

## **POWER, SOLIDARITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF REQUESTS IN SERVICE ENCOUNTERS**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper presents the analysis of service encounters which took place at the counter of the social/health office of a Brazilian public company. The data, collected in an ethnographically oriented research project, was analysed within a social-interactional approach to discourse. The focus of the analysis is on the different strategies clients use to ask for information and to demand for administrative services. It was observed that, among other things, these strategies vary according to the social and professional identities of the clients.*

**Key-words:** *service encounter; request; discourse strategies; professional discourse.*

### **Resumo**

*Este artigo apresenta a análise de encontros de serviço ocorrentes no balcão de um serviço de seguro-saúde de uma empresa pública brasileira. Os dados foram coletados no âmbito de um projeto de pesquisa de bases etnográficas, e analisados a partir de uma perspectiva sócio-interacional do discurso. O foco da análise são as diferentes estratégias utilizadas pelos clientes para pedir informações e solicitar a execução de procedimentos administrativos. Foi observado que, entre outras coisas, essas estratégias variam em função das identidades sociais e profissionais dos clientes.*

**Palavras-chave:** *encontro de serviço; pedido; estratégias discursivas; discurso profissional.*

## 1. Introduction

This paper presents the analysis of some aspects of service encounters which took place at the counter of a social/health office of a Brazilian public company, in the telecommunication field. Considering the clients' purposes in approaching the office, I will discuss the strategies they employed to reach these purposes, which, in general terms, were to get correct information and correct administrative procedures.

In order to achieve these goals, clients asked questions and requested action. In this sense, asking and requesting are understood according to classical Speech Act Theory: asking to get information and requesting to get things done. The analysis, however, will be developed according to an interactional approach to discourse, closely identified with the works of John Gumperz and Erwin Goffman (Gumperz, 1982; Tannen, 1992; Schiffrin, 1994). In this perspective, the meaning of what is said (or written) is not, as in classical Speech Act Theory, only a question of speakers intentions. Meaning, in an interactional perspective, is a joint production of the participants of discourse, in a given specific context. Developing an analysis through this approach also means that I will not be dealing with specific utterances of questions and requests, but with discourse strategies used by the participants in order to succeed in getting information and actions done.

Discourse strategies are here understood as the "linguistic and related communicative conventions that speakers must have [to know] to create and sustain conversational cooperation" (Gumperz, 1982:209). The knowledge of these communicative resources enable

individuals to produce and interpret discourse, obtaining "others' cooperation in activities at home, at work and in public affairs" (:209). The strategies used by clients to build requests for information and administrative procedures will be presented within the traditional theoretical framework of power and solidarity, introduced in sociolinguistics by Brown and Gilman (1960). Through the analysis of the use of second person pronouns, Brown and Gilman showed the relationship between language use and relations of power: solidarity has been associated with symmetrical relationships, social equality and similarity; and power with asymmetrical relationships, where one individual is superior to the other (cf. Tannen, 1994: 22)

According to Goffman (1992[1961]), the service professions are those in which the professional meets the public through his/her work, through personnel direct communication with each person. Although Goffman does not deal with the kind of service encounter I will be analysing in this study, I will be considering, after him, that the kind of service relations under study also involve, as he observed, a server, a client and an object. In Goffman's view, the object consists of the physical system belonging to the client that has to be constructed or repaired by the server; in this study, the objects of the transactions are of a different nature: they are symbolic objects, in the sense that clients seek information and administrative procedures. Goffman also identifies three verbal components in service relations: the technical part (give and obtain information for the work to be done), the contractual part (the presentation of costs and the approximate duration of the work), and the social part (courtesy and deference signs). In the service encounters under analysis, as we will see, the contractual component will take a different form, since clients are not paying directly for

each service. There will be, however, a negotiation around the commitment of the attendants in doing their work, and talk about dates and duration of the administrative processes.

