Title
Common Ground in Cross-Cultural Communication: Sequential and Institutional Contexts in Front Desk Service Encounters

Author
Kidwell, Mardi

Peer reviewed

Common Ground in Cross-Cultural Communication: Sequential and Institutional Contexts in Front Desk Service Encounters

Mardi Kidwell
University of California Santa Barbara

How do native and nonnative English-speaking participants understand one another in front desk service encounters? Specifically, what are the resources that enable them to transact their business at the desk? In this paper, I use the notion of "shared background" to show how participants at the front desk of a university-sponsored English language program rely on the sequential and institutional contexts in which their talk is produced to accomplish their service activities. In particular, I show how receptionists' orientations to the institutional requirements of students' actions in the "request slot" are evident in the design of their responses to students, especially in how they manage both the discourse and institutional relevancies that students' actions pose. Then, I show how participants' opening moves prepare the way for, and render accountable, students' service-seeking activities by constraining the kinds of actions that students can relevantly produce next. I propose that such constraints provide an important resource for participants to understand and respond to one another in institutionally relevant ways, in spite of their (at times) limited shared linguistic resources.

INTRODUCTION

A great deal of cross-cultural communication research takes as its central concern how speakers of different cultures and different language backgrounds misunderstand one another (e.g., Bailey, 1997; Erickson & Rittenberg, 1987; Gass & Varonis, 1985, 1991; Gumperz, 1977, 1978, 1982; Tyler, 1995; Ulichny, 1997). This concern centers not so much on participants' difficulties in understanding or producing words and sentences that may result from their limited linguistic proficiency in a common language, but rather on difficulties that may result from what researchers call their lack of "shared background." Shared background is a term used widely in cross-cultural, cross-linguistic studies to encompass a range of cultural and socio-pragmatic issues that may affect participants' communication: for example, their differential orientation to the cultural and institutional features of a situation (e.g., Erickson & Rittenberg, 1987; Garcia & Otheguy, 1989; Tyler, 1995) and their differential use of contextualization cues to convey pragmatic intent (e.g., Gumperz, 1982, 1992; Miller, 1996; Tyler, 1995). The following quote from a study by Gass and Varonis (1985) sums up these various issues associated with "shared background" and captures what can aptly be termed a *problem approach*

to the study of cross-cultural, cross-linguistic communication:

> …NSs [native speakers] and NNSs [nonnative speakers] are multiply handi-
> capped in conversations with one another. Often they may not share a world
> view or cultural assumptions, one or both of which may lead to misunder-
> standing. In addition, they may not share common background…that would
> permit them to converse with shared beliefs about what Gumperz and Tannen
> (1979) call the "semantic content" of the conversation. Furthermore, they
> may have difficulty with speaking and interpreting an interlocutor's discourse
> as a result of a linguistic deficit (340).

In contrast to this *problem approach*, another tack that could be taken in the
study of cross-cultural, cross-linguistic communication is what could be termed a
success approach, in other words, an approach that has as its aim explicating the
resources that *enable* participants to accomplish their communicative tasks. In this
paper, I undertake such an endeavor in an examination of encounters between
native and nonnative English-speaking participants at the front desk of a univer-
sity-sponsored English language school. Using the notion of "shared background,"
I show how participants rely on the sequential and institutional contexts in which
their talk is produced to accomplish their service-seeking and service-providing
activities. Specifically, I first show how the sequential organization of their talk in
this setting—in conjunction with their institutional orientations to how that talk
should be understood—motivates them to produce and respond to one another's
actions as part of a cross-culturally and cross-linguistically recognizable and
projectable *course of action* (that is, a course of action recognizably and projectably
initiated and sustained for the purpose of transacting business at the front desk).
Then, I show how their opening moves at the front desk prepare the way for, and
render accountable, their service-directed activities. Further, I argue that partici-
pants' institutional alignments in front desk service encounters constrain the kinds
of activities that can relevantly occur after openings. Such constraints, I propose,
provide an important resource for participants to understand and respond to one
another in institutionally relevant ways, in spite of their (at times) limited shared
linguistic resources.

About the Data
The data examined in this paper are drawn from 8 hours of videotaped inter-
actions between international English language students and the native English-
speaking receptionists who assist them at the front desk of a university-sponsored
English language program. Students represent a variety of language backgrounds
and their proficiency in English varies from beginner to nearly fluent. The front
desk is where students go to transact school business, for example to pay fees,
request test registration forms, and announce their presence for appointments with
staff and faculty. They also seek assistance at the front desk for a variety of prob-
lems associated with their stay in the US: how to take the bus downtown, rent a

car, add or drop classes, or change "homestay" families. Videotaping occurred during the period just before and after lunch and during mid-afternoon hours, times when students were most likely to converge on the desk with all manner of business.

SEQUENTIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

Students come to the front desk to take care of a diverse range of matters, and the moves that comprise students' efforts to procure assistance for these matters are similarly diverse. In this section, I examine the sequential and institutional factors that enable receptionists to see students' actions as business-directed in this setting.

