BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: CONVERSATION ANALYSIS AND INVESTIGATION OF SALES PERSONNEL-CUSTOMER SPOKEN DISCOURSE

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to carry out a discourse analysis between sales personnel and customers in order to describe and explain how language is actually used in such a business context. The paper examines the organization of the business interaction between sales personnel and customers. The paper specifically examines turn-taking, adjacency pairs and topic organization using conversational analysis approach. Conversation analysis is the term used in linguistics to refer to a method of studying the sequential structure and coherence of institutional talk such as sales personnel-customer interaction. The study shows how both the sales personnel and customer structure and make their business talk coherent and intelligible leading to effective business communication. Though the conversations are quick and evanescent, they are more organized and structured. For this reason, both the sales personnel and customers should lay stress on rules and functions of spoken discourse as they carry out business transactions.

Keywords: Discourse, conversation analysis, turn-taking, adjacency pairs, sales personnel, customers, linguistics, business communication.

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1. Introduction

Discourse analysis focuses on a description of the organization of language in terms of linguistic units larger than the sentence or clause. Within business discourse research, it has been used to establish what patterns exist between longer sections of business talk or text in terms of conversational exchanges, and how business talk is organized generally (that is, in speaker turns, content episodes, and so on). It follows that discourse analysis is therefore concerned with language use in its social context, and in particular with interaction between speakers.

Talk is central to doing business and language play an important role in both the performance and the coordination of corporate activities. Business conversation can be conceived as a type of discourse, because the coherence and order in such conversations are not only found at the level of linguistic expressions, but also at the level of the interactional moves or speech acts that speakers make by uttering those expressions. This paper notes that sales personnel-customer discourse is a good example of naturally occurring and spontaneous language interaction marked by pragmatic aspects as well as conversational structures. Sales personnel-customer interaction is, as such, a business conversation that involves, among other things, goal setting, negotiation initiation and turn-taking in conversational exchanges. The initiation and realization of various tasks is not always premised on equal terms of exchange. That is why both the sales personnel and the customers are under pressure to set and reset their goals through the use of language. The pragmatic imperatives underwriting these tasks inevitably give structure as well as place demands on how language is used so as to attain optimal results.

We communicate everyday to express ourselves and exchange ideas. It is the most basic and widespread linguistic means of conducting human affairs McArthur (2001:1). Spoken discourse, which is the primary and universal method of communication, plays a far more important role in our lives than written discourse. This is probably because most people speak much more than they write. Besides, almost everyone learns to speak, but not necessarily to write. Therefore, the importance of speaking leads us to think how people communicate with each other by talking.

Many researchers work with spoken discourse to analyze its features and functions. A good example is Sacks et al (1974), who assert that conversational analysis is ‘a first step towards achieving a naturalistic observational discipline to deal with details of social interaction in a rigorous, empirical and formal way' (Coulthard, 1994:59). Through spoken discourse analysis, a variety of features and functions, which may not be explicit to everyone, are summarized to explain how people communicate effectively with these hidden rules.

One of the central concerns in CA is the analysis of talk in social interaction Hester & Eglin (1997), Schegloff (1997). CA shares with its sister discipline ethnomethodology (EM), an interest in the ways in which societal members display and make accountable their actions Ten Have, (2002). Therefore, EM and CA are directed towards the investigation of how members create understandability in social action. CA is particularly concerned with the ways that conversational machinery is used to this end. So, instead of explaining action according to abstract cultural rules that operate as a normative framework for action, social action is investigated such that those rules can be made visible as features of social praxis. The purpose of this paper is to analyze three phenomena specific to conversation i.e. turn-taking, adjacency pairs and topic management using data gathered from sales personnel-customer discourse. The objective is to show how this kind of spoken discourse is locally managed and organized.