An important aspect of these encounters in the health insurance office is that they are significant for the clients' personal and professional lives. They can be considered, therefore, as gatekeeping encounters, that is, "encounters such as employment interviews, counselling sessions, labour negotiations and committee meetings, which have come to be crucial in determining the quality of an individual's life in urban society" (Gumperz, 1982:7).

Finally, it must also be said that since discourse is here considered as a joint production of individuals, the verbal behaviour of clients is also seen as constructed in response to the behaviour of those who attend them. This means that, although the focus of the analysis is on the participation of the clients, I will, all the time, be dealing with the participation of the attendants.

## **2. Data and methodology**

The social/health office where the service encounters under analysis occurred offers administrative services to the users of the health insurance service (the employees of the company and their dependants), as well as to the hospitals, clinics, laboratories and doctors who are accredited by the health insurance. The 17 employees of the office attend around 50 thousand users and 3 thousand accredited health services.

The office is located in the building of the headquarters of the company, downtown Rio de Janeiro. The room where the office works has a counter and around twenty tables, where the employees do different and specific tasks: reimbursing, accrediting (of doctors and hospital services), protocol, authorisations, personnel, etc. The phone rings and people talk all the time. The noise is intense.

The data was ethnographically collected, in the sense the researchers took great care in approaching the setting, observed and interacted with the research subjects, audio taped previously chosen occasions and transcribed ongoing talk. In addition to this, we also talked to and interviewed the staff, and looked at the written documents they were working with.

The tape recording of the service encounters was done during four observation sessions: two at the end of the month (September, 1995), and the other two at the following week, on the beginning of the month (October, 1995), periods which were said to be the busiest ones. For the present study, three hours of tape recording were considered: 90 minutes from each week. In these three hours of tape, 62 encounters were identified and analysed.

During the period of tape recording, the office was undergoing a change: the manager with whom we negotiated our research project left, and a new manager took over. Fortunately, we were very well received by the new manager and the staff. This change in direction of the office entailed other changes: before, all the personnel went to the counter to attend clients; with the new manager, a new employee came to work exclusively at the counter. The first recording session was the first working day of this new attendant, who was

assisted by an experienced co-worker. On the recording sessions of the following week, the new attendant was working by herself. It is important to mention that whenever a specialist attendant (on authorisations, accreditation, etc.) was needed, he/she came to the counter. All these participations and the noise made transcriptions very difficult to do (cf. Pereira, Oliveira and Bastos, 1996).

### **3. Asking and requesting at the counter**

As mentioned above, the health service office attends basically two groups of clients: the users of the service, or the *internal clients*; and *external clients*, who are representatives of the hospitals, laboratories, clinics and doctors accredited by the health office. The internal clients come to be refunded for medical services, to get authorisations (for certain kinds of exams and surgeries) and to ask for information (about dates of reimbursements, for example). The external clients come to the counter to hand in invoices, to get statements of accounts, to ask for different kinds of documents (mostly pads of forms), and to ask for clarifications.

Therefore, in the context of these kinds of service interactions, the clients ask and request, and attendants (in principle) respond to these questions and requests with information or with the execution of the solicited action. These activities are part of the definition of the service situation. The script of the encounter also includes how and when clients are supposed to make questions and requests. This makes the presence of questions and requests quite different from their presence in ordinary conversation (they are not, or should not be, face threatening; there is no

misunderstanding in relation to the illocutionary force of requests - clients are there to ask).

The presence of specific question and request utterances is not necessarily related to the main communicative (observable) purpose of the client in the interaction. This means that the client can go to the counter specifically to get a form and never formulate a verbal request, or formulate questions which are not related to his/her main purpose. There are, in addition, different possibilities of verbal formulation of questions and requests (indirectivity, presence of modalization, mitigation, hedges, courtesy, etc.)

Making questions and requests is thus previewed in the roles of clients. Furthermore, the analysed encounters can be regarded essentially as request interactions: the clients are solicitors, even if they come to the counter to hand in reimbursement forms (internal clients) and invoices (external clients). In the encounters, the delivery of documents demands not only the attention of the attendant, but checking, stamping and signing. This makes the asymmetrical quality of the interaction very clear: in the frame of the service encounters the client is the solicitor and the attendant is the one who will, or will not, respond.