The Sequential Organization of Front Desk Encounters

With regard to sequential context, work by conversation analysts on the basic mechanisms of talk-in-interaction—for example, turn taking, sequence organization, and repair (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson 1974; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973; and Schegloff, 1990)—has done much to explicate the sequential import of participants' actions in ordinary conversation, especially with regard to how a particular action "makes expectable" a certain range of next actions, and how a particular action is understood by reference to the actions that came before it—what Heritage calls the "double contextuality" of talk (Heritage, 1984, p. 242). Front desk encounters are sequentially organized around a base adjacency pair (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974) of: (1) an action (or actions) that is treated by participants as a (first pair part) request for service; and (2) the (second pair part) provision of service. The things that participants do and say in front desk encounters take on their sense for participants via their placement in this basic sequential scheme. The following example can be analyzed for how participants "lead up to" the first and second pair parts of the request/response-to-a-request adjacency pair, and then for how they move to close the encounter upon provision of the second pair part (the arrowed turns point out the base adjacency pair; S designates the student, the service seeker in these data, and R designates the receptionist, the service provider):

Example 1 ELP 4-2
1   S: aHhaaii
2   R: Hi:
3   S: I want to talk to you=I need ((lifts up flyer hanging on counter)) zzhhh.
4   (.)
5   R: Yo::u are one of the people on that list ?
6   S: umhm=
7   R: =Okay
8   R: ((speaks in a low voice to another woman who has appeared behind the
9   counter, picks up papers, looks through them, moves back toward S))

```
10  R:    Your name?
11  S:    Min Chou
12        ( 7.0 )  ((R is looking for something))
13  R:    Oh here you are. Easy. Yours is all ( . ) in an envelope ( . ) ready to go
14        ((hands envelope to S))
15        ( . )
16  R:    [That's your transfer I-20
17  S:    [What is this?
18        ( 0.2 )
19  S:    Ahhh=I see. Thank you=
((Interaction continues))
```

In Example 1, the first pair part of the base adjacency pair, S's (the student's) request for service, is found in line 3, after a greetings exchange and a preface ("I want to talk to you") (Schegloff, 1980, 1990) that picks out R (the receptionist) to be the recipient of a disclosure of some matter. The student next produces a need statement ("I need ((lifts up flyer hanging on counter)) zzhhh") that serves as the request. The student doesn't complete the utterance with words, but rather lifts up a flyer that is hanging from the counter. That the receptionist hears and sees these actions by the student in line 3 as constituting a request is evidenced by her own actions: the receptionist asks the student questions in lines 5 and 10 ("Are you on that list?" and "Your name?") that show her to be assembling the information necessary for providing what the student has asked for. When the student has answered these questions, the receptionist hands her an "I-20" (line 13), a document students must take to the Immigration Service office in order to extend or change their visas. This action constitutes the second pair part of the base adjacency pair and is followed by the student saying, "Thank you" (line 19), which—in addition to displaying receipt and demonstrating that R's response to her request has been satisfactory—proposes a closing to the encounter (see Whalen & Zimmerman, 1987, 1990; and Zimmerman, 1992 for a discussion of related features in 911 calls).

Example 1 demonstrates the remarkably stable organization that characterizes front desk encounters generally, in spite of the various local contingencies that may influence how any one particular encounter unfolds (e.g., whether or not there is a crowd of people at the desk when a student arrives there; the student's English-language proficiency in forming a request for a particular sort of service; the receptionist's success in understanding the student's request; etc.). This organization, which presumably could represent the organization of service encounters in a variety of other settings, at least in terms of their basic adjacency pair format (e.g., hotels, banks, shops, and 911 calls; see Lamoureux, 1988; Merritt, 1977; Zimmerman, 1992), can be outlined as follows:

> 1. Opening
> 2. Request for Service
> 3. Optional Interrogative Series

4. Provision, or not, of Service
5. Closing

The organization of front desk encounters is comprised of what can be termed "slots," sequentially-organized features of encounters that can be described as: (1) an opening, which is used to establish participants' mutual availability for a student to request service and for a receptionist to attend to the request (in Example 1, this includes S's appearance at the desk, as well as lines 1 and 2); (2) the request itself, which can be constituted through a variety of lexical, grammatical, and action-type formats (line 3); (3) an optional interrogative series through which the receptionist assembles information necessary to providing what the student has requested (lines 5-12); (4) the provision, or not, of service (lines 13-14); and (5) a closing (line 19).

While the sequentially-organized slots that constitute front desk service interactions and account for their stable organization across encounters evolve from the basic sequential format of a request/response adjacency pair, how the participants' actions in the "opening slot" specifically project a request for service as the proper next action can be understood only by reference to participants' orientations to institutional context. That is, that a request for service should properly follow participants' opening actions cannot be explained as a purely sequential matter; an examination of how openings "launch" requests for service—as opposed to other action types—must be considered in light of the institutional context in which participants make their opening moves.

Institutional Considerations

Along the lines of Wilson (1991), institutional context, apart from sequential context, must be brought to bear on how participants understand the range of actions and utterance types that occur after openings as directed to front desk business. In a discussion of the institutional relevancies involved in 911 dispatches, Wilson argues that following a caller's utterance such as "somebody jus' vandalized my=car," which neither grammatically nor lexically formulates a request, participants' orientations to one another's categorical identities of "citizen complainant" and "complaint taker" (and the activities relevantly associated with these categories), provide the basis for their orientation to such an utterance as a request for emergency service (Wilson, p. 32-34). Similarly, in the case of the data at issue in this paper, the kinds of utterances that are produced by students in the request slot take a variety of formats (and combinations of formats): there are reports, narratives (Whalen & Zimmerman, 1990), need/want statements, questions, and, especially with these data, utterances that are difficult to comprehend due to participants' limited shared linguistic resources (i.e., students' low level of English language proficiency may make their talk difficult to understand for receptionists). Some of these various utterance-types used by students in the request slot can be seen in the following set of examples:

Report + Want Statement
Example 2 ELP 5-5
1   R: Hi!
2   S: I promised this the (.) I must (.) ((waves hands toward himself))
3   meet someone. I want homestay. ((points away))
4   (1.5)
5   S: no?
6   R: W-wait just start again I'm sorry ((leans forward, mouth open))
((As the interaction continues, S re-formulates his problematic utterance and R assists him))

Request for Permission as Request for Service
Example 3 ELP 1-1
1   R: Hhaai.
2   S: Uh can I:: (.) copy this is here. (.) Copy. [One copy.
3   R: [Uhh=I think so.
4   (0.5) One copy?
((R takes papers to make copies))

Question Preface + Report of Complaint/Problem
Example 4 ELP 1-3
1   R: Hi.
2   S: Hi. I have a question. ((looking away)) .hhh Uh-uh I asked
3   yesterday Maya if I could change my core classes and then
4   she told me I would know it uh yesterday afternoon
5   but nobody te-told me [about it.
6   R: [Who::'s your core class teacher?