2 Statement of the problem

A business interaction is largely a linguistic activity in which goods and services are purchased. The use of language can therefore contribute or hinder successful business interaction. This paper is based on the assumption that in the performance of any business interaction, language plays a dominant role in that it allows participants to coordinate and organize their business activities. It is therefore important to look at the role language plays in sales personnel-customer discourse and how it is structured so as to ensure success in this kind of business interaction. Though there are some studies that have focused on business discourse in and outside Kenya, our literature review has not come up with a study specifically focusing on the discourse structure and how language is pragmatically used in sales personnel-customer interaction. Following this gap this paper focuses on examining how business interaction is structured and made coherent and intelligible by sales personnel and customers who are the interacting participants.

3 Research question.

How are the conversational structures in sales personnel-customer discourse organized?

4 Objective

To examine how sales personnel-customer discourse is structured and made coherent and intelligible by the participants.

5 Review of related literature.

Numerous studies in discourse analysis, deals with language in an abstract sense and minimal levels, notably at phonological, syntactic, and semantic levels. Coulthard (1992) study is illustrative of this type of literature. It is concerned with the conversational analysis in which data that is collected is analysed in terms of interpretation, integration and systematization. While acknowledging the significance of interactants, Coulthard's rank scale analysis is more concerned with the intricacies of the exchange structure such as turn-taking. The issues that arise from this study postulate, among other things, that turn-taking, though spontaneous, is what enables conversational progression. This paper unlike Coulthard's proposes to take turn-taking out of its abstract confines to actual and situated conversational contexts. It seeks to explore the viability of spontaneity in such situated contexts, and this is an issue that hardly comes out in Coulthard's study.

A number of studies have used CA's concern within conversational practice in order to look at the intersections of different cultures in common language. Schegloff's, Jefferson's and Sacks' (1977) early work in CA, and their observations about the organizational structures of American English conversations led to a number of studies in this field. For example Bowles& Palloti (2004); Sifianou (1989) looked at the variation of these practices across different language contexts. Hosoda (2006) looks at the contexts of intercultural language communication. Halmari (1993) analyzed the differences between Finnish and English speakers in the context of business meetings conducted in English in the U.S. and showed that there were marked differences in the organization of the speech encounters. English speakers used a "how are you" sequence as part of the formal opening of the talk, and as a brief sequence used to get to the business at hand. In contrast, Finnish speakers treated such introductory issues as more lengthy topical sequence in their own right, requiring quite detailed exploration. It is easy to imagine comedy sketches playing on this subtle difference and the difficulties it may create for the hapless participants.

This is not by any means intended to trivialize the matter: the apparently minor problem of doing introductions has serious consequences for basic communicative exchanges.

Mori (2003) examined the achievement of intercultural discourse and the ways in which it is worked through in the moment-by-moment shifts of discourse. Mori explored co-presence question-answer sequences between first and second language Japanese speakers in multi-party conversations and analyzed the ways that cultural differences were organizationally dealt with. Mori showed that the strategies used by first language speakers when asking questions served to categorize the intended answerers (the second language speakers) as linguistic novices. More generally, Mori's work illustrates that cultural differences as represented in linguistic ability are visible aspects of talk, that are used by participant's to structure their conversations in orientation to their understandings of the "others" they are orientating to.

A key concern in CA has been with the participants in conversation creating sequences of talk by taking turns at speaking. Turns are constructed by participants orientating to tacit knowledge about how turns operate: In his lectures, Sacks (1992) proposed a number of maxims that can be seen to operate as general procedures for talk. Three of the most basic of these are: (1) that one person speaks at a time; (2) that conversational turns do not overlap; (3) that people take turns at producing turns (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974). There are lots of other maxims that participants use to decide, inter alia, who's turn it is next, when it is their turn, when might be a good time to make a conversational turn, what kinds of topics those turns might reasonably deal with, how turns can be organized to bring about an opportunity to talk about something, and so on. These basic maxims and conversational mechanisms are used to "read" contexts, conversational participants and their interactional "intentions." So, the ways in which participants organize their talk will tell you something about their role in that setting, their expectations of other people's roles in that setting, their intentions for what the setting should accomplish, and so on.

Walya (1996), on the other hand, studied the structure of banking discourse and the strategies employed by discourse participants in this setting. Her study was grounded in the notion of discourse as interaction where participants use a variety of strategies to negotiate for meaning.