#### **4. Power and solidarity in service encounters**

Clients will try to create a favourable ambiance for their requests, by, among other things, accepting the asymmetry of the relationship, by acting as if they were among friends, by trying to move the attendants with personal dramas, by constructing identification with the

attendants, by transferring the responsibility of the requests. These strategies work in the creation of rapport among clients and attendants, or, as Tannen (1989) puts it, in the creation of involvement - of emotional relations between participants. On the other hand, also trying to be successful in obtaining their goals, they can demonstrate power, by showing knowledge of the dynamics of the service, by getting the commitment of the attendants by asking their names, and by assuming the responsibility of the requests. These strategies, as we will see, are not used just any way; on the contrary, they are part of the ritual of the interactions, which follows quite strict norms of social status and hierarchy.

I will start by presenting the solidarity strategies, and then move to the power strategies, focusing on how they work in the relationship between clients and attendants, that is, on the lines sustained by the participants of the interactions (Goffman, 1981). After this presentation, I will give examples which illustrate the occurrence of some of these strategies in the interactions.

## **5. Solidarity**

### **5.1 Accepting the asymmetry**

Most of the clients who go to the office are of modest economic and educational backgrounds which is marked by dress habits and dialect (in Brazilian Portuguese marked, among other things, by lack of verbal and nominal agreement). The internal clients are mostly low level



employees, who need help to fill in forms, for example; the external clients are mostly messengers from the accredited medical services. Clients with better educational and economic backgrounds are exceptions: they do not come for routine services, and when they come it is usually to discuss more serious problems.

The attendants usually adopt a friendly attitude towards these low status clients: they seem to take pleasure in helping them to fill in forms, giving detailed instructions like “you will write your name, your registration number, correctly”, or “you will write your social security number from here to here”. This solicitous attitude seems to work in the validation of the images they have of themselves in the interaction: when talking to us (researchers), the attendants repeatedly claimed that they were aware people came to the office to do their work (the external clients), or because they or their families had medical problems (the internal clients), and that they had to be nice. And, of course, they seemed to enjoy being nice, feeling good (as Goffman 1959, 1967 puts it) about their images, about the definitions they have of themselves.

This ‘feeling good’ is certainly connected to the possibility of showing their expertise in accomplishing administrative procedures. According to Goffman (1992[1961]), there are two kinds of service professionals: the specialised professionals (like doctors) and the technical skilled workers (like telephone operators). The attendants of the social health office would perhaps be closer to the technical professions, since their professional competence is not (like the doctor’s competence) unavailable to the ones they serve; but, on the other hand, the attendants have the control of the administrative procedures necessary for the

clients to obtain what they want. Being in a position to 'teach' the clients, the attendants reaffirm a higher status in the relationship, feeling closer to more socially valued professionals.

Clients, in their turn, accept this patronising, seriously following the instructions, taking orders, accepting advice and forms of address like 'querido/a' (dear), 'amor' (love), 'filhinho/a' (son, little), 'fofinho/a' (sweaty), etc. This makes the attendants' superiority in relation to the clients very clear.

## 5.2 Social conversation

While documents are counted and stamped, or while waiting for documents to be delivered, clients and attendants frequently engage in conversation, mostly in small talk about different subjects. There was, for example, a long discussion about preferences on sweets and candies. Sometimes, they talked about personal problems, like lack of money, or about 'philosophical' questions, like how people should treat each other. It was interesting to notice that not only the clients, but also the attendants seemed to enjoy this social part of the interaction: they participated with long turns of talk and sometimes even initiated the conversations.

