SYRIAN SERVICE ENCOUNTERS: A CASE OF SHIFTING STRATEGIES WITHIN VERBAL EXCHANGE

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Abstract

This paper deals with interaction in Arabic (Syrian dialect). It is based on a corpus of service encounters, more precisely "shop encounters", which were recorded in small shops in Damascus. The characteristics of this type of interaction will be summarised in the first part of the paper. The analysis will concentrate on the pragmatic level, i.e. speech acts and speech activities, the description of which will pay particular attention to interpersonal relationships. The methodological approach adopted in this analysis will describe "from the inside" the way in which each recorded conversation unfolds. Therefore, it does not correspond to a straightforward cross-cultural approach (even if, from time to time, reference to similar French situations is made). The paper's main aim is to highlight the double-faceted nature of the recorded conversations, and to examine the overall representation of interaction in relation to its actual temporal unfolding.

Keywords: Talk-in-interaction, Service encounter, Arabic, Speech acts, Speech activities, Ritual, "Challenging exchanges".

1. Shop encounters: Defining the field

1.1. Main features

Shop encounters can be broadly defined as conversations between people who gather in a specific setting for a transactional exchange. Different studies have brought to the fore the main features of this type of interaction (see particularly Aston 1988). They can be

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1 A research field in which, to our knowledge, few studies have been carried out until now. Several works are nevertheless useful in such an approach, even if not based on naturally occurring interactions: In addition to learners' books and conversation books, there are studies on the structure of greeting exchanges (Ferguson 1981), studies on Arabic (Morocco) and American politeness formulas (Davies 1987), Safadi and Valentine's study (1990) on non-verbal and paraverbal aspects of communication in America and in the Arab world. There's also Hopper & Koleilat Doanny's paper (1989) on phone calls in Lebanon, Piamenta's work (1979) which is partly based on radiophonic interactions, and Suleiman (ed.) (1996), Parkinson (1985) on terms of address.

2 This study is a part of a research programme carried out by the Research Group on Communicative Interaction, Lyon. It compares the interaction in shop encounters in two areas: Variations according to the type of shop and those linked to culture (cf. Traverso ed., 2000; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2001; Traverso 2001a, 2001b).
summarised using four main sub-titles.

(1) *The "string of actions".*
First of all, shop encounters belong to a category of interaction in which material actions (entering the shop, choosing, weighing, paying, etc.) constitute the significant context as well as the pertinent analysis unit (Goffman 1987). As a consequence, talking is not necessary during the entire duration of the participants' co-presence, as is shown by the frequent silences, which correspond to the carrying out of concrete actions. It is even possible that everything occur in total silence, for instance, in the case where daily low-priced, labelled items (like cigarettes or bread) are purchased in a shop, or, more frequently, in a self-service store (see below, 1.2).

(2) *The routinized linking of actions.*
Another characteristic of service encounters is the high regularity in the linking of one action to the following one. This regularity facilitates the task of identifying the script for the transaction, whose basic recurrent sequence is the customer's request and the shopkeeper's response.\(^3\)

(3) *The heterogeneity of verbal exchanges.*
Some service encounters can include, before, after, or during the transaction itself, exchanges that may be not thematically linked to the action in progress. These exchanges are described as constituting social niceties, be they the "civility dimension" (Goffman 1969: 383) or the "interactional dimension" (Aston 1988: 75sq). They can be divided into two categories: One being the quite obligatory opening and closing sequences of the interaction that depend on the ritual dimension itself. The second category is an "out-of-transaction" exchange which contains optional conversational developments that can occur in the course of the encounter.

(4) *Complementarity.*
Finally, a structuring feature found in this type of exchange is a particular type of "asymmetry." Using Markova and Foppa's definition: "We propose to use 'asymmetry' as a general term referring to various sorts of inequivalences in dialogue processes" (1991: 4), this paper's use of "asymmetry" in shop encounter will be "extrinsic" (*ibid.*: 10) and termed "complementarity". This is particularly obvious on the level of roles, where each participant is expected to assume a set of specific tasks that are complementary to those of the interlocutor, and that correspond to the two *contractual roles*\(^4\) of customer and shopkeeper (ie.: Requesting and paying for the former and welcoming, proposing, serving, counselling for the latter). Complementarity is also displayed on the spatial and temporal levels. The temporal unfolding of such an interaction is often made up of a "together time" generally accompanied by verbal exchange, to which is added "apart time" for the two participants: While the client is queuing up, the shopkeeper is bustling about; while a hesitating customer is choosing, the salesperson is kept waiting. Similarly, the spatial set-up of a shop

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\(^3\) See Ventola (1983), or Meritt (1976) for instance.

