



Working the overall structural organization of a call: How customers use third position as leverage for gaining service representatives' assistance in dealing with service problems



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ABSTRACT

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This article examines customer service encounters in an electronic repair facility and documents two opportunities within the overall structure of the call where customers express, and service representatives manage, different and competing goal orientations within the encounter. The central analysis then demonstrates where and how, within the call, customers seek opportunities for resolving service problems. Findings offer a communication perspective for explaining where tensions between service representatives and clients manifest in service encounters, and contribute to an existing body of research that considers language use in institutional settings.

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1. The sequential organization of institutional calls

Overall structural organization is one type of sequential organization through which speakers manage their interaction. In ordinary conversation, the overall structural organization of a single conversation consists of the coordinated entry into and out of a conversation, and everything that comes in between (Schegloff, 1968; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; see Robinson, 2012 for overview). In institutional encounters, the overall structural organization takes on a particular “shape” (Drew and Heritage, 1992), through which participants organize their conduct to achieve specific tasks or goals (see Emmison and Danby, 2007; Heritage and Maynard, 2006; Robinson, 2003, 2012; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987; Zimmerman, 1992; among others). By understanding the overall structural organization of institutional calls, we can document the methods participants use to achieve these goals and understand how different opportunities for participation enable or constrain the ability for participants (specifically the client or lay person) to have their concerns addressed.

Participants accomplish their overarching goal, established at the outset of the interaction, through a series of activities wherein forward movement¹ to each successive phase is contingent upon completion of the prior one (Heritage, 2004; Heritage and Maynard, 2006; Robinson, 2003). The completion of each activity, whether in doctor–patient encounters, service-related encounters, or emergency service calls, in turn moves through a number of determinate steps. For example, in doctor–patient encounters, where the overarching goal is treatment for a medical problem, Robinson (2003) provides a detailed account of how treatment is contingent upon each phase of the medical activity, which is initiated through the patient's problem presentation (p. 47). Robinson's (2003) work demonstrates how the position of an action/activity within the overall structure of a conversation provides different opportunities for participation (or lack thereof), and informs the way participants orient to the ongoing conduct.

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¹ As noted by a reviewer, the progressivity of talk and the “forward movement” is oriented to in everyday talk as well (see, Stivers and Robinson, 2006).

By understanding goal orientation in institutional interactions and establishing the interactional achievement of the overall structural organization within these settings, researchers are able to develop a description for how members manage different contingencies within the call (Zimmerman, 1992), which has consequences for larger outcomes of the interaction. The analysis in this current article seeks to build upon prior work by first explicating an overall structural organization of another type of institutional setting, the customer service encounter in an electronics repair facility. Second, by using the method of conversation analysis, I demonstrate where and how, within the call, customers seek opportunities for making relevant issues related to service problems within the repair status solicitation encounter. The analysis documents two opportunities within the overall structure where customers express, and service representatives manage, different – and sometimes competing – goal orientations within the encounter. This article contributes to the body of research on the overall structural organization of institutional interactions, and offers a communication perspective for explaining where tensions between service representatives and clients manifest in service encounters.

2. Data and method

Data were collected as part of a five-month observation from an in-house repair facility of a mid-sized organization located in the Northeastern United States that sells and repairs cameras and other electronic goods. Throughout this article, the organization is referred to by the pseudonym *Jack Camera*. Data are audiotapes of 193 calls between any of the five customer-service representatives and customers calling to check on the repair status of equipment previously sent in for service. The analysis draws on 56 calls where customers indicated a service problem. As background for understanding the organization of calls in this present study, representatives received training on how to report repair status in response to customers' status inquiries. The standard procedure for reporting repair status included a first step where representatives looked up the repair order on the computer tracking system, which indicated the current status of the equipment within the actual repair process (e.g. on hold for parts). The second step involved looking at the community white board, which listed the estimated repair timeframe for each equipment type (e.g. digital video cameras take approximately 15–20 business days for repair). The analytic method is conversation analysis, and all calls were transcribed using Jefferson's transcription system (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984).

3. Overall structural organization

As indicated above, a primary feature of institutional interactions is their distinct organization consisting of ordered activity phases (Drew and Heritage, 1992, p. 43). For example, Whalen and Zimmerman (1987) explains how participants demonstrably orient to the organization of 911 emergency calls as: pre-beginning, opening/identification, request, interrogative series, response, and closing. Extract 1 provides an example of how these service calls are organized into opening, service request, interrogative series, service response, acceptance/rejection of response, and closing. As will be demonstrated below, and suggested by prior research (Kevoe-Feldman and Robinson, 2012), members display an orientation to a three-part structure as the basic sequence that organizes the primary course of action.

Extract 1 Laptop ready (Sta94)

01	((Ring))	
02	Rep: Jack Camera. This is Tara speaking.	Call Opening
03	May I help you?	
04	(.)	
05	Cus: Hi. Uhp- My- uhm laptop was se:nt onta	Service Request
06	thuh: Toshiba factory from- uhm: other	
07	r'pairs.=How do I check thuh status of that.	
08	(0.2)	
09	Rep: What's thuh repair authorization number.	Interrogative Series
10	Cus: Uhm:: it is: (0.5) >it's< two two eight	
11	zero two four.	
12	(.)	
13	Rep: Two four you said?	
14	(.)	
15	Cus: Two two <u>eight</u> . Zero two four.	
16	(.)	
17	Rep: Okay it's actually returned from	
18	thuh manufacturer.	
19	(.)	
20	Rep: °An:d° (1.2) Hold on just a moment.	
21	(.)	

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