Since those conversations started mostly when the participants were involved in mechanical activities (like stamping), their presence could be seen as 'fillers', or as ways of avoiding uncomfortable silence. However, it obviously works in building connections between the participants. The function of non-professional talk in institutional settings has already been commented upon: studies about business meetings, for example, show that the small talk before the meeting creates the ambiance for the technical discussions (Lacoste, 1992). In service encounters,

clients benefit of these moments to create a favorable context for their requests and attendants feel good about it - also because talking is, of course, a natural source of pleasure in itself.

Finally, it must also be said that, consistent with the asymmetrical nature of these service interactions, it was observed that when conversations were initiated by attendants, they were never rejected by clients; on the other hand, efforts of establishing conversation by clients were sometimes rejected by attendants.

### **5.3 Personal dramas**

Research on conversational narratives has shown that narratives of personal experience are an effective means of arousing emotions and involvement between individuals (Labov, 1972; Tannen, 1989). Personal dramas were told at the counter: a divorced woman narrated the difficulties in getting her pension documents (which included her right to the health insurance), and how her ex-husband made things difficult for her; a man told about his new born son, his wife's problems and all the money he was spending on medicines; a man told about his missing child, his and his wife's sadness and their efforts to find the child.

These stories, told by low status clients, were attentively and cooperatively listened to by attendants, with the exception of the one told by the divorced woman, who was attended by "specialists", who are not as interested in maintaining the solicitous representation of the attendant role as those who worked specifically at the counter.

The narration of personal dramas, as well as the occurrence of small talk, can be analysed as belonging to what Goffman (1992[1961]) has identified as the social component of service encounters. While telling their stories or discussing personal affairs, participants were not dealing with the exchange of information needed to accomplish the task (as in the technical component). They were not dealing, as well, directly with the contractual component of the encounter, although the favorable atmosphere created by the occurrence of social conversation facilitates the engagement of the attendant in the interaction.

#### **5.4 Transference of voice**

Lower status clients frequently attributed the responsibility of their requests to someone else: external clients to their bosses (“they told me to ask you ...”, “my boss wants to know ...”, etc.), internal clients to doctors, hospitals and laboratories (“the clinic told me my son needs this exam”). This strategy softens the illocutionary force of the request, helping to create rapport between attendants and clients, since it points to the fact that the clients' demands do not originate in themselves, but in someone else, who is superior to them. Attendants, in this kind of service encounter, are working in an organisation in which they are obviously at the bottom of the hierarchy, that is, they have bosses and obey orders. Both attendants and clients are dealing with an institutional hierarchy, in which they are acting according to someone else's will.

Different from personal dramas and social conversation, transference of voice and acceptance of asymmetry occur mostly while technical or contractual talk is going on. The topic of the conversation does not change to

non-professional subjects. But, as mentioned above, all these solidarity strategies work in creating rapport between the participants of the encounters.

## **6. Power**

### **6.1 Demonstration of competence**

More or less directly, clients introduced talk that revealed that they were familiar with the working habits of the office, with the administrative procedures and with the staff. This demonstration of knowledge constructs authority at the same time that it diminishes the power of the attendants, making clear his/her technical competence is not unavailable to other people. This technique occurred frequently in the analysed encounters perhaps because one of the attendants, as mentioned above, was just starting on the job. Depending in how skilful the client was in introducing his/her 'technical competence', the strategy entailed a positive response of the attendant, in the sense that it committed the attendant in performing the task in the correct way. Otherwise it proved to be disastrous, since it discloses that the attendant's knowledge is not unattainable.

### **6.2 Personal names**

Also in order to negotiate commitment from the attendants, clients asked for their names and phone numbers. In this kind of service encounter, as mentioned above, the nature of the contractual component is different from the one previewed by Goffman (1992[1961]), since it does not involve costs (the attendant does not charge for each service).

The client will then try to ensure that the necessary procedures will be done based on the commitment of the attendant to do his/her work. The knowledge of the attendants' names can be used to address the responsibility of the service to a specific individual. The attendants give their names very easily, and sometimes even volunteer it. It is regarded as normal procedure of the interaction, as part of the ritual.