She noted that given that banking is a business, bankers and their customers employ both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication to create rapport. Such forms include gaze, smiling and nodding. She also examined the organization of the discourse structures in banking. Her study was largely concerned with the organization and structure of turn-taking. Walya's work established that turn-taking in banking discourse was highly organized so that only one person spoke at a time and that speaker change was mutually collaborated and coordinated.

In face-to-face postgraduate educational seminars, teachers and students have been shown to use their conversational turns in distinctive ways. Teachers have—or "show" or "are treated as having" or "regularly display"—greater interactional rights in terms of the selection of next speaker than students do, and can "close down" other people's talk in ways that student cannot (Gibson, Hall & Callery, 2006). Those particular educational contexts are comprised of and constituted by those kinds of conversational mechanisms. The very fact that participants regularly display preferences for and deference to these turn-taking procedures is, in part, what distinguishes those interactive environments from any other; in other words, these types of conversational practice constitute educational talk.

Another key concept in CA as introduced by Sacks (1992) is adjacency pairs. An adjacency pair is a sequence of conversational turns that are tied to each other in which the former calls forth the latter. Examples of an adjacency pairs include "question—answer"; "greeting—greeting"; and "request—reply." In all cases, a turn that is readable as the first part of a pair creates a strong interactional preference that it is followed by the second part of a pair. In his analysis of online discussions, Gibson (2007) found that one of the methodological challenges was to uncover the logical sequence of the posts. Precisely because postings are not synchronous, participants do not always take turns at relevant "places" but "take turns when they can" (e.g. when they log on), which means that "turn placement" is often rather haphazard in comparison to the order of turns in face-to-face conversation. However, participants nonetheless do display what Ten Have (1999) has described as a "reading path," and demonstrate through the organization of their posts how they functionally relate to other contributions. For instance answers are readable as answers wherever they occur in a sequence of postings in "answer positions" (next turns). Those that are not answers, are readable as such even though they do occur in answer positions while postings that provide answers to more than one question or that index multiple posts in some way, are readable as such.

6 Methodology.

The paper adopted a descriptive research design and employed qualitative procedures in sampling, data collection and data analysis. The data consist of tape recordings and transcriptions of spontaneous sales personnel-customers discourse working for different companies in Kenya. The excerpts are analysed in order to look for recurring patterns across many recordings of real conversations and to establish the properties which are systematically used by both the sales personnel and customers as they interact linguistically. The data presented were covertly tape recorded by myself, therefore ensuring reliable spontaneous data for analysis. This is an empirical study which is basically descriptive, but the inductive approach is indispensible for conversational analysis.

6.1 Turn-taking

Among all the rules in spoken discourse, perhaps the most essential and important one is turn-taking because it can tell people when to talk, when to be silent and thus, avoid interruptions. According to Coulthard, turn-taking refers to 'the roles of speaker and listener change' collaboratively with remarkably little overlapping and few silences (Coulthard, 1994:59). Yngve (1970) states that listeners can concentrate on the syntactic completeness, the speaker's contribution, or intonation to seek information from a turn once it is be taken.

According to Graddol et al, turn-taking cues are differentiated from both the listener's and the speaker's aspects. On one hand, from the listener's point of view, turn-anticipation cues are considered. That is to say, listeners can 'draw upon various kinds of knowledge allowing them to anticipate with different degrees of precision what kind of utterance will be made next' (Graddol et al, 1994:163). They summarize three kinds of turn-anticipation cues including general script or frame, discourse structures and grammatical structures. On the other hand, from the speaker's viewpoint, turn-yielding cues are taken into account, which can 'help the prompt recognition of an end of turn, and help participants synchronize their turn exchanges with precision' (Graddol et al, 1994:164). Let us consider several examples from sales personnel-customer discourse:

I-a

T18C: Does the life insurance also cover my children and wife?

T19SP:No, my friend, this is only for you but we have another one that takes care of children called education policy.

