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The impact of globalisation on brief Greek service encounters

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1. Introduction

It has been argued that in the age of globalisation, our linguistic practices are influenced by the respective powerful US practices. Service encounters have been used as exemplary cases since, as has been argued, the practices of large multinational companies are not only transferred to their subsidiaries when they move to other communities but constitute a wider influence on the way language is used in service encounters in these other localities (e.g., Cameron, 1997, 2000a, 2003).

The above that are directly related to language use in service encounters are obviously related to the widespread tendency for conversationalisation in public discourse which has been noted in both England and the USA (Fairclough, 1995a; Lakoff, 2005). Conversationalisation involves the adoption of features of informal, everyday language and is associated with 'personalization', that is, the construction of an assumedly personal relationship between interlocutors thus simulating intimacy, what Fairclough (1992) calls 'synthetic personalization'. This trend for conversationalisation of public discourse has been verified by various studies (e.g., Fairclough and Mauranen, 1997; Pearce, 2005). In service encounters, in particular, this means, among other things, using informal language and familiar terms of address even among strangers.

Given the above claims, in this article, we will try to investigate whether the above apply to brief service encounters in Athens. The paper is based on a collection of data from Greek and multinational chain stores as well as local businesses located in and around Athens and other Greek cities. The exchanges that are the focus of our research interest are brief face-to-face encounters gathered with the aim to explore whether they have been influenced by the forces of globalisation. We will first provide a brief overview of the relevant literature on globalisation and service encounters (Sections 2 and 3) and proceed with the data collection methodology (Section 4). Section 5 presents the analysis of the data and Section 6 the results of the study.

2. Globalisation

Globalisation has been viewed from different perspectives and has thus been variously interpreted and defined.[2] It is seen as a "catchword for a particular historical phase" (Blommaert, 2010:1), a "faddish academic concept of the 1990s" (Coupland, 2010:2) and a fashionable term (Block and Cameron, 2002:1; Eriksen, 2014:1). In its simplest sense, globalisation refers to the speeding up of interconnectedness in every aspect of social life. Even though the term is relatively new, the processes involved

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[2] See Garrett (2010) on the various meanings of the term.

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are rather old but differ in terms of "intensity, scope and scale" (Blommaert, 2010:1; see also Coupland, 2010; Eriksen, 2014; Robertson, 1992). For Blommaert (2010:13), the term 'globalisation' typically refers to "the intensified flows of capital, goods, people, images and discourses around the globe", driven mostly by technological advances and "resulting in new patterns of global activity, community patterns and culture". Despite its largely economic basis, globalisation involves social and cultural change and affects language use through which social relationships are constructed and maintained or collapse. Globalisation entails extensive mobility and growing numbers of various kinds of interactions both traditional and novel thus assigning a dominant position to language use and discourse practices. In this context, language is typically viewed as a commodity and, like other commodities, is seen as falling under the sweeping power of American culture and norms (Cameron, 2000b, 2005; Heller, 2003; Meyerhoff and Niedzielski, 2003:535).

In different ways, "English permeates speech habits, propagates and organizes genres, or reorganizes functional hierarchies for languages" as Blommaert (2003:608) states and further adds that it is domain-related global registers which spread rather than language practices, ideologies and values as a whole. "What is globalized is not an abstract Language, but specific speech forms, genres, styles, and forms of literacy practice" (Blommaert, 2003:608). This then implies that the diffusion of certain discourse patterns from the English-speaking world will not displace local languages but established local ways of speaking may be seriously affected (Cameron, 2003:28), leading to a homogenization of discourse practices. Cameron (2003:33), for instance, discusses how a McDonald's restaurant in Budapest will serve its customers in Hungarian, but the use of Hungarian will follow the norms of interaction which prevail in the company's headquarters in Chicago. And yet there are counter-examples, such as a Swedish McDonald's restaurant where employees address lone customers using neither the norms of American informality nor even the usual Swedish second person singular but rather an impersonal construction like "will there be fries with that?". The use of this construction is not a result of globalisation but a re-emerging avoidance strategy which was dominant in Swedish until the mid-seventies when it was replaced by the informal singular (T) form to single others (Clyne et al., 2009:8, 23).

Such examples clearly demonstrate a crucial area of debate among scholars concerning the extent to which globalisation should be seen as a homogenising process which will inevitably lead to uniformity or as a synergetic relationship between the global and the local which leads to what has been termed 'glocalization' (Robertson, 1995; see also Block and Cameron, 2002:3; Coupland, 2010:5). Of the proponents of globalisation as a homogenising force, Ritzer (1983) coined the phrase "McDonaldisation of society", a metaphor used to describe what he saw as a pervasive trend in many sectors of American society based on the success of fast food chains. According to Ritzer (1996), this success rests on maximizing efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, which guarantee efficiency and uniformity of product and behaviour but lead to, among other shortcomings, dehumanizing both the employee and the customer. On the other hand, advocates of glocalisation argue that globalisation processes do not necessarily threaten individuals or local practices. On the contrary, localities may critically adapt or resist global forces since the very creation of localities is part of globalisation (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007:134). Globalisation entails interrelatedness and intensification in the levels of interaction but whether the world is becoming more homogeneous remains a controversial issue. In fact, localities may be strengthened by globalisation because people will emphasise their uniqueness when they assume it is under threat (Eriksen, 2014:7).

Consequently, when exploring globalisation, "we need to explore the *tensions* between sameness and difference, between centripetal and centrifugal tendencies, and between consensus and fragmentation" (Coupland, 2010:5, emphasis in the original). In this sense, rather than assuming that it is only external forces which influence linguistic processes and local politeness norms, we should also turn our attention to continuity and the confluence of local and global social forces in the specific context.

To explore this, we will use mainly the notion of positive politeness but also that of negative politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1978/1987) in the context of brief service encounters. As is well-known, positive politeness conveys the speaker's attempt to establish and/or maintain cooperation with his/her interlocutor and is associated with informality and solidarity. Negative politeness, on the other hand, conveys the speaker's attempt to attend to the addressee's desire to be free from impositions and is associated with distance and formality.

3. Service encounters

Shopping is a mundane experience most, if not all, of us share and there is an increasing body of literature on the various types and socio-cultural contexts of service encounters, both off-line and more recently on-line (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2015; Hernández-López and Fernández-Amaya, 2015; Márquez Reiter and Bou-Franch, 2017).

Service encounters are typically instances of routine interactions involving two individuals in the roles of service provider and service recipient whose interactions involve the exchange of commodities (be it information or objects). Such interactions are oriented to the customer's need for service and the provider's concern to satisfy that need. Thus, service encounters are typically goal-oriented, but, as research has shown, interactional features are not absent. In fact, it can be assumed that openings and closings are purely interactional phases strictly speaking unnecessary, thus optional for the transaction itself (Márquez Reiter and Bou-Franch, 2017). However, interactional features are not restricted to these phases as they may also be incorporated in the main body of the transaction (e.g., Antonopoulou, 2001; Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; Kuiper and Flindall, 2000; Placencia, 2004; Tsakona, 2014). In fact, Bradley et al. (2015:223), quoting McCallum and Harrison (1985) state that service encounters are "first and foremost social encounters".

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