This exchange of names is done on a first name basis, what is certainly very typical of Brazilian culture. Staff and manager, clients and attendants address each other by 'você' and 'tu' (informal pronouns) and their first names. Sometimes, 'sir' and 'madam' are enounced by the attendants in ritualized formulas ("Yes sir!", "Yes madam!"), or in ritualized openings. The exception is when the client is of an older age.

### **6.3 Assuming the voice**

Clients can also formulate their requests clearly demonstrating that they are the origin, the agent of the request. By doing this, the client assumes authority. This strategy was used by higher status clients, who were, as already mentioned, the minority at the counter: they were doctors or administrative staff of medical services. In using their authority, without having to use solidarity strategies, they felt they could assure that the service would be done.

Assuming the voice, as well as the other strategies associated with the display of power, occur mostly during technical and contractual talk. Although the use of power strategies can be seen as challenging the attendants'

superiority in the interaction, they work, as the solidarity strategies, in trying to get the clients' demands done.

### 7. Successful and unsuccessful requests - examples

The most common encounters were those between attendants and lower status clients who came to hand in invoices, to pick up forms ('material', as they say) and statements (external clients) or to get authorisations or reimbursements (internal clients). These routine services went on quite easily, if the ritual behaviour norms were followed: the attendant was friendly and patronising, and the client courteous, engaged in social conversation when convenient and accepted the attendant's authority. This behaviour was menaced if the clients broke the ritual in some way, that is, if the client employed strategies not previewed by their roles. To a low status client who demonstrated her irritation and formulated her request assuming the first person, the attendant expressed her disapproval very clearly:

(1)

C:Então, tá o.k.	C: Then, it's ok.
E tem material?	And do you have material?
Eu queria material...	I wanted material...
Eu quero, né?	I want (it), ok?
Se tiver dos dois...	If you have both...
Do 4 e do 6. [acc]	4 and 6 .[acc]
A:TÁ QUÉRENDO MÚITO!	A:YOU'RE ASKING TOO MUCH!
C: Porque lá a fatura é muita.	C: Because there are many invoices there.
A: Eu sei, meu amor!	A: I know, my dear!

This exchange occurred after the client had already asked for the statements, and had expressed her disappointment and tension when she was told that the statements were not available. When she asked for ‘material’ (forms) in an accelerated speed, and in addition for two different kinds of them, she got severely reprimanded by the attendant. After the reprehension, she justified her request (‘because they have a lot of invoices there’). This justification also took the force of an apology, what was accepted by the attendant who returned to her patronising attitude. It must be said that other clients who asked for two or more different kinds of material, but following the ritual norms, did not have any problems. In the following example, the client (also low status) comes to deliver invoices. The interaction is initialised by gestures, and while waiting for the attendant to check the documents, he starts asking questions:

(2)

C: O horário daqui de entrega  
C: You're open until what  
é até que time?  
horas?

A1: Até ... deixa eu ver... A1: Till... let me see...  
Eu tô hoje pela primeira vez I'm here for the first time,  
aqui. today.

C: (risos) C: (laughs)  
A1: Dezesseis e trinta. A1: Til four-thirty.  
C: Mas pára pra almoço? C: But do (you) stop for  
lunch?

A1: Pára. Pára meio dia e A1: Yes, we stop at twelve  
trinta. thirty.

É meio dia e trinta? [acc] Is it twelve thirty?

Pára pro almoço? [acc] You stop for lunch?

Pára pro almoço? [acc] You stop for lunch?

A2: Não. A2: No.



