away (turn 4) indicates what she wants without any hesitation or additional questions. She also gives the product number. Anna, the customer service representative, which seems to have talked to the customer before (“Hello Monica”) makes written notes and confirms the requests with two prolonged “Hm” and a short “Yes”. Monica also mentions the specific number that identifies her (among other customers). Anna confirms in the end of the conversation (turn 11) that the company (“we”) will arrange it. There are no hesitations or additional questions from Anna or Monika. There is simplicity in the turn-taking and no repairs/explanations from either of them. Since Monica

only wants to order a product (turn 4) and make a request about place of delivery (turn 10) the interaction could seemingly easily be transferred to a SST. It can thereby be classified as a *Typing* situation.

The second conversation illustrates a situation where a customer (a wholesaler), Nils (N) calls Carl (C) with last name Skoglund at the customer service and has a complaint about the product.

- 1 C Skoglund.  
 2 N Hello Nils Viklund, O-company.  
 3 C Hello.  
 4 N A colleague ordered a KS-product from you this Friday that has been delivered to Lövinge castle.  
 5 C Yes.  
 6 N Now the customer ((the wholesaler's customer)) has called and wants to cancel it because there is leakage in a SL-product.  
 7 C Well is it damaged or?  
 8 N It is not in a joint.  
 9 C In a joint?  
 10 N No.  
 11 C Not in a joint. Okay.  
 12 N Can you take a return so he will be satisfied?  
 13 C Yes but we must have it back as you understand.  
 14 N Yes but the customer must get a new one.  
 15 C Of course. Then we will have send a replacement. Eh : : you do not have an order number or?  
 16 N I got my order number.  
 17 C Your order number? That is great.  
 18 N It is 24680864-358.  
 19 C ((C enters the ERP-system)) 246-something- No when I entered it it disappeared. Can you take it from the beginning?  
 20 N 24680864-358.  
 21 C 246- Now I did not get it either. Where did you say you where calling from?  
 22 N O-company.  
 23 C O-company. What was the destination?  
 24 N D-town Lövinge castle.  
 25 C ((Carl checks the ERP-system)) There is something yes. Three 120 meter KS-products to D-town. Do you think it is that?  
 26 N Three yes.  
 27 C 24680864-359.  
 28 N Yes that is wrong. 359 is right.

- 29 C Yes there you see. Then we anyway got an explanation to that. But on of them- One is damaged?  
 30 N Yes one is damaged as I understand.  
 31 C Your name was?  
 32 N Nils Viklund.  
 33 C Yes. Hm : : Then we- We send a return consignment note with the goods. It is the easiest way.  
 34 N Since he is in a state of panic when can he have it? You can not send it today?  
 35 C We send it tomorrow.  
 36 N Then he will not receive it until Monday?  
 37 C Yes. Not unless he will come here and get it and that is probably unlikely.  
 38 N I call and check.  
 39 C Hm : : But otherwise- Anyway I register one for exchange.  
 40 N Your name was?  
 41 C Carl Sundin.  
 42 N Then we go for it. Thanks.  
 43 C Okay. Great. Bye.

At first in turn 4 the customer announces that a colleague to him ordered a product that has been delivered to a specific place. The customer then in turn 6 put forward a complaint about that his customer "wants to cancel" that in this context can be seen as an indication of dissatisfaction with the product. Nils, the customer, indicate what seems to be the problem by announcing that there is a leakage in the product. Carl's response in turn 7 is to try to find out what the problem consists of by asking a question. The question seems obvious since the customer has announced a leakage. The question should however be interpreted as an attempt from Carl to find out if the product is damaged from the transport or if the customer's customer has caused it himself. It can also be an attempt to find out if the problem is in a joint rather than the product. It is part of their role to find out as much as possible. The customer's answer in turn 8, "It is not in a joint", indicate that. In turn 12 the customer suggests a solution to satisfy his customer. The customer thus emphasize that it is important to solve this. Carl does not answer instead he informs the customer that "we" i.e. BIAB, need to get the defect product in return. The customer expresses acceptance in turn 14 but also repeats that his customers needs a new one. Carl's response is that this will be done. The conversationalists have thereby made an agreement. Then there is a long sequence, turn 15-29, where Carl through different questions tries to identify the specific order. In turn 33 the customer asks when his customer can have it (the replacement product) and if it can be sent today. The customer emphasizes the need by stating that his customer "is in a state of panic". Carl answers that it can be delivered the following day. The customer states in a disappointed way "Then he

will not receive it until Monday?” Carl confirms that in turn 37 and also offers a solution that he indicates is probably unlikely. The customer responds that he will check that. The conversation ends with an acceptance from the customer. This conversation represents a situation where a customer initially announces a complaint and where the customer service representative tries to find out what went wrong. This leads to several turns of questions-answers. There is also a need to find the original order, to confirm the destination and the customer’s name and through questions-answers establish when the new product can be delivered. The need to ask each other questions indicate a lack of information and uncertainty. They ask questions to reduce this uncertainty and to get things confirmed. The overall complexity in form of a lot of questions-answers, and a specific situation where a customer has a complaint and need immediate reassurance lead to that this interaction can be classified as a *Talking* situation.

