



# Intersubjectivity at the counter: Artefacts and multimodal interaction in theatre box office encounters

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## Abstract

The present study investigates the interplay between language, material and embodied resources in one specific type of service encounters: interactions at theatre box offices. The data consist of video recorded interactions in Swedish at three box offices, two in Sweden and one in Finland. Cases representative of the interactions are selected for a multimodal micro-analysis of the customer–seller interactions involving artefacts from the institutional and personal domain.

The study specifically aims at advancing our understanding of the role of artefacts for structuring and facilitating communicative events in (institutional) interaction. In this way, it contributes to the growing research interest in the interactional importance of the material world. Our results show that mutual interactional focus is reached through mutual gaze in strategic moments, such as formulation of the reason for the visit. Artefacts are central in enhancing intersubjectivity and mutual focus in that they effectively invite the participants for negotiation, for example, about a seating plan which can be made visually accessible in different ways. Verbal language can be sparse and deictic in these moments while gaze and pointing to an artefact does more specific referential work. Artefacts are also a resource for signalling interactional inaccessibility, the seller orienting to the computer in order to progress a request and the customer orienting to a personal belonging (like a bag) to mirror and accept such a temporary non-accessibility. We also observe that speech can be paced to match the deployment of an artefact so that a focal verbal item is produced without competing, simultaneous physical activity.

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## 1. Introduction

This study explores the role of artefacts and multimodal interaction in service encounters at theatre box offices. In these interactions customers enquire about ticket availability to make a purchase or they come to pick up pre-ordered tickets. The encounters were video-recorded at three large theatres in one Finnish and two Swedish major cities and the interactions took place in Swedish. The overall aim is to investigate how intersubjective understanding of the focus and trajectories of actions (cf. Schütz, 1953) is facilitated and achieved through artefacts in a service encounter. In particular, we analyse moments of mutual, simultaneous orientation to the artefact in focus, but also asymmetrical orientations to

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artefacts when they serve as resources for temporary exits from mutual accessibility. Moreover, we analyse the interplay of the verbal formulation of action with embodied cues (gaze, handling of artefacts). The analysis presented in Section 4 focuses on three important activity phases dealing with the reason for the customer's visit: initiation of the encounter, recognition of the reason of visit, and agreeing on the ensuing transactional process. Section 2 below gives a brief overview of previous multimodal studies in interaction and presents the interactional ecologies of the theatre box office encounters. Section 3 introduces the data and analytic approach.

## 2. Background

The interest in multimodal aspects of interaction within Conversation Analysis (CA), and other closely related methodological frameworks, dates back to at least the 1970s (see, e.g. Goodwin, 1979, 1980, 1981). However, in more recent years we have seen a surge in the number of studies on multimodality in interaction, not least evidenced by the growing number of special issues and edited volumes devoted to such inquiry (e.g. Depperman, 2013; Haddington et al., 2014; Nevile et al., 2014a; Seyfeddinipur and Gullberg, 2014; Stivers and Sidnell, 2005; Streeck et al., 2011a). In a recent state-of-the art review article, Nevile (2015) introduces the notion of *the embodied turn* in research on language and interaction to capture the growing interest in the role of the human body in social interaction. This includes, for example, gestures, such as pointing; gaze direction; facial expressions; shifting parts of the body, or the entire body as in walking; handling material objects as well as affordances of the physical environment (see Nevile, 2015:122 for further references and examples; cf. also Streeck et al., 2011b; Mondada, 2016).

The inquiry into multimodal aspects of interaction can, broadly speaking, be divided into studies that show the use of multimodal resources, including artefacts, in communication more generally (see, e.g. studies by Goodwin, 1986, 2000, 2013; Mondada, 2009, 2011, 2014; Streeck, 2009, 2014), and studies that address issues of interaction and embodiment in certain contexts and domains, such as meetings, educational or medical contexts. The body of research dedicated to multimodality and embodied interaction in service encounters is small but increasing. One case in point is Sorjonen and Raevaara's (2014) study on requests for goods at a convenience store chain. In addition to the use of language and embodiment, some previous studies have also highlighted the role of artefacts in service encounters. Evidence before the present analysis includes research by Brown (2004) on practices in a queue and certain artefacts in a shop setting; Lewellyn and Hindmarsh (2013) on ticket sales at an art gallery; Raymond and Lerner (2014) on how the handling of artefacts at a restaurant counter launches a "recognizable service routine", and Richardson and Stokoe (2014) on requests in a public bar, which demonstrates the salient role of the computer. In a recent study, Fox and Heinemann (2015) investigate how customers in a shoe repair shop manipulate material objects as part of making a request. Their findings showed that customers handled the objects brought in for repair in ways that aligned with the production of the verbal request. Also of relevance for our own inquiry are Mortensen and Hazel's (2014) study on social encounters at a university helpdesk, which documents how participants literally move into interaction through joint attention to the other's embodied actions, and, in particular, Hazel and Mortensen's (2014) investigation of the employment of material objects, such as pen and paper, to manage the sequential organization of the on-going interaction in study counselling meetings.

In a service encounter both customer and staff need to make themselves available for communication and create a mutual *interactional space* (Mondada, 2009). The physical environment has been shown to impact on the ensuing interaction; if the locality enables a participant to approach his or her target addressee straight on this allows for mutual visibility and early recognition, whereas an approach from the side is usually marked by a delayed recognition (Mondada, 2009:1991). Also, the transition from walking to standing plays an important role for opening the interaction. For example, Sorjonen and Raevaara (2014) found that interactional focus was established through the means of mutual gaze as well as the customer's trajectory towards the counter. In other words, the physical affordances of the venue are important for how the ensuing interaction takes shape.

The ticket counter design varies between the box offices of our study, ranging from an open counter with no partition between the interlocutors to one where staff and customers are fully separated by a glass wall and interact via loudspeakers and microphones. However, common to all three theatres is a layout where customers must approach the ticket counter from the side, thus making visual contact between customer and staff possible only during the last few steps when approaching the counter. The regulation of the flow of customers follows different institutional practices. In the two Swedish ticket offices, customers take a queue number as they enter the premises, and the staff summons the next customer by pressing a button which emits a beeping sound at the same time as the next ticket number is displayed on a monitor. At the theatre in Finland, there is no such central queue management system, and the box office is operated on a first come, first served basis (however, in most cases there is no queue). These differences in the material environment are not the focus of this study: the analysis starts from the initial greeting sequence, leaving the approaching practices aside. Our analysis also shows that the basic interactional trajectories and the facilitating role of artefacts therein are profoundly similar in our data, although the physical construction of the ticket counters and the actual physical form of some of the available artefacts vary.

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