\(^4\) Contractual in the sense that they correspond to the "communicative contract" within the situation.
assigns complementary places to the participants: Some areas are off limits to customers, be it explicitly as with the storage area, or the back room to which customers do not even have visual access, or tacitly as is the case with the area located behind the counter.

1.2. Elements for a typology

Taking into account a general typology that distinguishes between shop encounters on the basis of minimal oppositions can refine this first overview further:

(1) **Open / closed settings**
This opposition distinguishes the small corner shop (like the one described by Mayol 1980 from the open marketplace (cf. Lindenfeld 1990). This distinction will influence the choice of specific conversational styles.

(2) **Type of products purchased**
Whether it is foodstuffs or everyday consumer products that are bought (or not) will have an influence upon several levels of the exchange: On its frequency (is it an everyday interaction or an unusual one?), on its degree of routinisation, on the types of verbal activities that are accomplished, and on the extent to which talk is expected (for example, selling/buying a computer requires more talk than selling/buying a newspaper).

(3) **Type of sales outlet**, i.e., self-service stores versus other venues.
Self-service (markets or supermarkets) makes for a situation where the customer walks around, and where the actual interaction is often reduced to paying. This action may not even take place at all if the customer goes out without having purchased anything (what we could call an "ambulatory" setting). In a non self-service store, conversely, the setting directs the customer rapidly towards a face-to-face interaction (or a queue). In such a "canalised" setting, the customer's presence is automatically interpreted as a request for interaction.

NB. Although the above external features help distinguish various aspects of this type of exchange, they probably do not describe the complete external framing of the situation, the characteristics of which need to be identified using a dominant model. In Syria, for instance, where the (still) dominant model is not self-service, numerous groceries have the following characteristics: The settings are small, the products are on display but most of them are out of reach and the number of service-offerers is high. Consequently, the unfolding of a conversation frequently contains various stages in which different participants are involved: The customers address their request to the cashier (who is generally the boss), then either the cashier indicates to them where the product is to be found or he asks an assistant to get it or to carry out the necessary actions (weighting, cutting, wrapping, etc.). Thus, in this type of shop, not only does the script of the conversation encompass additional steps, but the participation framework is also more

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5 Cf. Merritt who defines a service setting as "that part of a service where a customer’s presence functions as a summons for the server’s attention" (1976: 321).
complex than the ordinary bilogal format.

2. Describing Syrian shop encounters

The following analysis is based on data recorded in Damascus. I will first present the specificity of the shops that have been chosen as fieldwork sites, with reference to the typology above, and then define the methodological approach used in this paper.

2.1. The data

The data was collected in three busy shopping districts of Damascus: Two are situated in the modern city and one in the old city (the latter being commonly referred to as "souks" by French and English speakers). The corpus contains 17 interactions that make up about 6 hours of recording. All the recordings were made in the same way: I accompanied a Syrian friend, sometimes with her mother, while she/they shopped. The microphone was hidden in my bag. Thus, my two customer-friends were aware of my recording them, while the shopkeepers were not. I tried as much as possible to remain silent, in order to avoid sequences of native/non-native talk.

The shops where the recordings were made were shoe-shops, clothes-shops, sewing-shops, jewellers, cosmetics and toiletry shops. With reference to our typology, all were small closed locations, selling non-foodstuff products. These products were not destined for immediate consumption and self-service was not an option. In all cases, the salesperson is either a craftsman or he is in direct contact with the manufacturer: His expertise is, hence, linked not only to the selling business, but also to the making of the products. Because of these features, the choice was made to refer to this participant as the "shop-keeper" not the "shop-assistant".

With respect to verbal activity, these types of shops can be qualified as:

- "Lengthy exchange stores", ie. stores where the customer generally stays a rather long time, as he chooses the product according to a wide range of rather complex criteria (size, colour, comfort, price, taste, etc.). Furthermore, most of the time this choice implies that the product is tried on.

- "Speech intensive stores": Because of the multi-criteria based choice, the two participants are generally expected to talk (explain, describe, give advice, justify a choice or a refusal, etc.) in order to complete the transaction.

The data also contain interviews that were recorded at two different stages of this analysis: Firstly, for the completion of the written corpus, when my transcription and translation were checked and discussed with a native speaker, and, secondly, after the completed analysis, when I discussed my interpretation of various phenomena with native speakers.
2.2. Methodology

This paper wishes to explain and clarify the internal logic of the interactional activities achieved by the participants. As an analyst of data in a foreign language, I will try to define the methodological stance I have thus adopted in relation to both cross-cultural analysis and intercultural analysis.