T20C: Aaha! Is this a different policy all together?

T21SP: We could say so, but allow me to explain to you what entails education policy.

I-b
T12C: What is its pharmacological history?

T13SP:P-Alaxin has no sulphur which affects most of the patients. There are also no serious side effects that have been reported so far.

T14C: Well, what makes me think that sulphur does not have an alarming side effect?

T15SP: Most of the malarial drugs that have sulphur dehydrates the body making the patient weak and also reduces appetite. As a result (.) most patients therefore skip meals. This delays the action of the medicine. So instead of Sulphur; P-Alaxin has 320mg of piperaquine Phosphate in each tablet.

In both I-a and I-b, the sales personnel can anticipate his turn by grammatical structures, which are two interrogative sentences given by the customer. In other words, the sales personnel able to identify his turn by realizing grammatical completion of the speaker. Whereas no general script or frame and discourse structures cues occur in the short extract.

I-c
T30C: Mmmh

T31SP: And it is quite friendly to most patients.

T32C: That is quite good eh yeah
T33SP: Also I-me-
1-d

T14C: What do you mean?

T15SP:I mean, if our client happens to die after paying the beneficiary the full benefits as it the premiums were all paid.

I-e
T10C: Is it?

T11SP: Yes (.) Besides (.) the British American Assets Managers have launched a series of Insurance policies in the market such as market balanced fund, bond fund, managed retirement fund, financial planning approach to investment advice and education policy.

Examples I-c, I-d and I-e indicate turn-yielding cues from the speaker's viewpoint. Duncan claims that speakers use a range of verbal and non-verbal cues to imply their yielding of the turn, such as syntax, gaze, intonation, loudness, drawl, stereotyped tags and gesture (Duncan, 1972 cited in Graddol et al, 1994:166). In example I-c, turn 32 the customer signals the end of his turn by using a small interjection "eh yeah", which means "I do agree". The sales personnel respond in turn 33 by adding more information. Example I-d shows that the customer yields his turn by an interrogative question with a rising intonation. A tag question "is it" is applied in I-e to indicate that the customer wants to obtain an answer from the sales personnel and thus, his turn-yielding cue is given in stereotyped tags.

To sum up, at most times turn-anticipation cues and turn yielding cues can occur simultaneously. In other words, while the speaker is signaling his yielding of a turn, the listener can anticipate his coming of a turn according to the same cue at the same time. For instance, turn18 in I-a, turn12 I-b, turn14 in I-c, etc. According to Duncan, 'the more cues displayed simultaneously, the more likely a rapid and smooth exchange would occur' Duncan, (1972), Graddol et al, (1994:167). When we pay attention to turn-taking we look at conversation as the result of the successful application not only of the rules of grammar but also of other types of rules. In this case, these rules have to do with the fact that a conversation is a cooperative enterprise in which the participants must perform in a coordinated way.

6.2 Different types of interruptions

Beattie distinguishes three types of interruption including simple interruption, butting-in interruption and silent interruption in addition to overlaps Beattie (1983) cited in Graddol et al, (1994:170). Simple interruption occurs when the attempted speaker interrupts successfully and the first speaker's utterance has not been completed with simultaneous speech presented. As in the following examples:

1-f

T27SP: Do not even ask, (...) what I know is that they are certainly the best, [from my] sales analysis I have sold quite a lot.

T28C: [From] its pharmacology, it appears as if it is quite acidic?

Here the customer interrupts successfully and thus, the sales personnel's utterance is broken into an incomplete sentence. The two participants speak "from my" and "from" at the same time and as a result, an overlap occurs. This example 1-f is a typical simple interruption according to Beattie's classification. Overlap is a quite common feature in conversation. It is 'dealt with by one speaker ending his turn quickly, gaps between turns by another speaker beginning his turn or simply indicating that his turn has begun and incorporating the silence into it' (Coulthard, 1994:60). Sacks et al explain overlaps in two ways: one is when a speaker mistakenly anticipates the arrival of a transition-relevance place; the other is the self-selecting speaker enters a turn rapidly by overlapping with others (Sacks, et al (1974). However, according to Beattie's classification, overlap means the attempted speaker interrupts successfully when the first speaker's utterance has been completed with simultaneous speech occurred (Beattie, 1983 cited in Graddol, 1994:170). Let us discuss these claims using the above example 1-f:

In the above short piece, when the overlap between "from my" and "from" occurs, it is quite obvious that the first speaker's utterance is not finished. Whereas, according to Beattie's classification, turn 28 cannot be regarded as an overlap because the first speaker should give a complete sentence before the interruption. But according to Sacks et al, the above example can also be classified as overlap. However, silent interruption which is another type of interruption will happen when the attempted speaker interrupts successfully, and the first speaker's utterance has not been completed (Graddol, 1994:170). This is exemplified by the following example:

I-g

T31SP: And it is quite friendly[…

T32C: to most patients.

T33SP: …and can sell[…

T32C: it over the counter?

From this short piece, the customer interrupts the sales personnel successfully without overlapping. Besides, the first speaker's utterance is apparently not finished but it is completed by the customer. Having exemplified three types of interruption as well as overlaps, we note that interruption occurs very frequently in sales personnel-customer interaction. As state by Graddol et al (1994:172), frequent interruptions may occur in the speech of close friends as a form of collaborative talk. So we take the sales personnel-customer business interaction as a collaborative one.

6.3 Back-channel support

Back-channel support refers to noises and short verbal responses made by listeners who acknowledge what the speaker is saying and reacts to it, without wishing to take over the speaking turn. Some examples include: Mmmh, yeah, oh, really, right. This is prevalent in sales personnel-customer interaction as illustrated by the following example:

I-h
T8C: Mmmh.

T9SP: The new investment group management and investment advisory offers services to individuals and institutional clients. It also addresses a growing need for innovative investment products and services. Since the British American Assets Managers is licensed as a fund manager by the Capital Market Authority and the Retirement Benefits Authority, the client has a lot of confidence in it.

T6C: Yeah we said Kazi iendelee. Otherwise one has to work in order to feed the family.

T7SP: That's true. Can I take a bit of your time?

T8 C: Oh Sure (.) go ahead (pays attention).

The small word "Mmmh" in I-h is a typical back-channel support with two purposes. One is to imply that the customer is following what the sales personnel is saying and reacting to it. The other is indicating that the customer agrees with what the sales personnel has said. Regarding example I-h, an interjection "oh" is pronounced. 'When used alone, without the syntactic support of a sentence, 'oh' is said to indicate emotional states, e.g. surprise, agreement, fear, or pain' (Schiffrin, 1999: 275). Hence, the short word "oh" in turn 8 serve as a back-channel support to deliver the feeling of consent.

6.4 Spoken discourse markers

By contrast, spoken discourse markers are generally employed at the beginning of a turn in order to mark boundaries in conversation between one topic or bit of business and the text (Anon, 2004). Cameron argues that they are often condemned 'as marks of inarticulacy and sloppiness in speech' because they are sometimes meaningless and only as fillers (Cameron, 2001:114). That is to say, speakers will use spoken discourse markers to fill out their utterances when they do not really know what they want to say, or have nothing of substance to say. For this reason, spoken discourse markers may share one same purpose with filled pauses, which is to buy time to think what the speaker is going to say next. The difference between the two is that the former is used at the beginning of a turn, while the latter usually occur during an utterance. A lot more examples are shown in the following:

I-j

T62C: But but what is the problem, I thought you told me that (..) aah(..) you will recover the loan with the amount of premiums that I have accumulated over time.

I-k
T16C: Aaah.(?) Hiyo ni vizuri (that is great) (ha ha ha) it shows that you are aware of how the economy is eeh.

