

The termination of complaints in calls to an authority for student support



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Abstract

This study investigates how complaints are handled and terminated in calls to the government authority for student loans in Sweden. It is based on Conversation Analysis and compares complaints embedded in two contexts of the calls: (1) complaints about previous contacts with the authority, typically articulated in the beginning of the call, and (2) complaints in response to the decisions and solutions to the caller's requests offered by the call-taker. The shift towards a next activity constitutes the general orientation of call-takers' handling of complaints. The design and positioning of different transitional devices are analyzed. The study confirms previous research indicating that the responding to complaints involves a delicate balancing of stance, and that affiliation is typically avoided or minimized in institutional contexts. Most important, the study shows how the collaborative termination of complaints is conditioned by the activities in which they are embedded and the participants' different preferences for progressivity. Complaints in the first context are typically treated as a secondary issue in an orientation to the reason for call. In the second context, extended and up-graded complaints are marked by the callers' refusals to accept complainable decisions and repeated rejections of call-takers' shift initiatives.

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1. Introduction

The everyday work of many civil servants includes receiving and handling complaints (Monzoni, 2009; Orthaber and Márquez-Reiter, 2011). This is the situation for the officials answering calls from students and debtors at the Swedish Board for Student Support (SBSS). The calls concern applications for, disbursements of, and repayments of student loans. Callers sometimes express dissatisfaction with the service and in response to call-takers' information that their request cannot be met. While some complaints remain as restricted negative remarks, others expand and sometimes develop into direct accusations.¹ Research shows that complaining is an activity "that requires a certain amount of delicacy" (Heinemann and Traverso, 2009: 2381; Edwards, 2005). This study is based on Conversation Analysis (CA) and focuses on the delicacy of responding to complaints in institutional work. To enable and promote the termination of complaints is a significant achievement for the call-takers at SBSS. While complaining in some institutional contexts is the main business and the reason for the call (Orthaber and Márquez-Reiter, 2011), in the calls analyzed in this study it is rather a secondary issue which, however, has to be handled for the main tasks to be resolved. We also know from interviews that caller's expressions of dissatisfaction can be emotionally demanding for call-takers. Having access to practices that help to handle and restrict complaints is thus a work environment issue for the call-takers.

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¹ Following previous research, we define complaints as cautious or highly emotional expressions of dissatisfaction indicating wrongdoings (Drew, 1998; Orthaber and Márquez-Reiter, 2011).

More precisely, this study explores what is observed as a general feature of the call-takers handling of complaints, namely the orientation towards a shift of activities. The complaints studied are typically embedded in other activities (cf. Edwards, 2005). This orientation is recognized also in previous studies. Ruusuvuori and Lindfors (2009: 2416) show how patients' complaints in health care settings are integrated in the presentation of their reason for the visit and handled in an orientation "towards the management of the ongoing business," and Weatherall (forthcoming) demonstrates how call-takers' responses to complaints initiate shifts towards new "institutionally relevant courses of action." This study contributes to our knowledge about the practices employed in such responses, and what they manage to achieve, by comparing complaints in two distinct contexts of the calls to the SBSS. A review of our data showed that complaints mainly occur in; (1) talk about previous contacts with the SBSS and how callers have been dispatched from one call-taker to another, typically articulated at the beginning of the calls; (2) dissatisfaction about the information, decisions, and solutions to the caller's requests offered by the call-taker. The comparison makes it possible to explore how the collaborative terminations of complaints are conditioned by the institutional activities in which they are embedded and the participants' different preferences for progressivity in relation to the tasks handled in these activities.

Two overall practices are recurrent in call-takers' responses to callers' complaints in our data: (1) the use of *shift devices* in the form of, for example, response tokens ("yeah," "okay"), freestanding or in combination with questions (cf. Beach, 1993; Ruusuvuori and Lindfors, 2009; Weatherall, forthcoming); (2) *accounts* that typically refer to institutional rules and practices (cf. Monzoni, 2009). Our analyses focus on how these practices are designed and positioned, how they relate to the complaints in progress and contribute to the shift of activities in the two different contexts of the calls.

As shown in a number of studies, affiliation is a key aspect of how complaints are differently responded to and how they develop in various settings. While a certain form of recipient affiliation is recognized as a systematic feature in everyday talk (Drew and Holt, 1988; Drew, 1998; Couper-Kuhlen, 2012; Selting, 2012), it is typically avoided or minimized in an orientation to professional identities and institutional agendas (Heinemann and Traverso, 2009; Ruusuvuori and Lindfors, 2009). The relation between affiliation/disaffiliation and the progression/termination of complaints is, however, anything but simple (Ruusuvuori and Lindfors, 2009). Research shows, for example, how disaffiliate responses, in different contexts of interaction, contribute to upgrading and expansion of complaint stories (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012: 130; Orthaber and Márquez-Reiter, 2011), or are treated as an initiation of an activity shift (Orthaber and Márquez-Reiter, 2011). In a study of calls to an independent dispute resolution service, Weatherall (forthcoming) shows how complaints are handled in a "delicate interactional balance" of acceptance and understanding without taking part in negative assessments. The delicate balance in the relationships between the participants will be further explored in this study as a key aspect of how the call-takers manage to promote a shift away from talk about complainable matters.

2. Data and methods

In Sweden, a common way to finance higher education is via loans administered by one single public authority – the SBSS. Annually, about one million people receive loans from SBSS. Although services are increasingly Internet-based, telephone conversations still represent an important service and contact between the SBSS and its clients. The officials handle questions and requests about applications, approval, and repayments of loans in telephone work shifts of normally 2 h at a time. The length of the calls varies from about 1 to 30 min. Examples of recurrent and sometimes complex cases handled are the requests for reduced or temporary suspension of repayment. Officers' discretion is restricted by laws and regulations, which, however, are translated in individual cases. Exceptions are sometimes made. Impartiality, efficiency, good service, and satisfied "customers" are goals stated in official documents and measured in regular evaluations.

The data comes from a larger corpus of audio recordings of 1400 telephone calls to the SBSS. We recorded calls from four regional offices and 62 different call-takers during 2011 and 2012. Based on rough transcriptions of the data and also listening through the calls, we selected 30 telephone calls that contained complaints. The relevant parts of these calls have been transcribed according to the CA conventions (see Heritage and Clayman, 2010) and translated into English. In the examples referred to, we have included only the idiomatic translation (and not word-by-word) as we consider this sufficient for the analyses presented. The data are anonymized and the study was approved by one of Sweden's regional ethics boards.

3. Complaints related to previous contacts and the dispatch of calls

It is a regular procedure in the SBSS to dispatch calls from one official to another. The telephone service is organized with a "front office," that is supposed to handle relatively simple cases, and a "back office" of officials specialized in different areas. Calls are transferred when call-takers lack the competence required to answer a question or to make a decision conditioned by the rather complex regulations. It also happens that the dispatch is used as a way to handle situations of disagreement when callers do not accept call-takers' decisions. This procedure of transferring callers within public authorities and service organizations is certainly not unique to the SBSS. It is a potentially problematic institutional practice. The dispatch may create confusion if not properly performed, and the caller's reason for call has to be

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