

**SPOKEN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TELEPHONE SERVICE
ENCOUNTERS IN A HOTEL**

**TING SING YEA
(13147)**

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Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development
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ABSTRACT

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Ting Sing Yea

A case study was conducted to examine the spoken discourse of hotel telephone enquiries by analyzing how the receptionist handles the call to address different purposes of customers in Malaysian context. The objectives of the study were to (1) examine how the discourse stages are structured to achieve communicative purposes; (2) identify the speech functions associated with the telephone service transactions; (3) identify deviations by comparing the exhibited interactional patterns with the western norms of hospitality practices which the receptionist had acquired during her study and training. The study was conducted in a three-star hotel, where twenty-five hotel telephone service encounters involving one particular hotel receptionist and twenty-five customers were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The analysis of discourse data along with interview and observation data revealed that the discourse structure, regardless of its varied communicative purposes, was generically confined to a typical sequential staging: *Greeting* ^ *Service Initiation* ^ *Service Request* ^ *Service Compliance* ^ *Service Closure* (^ means followed by). The speech function identification revealed the speech role of the participants. The receptionist used speech functions *to offer* and *to comply*, while the customers used speech functions *to accept* and *to request*. *To question*, *to answer*, *to check*, *to confirm*, *to acknowledge*, *to probe* and *to agree* are the shared speech roles among the receptionist and the callers. The identified speech roles depicted the powerless role and status of hotel receptionist and that the customers exercised greater power and authority in this context. The detection of receptionist's deviancies, mainly the absence of self-identification, improper questioning and non-existence of positive notes for closing up the call, uncovered the sociocultural influence on the discourse pattern of hotel telephone enquiries.

ABSTRAK

ANALISASI WACANA PERKHIDMATAN TELEFON DALAM SEBUAH HOTEL

Ting Sing Yea

Satu kajian kes telah dijalankan untuk mengkaji wacana lisan telefon perhotelan pertanyaan dengan menganalisa bagaimana penyambut tetamu hotel itu mengendalikan pesanan pelanggan melalui telefon secara berkesan dan efektif dalam konteks Malaysia. Objectif kajian ini adalah untuk (1) menyelidik struktur telefon perhotelan pertanyaan dan mengenal pasti bagaimana struktur tersebut digunakan untuk mencapai tujuan komunikatif yang berlainan; (2) mengenal pasti fungsi ucapan dalam pengendalian telefon yang berkaitan dengan transaksi perkhidmatan; (3) mengenal pasti penyimpangan antara struktur komunikasi yang dipraktikkan oleh penyambut tetamu dengan struktur komunikasi yang mengikut norma-norma kebaratan yang telahpun penyambut tetamu itu belajar semasa pembelajaran dan latihan industrinya. Kajian ini adalah dijalankan dalam sebuah hotel tiga bintang, di mana dua puluh lima transaksi perkhidmatan melalui telefon yang telah melibatkan seorang penyambut tetamu hotel dan dua puluh lima orang pelanggan direkod secara audio dan ditranskripsikan untuk tujuan analisis. Analisis data wacana bersama dengan temu ramah dan data cerapan mendedahkan bahawa struktur wacana, tanpa menghiraukan tujuan komunikatifnya yang berbagai-bagai, adalah pada umumnya terbatas kepada satu struktur berperingkat yang teratur: Sapaan ^ Membekalkan Permulaan ^ Permintaan Layanan ^ Membekalkan Pematuhan ^ Membekalkan Penutupan (^ bermakna berikut dengan). Pengenalpastian fungsi ucapan menunjukkan peranan ucapan yang dipegang oleh peserta-peserta komunikasi itu. Fungsi-fungsi ucapan dipakai oleh penyambut tetamu adalah untuk menawarkan dan untuk mematuhi, sedangkan pelanggan-pelanggan memakai fungsi-fungsi ucapan untuk menerima dan untuk meminta. Untuk menyoal, untuk menjawab, untuk memeriksa, untuk mengesahkan, untuk mengakui, untuk menyiasat dan untuk bersetuju adalah peranan-peranan ucapan sepunya yang dipraktikkan oleh penyambut tetamu hotel dan juga pelanggan-pelanggan. Peranan-peranan fungsi ucapan menggambarkan peranan dan taraf penyambut tetamu hotel yang tidak berkuasa manakala pelanggan adalah parti yang mempunyai kuasa dan autoriti yang sepenuhnya dalam komunikasi sebegini. Perbandingan struktur perbualan telah menunjukkan bahawa hotel receptionist itu tidak mempraktikkan tiga unsur yang telah disenaraikan dalam nota latihannya yang berdasarkan prinsip komunikasi barat iaitu ketidakhadiran unsur pengenalan diri, struktur soalan yang tidak sempurna, dan juga ketidakhadiran nota positif sebagai tanda penutup perbualan tersebut. Penemuan ini telah mencerminkan pengaruh sociobudaya ke atas struktur perbualan bagi wacana telefon perhotelan pertanyaan.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the background of the proposed study. It also explains the research objectives, significance of the study, the operational definitions for terms as well as the scope of the study.