T17SP: Well (.) Actually you know we're also Kenyans

I-L
T25C: Well most of the people fear what the doctors are calling lifestyle diseases or high blood pressure

T26SP: Eer: Meaning what? Is there life-

I-m
T29C: High blood pressure for example uh

T30SP: well (.)Yeah

From all the above examples, we can note that both the sales personnel and the customers tend to use 'well' many times to mark the beginning of their turns. "Well" seems like a typical boundary for most English speakers to begin their utterances. As for the example in I-L, I would like to regard the small word "Eer" as not only a spoken discourse marker but also as a filled pause. The reason is that the sound not only gives the sales personnel time to think about what he is going to say but also marks his beginning of the turn.

6.5 Repetition and false starts

Cameron argues that it is not surprising that speakers often make false starts and repeat themselves because they 'have to produce their contributions in real time, with minimal planning' (Cameron, 2001:34). Repetition can be a way of gaining time to plan the next chunk of utterance. False starts can be adjusting the grammatical structure to the right expression of the meaning.

1-n
T62C: But but what is the problem, I thought you told me that (...) aaah (...) you will recover the loan with the amount of premiums that I have accumulated over time.

1-p
T78SP: [uh-] I think madam; life has never been like this before. I do not know where we are heading to.

T79C: [We will] we will head nowhere. Kenya is one country and so we will try to survive.

T82SP: The Economic bar is Shs. 30 and the full bar is Shs. 55.

1-q
T83C: but I mean is- it- the wholesale price or retail?

T84SP: Both

The example in 1-n indicates that the customer has not prepared himself well when he begins his turn. This is probably because he intends to change the topic in a hurry from the disadvantages of getting a loan to that of getting a premium that will benefit him more. The repetition in example 1-p occurs maybe because of the sales personnel's vague sound "uh" which overlaps the customer's "we will". So on account of this unintentional 'interruption', the customer repeats another "we will". On the other hand, two obvious false starts "is-" and "it-"occur in 1q. The possible reason is that the customer has not produced his utterance in real time. So he is adjusting his grammatical structure and meaning to express himself properly.

6.6 Adjacency Pairs

The notion of adjacency pair is another fundamental unit of the local management system of organization in conversations. Conversational Analysis places great emphasis on the idea that conversation is 'one thing after another'. Thus spoken interaction is often structured around pairs of adjacent utterances in which the second utterance is not just related to the first but functionally dependent on it. Thus if the first utterance is a question the next utterance is an answer. The sequence 'question-answer' is called an adjacency pair (Sacks *et al.* 1974). Examples of such sequences are greeting-greeting and also some first turns which present the producer of the second turn with a choice of accepting or declining. Examples are: invitations, offers, suggestions or proposals. Also a turn which solicits the addressee's opinion on some proposition made by the speaker may be met with either agreement or disagreement. Such utterances are also referred to as adjacency pairs. To illustrate this, the following examples are sampled from the sales personnel-customer data:

2-a

T3SP: How are you?

T4C: Fine and you

T5SP: I am fine, thank you, bado mnafanya tu? Habari ya kazi (you are still working, how is work)

T6C: Nzuri Sana, labda yako (it is okay, what about you)

2-b

T12C: What is its pharmacological history?

T13SP: P-Alaxin has no sulphur which affects most of the patients. There are also no serious side effects that have been reported so far.

T14C: Well, what makes me think that sulphur does not have an alarming side effect?

T15SP: Most of the malarial drugs that have sulphur dehydrates the body making the patient weak and also reduces appetite. As a result (.) most patients therefore skip meals. This delays the action of the medicine. So instead of Sulphur; P-Alaxin has 320mg of piperaquine Phosphate in each tablet.

Example 2-a illustrates the structure of an adjacency pair since most of the turns are in form of question and answer sequence. In turn 4, the customer is constrained by the first pair which is a question posed by the sales personnel ‘how are you? In response the customer gives the answer ‘fine’. In example 2-b, the customer poses several questions which are responded to with appropriate answers by the sales personnel in turns 13 and 15. The observation made is that the participants in this discourse seem to have no problem coordinating the orderly exchange of turns. The idea according to Sacks (1974) that conversation is one thing after another is an activity that unfolds in this discourse. In the above examples, the answers to the questions which are mostly posed by the customer requesting information on services and products that the sales personnel is offering are provided instantly by the sales personnel. The examples above illustrate that sale personnel-customer discourse is uniquely structured around pairs of adjacency utterances.