Narrative of Complaint/Problem
Example 5 ELP 2-5
1   S: Excus:e me ((said as she's approaching the desk; starts high pitched
2   and softly))
3   R: Yeah<u>ss</u>.
4   S: Yea- I just <u>buy</u> this card (.) ((holding up card, looks at it during
5   pause))
6   R: Okay
7   S: A few (minutes) ago (.) but
8   R: hmhm
9   S: this doesn't work. (it) ((shaking card as she holds it))
10 R: (Actua-)
11 S: I called this number (.)
12 R: hmhm
13 S: This message is: ((shrugs and smiles)) (.) hhuhh!
14 R: ((Takes card, picks up phone, begins to dial))

That receptionists see and hear students' various actions and utterance-types in the request slot as bearing on institutional matters is ultimately evidenced by their provision of service. However, the receptionist's provision of service is also

responsive to the specific form a student chooses from the range of things one may say or do in the request slot. Receptionists make their responses to students' actions in the request slot within the constraints of both the discourse and institutional relevancies that various formats pose (see Jefferson & Lee, 1981, for a discussion of what they call "activity contamination" upon the convergence of a troubles telling and a service encounter).[1] An examination of how receptionists manage these constraints—in other words, how these constraints shape receptionists' provisions of service—furthers our understanding of the import of institutional context for receptionists' ability to respond to students' activities as business-relevant.

In Examples 1 (from the previous section) and 2, in which the students come to the desk and employ lexical items that project that they need or want something, the sequential basis for the receptionists' provisions of service can be regarded as a lexical/syntactic matter (albeit in Example 2 a great deal of clarification work must be gotten through for the receptionist to understand what the student wants). In other words, a student's *statement* that he or she needs or wants something—the case in these two examples—at least on the basis of semantics, makes relevant the receptionist's attempt to deliver it (or account for why delivery is not possible):

Example 1 ELP 4-2
3   S: I want to talk to you=I need ((lifts up flyer hanging on counter)) zzhhh.
4   (.)
5   R: Yo::u are one of the people on that list?

Example 2 ELP 5-5
2   S: I promised this the (.) I must (.) ((waves hands toward himself))
3   meet someone. I want homestay. ((points away))
4   (1.5)
5   S: no?
6   R: W-wait just start again I'm sorry ((leans forward, mouth open))

While students in Examples 1 and 2 lexically signal that they want or need something, this is not the case in Examples 3, 4, and 5. In these examples, the lexical and turn design features of students' talk cannot explain the receptionists' provisions of service in the same way as in Examples 1 and 2, and yet the receptionists' provisions of service in these examples appear as transparent accomplishments. As such, these examples lend themselves especially well to a consideration of the institutional basis for receptionists' responses. In these examples, receptionists visibly manage the discourse relevancies posed by the variously-shaped utterances that students produce in the request slot with regard to the institutional relevancies posed by the situation. That is, receptionists in these examples can be seen attending to students' actions for the ways in which they form up "assistables"—problems, or requests for assistance—and not merely to the syntactic or lexical features of the students' utterances.

For instance, in Example 3 the receptionist not only answers the student's query, "can I:: (.) copy this here." with "Uhh=I think so.", thus attending with her answer to the syntactic features of what has been formulated as a question; she also takes the student's papers to actually make the copy for him.

Example 3 ELP 1-1
((line 1 deleted))
2   S: Uh can I:: (.) copy this here. (.) Copy. [One copy.
3   R: [Uhh=I think so.
4   (0.5) One copy?
((R takes papers to make copies))

Example 3 is of the sort that is often used to illustrate the point of "illocutionary force" (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; see also Schegloff, 1988). The receptionist can be seen orienting to the student's utterance not simply as a request for information, nor as a request for permission (an action type with which this format is conventionally associated), but for how it implicates her in making the copies for the student. In other words, it is not enough that the receptionist answer the student's question; in this particular context, she also has to *do* something for him.

Example 4 can be similarly examined for how the receptionist's actions in this setting constitute "doing something for the student." In Example 4, the receptionist "disattends" the sequential and syntactic, turn-constructional implications of the student's actions in the sense that she does not wait for the question projected by the student with the preface "I have a question" and followed by the student's explanation of her situation. Rather, the receptionist cuts in with "Who::'s your core class teacher?" and begins an interrogative series that shows her to be assembling the information necessary for providing the student with assistance.

Example 4 ELP 1-3
2   S: Hi. I have a question. ((looking away)) .hhh Uh-uh I asked
3   yesterday Maya if I could change my core classes and then
4   she told me I would know it uh yesterday afternoon
5   but nobody te-told me [about it.
6   R: [Who::'s your core class teacher?

The receptionist begins this response not at a place of "possible completion" (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974) within the student's turn (while the student is projectably nearing syntactic completion of the turn constructional unit, her nonnative like intonation does not foreshadow this), nor at the completion of the projected question, but at a place where she has gleaned enough of the details from the student's report to see what the problem is and what it is she can do to assist.

In Example 5, the receptionist can be seen "going back and forth" between the discourse and institutional relevancies set up by the student's talk in the way she alternates her alignments to the student as either a narrative recipient or a service provider.