1.1 Setting of the Research Problem

Undoubtedly, human beings spend much of the lives talking, or interacting, with other people in their social life. According to Eggins and Slade (1997, p. 6), talking or interacting is not merely a mechanical process of taking turns at producing sounds and words but rather a semantic activity as people engaged in the process of negotiating and making sense of meanings. They further explained that, actually this process of taking turns to negotiate and exchange meaning is functionally motivated whereby we interact with each other in order to accomplish a wide range of social purposes and tasks.

Crystal (2005, p. 267) stated that, of the many types of communicative act, most studies have been devoted to conversation, which is seen as the most fundamental and pervasive means of conducting human affairs. Upon analysis, conversation turns out

always crucial for service providers to be able to interact effectively and efficiently with the customers, while this kind of social interaction is recognized as service/transactional encounter. As Crystal (2005) has mentioned, for a conversation to be successful, in most social contexts, the participants need to feel they are contributing something to it and are getting something out of it. For this to happen, some definite conditions must apply which includes the use of correct and appropriate forms to achieve certain speech functions, as well as the management of turn-taking system. Thus, significant features in service/transactional encounters should be identified to provide the information of “how is language structured to enable us to do conversation?” (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 7). Therefore, in order to know something about the nature of language as a resource for doing social life, spoken discourse in service/transactional encounters should be analysed from different linguistic levels and aspects.

Conversation, as affirmed by Eggins and Slade (1997, p. 7), plays a privileged role in the construction of social identities and interpersonal relations. Language enables such construction and negotiation. Drawing on this notion, language is also vital for the service provider to initiate and sustain the service/transactional encounters. As mentioned before, these encounters are pragmatically motivated, whereby it involves the transactional goal of buying and selling of goods and services. Therefore service/transactional encounters are complementarity (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 20) in that one interactant demands and another gives, resulting in much shorter conversations in comparison to everyday talk. Besides, because of social goal to succeed in the transaction, language in this type of encounter has its level of formality that is far more formal than casual conversation even though it may exhibit informal characteristics such as colloquial expressions of agreement such as “yeah” and “yep”. The interactants, especially the service provider, are involved in formal spoken interaction due to their workplace needs as well as the distanced familiarity of identity-- since the interactants are not familiar with each other and thus they interact formally. Because of the workplace need, the service provider needs to conduct the

conversation using a serious and formal tone accompanied by various language expressions of politeness. As these language features are clearly exhibited in formal spoken interaction, many discourse analyses have been devoted to formal conversation in institutional settings in which more or less official or formal task-based or role-based activities are undertaken: doctor-patient interaction, courtroom trials, job interviews, classroom lessons, news interviews and emergency calls to the police (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991; in Boden & Zimmerman, 1991, p. 94). Therefore, evidently, there is still limited study in devotion towards service/transactional encounters even though Hasan (1985) have made the attempt in analyzing the structure of service encounter which is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Service Encounter

Sale request Customer	Can I have ten oranges and a kilo of bananas please?
Sale compliance Vendor	Yes, anything else?
Customer	No thanks
Sale Vendor	That'll be dollar forty
Purchase Customer	Two dollars
Purchase closure Vendor	Sixty, eighty, two dollars. Thank you.

(Halliday and Hasan, 1985, cited in Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 55)

Hasan's (1985) analysis of service encounters was based on the model proposed by Halliday (1973), "language as social semiotic", a functional-semantic interpretation of conversation which is widely adopted in discourse analysis as cited in Eggins and Slade (1997, p. 55). She analyzed the staging in service encounters and found that it consists of the obligatory elements which are a defining feature of that particular genre.