Question and answer is not the only type of adjacency pair identified by Sacks *et al*. (1974). Another type is Greeting-Greeting and Health enquiry sequence which fall in the same category as greetings. Sack points out that, if someone produces an utterance that is hearable as a greeting, the person they are addressing is constrained to produce a greeting in return. This type of adjacency pair occurs in this data as illustrated in 2-a. The inherent rule noted in this data is that each turn that is produced by either party does not latch onto other turns in the course of the transaction. As such, the two parties manage to get along with each other and this contributes significantly to the sustenance of the discourse and effective business communication.

In reference to the above examples, it is noted that the participants adopt a self-selection technique so that each second pair part is interpreted relative to the first or preceding utterance. It is apparent that the two participants alternate freely at speaking as each party has equal opportunities in contributing to the exchange event. This enables the sales personnel to carry out a successful business interaction. The observation made is that all the turns in this example can be said to constitute an APs structure that is constitutive of the turn-taking arrangement.

6.7 Topic management

This is the set of signals used by the speakers to introduce and manipulate different referents in a communicative event. The notion of topic is important, in the first place, because we can approach more systematically another notion which is very difficult to grasp: coherence. Coherence should not be understood as a pre-existing relationship between different referents from reality. Rather, coherence is verbally created by the participants in a communicative event. In the second place, topic is the basis for interaction; without a topic there is no interaction. What people talk about, how they talk about it and how long they talk constitute three very important aspects of communication. The function of topic management markers in general is to contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of the message by signaling explicitly the relationship in terms of topical coherence between the different parts of the message. The following examples drawn from sales personnel-customer illustrates this claim:

(1) Topic shift

1-a

T71C: By the way. You had talked about a bar soap?

T72SP: Yes, I was about to remind you of it so that you can also order.

T73C: Do you have any sample that I can see?

T74SP: Of course (goes to collect from the car)

1-b

T23SP: I nearly forgot, the education policy, is a policy that you contribute towards education on monthly basis and this contribution is known as education premium.

T24C: Is there a particular amount that one is expected to pay, or you pay according to your budget?

1-c

T50C: So to be on the safe side, I think these are the things we require.

T51SP: By the way, on an entirely business matter now, I have other products from our company that could be of interest to you

T52C: Okay, which ones (.) knowledge is power even if I will not buy them today, there is always tomorrow.

When a new topic is introduced, it is the responsibility of the participants to indicate more or less explicitly the connection (or lack of connection) between the new topic and the previous one, and, by doing so, maintain the coherence of the text being constructed as indicated by the above examples.

(2) Summing up

2-a

T84C: Thank you so much. Indeed I have been so informed. I am so glad to have given you my time. For now I will think about all those other policies and will contact you once I have decided.

2-b

T80C: Okay, to sum up , I want to place an order of 25 bags of kg, 25 bags of20kg and 50 bags of 70kg.that makes a total of 100bags.

A way of closing a topic in sales personnel-customer discourse consists of pointing out the main aspects that have been dealt with as seen in example 2-a and 2-b. The expressions listed in this section allow the participants to effect the transition to close the topic while at the same time reinforcing the message conveyed.

(3) Structuring

3-a

T69SP: To begin with, this is calculated immediately after purchase if you are paying in cash but after sales if you take the product on credit.

T70C: Why can't you consider me as a business friend and an old customer and calculate my discount after I have done the order regardless of whether I am paying in cash or not?

T71SP: To be sincere mum, that is not possible. It would be going against the rules of the business.

3-b

T59SP: In addition, there will be free transport, free off-loaders who will arrange your feeds in your store.

T60C: I appreciate the transport offer but as a wholesaler, I deal with retailers who will demand that I give them discount. At least, you should lower your prices and make them friendly or increase the discount.