A1: Não.	A1: No.
C: Não tá parando mais não?	C:(You) don't stop any more?
A2: Sempre fica alguém de plantão.	A2: There's always someone on duty.
C: Ah! Então tá bom... Eu vim correndo,	C:Ah! Then it's ok. I came in a hurry,
Falei: "Ih! Caramba!	I said: "Ih! Caramba!
Vou chegar lá depois das onze e trinta!" (risos)	I'll arrive there after eleven thirty" (laughs)

These information questions about office hours do not refer to the client's purpose in approaching the counter, that is, he did not come to the counter expressly to obtain this kind of information. He is checking on a possible new service routine (he sees a new attendant) at the same time he is starting a rapport. By doing this, he is also skilfully and indirectly showing some familiarity with the service (specially in the last question). This strategy seems to work. He puts it indirectly, in a good mood, expressing his satisfaction of having arrived in time. While this conversation went on, the attendant observed that the delivery form he presented was a photocopy. The client then made a request for a pad of these delivery forms. He probably knew that these forms (and we get to know it through a future talk between the two attendants) are not always easy to obtain. To this request, the experienced attendant replies:

(2b)

A2: (...) Como eu tô com peninha dele, eu vou dar um pouquinho mais.	A2: (...) Since I'm sorry for him, I'll give him a little bit more.
(...)	(...)
A2: Tóma meu amor...	A2: Take (it) my love,

como ele teve que tirar xerox... eu	since he had to xerox...
tô com peninha dele.	I'm sorry for him.
C: Eh! Que bom!	C: Oh! How nice!
A2: Vou dar um pouquinho mais.	A2: I'll give you a little bit more.

The client succeeds in getting the attendant's solidarity behaving in the 'correct' way.

The most difficult interactions were those between the specialised attendants and middle employees of accredited medical services. These clients do not easily accept, as low status clients do, the asymmetrical quality of the interaction. In the example that follows, we have an administrative staff of a certified hospital, who comes to discuss, among other things, the cuts on payments that were made on the Intensive Care Unit of his hospital. He was attended by a woman specialist staff, who, at the beginning, tries to delegate not only the cuts but the whole case to another specialist attendant, Alex, who was not at the office at that moment. After the client introduces the case, the attendant replies:

(3)

A: Isso aí .... é um problema, que você quer resolver com o Alex...	A: This ... is a problem, that you will want to solve with Alex...
C: Não... não, problema com o Alex... é outro,	C: No... no, problem with Alex... is another one,
isso que eu quero te mostrar ...	this (that) I want to show you ...
que não foi re/ ... tá vendo,	that was not sol/ ... you see,
toda doc/ a Dra. Maria da Penha	all doc/Dr. Maria da Penha

... eh viu, agora essa aqui,	... eh saw, now this here,
A: [a parte do CTI	A: the ICU part
C: É ... essa aqui que era de CTI, não foi visto.	C: Yes ... this one from the ICU, was not seen.

The client starts by disagreeing with the attendant, assumes the voice of his request, explains the case showing knowledge of the business. The attendant demonstrates her distance and non-involvement through monotone intonation, slow rhythm, and trying to get the other staff to deal with the business. After some interruptions and talk about the whereabouts of Alex, the interaction continues:

(3b)

A: Não sei onde ele se meteu ...	A: I don't know where he is ...
C: Ele não foi almoçar?	C: Did he go out for lunch?
A: Não sei ...	A: I don't know ...
C: Não vai ter problema, não?	C: There won't be any problems, will there?
prá resolver hoje não?	to solve (it) today, will there?
A: Heim?	A: Anh?

At this point, the client tries to deal with the contractual part of the service relation, asking about the chances of solving the problem on that day, to which the attendant does not listen. Right after this, the client tries another move:

(3c)

C: Moça, esse rapaz/que fazem essa revisão,	C: Young girl, this young man/who does this revision,
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eles são funcionários da are they employees of TX?  
TX?...  
não ... né? no .... huh?  
A: Não ... eles são médicos A: No ... they are accredited  
credenciados. doctors.  
(...) (...)