The internal or generic structure found with its obligatory elements, as a defining feature of service encounter, had actually individuated the service encounters as a specific genre on its own. While at the same time, Hasan also stated that other conversation or texts of the same genre will realize the same obligatory elements of that particular language structure (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 56). Similarly, the organization of turn-taking for conversation, as emphasized by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), can also be an element that functions as a defining feature of a particular genre. In other words, turn-taking organization is actually varied among different genres of conversation and these variations has can be provided for the recognizability of conversation genres. According to them, it is not surprising that turn-taking systems can be workably built in various ways and since they are used to organize sorts of activities that are quite different from one another, it is of particular interest to see how operating turn-taking systems are characterizable in different sorts of social interaction. A study done by Greatbatch (1988) found that, certain obligatory elements in a particular spoken discourse derive from a set of constraints which means, a conversation will be markedly different if certain restrictions have been imposed on the participants. For example, the turn-taking system in the news interview examined by Heritage and Greatbatch (in Boden & Zimmerman, 1991, p. 96) revealed that, the news interview talk proceeds as sequences of interviewer's questions and interviewee's responses to those questions. In other words, speakers who act as interviewers may not properly engage in actions other than questions, while those who take part as interviewees should refrain from initiating actions. Thus, the talk is largely confined to the following patterns:

Interviewer: Question

Interviewee: Answer

Interviewer: Question

Interviewee: Answer

This is indeed not the only restriction that has been imposed on the news interview. However, it has evidently made the news interview distinctive from other mundane or formal conversations. Heritage and Greatbatch's research in news interview has proven the unique and distinctive features of "news interview talk" that marked great contribution towards the field of discourse analysis in institutional context. Such research is also beneficial in the teaching and learning English for specific purposes whereby real-life data or findings can be effectively manipulated for guidance and training.

In fact, of all the research done in discourse analysis, many have proposed the use of the analyzed spoken discourse data into the teaching and learning of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) like the training for workplace needs. However, it is found that such ESP studies were predominantly focused on business communication (Blight & Stephens, 2006; DeCormier, 2002; Sharma, 1999; Planken, 2005) instead of service/transactional encounters (Hewitt, 2006; Bowles, 2006; Hasan, 1985). In point of fact, there are quite a range of insightful research have been devoted towards the service/transactional encounter, however more emphasis has been placed on marketing research in terms of customer satisfaction towards their experience with the encounters (Gremler & Bitner, 1993; Paraskevas, 2001; Burgers, Ruyter, Keen & Streukens, 2000; Lemmink & Mattsson, 2002) rather than looking into the language used in-depth. While of its examination in language features of service/transactional encounter, even more specifically in terms of the telephone enquiries of conduct within such encounter, have remained largely unexamined.

In most of the institutional contexts, for example the hotel organization, the telephone is an essential medium of communication whereby a ringing telephone could be a business opportunity. Efficient and professional handling of telephone

enquiries makes a great difference between a professional organization, and one that is not. Therefore, in handling telephone enquiries that involve service/transactional encounters, both participants, especially the service provider, have to possess good communication skill in order to achieve the goal or purpose of the transactions. Hence, it is essential to delve into the study of service/transactional encounters through discourse analysis to provide insightful implication for better customer service in hospitality industries especially hotels where business is based primarily in the commercialization of hospitality.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Hotel enquiries can be done face-to-face, through letter and telephone. In fact, no reference to communication would be complete without considering the vital role that the telephone plays in any business operation. Effective communication by telephone does not only assist in selling the hotel, but also promotes an image of efficiency. Good communication skill is essential to telephone use since the customers has only the telephone conversation to mentally judge the standard of the hotel. Thus, the way the receptionists interact and respond through telephones make a great difference to the quality of hotel service. Good telephone techniques help to create a first impression that is positive and professional which can leave a lasting impression. It is a social facilitation that helps to expedite business transactions. On the contrary, poor telephone communication techniques, for example in handling a complaint, it is definitely erroneous for the receptionist to respond with the tendency to overlap in conversation, or excessively talking instead of listening due to the fact that it might be offensive and create certain annoyance to the customers. At the end, it might even deteriorate the situation. In contrast with the previous situation, if a particular receptionist responds with a lot of pauses when a customer is enquiring for room accommodation, it might create unwanted misunderstanding. The occurrence of recurring hesitation or long pauses in talk may demonstrate the inefficiency of hotel

services and might have affected the hotel sales and image. Thus, it is tremendously important for hoteliers, especially front desks receptionists, to be acquainted with telephone conversation skill.

Moreover, Malaysia is well-known internationally as a tourist destination and tourism has blossomed in terms of economic growth and national image development. Hence, indirectly this phenomenon brings up the potentiality in the development of the hotel industry.