Example 5   ELP 2-5
4   S: Yea- I just <u>buy</u> this card (.) ((holding up card, looks at it during
5   pause))
6   R: Okay
7   S: A few (minutes) ago (.) but
8   R: hmhm
9   S: this doesn't work. (it) ((shaking card as she holds it))
10 R: (Actua-)
11 S: I called this number (.)
12 R: hmhm
13 S: This message is: ((shrugs and smiles)) (.) hhuhh!
14 R: ((Takes card, picks up phone, begins to dial))

In Example 5, the student produces a narrative about her phone card not working and, up to line 10, the receptionist aligns to her talk as a narrative recipient (what could be called her "discourse role" in the situation) through the use of continuers: "okay" and "hmhm." The receptionist first tries to produce an assisting response upon hearing the first part of the student's narrative as the formulation of a problem about the phone card, followed by a word search in line 9: "this doesn't work (it)" The "(Actua-)" in line 10 is arguably on the way to an offer of some sort of assistance. The student, however, continues with her narrative in line 11, causing the receptionist to cut off her attempt to assist (line 10) and re-align as a narrative recipient in line 12. The student's next turn constructional unit in line 13, "This message is: ((shrugs and smiles)) (.) hhuhh!" elicits another assisting response from the receptionist who, re-aligning to the student's talk as a service provider, picks up the phone and begins to dial for the student (line 14).

In the next example, Example 6, a slightly different case can be made for how institutional relevancies potentially override those occasioned by discourse, and, in fact, provide a context for understanding action in the absence of talk. In Example 6, a student comes to the desk, says "Excuse me", and hands a piece of paper that he has taken out of an envelope to the receptionist. The receptionist takes the paper, reads it, says "I see," and then asks a question, "Do you understand?", that launches a provision of assistance on her part:

Example 6 ELP 2-12
((S comes to the desk holding a piece of paper and an envelope)
1   S: uh (.) Excuse me.
2   (.)
3   uhh ((unfolding paper as he says "uhh," hands paper to R, who is not
4   visible on camera))
5   (1.8)
6   R: ((takes paper, reads it, nodding))
7   (1.0)
8   I see.
9   (2.0)
10 S: ((taking traveler's checks out of his wallet))

11   R: Okay. Do you understa:nd what happens?
((Interaction continues))

The point with Example 6 is that even when a student comes to the desk and doesn't say anything, her or his actions will be viewed, attended to, and inspected by the receptionist for how they make relevant an assisting response on her part. That is to say, even when a linguistic context is lacking, as in Example 6 (or in a situation in which a student's linguistic production is difficult to comprehend as in Example 2), receptionists will attend to students' actions in the request slot as business-related. As with the utterances that students produce in the request slot, examined in Examples 1–5, the bodily actions that they produce in the request slot are also seen and treated by receptionists as institutionally motivated.

Pre-Beginnings and Activity Types

A question that can be asked is, how are participants' institutional motivations in these front desk service encounters formed in the first place? The previous examples demonstrate that participants' actions at the front desk are understood first of all by reference to the front desk interaction as an institutional phenomenon in the way that participants rely on the institutional context in which their talk is produced in order to make sense of it as a social action. The argument is made here that this is the case *in spite of language and culture differences.* The front desk, and the activities that expectedly take place at this site, can be said to comprise what Stephen Levinson calls an "activity type" (Levinson, 1992), and in particular one that is constituted through participants' shared orientations to front desk conventions, orientations that derive from what Schegloff (1979) and others (see Wakin & Zimmerman, 1999; Whalen & Zimmerman, 1987; Schiffrin, 1977) term "pre-beginnings."[2]

Pre-beginnings refer to the processes by which various alignments to an encounter are constituted prior to the opening of the encounter. In the case of front desk service encounters, students are directed to the front desk by their instructors to take care of matters for which they may first try to get assistance from their instructors, or for matters that the school has asked instructors to announce in their classes. When students first arrive at the school and are given an orientation, they are told that the front desk is where they should go for assistance and to take care of various school matters. In addition, the front desk provides a physical entity that students regularly pass by en route to their classes. Not only can students see what kinds of activities transpire there, but they also have experience with similar sites for procuring assistance in a range of other settings in their own countries: such as doctors' offices, banks, and hotels. Thus, when students arrive at the front desk, receptionists understand themselves to have been selected to be recipients of actions for which they are known to provide assistance via the avenues just mentioned, and students can expect this. The front desk, and the activities that participants engage in there, comprise "common sense knowledge" (Garfinkel, 1967).[3]

That is, the activities that relevantly transpire at the front desk are activities that are known in common and constitute socially sanctioned grounds for inference and action. As such, participants are reciprocally accountable for maintaining congruent lines of action with regard to the encounter (see Garfinkel, 1967, on the "reciprocity of perspectives").

In the next section, I will examine this issue of accountability in more detail. I will show how participants, through their opening actions, clear the way, so to speak, for students to produce utterances and actions that are treated as "assistables" by receptionists and, in fact, make a service-seeking type action by a student a proper outcome of her or his appearance at the desk.

OPENINGS

Students' Appearances at the Desk

The "institutional fingerprint" (Drew & Heritage, 1992, p. 26) that front desk encounters bear is evidenced in the very first actions of participants. The action that constitutes the first possible component of an opening in front desk encounters is an appearance by a student at the front desk. This is an action that on its own provides receptionists with a resource for orienting to the student's next action as a request for service. The front desk, as just discussed, is an "activity relevant site." When someone appears there, certain inferences are made as to why that person is there, inferences that constrain what participants can relevantly do next and that set in motion a course of action directed at taking care of front desk business.

This is demonstrated in Example 7. There, the receptionist responds to the student's approach toward the desk, *prior to any verbal exchange*, as a "request" for her attention. In this example, the student approaches the counter and the receptionist leans forward and raises her eyebrows. This action shows the receptionist's readiness to attend to the student's next action before the student has in fact said anything:

Example 7 ELP 4-6
```
1   S:   ((walks up to the counter))
2   R:   ((leans closer to the counter—until this point she's out of view of the
3        camera—and raises her eyebrows))
4   S:   Uhhh Jane do you know uhh (i)f uh Pam di(d) she got my uh she got m:y
5        ( . ) I-twenty?
```

As Example 7 demonstrates, the student's merely appearing at the front desk elicits the receptionist's attention, and the receptionist's attention is clearly *for* something. That is, the student's appearance at the desk makes relevant a subsequent action by that student, and is oriented to as such by the receptionist in the way the receptionist shows herself through re-arrangements of her body position, expression, and gaze to be a ready recipient of the student's next action. Students

appearing at the desk can be compared to a summons (Schegloff, 1968), and like a summons, once a receptionist's attention has been elicited by a student's appearance, the student is expected to provide a reason to the receptionist for having come to the desk. In Example 7, the student's reason for coming to the desk turns out to be asking for information.

