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A grounded theory model of service language in Australia's luxury hotels

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study critically analyzes service providers' spoken language in luxury (five-star) hotels. Informed by an interpretive research paradigm and a grounded theory methodology incorporating a concurrent process of data collection and analysis, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 22 service providers employed in luxury hotels in the Central Business District of Sydney, Australia. Our findings reveal that service providers open and close their service encounters with hotel guests by using structured, and often rehearsed, sequences of verbal exchange. Between the opening and closing sequences, service providers' interactions and conversations with guests vary depending on the situations arising during encounters. Processes that allowed for flexibility and adaptation during encounters were important for transitions in service providers' verbal exchanges and building relationships with guests. A substantive grounded theory model for critically analyzing the language of service in Australian luxury (five-star) hotels is presented. Our research contributes to theoretical and applied understandings of service in five-star hotels broadly, and the language of service in particular. It adds to knowledge of the complexities and multifaceted characteristics of service provider – customer interactions, relevant to hospitality and broader service contexts.

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1. Introduction

Hospitality service providers' spoken language usage is pivotal to successful communication during service delivery (Lolli, 2013, p. 296) and to the quality of service encounters and outcomes (Schau, Dellande, & Gilly, 2007). By incorporating interpersonal communication skills, hospitality service providers are able to communicate aspects of personality and emotional warmth, adapt their behaviours to situational requirements during service interactions, positively influence service relationships and meet organizational measures of quality (Bailly & Léné, 2013). Hospitality studies acknowledge specific yet idiosyncratic patterns of service providers' language usage (e.g. Blue & Harun, 2003; Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Otnes, Ihan, & Kulkarni, 2012). These include dialogue related to specific service provider roles (e.g. concierge; check-in), to personal or small talk topics with guests (Nikolich & Sparks, 1995), and to organizational scripting of language (Katz, 2001).

Few studies have analyzed hospitality service providers' spoken language in the context of their interactive behaviours, particularly in specific settings where there is prolonged customer contact such as in luxury hotels. A paucity of research in this area is surprising, because service as a social interaction requires a focus on the dimensions of spoken language. As Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 55) explained, ‘discovering the principles of language usage may be largely coincident with discovering … dimensions by which individuals manage to relate to others in particular ways’. Moreover, an analysis of spoken language in the context of service providers' behaviours can enhance our understandings of the highly interactive and relational nature of hospitality service and the negotiation of transactional and social exchange during service encounters (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015).

The aim of our study was to critically analyze service providers' spoken language during service interactions in a case study of luxury (five-star) hotels in the Central Business District (CBD) of Sydney, Australia. The term ‘service language’ has been developed for this study to refer to the words, phrases and characteristics of spoken language that relate to and represent service delivery,

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including what is said by service providers and how the spoken message is delivered. Specifically, our research objectives were to:

1. Identify the key elements of frontline service providers' language usage in luxury hotels.
2. Develop a theoretical understanding of frontline service providers' language.
3. Develop a grounded theory model for studies of service language.

The paper first reviews studies related to interpersonal communication, spoken language and verbal scripting in service, and then outlines the grounded theory methodology we applied in the study. Key findings are presented against theoretical categories derived from the grounded theory process, and the findings are synthesized and interrelated with the presentation of a model of service language. Finally, we discuss the managerial and applied contributions derived from our findings and theoretical model.

2. Literature review

Service is an interactive process of communication and social exchange (Salomonson, Allwood, Lind, & Alm, 2013). Hospitality service encounters are commonly produced, distributed and consumed in person-to-person dyadic interactions between the provider and receiver (Grönroos, 2000). This interpersonal exchange has been conceptualized within the service literature as a *service encounter* (Czepiel, Solomon, & Surprenant, 1985), depicting the 'dyadic interaction between a customer and a service provider' (Surprenant & Solomon, 1987, p. 87). Informed by role theory, these personal interactions between service providers and receivers are generally understood to be role performances (Solomon, Surprenant, Czepiel, & Gutman, 1985), and are often a task-oriented, planned communication process with socio-emotional dimensions (Bradley, Sparks, Zapf, McColl-Kennedy, & Jimmieson, 2013).

