

J. César Félix-Brasdefer. (2015) *The Language of Service Encounters: A Pragmatic-Discursive Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-1-107-03582-9, 200 pp.

**Reviewed by Rachel Shively (Illinois State University)**

As Félix-Brasdefer (2015) highlights in the opening chapter of his volume, *The language of service encounters: A pragmatic-discursive approach*, service encounters such as ordering a coffee, buying a book, and making a query at an information desk are a commonplace activity in everyday life. As a topic of scholarly inquiry, service encounters have been investigated since the late 1950s, but have received increasing attention since the turn of the twenty-first century. In the case of Spanish, research in the last two decades, in particular, has enriched our understanding of cross-cultural variation in service encounters between Spanish and other languages (primarily English), as well as regional variation within Spanish. The volume by Félix-Brasdefer covers new ground in the field with an examination of both cross-cultural and intra-lingual variation in American English and Mexican Spanish which, notably, is based on a large corpus (147 hours) of naturally-occurring service encounters from five different U.S. and Mexican cities. In addition to the important empirical study, this book also makes a valuable contribution to the field through a state-of-the-art review of previous research and a thorough discussion of various theoretical approaches to the examination of service encounters.

The first three chapters (i.e., Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2) of the volume provide an introduction to the genre of service encounters, a discussion of key concepts, philosophical traditions, theoretical frameworks, and research methods, a description of the approach used in Félix-Brasdefer's study, and, finally, a review of previous research in this area. The scope, thoroughness, and clarity of these chapters offers a helpful overview of service encounter research that both novice and seasoned researchers will appreciate. For the novice, I cannot think of another introduction to service encounters that offers such breadth and depth: foundational concepts such as discourse, social action, and context are defined, various philosophical, theoretical, and methodological traditions (e.g., Speech Act Theory, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Variational Pragmatics, Conversation Analysis, Interactional Sociolinguistics) are discussed in relation to service encounters, and previous empirical research is carefully summarized. The aforementioned

characteristics also have much to offer scholars who already have knowledge of the field. Given that many approaches to analyzing service encounters have been taken, yet researchers tend to specialize in just one or a few of those approaches, Félix-Brasdefer's review of theories and methods can help to broaden one's view of the entire field and gain renewed appreciation for what each approach contributes. The author himself takes an "integrative approach" to the analysis of service encounters, specifically drawing from Variational Pragmatics (e.g., Barron and Schneider 2009) and Rapport-Management Theory (e.g., Spencer-Oatey 2000), "because a combination of congruent theoretical and methodological research traditions yields a broader understanding of language use in social interaction than just one approach" (Félix-Brasdefer 2015, 43). More specifically, the author examines service encounters on different levels of analysis (43–47): formal (e.g., form and function of linguistic expressions), actional (e.g., pragmalinguistic resources used in speech acts), interactional (e.g., organization of joint actions among participants), stylistic (e.g., register, footing), topic (e.g., management and selection of topics), organizational (e.g., turn-taking), non-verbal (e.g., gestures), and prosodic (e.g., intonation, stress, loudness). Finally, both novice and expert service encounter researchers will welcome Table 2.2 (61–69), which catalogues 84 empirical studies concerning service encounters published the past 60 years, clearly listing each study's citation, setting, targeted language, and theoretical framework.

After background information about service encounters is provided in the first section of the book, the remaining seven chapters of the volume offer the empirical findings of the study. Discussion of the results begins with Chapters 3 and 4, which focus on service encounter interactions in supermarket delicatessens and small stores and discuss cross-cultural variation between the U.S. and Mexico (Chapter 3) as well as intra-lingual regional variation (Chapter 4). In Chapters 5 and 6, the author turns to different service encounter settings, namely, an open-air market in Mexico (Chapter 5) and a university information center in the U.S. (Chapter 6). While Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 focus on transactional talk (i.e., talk related to accomplishing the task of the encounter), Chapter 7 looks at instances of relational talk (i.e., non-obligatory interpersonal talk in the encounter, such as phatic exchanges and small talk) in the U.S. data. The final two chapters of the volume include an examination of forms of address in the English and Spanish service encounter data (Chapter 8) and a chapter dedicated to drawing conclusions from the empirical data (Chapter 9). Each of the empirical chapters of the volume is well-organized, is clearly written, and effectively presents the data through tables and numerous examples.

Cross-cultural variation in service encounters at American and Mexican supermarket delicatessens is the topic of Chapter 3. Based on 70 hours of naturally-occurring data from a total of 700 face-to-face encounters in the U.S. and 700 in

Mexico, this chapter highlights variation in openings, requests, request-response negotiation sequence, and closings in service encounter interactions in the two countries. In presenting the data, the author strikes a good balance between qualitative analysis and quantitative trends. In terms of request strategies, for example, Félix-Brasdefer (2015, 93) presents the frequencies of request utterance type, finding that while American customers preferred conventional indirectness (46.3%) and want statements (19.1%), Mexican customers employed elliptical utterances (42.9%), assertions (24.1%), and imperatives (23.9%) most frequently. Other notable cross-cultural differences included the use of address forms and the presence of a suggestion in the opening sequence of the encounter. With regard to the former, Mexicans were observed to employ a wider variety of address forms than the Americans, including both variants that expressed respect (e.g., *caballero* 'gentleman', *doña* 'madam') and those that expressed solidarity (e.g., *amigo/a* 'friend', *corazón* 'sweetheart'). Finally, in the opening sequence, Mexican service providers were observed to offer unsolicited suggestions to customers about buying a particular brand of product; American service providers did not do so, limiting their role to that of providing information to the customer, not advice on which brand to buy.