The point that will be made through a further examination of these data is that a student's appearance at the desk sets in motion not just any course of action, but one that is accountably business-related. A student's appearance at the desk, however, may occasion other interactional work by participants, additional components of openings which help participants to establish a place in the encounter to begin their business activities. An examination of some of these additional components shows further how participants in this setting form up their alignments to one another as service seekers and service providers.

Solicits

While students may simply appear at the desk and in so doing round up the attention of receptionists and launch directly into a service-seeking disclosure (as in Example 7), some bit of talk may—and usually does—intervene between students coming to the desk and their disclosure of an item of business. One type of talk is that produced by receptionists which not only serves to show their availability to attend to a student, but also serves to prompt the student's disclosure of business. For example, upon a receptionist's noticing a student at the desk, he may say, "yes?", "what's up?", or "do you have a question?", moves which may be termed *solicits.* Consider the following examples:

Example 8 ELP 1-7
((Student comes to the desk.))
1   R: Yes.
2   S: (Hi) (.) ha! (.) Can I take my- your I-ten form?

Example 9 ELP 2-10
((Student comes to the desk.))
1   R: Hi What's [up.
2   S: [Hi. About the:: business with the (   ) (east coast) (.)
3   I don't <u>kno:w</u> (.) <u>who</u> (.) I have to talk to.

Example 10 ELP 1A-5
((S4 has been waiting in line as R finishes transaction with S2. R tells S2 that she must go in the back to take care of her business, then R notices S4 standing at desk.))

1   R: and if anybod—((to S2))
2   Do you have a question? ((to S4))
3   S: yeah uh (.) we are in Steve's class.

Example 11 ELP 4-9
((R has just finished talking to S9; S10 has been waiting in line, R turns to S10.))
1   R: Your question
2   S4:   Do you know if Toby's in today?

Receptionists' responses in the above examples show that not only do they make themselves available to attend to students when they come to the desk, but that they *elicit* students' disclosures of their reasons for coming to the desk. Receptionists' solicits can be separated into two kinds: those directed to an *unspecified* next action by the student, and those directed to a *specified* action. In Examples 8 and 9, "yes" and "what's up" are directed to an unspecified next action by the student: that is, the student should do or say *something* upon appearing at the desk that warrants his or her appearing there, but what that should be is not specified by the receptionist (although this is not to say that what the student says or does next should not be business-related, the point to be continued below). In Examples 10 and 11, however, receptionists' responses are directed to a specified action that make explicit the institutional bearing that students' next moves should have. In these examples, receptionists demonstrate an orientation to the students' next moves specifically as questions, and provide evidence of their strong orientations to the range of things that a student is not only likely to do next but *should* do next, before the student has in fact done anything except appear at the desk. These examples of solicits (Examples 8-11) demonstrate participants' in-progress alignment to an encounter: students who appear at the desk summon the attention of a receptionist who displays—or delays displaying—his or her readiness to attend to a next action by the student, thereby regulating when students can have a turn at disclosing their business; receptionists use solicits to prompt students to state their business when they are ready to attend to it, and constrain what students should do next.

Summonses

Further evidence of how participants set in motion a course of business-directed activities with their opening moves is provided by another set of examples. When receptionists are unavailable to attend to students upon their appearance at the desk, students may seek to engage receptionists via verbal or mechanical means. Students may speak first, or ring a bell, when presenting themselves at the desk has—on its own—been ineffective in rounding up the attention of the receptionist. For example, the receptionist may have stepped away from the desk, or be engaged in other business, such as helping another student or talking to a co-worker. In these instances, students may accompany their appearances at the desk with a greeting, with a verbal summons such as "excuse me," or with a mechanical summons such as ringing a bell that resides on the counter. These methods are demonstrated in the following examples:

Example 12 ELP 1-4
((Student appears at the desk. Looks around, over desk. R is visible kneeling behind the desk.))

1	S:	°Hi° ((looks over the desk))
2	R:	Hiya (So Fan) . ((Points to the door behind her)) (.)
3		She's here (.) Pam! (2.0) Just a sec.

Example 13 ELP 2-5
((Student is trying to use the telephone, leaves, then comes back. No one is at desk.))

1	S:	Excuse:e me ((said as she's approaching the desk; starts high pitched and
2		softly))
3	R:	Yeahss
4	S:	yea- I just <u>buy</u> this card (.) ((holding up card, looks at it during pause))

Example 14 ELP 3-1
((Student comes to the desk, looks around, looks at the yellow slip of paper that he is holding. No one is at the counter, so he rings the bell))

1	S:	((rings bell))
2		(3.0)
3	R:	He::y
4	S:	Hi Jody. Good morning. Uhh can you hhelp me.

In Examples 12-14, students' appearances at the desk on their own do not elicit responses from receptionists, who are visibly preoccupied, or away from the desk. Students in these examples summon the receptionists, which as discussed above, is an action that has built into it a subsequent—though not-as-yet-produced—action (i.e., a student should do something after summoning the receptionist). Receptionists' responses to students' summonses in these cases, like receptionists' responses to students' appearances at the desk in the previously discussed examples (Examples 8-11), serve to show a receptionist's availability to attend to a student's not-as-yet-produced action, and provide the go-ahead for his or her disclosure of business. In these examples, students pursue receptionists for attention to their business matters and make the treatment of their appearance at the desk an accountable issue.

