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Greetings as a device to find out and establish the language of service encounters in multilingual settings

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Abstract

Service encounters at the counter are a social arena in which unacquainted people come to interact together, without *a priori* knowing the language of the other. In multilingual institutional settings, such as places where immigrants, mobile workers, cosmopolitan clients, and tourists gather to ask for services, this is a common configuration. These settings are exemplary for investigating how relevant linguistic resources are emergently discovered, negotiated, and established in the course of the interaction. Instead of supposing that shared linguistic resources are a necessary condition for social interaction to happen, the detailed analysis of these settings invites the researcher to study how participants orient to other available linguistic resources, identify and recognize them, and finally negotiate and select the appropriate and adjusted ones to progress within the encounter. Based on conversation analysis, the paper describes the opening of encounters as a locus where linguistic choices are guessed, checked, requested, and negotiated among participants. The main focus is on greetings, as a practice used to establish and possibly negotiate the language of the encounter. The data come from video recordings at two federal institutions in Switzerland – counters offering services at the border and at railway stations – considered exemplary sites for observing multilingual exchanges among customers and clerks.
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1. Introduction

In multilingual institutional settings, such as multilingual administrative services, participants routinely engage in social interactions with strangers without knowing beforehand which language they speak. The language of the encounter is discovered and chosen *in situ*, being established and negotiated during the very first words exchanged by the participants. This paper studies how openings, and more particularly greeting sequences, are used as a device to find out the relevant language available between the participants and to establish it for the encounter that has just been initiated. It deals with encounters in two federal institutions in Switzerland serving local and international customers, at the border and at the railway station. In these settings, officers routinely deal with customers with very diverse linguistic backgrounds and adjust to them in offering their services.

This type of social interaction constitutes an exemplary context for reflecting on the practices through which linguistic choice is actually accomplished *hic et nunc* by the participants at the hedge of their encounter – rather than being pre-decided on the basis of mutual knowledge or formal procedures. Within the framework of conversation analysis, this study contributes to our understanding of the indexical, situated, contingent, emergent, dynamic

features of the resources mobilized to organize social interaction – including the choice of language and other embodied resources.

1.1. Language choice in multilingual institutions

By focusing on language choice in openings of institutional encounters in multilingual settings, this study contributes to two main areas: the study of multilingualism, and more precisely language choice and negotiation in institutional settings, and the study of sequence organization of social interaction, with a specific focus on openings.

Studies of multilingualism have been interested in how language choice is achieved within different settings and communities. While studies of code-switching have described how language choice might be negotiated on a turn-by-turn basis at any point of the conversation (Auer, 1995), studies of institutions and workplace settings have shown that language choice can be much more constrained by norms and regulations. Language choice might be ruled by explicit multilingual policies (Gunnarsson, 2010), decided *in situ* through explicit announcements and discussions, for example at key moments in which participation frameworks are established and changed within meetings (Markaki et al., 2014), as well as negotiated in more implicit and tacit ways (Hazel, 2015).

In multilingual institutional, commercial, and economic settings, local language choices are associated with more global issues of commodification, provision of services, and political rights (Gal, 1988; Heller, 2003; Unger et al., 2014). In particular, language choice is related to the institution's national and international image, and the linguistic obligations of its servants, as well as clients' expectations and right to be served in their preferred language (Duchêne, 2009; Hazel, 2015). Openings are a sequential environment of particular interest for language choice and negotiation: often participants orient to the relevance of a "basis code" (Gafaranga and Torras, 2002) of the encounter, orienting to and aligning with the use of a common language through the entire interaction, rather than engaging in a multilingual exchange or a "bilingual code" (but see Gafaranga and Torras, 2002 and Mondada, 2017 for alternative orientations). Openings are a privileged *locus* where these orientations are expressed and where the relevant and available linguistic resources are negotiated.

1.2. Language choice in openings

Particularly studied by conversation analysis (Schegloff, 1968, 1979, 1986), openings are the sequential environment in social interaction in which participants achieve their coordinated entry into the encounter. It is the *locus* where the availability of the participants is established (in responses to summons, Schegloff, 1968), and where they identify themselves (Schegloff, 1979), either recognizing who they are or recognizing the relevance of their membership categories for the incipient encounter (Duranti, 1997; Sacks, 1972; Zimmerman, 1992). Interestingly, the issue of the available languages and/or linguistic categorization of the interactants have not been centrally discussed in this framework (but see Mondada, 2004).

Openings have been abundantly studied in telephone conversations, but less in face-to-face encounters (Mondada and Schmitt, 2010). Video data for the study of openings have revealed the central importance of the visual appearance of the co-participants: the establishment of a shared perceptual field is essential for openings (Duranti, 1997:68). It includes practices for sighting, catching the eye, and mutually seeing each other, which precede what Kendon and Ferber (1973) call "distant salutations" (head toss, hand waving, eyebrow flash), and, after the participants have approached, "close salutations" (smile and nod, verbal greetings, body contact). Thus, in face-to-face interaction, and especially in public or institutional spaces, approaching each other is a fundamental aspect of openings that is implemented in mobile trajectories within space (Hazel and Mortensen, 2014; Mondada, 2009) before initiating the encounter with verbal greetings. Verbal greetings are often the first words produced in the encounter, and this motivates our special interest for them; but their positioning within the initial moments of the encounter crucially depends on the way they are multimodally organized.

Openings of service encounters have been largely studied from diverse sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and interactional perspectives (Anderson, 1988; Aston, 1995; Dausenschön-Gay and Krafft, 2009; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2006), sometimes within a comparative approach (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; Traverso, 2001; Zorzi et al., 1990). Multimodal interactional analyses of openings in service and shop encounters remain sparse (De Stefani, in press; Harjunpää et al., in press; Hausendorf and Mondada, 2017; Hazel and Mortensen, 2014; Varcasia, 2010).

Multilingual openings have been identified as the locus of language negotiation (Gafaranga and Torras, 2002; Heller, 1978). A particular type of service encounter, front desk services at universities, has mostly been studied for its multilingual issues (Gafaranga and Torras, 2002; Hazel, 2015; Hazel and Mortensen, 2014; Kidwell, 2000; Varcasia, 2010), including the use of local language(s), L2 uses by non-native speaking students, and English as a lingua franca. Here, I focus on another type of setting, also characterized by its internationality, but open to a larger diversity of unacquainted customers.