It would be incorrect to state that the angle I have chosen has no link at all with cross-cultural approaches. Indeed, my representation of the topic under analysis will unavoidably include my own cultural grid of references. Hence, a given phenomenon will be interpreted according to expectations such as "normal", "bizarre", "unexpected" etc. In the study, this background reference will need, from time to time, to be made explicit. The two methods nevertheless differ. First, in the collecting of the data. In a cross-cultural analysis, collecting has to be done in accordance with a "comparativity principle". Several differences would have made holding onto this principle difficult in our case, for instance, there is the fact that in France shop-keepers and shop-assistants in this type of shop (especially shoe-shops, feminine clothes-shops, cosmetics and toiletries shops) are mostly women, which is rarely the case in Syria (and not at all the case in the data). This difference combined with gender relationship variations in the two cultures would have raised difficulties in the comparison: For instance, a Syrian shoe-shop keeper does not kneel down and help the customer to fit the shoes on. Is this because this custom is not in usage or because the client is a woman? In the analysis itself, the main difference between the two approaches is linked to a description perspective. In an internal non-cross-cultural approach such as mine, the researcher is "freed" from the necessity of describing in terms of similarities and differences, as would be the case in a strict cross-cultural analysis, and he/she can thus concentrate on the actual processes within the foreign interaction. It could be argued that, with these two perspectives, it probably would not be the same phenomena that the researcher's attention would be drawn to.

On the other hand, the approach of describing data in a foreign language also offers similarities with "intercultural approaches", i.e. with the description of intercultural encounters. Indeed, the data is, as far as possible, culturally homogeneous, while the analysis itself can be considered a kind of intercultural encounter in its own right. By this I mean that my preliminary representation of "shop encounters" was both challenged and, little by little, modified, as I attempted to understand the internal logic of the actions. In the analysis of my Syrian corpus, what I knew and understood to be "shop encounters" (both as a French customer and as an analyst of French conversational style), was strongly and regularly called into question by the occurrence of unexpected, amusing or undecipherable "moments". The discovery of these "moments" within the conversations was the driving force behind this paper.

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6 In the very broad sense that it does not contain native/non native interactions. With respect to subcultures, it is of course not homogenous.

7 This "deferred" encounter also reminded me of my own face-to-face interactions as a foreign customer in Syria, and the analysis threw light on their definitely atypical feature.
3. A double-faceted exchange

My analysis focuses on the two opposite impressions given by the interactions of the corpora that result from the presence of two contrasted facets in the participants' interactional behaviour. These two facets will be described successively. The first one is linked to the way in which the ongoing activity is continuously categorised and codified by the use of specific verbal devices; the second concerns the activity of challenging and negotiating which appears to be a regular feature within the recorded conversations.

3.1. A highly codified exchange

Shop encounters are known for the recurrent verbal patterns that characterise them, partly due to their predictable unfolding (script). On the level of verbal formulation, these patterns are often accomplished via the use of routine formulae, i.e. "expressions whose occurrence is closely bound to specific social situations and which are, on the basis of an evaluation of such situations, highly predictable in a communicative course of events. Their meaning is pragmatically conditioned, and their usage is motivated by the relevant characteristics of such social situations" (Coulmas 1979: 240). The specificity of the recorded Syrian conversations is due to the fact that this situation-linked feature also includes the widespread use of ritual formulae used in any everyday interaction. So, many of the basic verbal activities regularly achieved in a shop encounter come in the form of ritual formulae or at least accompanied by such formulae. In other words, the repetitive and stereotyped feature of the interaction is displayed via expressions that are not only recurrent, fossilised and situation-linked, but also present a symbolic function on the relational level of common daily social intercourse.

(1) Access routines

The opening sequence of a shop-based interaction is, therefore, characterised by the production of specific speech acts (greetings) that are achieved using specific formulae. It develops through the sequencing pattern of adjacency pairs. In our situation, the basic greeting exchange is:

(1) C  jaštīk l-ṣāfje
SK  ʔahlēn
C  (God) give you health
SK  welcome [DUAL]

This exchange is present in all the conversations recorded for the data. Either the customer or the shopkeeper will initiate it, and the sequencing only depends on conditional relevance: i.e. once one of the two moves is produced, the other has to be produced. The main point here is that, in contrast to French greetings, for instance, each move is role-linked.

The customer's move '(God) give you health' (jaštīk al-ṣāfje) is described by

8 Ferguson’s translation is "(God) give you strength" (1967: 41).
Ferguson as: "A greeting or expression of encouragement to someone who is engaged in an arduous task or about to undertake one." (1967: 41). In our situation, this formula makes explicit the fact that the recipient (the shopkeeper) is at work.