The different types of openings discussed (a student appearing at the desk and launching into a disclosure of business following a non-verbal show of recipiency by the receptionist; a student appearing at the desk and being prompted by the receptionist to disclose business; and a student appearing at the desk and summoning the receptionist who is not readily available) are shaped by differing local contingencies, and they are structurally different as well (in who speaks first and at what point). Nonetheless, they are manifestations of the same basic organization which derive from the institutional requirements of the situation that make students' coming to the desk an accountable matter.

"Deviant" Cases: The "Relevant Absence" of Business Disclosures

One final set of examples will be turned to now to make the case that certain institutionally directed actions should follow participants' opening moves in front desk encounters. When students do not provide, or delay providing, a business-directed reason for appearing at the front desk, the "relevant absence" of such a reason is noticeable in participants' actions that follow. This is evident in the next two examples in which participants take a detour from business-related matters after their opening actions and pursue social, non-business activities in the request slot. In so doing, they engage in behaviors that show their actions in the request slot to be alternatives to the kinds of actions that usually occur there.

In Example 15, the student comes to the desk and says "hi", which is in overlap with the receptionist's solicit, "what's up?" Rather than answering "what's up" with a business-directed response, however, the student repeats "hi" in a louder voice and adds "how are you?", initiating a sequence that pushes back his disclosure of business to line 9 (arrowed turns denote the alternative action, and then the canonical action):

Example 15 ELP 2-4
((S is waiting at the desk as another student finishes up. He's waiting to the side, looking down. When the other student leaves he slides over and takes his place.))

```
1    S:   [°hi::°
2    R:   [What's up.
3         (0.2)
4-> S:   Hi how are you? ((smiles))
5-> R:   Okay ((smiling)) [and you?
6-> S:                    [he-he-he
7-> S:   [(goo'(d)) ((nods head affirmatively))
8-> R:   [=thhh! ((laughing sound))
9    S:   Uh ca:n you give me the telephone for m: [y=uhh conversation partner?
```

There are two points to be made about what follows the receptionist's "what's up?" in line 2 that demonstrate how participants reorganize their actions in this encounter and orient to what becomes an exchange of social "niceties" as an alternative to business matters. First, there is the two tenths of a second gap that occurs in line 3. In one sense, the gap "belongs" to the student: The receptionist's solicit, "what's up," has opened up the request slot, making relevant here the student's disclosure of business, which the receptionist waits for in line 3. The student, however, has greeted the receptionist, and in that sense, the gap is a place for the receptionist's return greeting. Evidence that the student is oriented to the gap as such, that is, that it is a place for the receptionist to say something, is found in his louder, renewed greeting in line 4. This second greeting by the student has a reparative quality (i.e., it is a repeat in the context of his first greeting having been said in overlap with the receptionist's talk, and he produces it with a louder volume and stresses it; see Schegloff, 1987). However, with the addition of "how are

you?", the student pursues a response from the receptionist in a stronger way than if he had just reissued the greeting. In so doing, he transforms the repair of his prior greeting into a new, non-business activity, with which the receptionist can be seen aligning in line 5.

The second point to be made about how the participants are reorganizing their activities in Example 15 is that the smiling and chuckling with which they accompany the non-business trajectory of lines 4-8 render the sequence a joke of sorts, or perhaps more aptly, a "mock" how-are-you exchange. The smile with which the student accompanies his "how are you" and the smile that the reception-ist returns underscore the social posture—in contrast to a business one—that they are taking with one another. With their laughter, they show the sequence to be an out-of-context exchange of niceties that is produced within the context of the re-ceptionist having prompted the student to disclose his business, a *misplacement*, so to speak, that they make visible as such with humor.

Example 16 shows participants to be similarly responsive to the alternative action-type produced in the request slot. In this example, two students come to the desk and are greeted by the receptionist in a friendly, informal manner. S1 says "hi" in return, which the receptionist follows with "what's up?" However, her solicit is not answered. Rather, S2 proffers his own greeting to the receptionist, made relevant particularly because the receptionist greeted both men (the receptionist's "what's up?" is issued after S1 greets her, but before S2 has had a chance to greet her). The receptionist does not respond to S2's greeting. Instead, the receptionist appears to wait for a disclosure of the students' business in line 5, the request slot position that she occasioned with "what's up?" She then embarks on a "so-how's-the-baby?" (line 6) sequence that pushes back S1's disclosure of business to line 15:

Example 16 ELP 5
((Two students appear at desk, chatting to each other in Arabic.))
1   R: Hey guys!
2   S1:   Hi!
3   R: What's up?
4-> S2:   Hi Judi
5   (2.0)
6   R: So how's the baby?
7   S2:   ha-ha yes
8   R: It's ok?
9   S2:   It's ok
10   R: It's a boy or a girl.
11   S2:   No, boy
12   R: Yeah.
13   S2:   Hm-hm.
14   (0.5)
15->S1:   Yeah. (.) Uh you know I told you about my uhh (.) I-20

The receptionist's use of "so" in "so how's the baby?" in line 6 marks the utterance as a new topic. In the context of having solicited a disclosure of business from the students, and the absence of that disclosure in line 5, she detours from the business topic she had proposed and invites S2's disclosure on a social matter. While in other contexts the newsworthiness of the birth of a baby—in particular, the baby's health and sex—may occasion its discussion earlier on in an encounter (as soon as participants meet, for example, or just after greetings), in this context, it is a topic that is subordinated to business matters, and turned to by the receptionist when the students' disclosure of business is unforthcoming.