Pragmatic variation within American English and Mexican Spanish is described in Chapter 4. In the case of English, Félix-Brasdefer (2015) compared service encounters in supermarket delicatessens in two Midwestern cities: Bloomington, Indiana, and Solon, Ohio. Among other aspects, local contingencies such as the requirement to take a ticket in Ohio, but not in Indiana, resulted in differences in opening sequences. Further, while conventional directness was the most frequent strategy in both locations (40% and 43%), Ohio residents used elliptical requests more than twice as often as Indiana residents (31% and 13.5%, respectively). However, Indianans were more likely to use internal modifiers (e.g., please) than Ohioans. Likewise, service encounters in small stores in two regions of Mexico (i.e., Mexico City and Guanajuato) presented pragmatic variation. For example, elliptical requests were favored more strongly in Guanajuato than in Mexico City. However, in Guanajuato, gender was a significant factor in request strategy choice: male customers preferred elliptical forms (48.7%) whereas female customers favored assertions (45.3%). These findings contribute to the growing body of work on variational pragmatics that has shown that regional varieties of a language differ not only with regard to phonological and lexical features, but also in terms of pragmatic norms. Gender was also found to be a significant variable in request strategy choice in Guanajuato. While few previous studies have examined gender variation in service encounters, these results highlight the importance of taking this variable into account.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine service encounters in different locations from the previous chapters: an open-air market in Yucatan, Mexico, and a university information center in the Midwest U.S. In the case of the former, Félix-Brasdefer (2015) again examines openings, requests, negotiation, and closings, but also, discusses bargaining sequences, “a series of attempts on the part of the customer to get the vendor to reduce the final price” and which are “frequent social practices in the Mexican market” (158). As the author describes, bargaining is the expected behavior in that speech community and involves the collaboration of both customer and service provider in arriving at the sale price. With regard to the university information center and in contrast to previous chapters, Chapter 6 investigates non-commercial service encounters in which the task was the exchange of information rather than goods. Elements analyzed in this chapter that do not appear in previous chapters include the analysis of dispreferred responses and prosody. The author argues that dispreferred responses (e.g., not being able to fulfill a request for information) do not seem to be viewed as impolite in this service encounter context because if a service provider proffers a negative response, the customer can assume that he or she is simply following institutional rules. Dispreferred responses in that variety of English included expressions such as hedges (e.g., probably) and “pro-forma agreements” (e.g., yes, but...) (Félix-Brasdefer 2015, 173). On the topic of prosody, the author examines the role of prosodic resources in requests, finding, for example, that final rising pitch and elongated syllables serve to make a declarative request more tentative and polite.

While Chapters 3 through 6 provide examples of relational talk embedded in service encounters, the focus is on transactional talk. In Chapter 7, however, the author turns to relational talk and, more specifically, to the negotiation of face in those sequences of interpersonal talk, looking specifically at service encounters in U.S. supermarket delicatessens and a university information center. Phatic exchanges (e.g., greetings, partings) and small talk were all observed in the data. Small talk occurred in 11% of the supermarket interactions and in 49% of the information center encounters and involved brief discussion of topics such as the weather, food, and holidays. Small talk was found to serve various functions such as filling silence during task completion and establishing social bonds.

In the penultimate chapter of the volume, Félix-Brasdefer (2015) discusses the use of address forms in both Mexico and the U.S. Looking at the supermarket delicatessen interactions, for example, the author found that, in Mexico, 80% of the service encounters included a second-person address pronoun (i.e., the informal *tú* or formal *usted*). In those instances, service providers almost always employed the formal pronoun with customers (96% of the time), whereas customers varied in how they addressed employees: 60% of the time customers used the formal *usted* and 40% of the time they produced the informal *tú*. However, gender was

important in conditioning address pronouns in Mexican supermarkets: the informal *tú* was used regularly when both customer and employee were male, whereas the formal *usted* was employed more often when both parties were female and in male-female interactions. In the community studied, the use of the formal pronoun conveyed deference and respect, while the informal pronoun expressed solidarity politeness. Further, customers and employees at times alternated their use of address pronouns during the same interaction. For example, one service provider opened the service encounter with a phatic exchange using the formal *usted*, switched to *tú* when offering the customer a taste of turkey, and then returned to *usted* in the closing sequence (Félix-Brasdefer 2015, 223). The author argues that switching to *tú* “in the offer creates a special effect on the interlocutor, such as establishing rapport or solidarity politeness” (224). Finally, in terms of vocatives (e.g., terms of endearment, titles, kinship terms), a wider range of terms ( $N = 16$ ) were observed in the Spanish data compared with the English encounters ( $N = 10$ ) and the use of kinship terms such as *hija* (lit. ‘daughter’) and *mamá* (lit. ‘mother’) were observed only in the Mexican interactions, not in the U.S. encounters.

Although the data presented in this study came from several commercial and non-commercial settings in various regions of two different countries, there were common elements in the structure of the service encounter genre. In the final chapter of this book, the author highlights structural elements that service encounters tend to share (e.g., openings, requests, closings) and the sequences of speech acts that participants may negotiate as they carry out the task of exchanging goods and services. Also provided in this final chapter are suggestions about logistical and ethical issues in collecting naturally-occurring data in the service encounter context and ideas for further research on this topic. Overall, this book is well-written, thoroughly researched, and well-grounded in theory. The design of the study and the size of the corpus are equally impressive. This volume makes an important contribution to the field and is certain to become a point of reference for future studies on the topic as well as a model for conducting research on service encounters in authentic settings.

## Referencias

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