The third conversation represents a situation where the customer (a wholesaler), Sjögren (S, his last name) wants to order a product from Carl (C) but also has additional question related to the product and delivery.

- 1 C Sundin.  
 2 S Hello Sjögren, O-company in Ö-town.  
 3 C Hello.  
 4 S I have a customer that asks for the price on an U-product, dimension 560.  
 5 C Yes. You mean an UR-product?  
 6 S Yes is that the name?  
 7 C You mean UR 2?  
 8 S Yes UR 2 dimension 560.  
 9 C Hm : : (3.0) ((Carl checks a list with prices on his table))  
 10 S It is 6 meter.  
 11 C 6 meter P-products ((overall name of the product category)) yes. Yes and for that you pay 3467,27 for a P-product.  
 12 S 3467. It is net price?  
 13 C Yes.  
 14 S BR-product- ((overall name on the product category)) There are no 20 degrees?  
 15 C No not above 315 no. That is correct.  
 16 S Do you have it in 45 and 30 degrees?  
 17 C Sure thing.  
 18 S Can I get a price on that?  
 19 C (2.0) ((Carl searches the ERP-system)). 30 degrees costs 3612 kronor och 14 öre.  
 20 S Hm : :  
 21 C And 45 degrees costs- (2.0) ((Carl searches the ERP-system)) 3901 and 19.

- 22 S You have that in stock?  
 23 C Yes.  
 24 S Is there a particular day in the week you deliver products to Ö-town?  
 25 C What is it Thursdays or is it- Yes it is either Wednesdays or Thursdays.  
 26 S You have a least one shipment every 14 days?  
 27 C Yes we have.  
 28 S Yes then I thank you for that.  
 29 C Yes you are welcome. Bye.

In this conversation the customer initially wants to know the price of a specific product. He also indicates that it is his customer that needs this information. The name of the product that the customer use is potentially wrong since Carl asks if the customer means “an UR-product”. A further clarification occurs in turn 6-10 before Carl give information about the price. Then follows a long sequence, turn 12-27, with questions-answers where the customer needs information about price (net), product (degrees), price, in stock, days of delivery, and frequency of delivery. The customer can use this information in further discussions with his customer. Carl’s role in this conversation is to act as an information source. He asks some questions in the beginning then he is more passive. One can assume that the customer could be informed about more general things like weekdays of delivery and product specifications through the company’s web site. An extranet could deliver answers about specific prices and if there are products in stock. However the conversation is a way for the customer to get quick answers and reassure that the customer gets information about the right product. The customer can get confirmation right away. The conversation can therefore be classified as a *Talking/Typing* situation.

## 5. ANALYSIS AND RESULT

As illustrated we can distinguish three different basic categories of conversations between customers and customer service representatives: (1) Typing; (2) Talking; and (3) Talking/Typing. The first one, *Typing*, represents conversations that on basis of their content should be transferable to a SST, i.e. the customers could serve themselves without contacting the customer service representatives. The second one, *Talking*, represents conversations that are not preferably transferred to a SST due to the need of inter-personal interaction. An example of this is when a customer has a complaint and need an immediate solution or a reassurance that this can be solved in a near future. The third category of conversations, *Talking/Typing*, represents situation where a combination of a SST and the possibility to talk to customer service is most suitable. Examples of this are conversations when customers have a lot of questions related to a possible purchase of a product. Questions indicate a lack of

knowledge possible to acquire from a SST about the product or product related topics that the customer needs in order to make decisions. A well formed SST can give the answers customers seek. However some customers prefer to get answers by talking to a person.

Then what are the characteristics in the conversations that enable this classification? Our suggestion is to study the overall composition in form of topic and the conversationalist's activity in the conversation. Studies according to Salomonson [19] show that in-depth studies of the 80 tape recorded conversations are about different topics. Three major categories of such topics are ordering, information seeking and complaints. The same categories could be derived from business interaction frameworks in which conversations are divided into different phases, such as market phase, ordering-fulfilment, assessment as well as after-sales (c.f. e.g. [20, 21]). This phenomenon is referred to as topicalisation according to speech-act approaches such as SAMPO [22]. In speech act terms topic refers to the propositional content, i.e. what is talked about, and illocutionary forces to achieve ends concerning that topic. The topic in combination with the conversationalist's activity can then indicate the category of conversation, Typing, Talking or Talking/Typing, at hand.