Another point to be made about Examples 15 and 16 is that while students' departures from business topics to social topics entail re-alignment work by participants, the students' return to business matters does not appear to necessitate the same kind of work. A possible answer to how this is so may be found, again, in the institutional requirements of encounters: Participants may be treating the departures as quick detours that expectedly lead back to business matters. This is not to say that there is not some work involved in leading them back, however. In Example 15, the student launches into his disclosure of business immediately following his "how-are-you" exchange with the receptionist. In contrast, in Example 16, getting back to business is undertaken via a more circuitous route. In Example 16, the receptionist does not pursue her line of inquiry about the baby after line 12, where she produces a third position receipt token, "Yeah". Then in line 14, she allows a gap to elapse following S2's "Hm-hm," after which S1 begins his disclosure of business. That S1, too, allows the gap to elapse as he waits for S2 and the receptionist to finish up their exchange is also worth noting.

While front desk encounters are sequentially and institutionally organized such that addressing students' business is the first—and usually only—topic that participants turn to, the organization is nonetheless a flexible one: topics other than business may be brought up in front desk encounters, but they are organized as "alternatives". That is, participants may propose a social rather than a business footing (Goffman, 1981) to an encounter in their first actions. However, a non-business footing is consequential for how an encounter is subsequently organized, and represents an alteration of an encounter's canonical format that may be marked as such in the ways demonstrated above.

In sum, there is a place in the routine of front desk encounters—a place in their institutional organization as occasioned by participants' sequential conduct—for a request for service to be made. Participants' opening moves prepare the way for this by constraining the kinds of actions that can relevantly occur once a student appears at the desk, predisposing participants to recognize those actions as relating to front desk business. If participants' actions do not relate to front desk business, they are likely marked as alternatives, as in Examples 15 and 16.

CONCLUSION

Participants' orientations to institutional context enable them to attend to the diverse utterances and action types that occur in the request slot as service-related, such as need/want statements, questions, reports, narratives, and—especially with these data—difficult to comprehend utterances, in addition to non-verbal actions (such as a student handing the receptionist something as in Example 6). That is, the service-related relevance of these various utterances and action types is formed up through participants' orientations to the institutional identities of service seeker and service provider, identities that are invoked and accountably oriented to when students present themselves at the front desk. These identities, and the discourse routines they are tied to, are associated with the front desk as an institutional and culturally recognizable phenomenon, an activity type that is constituted through participants' shared orientation to front desk conventions, and which derive from participants' pre-beginning activities. The institutional nature of front desk encounters, and the kinds of things that participants expect one another to say and do, predisposes participants to understand one another via the activity categories relevant to this setting.

The native/nonnative aspect of these data make especially visible the contextual, *extralinguistic* resources—specifically sequential and institutional resources—that participants employ to make sense of one another's actions, and provide evidence of the processes by which context indexes language and renders recognizable speakers' utterances within activity types, regardless of speakers' native or nonnative speaking abilities. Language, as many scholars have noted, is inherently *underspecified* (e.g., Gumperz, 1996; Sapir, 1933; Whorf, 1956). That is, no matter what anyone says, their utterances can never completely convey all of the potential or even relevant meanings about a given situation at any moment in time: There is always more that could be said. In the data presented here, students' utterances in the request slot were not only *underspecified*, but, in their nonnative-like formulations, they were frequently *misspecified* as well. As Hanks (1996) writes, it is suggested as a concluding point that,

> ... for two or more people to effectively communicate, it is not sufficient, and perhaps not even necessary, that they "share" the same grammar. What they must share, to a variable degree, is the ability to orient themselves verbally, perceptually, physically to their social world. That is, the basis of linguistic practices is not a common set of categories (whether viewed as verbal or cognitive) but rather a commensurate set of categories, plus commensurate ways of locating oneself in relation to them (235).

The organizational constraints discussed in this paper, sequential and institutional, provide an account of how requests for service by the language students in this study are understandable as requests for service, in spite of linguistic difficulties they may have had in formulating their requests. In other words, partici-

pants' linguistic difficulties did not, in the end, appear to impede students' abilities to get assistance, nor did they appear to hinder receptionists' abilities to provide assistance. In an age of "multiculturalism," such front desk routines should be considered what Gumperz calls an "international *genre*" of talk (1996, pp. 377-388), one that enables participants to "get around" the cultural and linguistic differences that are the preoccupation of a great deal of cross-cultural communication research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

[1] Jefferson and Lee discuss how troubles telling sequences warrantably occasion a certain kind of response from recipients of a telling, namely the expression of sympathy. However, "sequential problems" can arise when a troubles telling occurs in a service encounter context (e.g., the provision of emergency services). Service encounters are subject to their own sequential constraints in the form of the kinds of responses oriented to as relevant by participants. The convergence of these two relevant organizations, that is the troubles telling and the service encounter, can result in something that Jefferson and Lee call the "cargo syndrome," a situation whereby service providers come off as "indifferent" to the troubles to which they are responding (Jefferson and Lee, 1992, p. 538).

[2] Whalen and Zimmermann (1987), in research on 911 calls, use the term *pre-beginnings* (see also Schegloff, 1979, p. 26; Schriffrin, 1977; and Wakin & Zimmerman, 1999) to refer to the institutional processes by which emergency dispatchers will recognize a 911 call to be a request for emergency assistance, *regardless* of the kinds of utterances, or lack of an utterance, that callers might produce upon reaching a 911 operator. They exemplify their point with the case of callers who hang up upon reaching a 911 operator. When a caller hangs up, the 911 monitoring system allows the operator to call back the caller and inquire as to whether or not assistance is really needed. Thus, operators treat *any* call as a "virtual" emergency by virtue of what they presuppose the caller to have done before reaching the emergency operator, which is to have dialed 9-1-1. Dialing 9-1-1 constitutes a *pre-beginning* activity by which the caller *selects* a recipient, inferrably to solicit recipient's engagement in the course of activities for which they are conventionally, or *institutionally*, associated: providing assistance for emergencies.

[3] I would like to thank Tom Wilson for his suggestions about how to incorporate an ethnomethodological perspective here.