C: (...) C: (...)

eu nem conheço esse I don't even know this doctor  
médico do CTI, a Dra. from the ICU, Dr. Maria da  
Maria da Penha, Penha,  
ela tá sempre lá ... she is always there ...  
agora esse médico do CTI but this doctor from the ICU ...  
você nem sabe quem é, you don't even know who (he)  
sabe? is, do you?  
A: Dr. Márcio André. A: Dr. Márcio André.  
C: [Márcio André ... C: Dr. Márcio André ...  
agora eu quero saber, now I want to know,  
se a glosa que eu tive, if the cut I had,  
porque eu recebi ( ), was because I had ( ),  
CTI no mês passado ... ICU last month,  
que ele não apareceu pra that he didn't show up to see.  
ver ...  
se a glosa foi ( ), if the cut was made( ),  
ou se eu vou ter que falar or if I'll have to talk to Leila,  
com a Leila,  
não sei ... com alguém aí I don't know... with someone  
... there ...  
A: Tem que explicar com A You have to explain to Paulo,  
o Paulo, que a cause Leila  
Leila saiu (riso) left (laughs)  
C: Paulo ... a Leila saiu ... C: Paulo ... Leila left ...  
A: [é o Paulo é o nosso A: Yes ... Paulo is our new  
novo gerente ... manager ...  
agora ... now ...

The client tries to get the complicity of the attendant by criticising the doctors who review the bills of the ICU, insinuating that they do not do their jobs as well as the other doctor (who approved his bills). Again, he assumes the responsibility of the case ("the cut that I had", "now I want to know (...) if I'll have to talk to Leila"), displaying technical competence. The attendant rejects all his attempts, and even commemorates her victory in the dispute for 'who knows more about the service', when she laughs and informs him that they have a new manager called Paulo, and that Leila (the previous manager) had left. After that, he still tries to get her solidarity and asks her to talk to the manager about his problem. Again he is rejected, and she appoints the case again to Alex:

(3d)

C: Pode falar com ele? ... C: Can you talk to him?

Porque não pode ficar assim. Because it can't stay like this.

A: Tem que ver ... A: Have to see...

porque esse problema da glosa é só com o Alex. because this problem with "cuts", is Alex's responsibility.

The client fails in all his attempts to create a favorable ambiance for his requests.

## 8. Concluding remarks

This study, developed under an interactional perspective, aims to be a contribution to the description of service encounters in the Brazilian culture in terms of what clients do in order to be well attended. The discussion around the illocutionary force of questions and requests was not done

in classical terms: I was not dealing with differences (in terms of lexical items, syntax and prosody) between utterances of questions and requests, or strictly with the sequential organisation of conversation, but with general discourse functions.

Strategies used by clients at the counter of a social health office of a state company were identified. In order to obtain what they wanted - information and administrative procedures - clients behave according to the ritual norms of the interaction, which includes, for the great majority of clients, who were low status workers, accepting the asymmetrical quality of the relation and maintaining a friendly and 'social like' ambiance. The exception was if the client was from a higher social status: they did not need to be subservient, since their social position ensured the attention of the attendants - they could assume their voice as the origin of the requests. The most difficult interactions were the ones with middle status clients: in this case there was not a clear hierarchy between client and attendant and the technical competence of the attendant was menaced.

Social hierarchy is thus a determinant of the nature of the interaction, and the choice of strategies are closely dependent on the participant's definitions of the encounter, of being a client, and of being an attendant. Contrary to initial intuitions, it became clear that the problematic encounters were not those with low status clients, who behaved as expected and thus counted on the solidarity of attendants, but those with middle status clients, who had difficulty in managing the strategies to create a favorable ambiance for their requests.

Managing these strategies in the analysed encounters means above all managing rapport. Clients had to manage

personal and emotional connections between them and the attendants. Many authors, often following the path opened by the work of Goffman and Gumperz, have shown how linguistic and extra-linguistic variables are managed in the construction and the interpretation of discourse. This study is consistent with the assumption that individuals manipulate, to their own benefit if it is the case, emotional and personal connections in the construction of discourse.

### Transcription conventions:

A	attendant
C	client
.	sentence final intonation
,	clause final intonation
?	rising intonation
!	exclamatory intonation
...	pause (duration was not measured)
CAPS	emphatic stress
[	overlap
[acc]	accelerated pace
'	stressed sounds
" "	direct discourse
/	speech cut off
()	inaudible utterance

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