Generally, hotel functions mainly to provide accommodation and accommodate basic tourists' requirements for either local or foreign tourists. Consequently, hotelier especially the front desk receptionists always need to deal with their customers in their daily work routines by supplying them with services and information. Therefore, as stated in Cubo (n.d.), the key competences for employees working at receptionist front desks are efficiency, courtesy, initiative, capability of working in team as well as communication skill. In hospitality industry, in order to provide excellent customer service, front desks receptionists requires good communication skills to interact effectively with the customers. Some good hotels, in particular those with higher ranking require the hoteliers to undergo training from time to time for quality control as well as for upgrading purposes. However, many of the training materials originate from foreign context instead of local context which might some how differ and inappropriate for the environment of Malaysian hospitality industry. In this case, learners might have difficulties exhibiting the desired interaction patterns when servicing in local context which is quite different from what they have learned. Circumstances of cultural variation brought up the need for investigation to be done in the local context so that more authentic and locally contextualized training materials can be provided. Besides, it can also help in cultivating the development in teaching and learning of English for specific purposes for the workplace requirement.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to analyse the spoken discourse of hotel receptionist through telephone enquiries by analysing how he/she addresses different need or purposes of customers in the prevailing sociocultural context in order to accomplish a variety of social or communicative purposes.

The objectives of the study were to:

1. identify the structure of service/transactional encounters in the context of hotel enquiries (receptionist) to achieve different communicative purposes through telephone conversation.
2. find out if there is a turn-type preallocation procedure (Question-Answer) occurs in the service/transactional encounter which serves as a confining turn-take pattern for such encounter in relation to varied communicative purposes.
3. examine the correspondence between the trained and actual responses that the receptionist performs during the conversation in terms of the discourse stages within the service/transactional interaction when he/she is trying to address the customers' need.

1.4 Operational Definition of Terms

Service/transactional encounters

Transactional encounters are the pragmatic conversations that involve buying and selling transaction (Eggins & Slades, 1997, p. 20). In marketing research, service encounter is often identified as the 'moment of truth' when customers actually experience service (Johns, 1999, p. 965) However, this two terms are in fact used interchangeable whereby in this particular research context, these terms simply refer to the buying-and-selling transaction of goods and services in hotel front-desk encounters between the receptionist and the customers.

Spoken discourse

Generally, spoken discourse refers to the language organization beyond the sentence level as according to Halliday (1994). Thus, in this context, the spoken discourse refers to the features such as speech functions, turn-taking organization and structure that are used by hotel receptionist in handling telephone enquiries.

Hotel receptionist

Hotel receptionists, as defined by Muela, Parmentier, Rosner, Segond, and Stock (2005), are those represent as positive image of the hotel and assisting with all aspects of customer service. They act as buffers (shock absorber) between the customers and management of the hotel. Main duties for a receptionist includes making room reservations, and answering or responding to customers' enquiries, requests and complaints, regarding hotel services that can be done through letter, telephone, and in person.

Telephone enquiries

In this research context, the telephone enquiries include the customer's complaints, enquiries and requests in hotel context. External incoming calls as well as in-house calls are included as the main resource data to be collected for discourse analysis, however the interdepartmental calls such as transferring calls are excluded.

Turn-type preallocation procedure

It is defined by Heritage and Greatbatch (1991 cited in Thornborrow, 2002) as an institutionally specialized system where participants restricted themselves to the production of questions and answers. For instance, in their research in news interviews, it was found that the allocation of turns is predetermined, that the interviewer will always go first and the interviewee goes second. Besides, the turn types are also predetermined whereby interviewer takes the questioner role while interviewees take the response turn. Such phenomena thereby sustain the event as an

interview rather than a discussion. Therefore, in this research context, the turn-type preallocation procedure refers to the conversational system between the hotel receptionist with customers, to examine if their turns and roles are predetermined or not.

1.5 Significance of the Study

Practically, the significance of this study is to help hotelier to have a better insight into the ways to achieve certain communicative purposes through telephone conversation. Specified discourse patterns or structures and also the turn-taking organization can help them to successfully perform their job in the hotel setting. For example, many hotels insist upon their receptionist to answer the telephone with a proper opening, "Good morning. Kingwood hotel, Jamie speaking. How may I help you?" Such greeting or opening is in fact one of the essential elements in the discourse pattern that a hotel receptionist is strictly required to practice and perform while answering the calls. The outcome of this research can be reliable tools available for teaching and learning of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It can help accommodate the specific language needs of a particular organization (in this context, it is the hotel organization), and consequently of their present and potential employees, for instance, the vocational and university students who take up the hotel management courses. Added to this, there is a need to analyze the features of spoken discourse in service/transactional encounters of hotel receptionists within the mode of telephone conversation as it would help to further develop the existing training model for hotelier and at the same time, provide insights in the teaching of ESP or English for communicative purposes.