2.1. Service communication and interactions

Hospitality service encounters involve high levels of communication time, information richness and intimacy (Cruz-Ros & Gonzalez-Cruz, 2015). A service provider's ability to simultaneously deliver core services and facilitate interpersonal relations is highly significant to the function and outcome of the service process (Brotherton & Wood, 2007). Many studies have sought to conceptualize the critical components of service interactions (Bradley et al., 2013). McCallum and Harrison (1985) built on understandings of service as a social activity. Lusch, Vargo, and O'Brien (2007) and others, such as Vargo and Lusch (2008) and Varey and Ballantyne (2006), examined service encounters as an interactive learning process in which 'value is determined "in use" through activities and interactions of customers "with" the service provider/providers and others' (McColl-Kennedy, Vargo, Dagger, Sweeney, & van Kasteren, 2012, p. 370). Service providers' behaviours with regards to broad customer-orientation (e.g. Rafaeli, Ziklik, & Doucet, 2008), interpersonal adaptation (e.g. Bettencourt & Gwinner, 1996), rapport building (e.g. Gremler & Gwinner, 2008) and service recovery (e.g. Sparks, 2001) have also been studied.

The role and use of service providers' verbal and non-verbal communication have been addressed in diverse service settings (e.g. Kang & Hyun, 2012; Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2013), and have been analyzed for their effects on customers' experiences and evaluations of a service provider's attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness (De Ruyter & Wetzels, 2000). Verbal communication and dialogue influence customer satisfaction through the transactional transfer of information and the non-transactional establishment and development of service relationships (Allwood, 2000).

The actions and behavior of service providers when interacting with customers can be variable, idiosyncratic and hard to predict (Briggs, Sutherland, & Drummond, 2007). The critical components of service encounters have been conceptualized and operationalized in many studies (Bradley et al., 2013). These include analyses of customers' service quality perceptions (e.g. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985) and the determinants of customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction (e.g. Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990).

Service paradigms are increasingly shifting from a notion of service transaction towards one of experience (e.g. Hemmington, 2007), wherein the satisfaction of customers is highly dependent on a service provider's performance and their ability to incorporate sensory, emotional, cognitive and relational values into customized service interactions (e.g. McCarthy, Pitt, & Berthon, 2011). Employees are increasingly required to use their own initiative and commitment to interpret and respond to customers. This includes rapport-building (e.g. Gremler & Gwinner, 2008), interpersonal adaptive behaviours (e.g. Bettencourt & Gwinner, 1996) and service recovery behaviours (e.g. Sparks, 2001). Bradley et al.'s (2013) classificatory framework conceptualized both service provider and service receiver behaviours into 'task' dimensions, including procedural behaviours and routine acts of service exchange, 'relationship' dimensions, such as managing discourse and building bonds, and 'self' dimensions, including coping behaviours and managing emotions.

2.2. Spoken language

A service encounter is a social encounter (McCallum & Harrison, 1985), reliant on processes of dialogue between interacting parties (Côte, 2005). The socially constructed identity of a communicator is largely determined by the conversational discourse, and communicators can 'use language choice to differentiate themselves and construct nuanced individual identities' (Fuller, 2007, p. 105). Service providers' verbal communication skills, and indeed their use of spoken language, are important factors shaping service encounters (Snavely & McNeill, 2008; Vadi & Suuroja, 2006).

A service provider can use spoken language in conjunction with non-verbal communication to negotiate the provision of service (e.g. for greetings, answering questions, responding to customer problems and complaints) and to create an interpersonal dimension by customizing conversations (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015). Rafaeli et al.'s (2008) analysis of telephone service interactions in a retail bank conceptualized five core customer-oriented behaviours achieved through verbal communication. These were: anticipating customer requests; offering explanations and justifications; educating customers; providing emotional support; and offering personalized information. These findings are consistent with models of interpersonal communication that indicate dimensions beyond information exchange are expressed through spoken language verbalizations and intonations, and are supported by body language and other non-verbal cues in face-to-face encounters (e.g. Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1969).

The organization and classification of spoken language in service settings have been analyzed in quick-service coffee shops (Bartlett, 2005), over-the-counter transactions (Moore, 2008) and shop/retail encounters (Traverso, 2001). Other studies have considered the role and use of service providers' spoken language for creating rapport and relationships with customers and developing personal non-task related conversations in sales settings (Clark, Drew, & Pinch, 2003), hairdressing (Garzaniti, Pearce, &

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