Structuring devices are used in cases in which the topic involves different aspects or points. For instance in 3-a and 3-b the sales personnel is rolling down the profit that the customer is likely to enjoy after buying from his company. These markers function as a «reminder» that the different aspects introduced form part of the same topic.

4) Paraphrasing
4-a
T22C: What do you mean?
T23SP: What I was saying is that we pack with different people and economic status in mind. We are also very particular in ensuring that people's health is not at stake.

4-b
T26C: Aha, how do you do it?

T27SP: Good! I mean, we have 250gms pack, I kilo pack and 2 kilogramme. We also pack 5Kg in cartons and 10kg respectively.

T28C: That is great. That means one does not need to weigh anything while selling?

4-c

T57SP: Well, well, we do not look at it that way, let me put it in another way, a wholesaler is likely to make more sales and this means that he is likely to make a lot of profit. Besides, there is the discount that we shall always give.

Markers such as 'what I was saying' in example 4-a, 'I mean' in 4-b and 'let me put it in another way' indicate that what the sales personnel is saying is not a new topic but basically the same, although in different words. The markers help the participants make their message understood by their listeners.

7 Research Findings and Conclusion

Through the analyses of the structures of sales personnel-customer spoken discourse, we come to the conclusion that there are such a number of rules and functions implied which have made crucial contribution to the two speakers' conversation. For this reason, It is evident that sales personnel-customer interaction is neither formless nor unstructured. On the contrary, rules and features definitely exist, that guides this kind of business interaction. Thus both the sales personnel and the customers use a variety of verbal communication, such as filled pauses, back-channel support, spoken discourse markers as well as adjacency pairs which occur in the examples cited from various extracts. They also employ non-verbal cues such as gaze, facial expressions, and posture to get what they want to pass across.

We can conclusively say that sales personnel-customer discourse is well organized and structured even though it occurs spontaneously. Notably, the turn-taking is negotiated sequentially between the sales personnel and the customers and this gives the sales personnel and customers a notch to pitch the business**.** In this transactional discourse, the participants follow the question/answer AP structural sequence. Either party could ask the question while the other provides the answer. As such, turns alternates from one participant to another. As a result, this keeps the conversation going. On the whole the conclusion made is that, in this discourse there is no restriction of who should speak next. Turns are sequenced in line with the mutual goals as set out by the interlocutors. Therefore, there is no standard pattern for the overall organization and sequencing of the APs. Any turn or APs can take any length from one word, a sentence or a long monologue. In this case, it is concluded that this conversational behaviour enables the discourse participants to achieve their mutual transactional goal. It was also found out that in this discourse there is smooth transfer of speakership between the sales personnel and the customer. The two interact as collaborative and cooperative discourse participants so that neither of them holds the turn for too long. This can be attributed to the fact that sales personnel-customer discourse is a discourse of equal partners with no power relations. Evidently, neither the sales personnel nor the customers appear to compete for the speaking turns. This clearly shows that sales personnel-customer discourse is evidently governed by clear-cut convention so that only one person speaks at a time and that speaking gaps are almost non-existent. This enables the sales personnel and the customer to carry out successful business interaction.

Many of the APs in this discourse are uniquely structured in such a way that the participants give their response based on the previous turn. We observe that, there is no standard pattern for the overall organization and sequencing of the adjacency pair sequence in this discourse. Each turn or AP can take any length, from one word through short sentences to almost a whole paragraph. On topic initiation, shift and sustenance in sales personnel–customer discourse, participants use specific means in initiating and sustaining various topics as they engage in business transaction. It is revealed that either party in the business encounter is free to initiate a topic which is taken up by the other participant who willingly cooperates in ratifying and sustaining it. The topics are thus collaboratively and cooperatively terminated after a mutual agreement is reached. Each business encounter as the study noted, has an overall theme that guides it towards a given focus. As such the two participants find it easy to tolerate and accommodate each other as equal and mutually benefiting discourse participants as they embark on a joint production and negotiation of various business topics that inform their interaction. It is concluded that the initiation and sustenance of both peripheral and business topics enables the sales personnel and customers to carry out a successful sales negotiation.

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