Time to say goodbye: Writing center consultation closings

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ABSTRACT

College and university writing centers offer rich opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction about writing. Closings in these interactions are an important window through which to view participant talk-in-interaction along the mundane-institutional continuum. A study of closings in 58 writing consultations in English was conducted at two university writing centers. A five-phase apparatus was used to analyze closing structure. Subtle differences were found when comparing closings in the two writing centers and when comparing consultations with first- and second-language writers. The infrequency of complete closings and of terminal phases suggested that consultations were often constructed as institutional service encounters. However, some consultants and writers disrupted closings by inserting relational (mundane) talk. These results inform and challenge current writing center theory and consulting practice. They also suggest that all educators would do well to consider conversational closings.

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Review of the literature

Closings in mundane conversation

Schegloff and Sacks' paper in *Semiotica* (1973) treated conversational closings in telephone conversations in English as "achievements, as solutions to certain problems of conversational organization" (p. 290). The originators of Conversation Analysis (CA) argued that closings be treated as data because they are produced in an orderly manner by participants and bounded as "a single conversation" (p. 290). Closings are built of from sequenced *adjacency pairs*, two-part exchanges in which one conversationalist's speech turn occasions and somewhat limits another conversationalist's response turn. The "second" in an adjacency pair may be a "preferred" or "dispreferred" response, both of which are "inherently structured and actively used so as to maximize cooperation and affiliation and to minimize conflict in conversational activities" (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984, p. 55). For example, an answer is the preferred response to a question (Stivers & Robinson, 2006).

The purpose of closings is to discontinue turn-taking. The main task of conversationalists, then, is to bring the conversation to "a point where one speaker's completion will not occasion another speaker's talk, and that [completion] will not be heard as some speaker's silence" (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973, pp. 294–295), a refusal to interact. Closings consist of more than "terminal exchanges" (e.g., *goodbye. . .bye*).[1] Another part of a closing is *pre-closing*. Its function is to "pass" to the other conversationalist

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[1] Schegloff (2007) explained how *adjacency pairs* become *exchanges* in a *series* that then becomes a *sequence*, and these *sequences of sequences* become conversations (p. 195). In this paper, I use the term *phase* to denote the sequences that constitute a closing that is part of a larger institutional *conversation*.

the opportunity to open a new topic, a "heretofore previously unmentioned mentionable" (p. 304). Pre-closings acknowledge that both participants are done talking. If one conversationalist chooses not to open a new topic, a pre-closing adjacency pair is achieved (e.g., *O.K. . . .O.K.*); *yeah, right, all right, uh-huh*. Even nonwords (e.g., head nods, hand gestures) can accomplish pre-closings. They set up *thanking* and *leave taking* (the terminal exchange).

The initial speaker can reopen a topic or initiate a new one during pre-closing. In this excerpt (p. 320), both "Caller" and "Crandall" take advantage of pre-closings to propose new topics (indicated by *):

Caller[0]:	You don'know w- uh what that would be, how much it costs.
Crandall:	I would think probably, about twunty five dollars.
Caller[0]:	Oh boy hehh hhh!
Caller[0]:	Okay, thank you.
Crandall:	Okay dear.
*Caller[0]:	OH BY THE WAY. I'd just like tuh say thet uh, I *DO* like the new
	programming. I've been listening, it's uh //
	( )
Crandall:	Good girl!
*Crandall:	Hey listen do me a favor wouldja write Mister Fairchild 'n tell im that, I
	think that'll s-shi-break up his whole day for im.
Caller[0]:	ehhh heh heh hhh!
Crandall:	Okay?
Caller[0]:	Okay,
Crandall:	Thank you.
Caller[0]:	*bye bye,*
Crandall:	Mm buh(h) bye.

Schegloff and Sacks also allowed (in a footnote) the possibility for another adjacency pair in the closing phase, *shutting down the topic.*

Terminating a conversation is fraught with interactional hazards because speakers trying to close must "avoid beginning the terminal exchange until each has made certain that the other has nothing left to say" (Frank, 1982, p. 358). Closing sequences, therefore, "may be a locus of rather more extravagant expressions of esteem and affection. . . precisely because participants speak in anticipation of soon being less available to one another" (Jefferson, 1973, p. 48). Jefferson noted that conversationalists created especially *felicitous* (successful) closings by using one another's names. Aston (1995) noticed that mutual thanking (the pair *thank you-thank you*) functioned as a promise of future "mutual accessibility" (p. 71). Therefore, arrangements for future encounters (Ekberg & LeCouteur, 2014) are often a topic of closings. Such relational work is a hallmark of closings in mundane conversations.

Closings in institutional interaction

Investigations of closings in mundane talk-in-interaction were followed by studies of closings in institutional contexts, where task orientation trumps relational work (Drew & Heritage, 1992). In "Talk from the Top Down" (2008), Deborah Cameron made the important observation that in institutional service encounters "talk [is] designed to a large extent not by the people actually doing the talking, but by managers or consultants intent on controlling and standardizing institutional interaction" (p. 144). Institutional representatives, therefore, may orient not to the turn-by-turn unfolding of talk but instead to a set of prescriptions and proscriptions unknown to the client.

A classic study of service encounters is Leidner's (1993). He analyzed a scripted, step-by-step interaction between employees and customers at a McDonald's drive-up service window from the employee perspective:

(1) Greet the customer.
(2) Take the order.
(3) Assemble the order.
(4) Present the order.
(5) Receive payment.
(6) Thank the customer and ask for repeat business (p. 68).