In the point of fact, ESP practitioners and researchers are having the difficulty in obtaining spoken discourse data for the teaching of ESP. As highlighted by Cubo (n. d.), it is partly due to the impracticability of techniques in identifying specific language needs of a particular organization such as linguistic audits (Reeves and

Wright, 1996; Huhta, 2002 in Cubo, n.d.), specialist informants (Bahtia, 1993 in Cubo, n.d.), and in-company observation (Jasso-Aguilar, 1999 in Cubo, n.d.) which is too time-consuming. Besides, companies in the tourism industry often show little understanding for the task of the linguistic researcher, either because they are not familiar with it, or simply because they are not interested in such type of research. In relation to this, Hyland (2002) in reviewing the application of genre to language teaching and learning, had also commented that there is a relative paucity of work in spoken genres in comparison to written discourse (in Bowles, 2006). At the same time Bowles (2006) highlighted that there is a lack of raw oral data for spoken discourse analysis and thus accordingly, there is a lack of authenticity in ESP teaching and learning oral material. In relation to this, he provided an example in his study and pointed out that “a recent study of telephone talk in ESP textbooks by Wong (2002), has shown that textbook material does not correspond to real life recordings of telephone talk and is therefore of dubious pedagogical value” (Bowles, 2006). Hence, in short, difficulties in obtaining substantial natural occurring data has evidently led to the scarcity of having reliable and authentic ESP teaching and learning material.

1.6 Scope of the Study

Undoubtedly, the importance of context in the production and interpretation of discourse is evident whereby it helps to exemplify different interaction context, as well as in this particular research case—the context of hotel telephone enquiries. Hence, for the purpose of this study, the context of situation (field, tenor and mode) was taken into account to examine how it affects the way hotel receptionist responds to customers. However, the “mode” factor can be excluded as the channel for communication in this case is fixed which is through telephone. The telephone conversation structure, which is constituted by different customers who called for a range of purposes, was investigated to see how the communicative purpose is

achieved through effective communication in a way that the hotel receptionist satisfies the customers' need with excellent customer service through the service encounters. Therefore, any external in-coming calls as well as in-house calls from the guests to the reception desk are taken into consideration but with the exclusion of the interdepartmental call. Besides, as Malaysia is a multilingual society, under certain circumstances the callers may respond in their preferred language (Chinese and *Bahasa Malaysia*) instead of English, even though the hotel receptionist initiates the conversation using English language. All the telephone conversations are taken into account regardless of its language choice as long as it fits to the nature of a service encounter.

To sum up, this chapter has given a brief overview of the literature that is grounded within conversation analyses and more specifically in terms of service encounters that involve the “bargaining” of service as a social phenomenon of everyday existence. Specific terms used are predefined with reference to the previous research studies. Rationale in significance for the research to be carried out as well as the scope of the research is presented. In the next chapter, related research literature is reviewed.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the background concept in relation to spoken discourse in service encounters. Added to this, telephone service encounter is specifically discussed as it is the main focus of the present study. Besides, discourse elements that the research intends to examine from the discourse data including speech function, structure, and turn taking in service encounters are described with reference to the related literature.