If it is a conversation where a customer wants to place an order, has the correct information needed (displayed in the conversation) to do that (e.g. product name, product number, and where to deliver) and the CSR does not act beyond that information the conversation can be classified as Typing. The customer is in this conversation the more active part and the CSR is more passive, i.e. the CSR answers customers' questions and make other responds with a short "yes", "hm", "okey". The customer therefore serves himself to a higher degree. The customer gets short feedback on his questions/statement. This is then related to a typing situation. If it is a conversation where a customer has a complaint and there is an extensive use of questions-answers between them in order to find out what is wrong and how it can be solved the complexity in the conversation is higher. The CSR and the customer are both more active and use counter questions, i.e. answers a question with another question, to get explanations. There can also be hesitations from one of the conversationalists that trigger the other part to repeat or reformulate the question. This type of interaction represents a situation where the customer always should be offered the opportunity to talk to a person, i.e. Talking. This is also important for the supplier that through the conversation can get signals from the customer that are important for further interaction, also with other customers. Other researchers as e.g. Dabholkar [8] also indicate the need to have someone to talk to if something goes wrong. If it is a conversation that can be classified as information seeking, i.e. where a customer has several questions and the CSR answers

them without major hesitations or needs for explanations both are active. This is a situation where the customers possibly could find answers to the questions through an extranet provided by the supplier and/or the supplier's public Internet site. Some questions can however be of a more complicated sort that requires a more extensive answer from the CSR. This is then a conversation that is somewhat in between Talking and Typing and that we thus classify as Talking/Typing due to its overall composition.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Our study demonstrate that a thorough analysis of conversations increase the knowledge about which interactions that could be transferred to a SST and which interactions that should be handled on an inter-personal level. By recording and studying phone conversations it is possible to get a detailed glimpse of ongoing activities and interaction. Pre-defined patterns of interaction advocated for in some speech act approaches for communication modelling should not be used as the basis for making decisions about which interactions that could be supported by a SST. It is thus important to understand ongoing conversations and on the basis of that try to reveal recurrent patterns of interaction. In order to make such an analysis the conversations need to be analysed on pragmatic grounds. In this paper we have shown three conversations that in their content differ from each other. We acknowledge SST to be understood as action systems; actions performed by the SST itself and as support for humans to perform action mediated by the SST. In order to facilitate such agent-based support in business interaction there is a need to define the IT-system's action repertoire (= actions possible to perform by/via the IT-system). Interactions between two organisations are patterns of actions. Based on the analysis in this paper we have brought forward the possibility to identify actions to be supported by an IT-system based on the overall composition, i.e. topic and activity, in ongoing conversations.

It would from our point of view be naïve to claim that this is the only dimension to be considered for making well-founded decisions about what actions to should be supported by an IT-based media. One also needs to take actor (customer) relationships into consideration. Strategically some customers are more important than other. Therefore suppliers (especially B2B) tend to prioritise human-to-human conversations in order to ensure that expectations are fulfilled. Within conversations there are communicative actions embedded and such actions imply the establishment of relationships between speaker and listener [11]. Goldkuhl & Röstlinger [23] distinguishes between action relationships and role relationships (general actor relationships). The realisation of action relationships is the basis for developing role relationships (c.f. e.g. [24]). In this paper we have demonstrated three basic

categories for delimiting such variants: Typing, Talking and Typing/Talking.

In order to derive a framework for distinguishing the role of media in service encounters (in this paper telephone conversations) we have complemented the dimension of a pre-definable action repertoire with a relationship dimension. We have seen the actor relationship, between the supplier and customer, as strategic or non-strategic. However note that this second dimension is derived from theory rather than from the empirical data for this paper. Conversation analysis does not reveal these relationship dimensions good enough.

Relationship Action repertoire	Strategic	Non-strategic
Pre-definable	Talking / Typing	Typing
Non Pre-definable	Talking	Talking

As a mission for further research we will develop a methodological and theoretical framework, building on conversational and pragmatic foundations for capturing, analysing and making well founded decisions of which interaction variants that are suitable for adopting a talking or typing approach. We also need to develop methods to determine the frequency of certain types of conversations. The effort in creating IT-based artefacts for supporting service encounters must be worthwhile.

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