

Conventions of Malaysian Grocery Store Service Encounters

Abstract

The study aims to describe the conventions of the Malaysian model of service encounters and contrast them to the model proposed by Halliday/Hasan (1985) by focusing on interactions between Chinese service providers and customers from different ethnic groups in a grocery store. A total of 120 service encounters (60 with Chinese customers, 60 with non-Chinese customers) were observed and audio-taped. Analysis of the service encounters showed that Sale Request, Sale, Purchase and Goods Handover are obligatory stages in the shop, but a low frequency of Greeting, Sale Initiation and Finis was found. The infrequent use of politeness features resembling interpersonal interactions indicates a task-focussed interaction between the service provider and customer. The results also indicate some in/outgroup differences in the Chinese service providers' interaction with their Chinese and non-Chinese customers. The service providers were more likely to engage in Greeting and Finis with Chinese customers, and Sale Initiation with non-Chinese customers, indicating a clearer service provider-customer role and a stronger task-focus in interactions with outgroup members. The stages that are more likely to be enacted non-linguistically are Sale Request, Purchase and Goods Handover. In the grocery store, customers often brought goods they wanted to purchase to the counter, making verbalisation of Sale Request unnecessary. The non-Chinese customers were more inclined to make non-verbal Sale Requests than Chinese customers, whereas service encounters with Chinese customers had relatively more frequent non-verbalised Sale Compliance and Sale stages. The possible relevance of in/outgroup relationship on non-verbal communication in service encounters needs further investigation.

Keywords: intercultural communication, service encounters, nonverbal communication, high power distance, high context culture

1. Introduction

Service encounters between customers and service providers involve several essential stages for the exchange of goods and services (Halliday/Hasan 1985; [Mitchell 1957](#); [Ventola 1987](#)). [Ventola \(1987\)](#) highlighted that the non-linguistic realisation of the goods handover stage based on her study of service encounters in Finland. In contrast, Halliday and Hasan's (1985) schematic structure of service encounters was formulated based on their observations of service encounters in Australia. The handing over of goods is accompanied by verbal expressions such as "here you are". The difference is probably due to Finland being a high-context culture where meaning resides in the physical context and Australia being a low-context culture where most of the meanings are verbalised (Hall 1976). Although other studies have indicated that non-verbal communication occurs in both high- and low-context cultures (e.g. [McKechnie et al. 2007](#) in Dubai; [Moore 2008](#) in the United States), they have not paid attention to the linguistic and non-linguistic enactment of stages in service encounters.

Other researchers who have focused on the staging of service encounters have primarily studied the omission of opening and closing stages in interactions between Asian customers and service providers (e.g., [Bailey 2001](#); [Kong 1998](#); [Kuang et al. 2011](#); [Liu 2009](#); [Pan 2000](#); [Ting et al. 2012](#)), and interpreted the omissions as lack of politeness in instrumental exchanges. This interpretation is reasonable given that other researchers have found elaborate sequences for politeness

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