REFERENCES

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Bailey, B. (1997). Communication of respect in interethnic service encounters. *Language in Society, 26,* 327-356.

Drew, P., & Heritage, J. (1992). *Talk at work.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Erickson, F., & Rittenberg, W. (1987). Topic control and person control: A thorny problem for foreign physicians in interaction with American patients. *Discourse Processes, 10,* 4, 401-415.

Garcia, O., & Otheguy, R. (Eds.). (1989). *English across cultures: Cultures across English: A reader in cross-cultural communication.* Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter.

Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Gass, S. M., & Varonis, E. M. (1985). Miscommunication in native/nonnative conversation. *Language in Society, 14,* 327-343.

Gass, S. M., & Varonis, E. M. (1991). Miscommunication in nonnative speaker discourse. In N. Coupland, H. Giles & J. M. Wiemann (Eds.), *Miscommunication and problematic talk* (pp. 121-145). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Gumperz, J. J. (1977). Sociocultural knowledge in conversational inference. In M. Saville-Troike (Ed.), *Twenty-Eighth Annual Roundtable monographs on languages and linguistics* (pp. 191-211). Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Gumperz, J. J. (1978). The conversational analysis of interethnic communication. In E. L. Ross (Ed.), *Interethnic communication: Proceedings of the Southern Anthropological Society* (pp. 13-31). Athens: University of Georgia.

Gumperz, J. J. (1982). *Discourse strategies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gumperz, J. J. (1992). Interviewing in intercultural situations. In P. Drew & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Talk at work* (pp. 302-330). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gumperz, J. J. (1996). The linguistic and cultural relativity of conversational inference. In J. J. Gumperz & S. Levinson (Eds.), *Rethinking linguistic relativity* (pp. 374-406). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gumperz, J. J., & Tannen, D. (1979). Individual and social differences in language use. In C. Fillmore, D. Kempler, & W. S-Y. Wang (Eds.), *Individual differences in language ability and language behavior* (pp. 305-25). New York: Academic.

Hanks, W. F. (1996). Language form and communicative practices. In J. J. Gumperz & S. Levinson (Eds.), *Rethinking linguistic relativity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Heritage, J. (1984). *Garfinkel and ethnomethodology.* Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, Inc.

Jefferson, G., & Lee, J. (1981). The rejection of advice: Managing the problematic convergence of a "troubles-telling' and a 'service encounter.' *Journal of Pragmatics, 5,* 399-422.

Lamoureux, E. L. (1988). Rhetoric and conversation in service encounters. *Research on Language and Social Interaction, 22,* 93-114.

Levinson, S. (1992). Activity types and language. In P. Drew & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Talk at work* (pp. 66-100). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Merrit, M. (1977). On questions following questions in service encounters. *Language and Society, 5,* 315-357.

Miller, L. (1994). Japanese and American indirectness. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication, 5,* 1-19.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn taking for conversation. *Language, 54,* 696-735.

Sapir, E. (1933). Language. In D. G. Mandelbaum (Ed.), *Edward Sapir: Culture, language, and personality. Selected essays.* Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Schegloff, E. A. (1968). Sequencing in conversational openings. *American Anthropologist, 70,* 1075-1095.

Schegloff, E. A. (1979). Identification and recognition in telephone openings. In G. Psathas (Ed.), *Everyday language: Studies in ethnomethodology* (pp. 23-78). New York: Erlbaum.

Schegloff, E. A. (1980). Preliminaries to preliminaries: "Can I ask you a question?" *Sociological Inquiry, 50*, 104-52.

Schegloff, E. A. (1987). Recycled turn beginnings: A precise repair mechanism in conversation's turn-taking organisation. In G. Button & J. Lee (Eds.), *Talk and socal organisation* (pp. 70-85). Avon: Multilingual Matters.

Schegloff, E. A. (1988). Presequences and indirection: Applying speech act theory to ordinary conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics, 12,* 55-62.

Schegloff, E. A. (1990). On the organization of sequences as a source of "coherence" in talk-in-interaction. In B. Dorval (Ed.), *Conversational organization and its development* (pp. 51-71). Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.

Schegloff, E. A., & Sacks, H. (1973). Opening up closings. *Semiotica, 8,* 289-327.

Schiffrin, D. (1977). Opening encounters. *American Sociological Review, 44,* 679-691.

Searle, J. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay on the philosophy of language.* London: Cambridge University Press.

Tyler, A. (1995). The co-construction of cross-cultural miscommunication: Conflicts in perception, negotiation, and enactment of participant roles and status. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 17,* 129-152.

Ulichny, P. (1997). The mismanagement of misunderstandings in cross-cultural interactions. *Journal of Pragmatics, 27,* 233-246.

Wakin, M., & Zimmerman, D. (1999). Reduction and specialization in emergency and directory assistance calls. *Research on Language and Social Interaction, 32,* 409-437.

Whalen, M., & Zimmerman, D. (1987). Sequential and institutional contexts in calls for help. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 50,* 172-185.

Whalen, M., & Zimmerman, D. (1990). Describing trouble: Practical epistemology in citizen calls to the police. *Language in Society, 19,* 465-92.

Whorf, B. L. (1956). *Language, thought, and reality.* J. B. Carroll (Ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wilson, T. P. (1991). Social structure and the sequential organization of interaction. In D. Boden & D. Zimmerman (Eds.), *Talk and social structure* (pp. 22-43). Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Zimmerman, D. H. (1992). The interactional organization of calls for emergency assistance. In P. Drew & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Talk at work* (pp. 418-469). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Mardi Kidwell is a Ph.D candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of California Santa Barbara. Her research interests include native/nonnative speaker interaction, the organization of recipiency, and interactions between young children and their caregivers. In her dissertation, she is focusing on caregiver interventions in young children's conflicts, in particular how they manage their attention toward one another in intervention scenarios.