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Waiting for the customer: Multimodal analysis of waiting in service encounters



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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the activity of a salesperson waiting for a customer to make up his or her mind in Finnish and Finland Swedish service encounters in bakeries. In service encounters, studies have usually focused on the waiting customer. This paper concentrates on the salesperson waiting for a customer to choose a product. In these cases, waiting is a form of availability on the part of the salesperson, who nevertheless maintains some discretion. It is a professional posture that relies on an unfocused monitoring of the customer. Waiting is sometimes described as inaction or idleness, a sort of a non-action that continues until the primary activity can be initiated or continued. Multimodal analysis of waiting shows that, in reality, waiting involves systematic employment of embodied resources, such as standing and holding the arms in a particular way and withdrawing the gaze. In this way, a salesperson carefully demonstrates availability while simultaneously avoiding the initiation of any action or exerting any pressure.

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ESTRAGON *What do we do now?*

VLADIMIR *While waiting.*

ESTRAGON *While waiting.*

Silence.

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VLADIMIR *We could do our exercises.*

ESTRAGON *Our movements.*

VLADIMIR *Our elevations.*

ESTRAGON *Our relaxations.*

VLADIMIR *Our elongations.*

ESTRAGON *Our relaxations.*

VLADIMIR *To warm us up.*

ESTRAGON *To calm us down.*

VLADIMIR *Off we go.*

– Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*

1. Introduction

As Ayass (2015) has pointed out, the sociological and philosophical studies on waiting (e.g., Schweizer, 2008; Auyero, 2012; Göttlich, 2015) typically paint a rather grim picture. We “have to wait” or we are “made to wait.” And indeed, as Bourdieu (2000: 228) says, making people wait is an integral part of the exercise of power, by “delaying without destroying hope... adjourning without totally disappointing.” While it is true that waiting can often be seen as intermingled with the use of power, at the same time, lengthy waits are a mundane and ordinary occurrence: everyone has to wait at one time or another, and humans do this daily. Indeed, waiting is usually seen as something that is “normal, expected, and inevitable” (Auyero, 2012: 14–15).

A general way of viewing waiting is to regard it as “doing nothing,” “inaction,” or a “non-event,” which happens before we get to do what we are waiting for (Ehn and Löfgren, 2010). The view of waiting as non-action may be one reason why waiting has received relatively little attention as a research topic (Auyero, 2012: 26; see also Schweizer, 2008: 1; Göttlich, 2015: 47). However, the idea that waiting means doing nothing and that it is non-action is not quite true. When waiting is approached on a micro-sociological level with actual instances of waiting observed in detail, we see that when people wait, they are in fact doing many things: reading, browsing their telephones, walking around, and so on (e.g., Hirschauer, 1999; Ehn and Löfgren, 2010; Ayass, 2015). This paper focuses on these instances of waiting.

In various sociological and philosophical definitions (see Göttlich, 2015 for an overview), waiting is typically described as invoking two different time frames or courses of action. On the one hand, there is the activity that a person wants to do or attempts to do, such as keeping a doctor’s appointment or buying a product. On the other hand, the intended activity is postponed or interrupted by another time frame, for example, the doctor being preoccupied with a previous patient or another customer is already at the counter. Thus, the first activity is suspended, resulting in the person sitting in a waiting room or standing in line.

In institutional contexts, waiting is typically an activity required of the non-professional participant or the customer (e.g., Laurier et al., 2001; Brown, 2004; Richardson and Stokoe, 2014). This article concentrates on a different kind of waiting: waiting as a professional practice performed by a salesperson while the customer chooses a product. In such cases, waiting is a form of availability on the part of the salesperson, who nevertheless maintains some discretion. Detailed multimodal analysis of waiting shows that it involves systematic employment of embodied resources, such as standing and holding the arms in a particular way and withdrawing the gaze. Through such gestures, the salesperson carefully signals availability to the customer while simultaneously avoiding the initiation of any action or exerting pressure.

In conversation analysis (CA), waiting is typically observed within the context of some larger activity. For example, Richardson and Stokoe (2014) show how customers wait their turn to be served in a bar. Once the customers are served, a) the

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