

“Here's the link”: Hyperlinking in service-focused chat interaction



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Abstract

Today, most service organizations offer their clients a range of communication modes, including text-based chat which affords including hyperlinks to relevant sources of information. No studies have yet explored how hyperlinks are used in these interactions. Conversation analysis provides a set of concepts that can be used to explore the actions for which hyperlinks are being employed. We analyzed the use of hyperlinks by professionals in two types of chat services – 25 chat sessions from the Dutch national alcohol and drugs information service and 175 chats from an American university library chat service. We noted three types of hyperlinks: (1) hyperlinks as *direct* responses to the client's inquiry; (2) hyperlinks as *proposed* responses with a subset of cases in which parties are navigating to the linked website; (3) hyperlinks offered as *supplemental* resources. Providing links can influence the service encounter by ending the chat when it represents an acceptable response, by keeping the chat channel open when the client is not actively participating, or by launching a negotiation or collaborative navigation outside of the chat. Hyperlinking facilitates online service provision but may also jeopardize it when the link is treated as a proximate invitation.

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1. Introduction

Today, most service organizations offer their clients a range of communication modes: websites, e-mail, question forms, telephone and live chat. One of the affordances of the text-based modes is that they can include hyperlinks to refer clients to relevant sources of information. Hyperlinks are highlighted words in the text that one can click to go to another location in a document or website. No studies have yet explored how hyperlinks function in text-based chat interactions, a well-established medium that is being widely used to provide services in education, health and business. Conversation analysis (CA) is well-suited for such investigations as it provides a set of concepts that can be used to explore the actions for which hyperlinks are being employed. Furthermore, CA has developed a great body of knowledge on institutional, goal-oriented interaction, which is relevant to service-focused chat encounters (Felix-Brasdefer, 2015). In this paper we present an analysis of the use of hyperlinks in two types of chat-based professional/layperson information service encounters – counseling and library reference – focusing in particular on the point at which hyperlinks are offered and how the clients respond to the links. We first review the literature on hyperlinking and service encounters, describe our use of

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CA methods to analyze our data, illustrate the three types of hyperlinks identified in the chats (direct response, proposed response, and supplemental resources), and close with a discussion of these findings.

2. Hyperlinking

Most of the previous research on hyperlinking has explored them as signs of relationships between organizations, communities or individuals (cf. [De Maeyer, 2012](#)), treating links as having sociological meaning, rather than examining what they are doing in the conversation. Linking has received some attention in studies of social media. [Waters and Jamal \(2011\)](#) found that the vast majority (over 78%) of the tweets from the nonprofit organizations they analyzed included a hyperlink, illustrating the prevalence of sharing links via social media. In an educational context, [Lamy \(2012\)](#) studied multimodal conversations in online language learning classes. She argued that the way that hyperlinks are used when creating online course materials affords different types of meaning – with the resources hidden behind a link often being subordinated to information available on the main page. From an instructional perspective, [Colaric and Jonassen \(2001\)](#) argued against indiscriminately sharing hyperlinks, highlighting the importance of teaching students how to evaluate web resources for credibility and relevance.

[Ten Have \(1999a\)](#) contended that hyperlinks reframe reading as an embodied activity, but not as complete freedom from the structure of a text. Instead, providing external links risks losing readers entirely as they can serve as interruptive ‘invitations’: “The reader may choose to ignore or postpone this ‘invitation’, as many say they tend to do. But even considering this choice may serve as an interruption of sorts” (p. 291). Hence, hyperlinks confront readers with a dilemma – whether to interrupt their current reading by treating it as a proximate invitation, to treat it as a distal invitation and follow it later, or to ignore it completely.

[Mazzalli-Lurati \(2007\)](#) challenged the view that hyperlinked texts give more authority to the reader than to the writer. Through an analyses of how the author inserted hyperlinks, the author was found to direct the reader as a “designer of paths of meaning” (p. 166). Her analysis of the semiotic-communicative structure of hyperlinks distinguished between link manifestations (how it appears) and link meanings. The link meaning comprises it as a proposal, an invitation from the author for the continuation of communication (cf. [Ten Have, 1999a](#)), and this proposal contains a promise of relevance.

No studies have yet explored how hyperlinks are used in computer-mediated *interactions* (rather than texts) ([Herring and Androustopoulos, 2015](#)), nor has there been an examination of hyperlinking in relation to service encounters as they are conducted interactionally.

3. Service encounters

In conversation analytic studies, service encounters are considered a form of institutional interaction, in which the participants orient to the goal of information or advice giving in the way they structure their talk ([Jefferson and Lee, 1981](#); [Heritage and Clayman, 2010](#)). Institutional interaction is oriented to specific goals and constraints relevant to the particular setting ([Drew and Heritage, 1992](#)). Typical service encounters involve two participants, a professional and a lay person. Face to face and telephone help line interactions have been researched extensively from a CA perspective (e.g., [Baker et al., 2001](#); [Edwards and Stokoe, 2007](#); [Firth et al., 2005](#); [Reiter, 2006](#); [Sacks, 1992](#); [Whalen and Whalen, 2011](#)). One finding is that participants make relevant whether or not the caller (the lay person) has tried to find help elsewhere before calling the service. Another is that these encounters tend to be initially asymmetrical in nature due to role structure (e.g. service provider as expert and customer as layperson) but can shift into a less formal structure over time ([Drew and Heritage, 1992](#); [Felix-Brasdefer, 2015](#)). Service encounters have been found to be structured in ways that allow, for example the service providers to use opening sequences to assess the task at hand ([Baker et al., 2001](#); [Reiter, 2006](#)).

[Felix-Brasdefer \(2015\)](#) identified the following elements of the sequential structure of service encounters: summons, greeting, customer identification, service inquiry, request for service, negotiation of request, goods handover, offer of additional service, payment, closing, and farewell (p. 229). He also noted that “given the ubiquitous nature of online service via the Internet, research on the negotiation of e-service is needed to improve our understanding of this particular genre” (p. 239). Online differs from spoken (face to face or telephone) service encounters in a number of ways. Participants appear to orient to norms and conventions of the technology, which may have an impact on service work as it shifts modalities. For instance, in chat counseling sessions, advice acknowledgements are less articulated by clients than in telephone calls ([Stommel and Te Molder, 2015](#)). As a result, terminating a chat session requires extra effort from counselors. Hence, the norm of client-initiated closings (e.g., by thanking the professional) is less forceful in chat than on the phone.

Recent studies of online chat service encounters have been conducted in fields such as medical communication and consultations ([Bravender et al., 2013](#); [Jung and Padman, 2015](#)) and counseling ([Stommel and Te Molder, 2015, 2016](#)), with quite a few studies analyzing library chat reference services ([Dempsey, 2016](#); [Greenberg and Bar-Ilan, 2015](#); [Jacoby et al., 2016](#); [Kemp et al., 2015](#); [Maloney and Kemp, 2015](#)). Studies of the effectiveness of using chat as a medium to provide library services have included questionnaire and survey designs ([Bravender et al., 2013](#); [Greenberg and Bar-Ilan,](#)

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