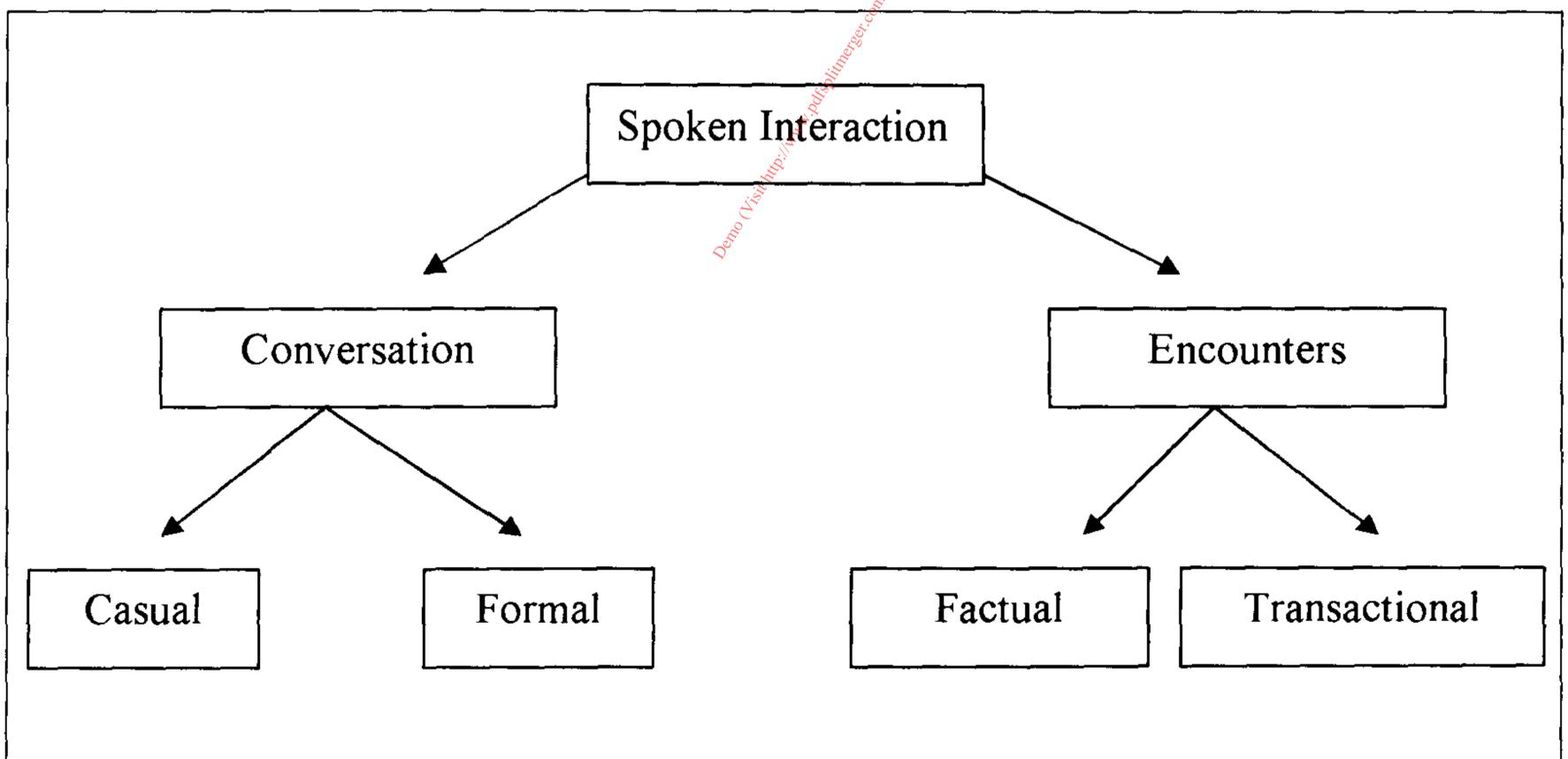
2.1 Spoken Discourse

As termed as “talk-in-interaction” by Schegloff (1987), talking with one another is social interaction, and that talk is ubiquitous in social life (in Boden & Zimmerman, 1991, p. 8) whereby it is pervasive and central to human history, in every setting of human affairs, at all level of society, in virtually every society (Boden & Zimmerman, 1991, p. 3). In order to provide fundamental framework of various social interactions, the pervasiveness and evanescence of daily speech event has made conversation an interesting domain of study for social scientists. Within these analyses of conversation, talk or social interaction is theoretically termed as “spoken discourse”.

Spoken discourse, as defined by Halliday (1994), refers to the language organization that lies beyond the sentence level. While it is embedded within the broader cultural context, the use of spoken discourse varies from one social situation to another (Burns, Joyce & Gollin, 1996, p. 6). It is influenced by the three contextual variables (field, tenor, and mode) and thus, different spoken discourse in varied context appears with distinctive linguistic levels which include the micro-interactive features such as grammar, semantics (word choice), and macro patterns like discourse structure (turn-taking), text-types or genre (Egins & Slade, 1997). Besides, attempts have been made by Egins (1990) in categorizing different types of spoken interaction. Egins (1990) has proposed a typology of spoken interaction which is shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1

A typology of spoken interaction



(Egins, 1990, cited in Burns et al., 1996, p. 11)

The terms *conversation* and *encounters* is used by Egins (1990) to identify and distinguish the different categories and subcategories of interactions involved.