In Ferguson's description, the formula is also presented as one requiring a "root-echo response": " [...] the invariable response is "God strengthen you" (الله يفعلك) (ibid.). In shop encounters, the second move is achieved rather by the "welcoming response" (اهلاً). This preference stresses another feature of the situation: The shopkeeper occupies and stays in the space that the customer visits. The "welcoming response" presents various morphological forms (complete or shortened, singular or dual) constructed around the standard Arabic form اهلاً وسهلاً. It can also be prefaced with the vocative particle يا. The most frequent in the data is the dual, shortened form, اهلاً, as in excerpt 1.

This basic greeting exchange is frequently strengthened by additional formulae: The customer may for instance produce two successive greetings within the same turn:

(2) C1 .marhaba jaftik al-rafe
hello (God) give you health

and the shopkeeper can repeat the welcoming formula in two different forms:

(3) Hamidiyyeh, material shop 5
SK اهلً وسهلاً يا اهلاً
welcome [DUAL COMPLETE FORM] welcome [VOCATIVE PARTICLE + DUAL SHORTENED FORM]

Such a greeting exchange is the first occasion for the participants to collaborate in giving verbal expression to the complementarity of the situation in which they are involved: One participant is at work, one participant is in his proper place and welcomes the other.

(2) Welcoming and offering service
The greeting exchange, be it basic or strengthened, is frequently accompanied by other formulae uttered by the shopkeeper, by which he invites the customer to enter and he offers up his service. These formulae are illustrated in the following excerpt, where two greeting exchanges (lines 1, 2, 3), two invitations to enter (line 3), the customer's request (line 4), and the acknowledgment of the request (line 5) are found in succession:

(4) Jisr, clothes-shop 5, opening sequence
1 SK اهل
2 C1 .marhaba jaftik al-rafe
3 SK اهلً وسهلاً فاولني تعاذالي
4 C2 al-bluz jilli [ (inaud.)
5 SK یاراسي تعاذالي

9 I do not intend to review the multiple possible uses of this highly "multi-functional" formula, that can achieve a wish, a greeting, etc. See Traverso (1998).
10 The next act produced by the customer is generally the request, which in spite of being routinized is not a ritual act.
Every one of these verbal acts comes in the form of a specific formula.

The invitation to enter (line 3) is uttered twice, using two different formulae. The first invitation is achieved by the verb ḥurfī, 'honor (me/us)' [derived on the root ẓrif, 'honor', in imperative mood, feminine singular]. The second is tfadqāli, 'If you please' [derived on the root ẓfdl, 'kindness, graciousness', in imperative mood, feminine singular]. In the more popular of the three districts (the souks), the welcoming sequence frequently contains, as well, an invitation to sit down and to rest:

5 Hamidiyyeh, cosmetics shop, the shop is at the first floor
SK2 ʔahlēn tfadqāli / ʔistrīḥi ʕājni
welcome [DUAL COMPLETE FORM] if you please rest a little "my eye"

The offer of service can be achieved by several formulae, all signifying 'willingly' or 'at your service': ʕala rāʔi u-ʕājni (lit. 'on my head and eye'), ʕala rāʔi (lit. 'on my head'), ʕala ʕājni (lit. 'on my eye'). One of the regular localisations for this formula is the immediate turn after the request. Its occurrence in excerpt 4, line 5, clearly shows that its value is much more ritualistic than informative (ie. acknowledgment), as the customer's request is "acknowledged" without having been completed (overlapping l.5). This formula may be repeated by the shopkeeper throughout the customer's deliberations.

(3) The blessing exchange linked to the buying of the product
A specific formula is produced, in this type of shop, when the transaction is successful via the "mabruk formula". It takes place as a turn that follows the customer's agreeing to buy the product, and is frequently repeated in the closing sequence:

6 Hamra, shoe-shop
C ʔe māfį-bajdā lakān
SK ʔajj wabdē
C ʔajj
-> SK māfį (.) mabrūk

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11 Term of address from the "affective category", see below. On terms of address in Arabic, see Parkinson (1985) and Braun (1988).
12 Translation proposed by McLoughlin (1993). In Hans Wehr dictionary (1980): "very gladly!", "just as you wish!", "at your service".
13 This formula is very widely used in addressing someone who has just got or obtained something new (a new car, house, clothes, or any kind of success).
This exchange is composed of a blessing formula in the first turn that is reciprocated in the second turn in a typical "root-echo response" format, on the root  ❯ brk, 'blessing, benediction': mabrûk —  ❯ alla ibârik fiʾk, 'may it (this pair of shoes) be blessed — God bless you'.

(4) Payment
Whereas in France the exchange of money is commonly a rather "mute" one, or at least only constituted, on the verbal level, by the announcement of the price by the shopkeeper and by reciprocal thanks, in Syria, on the contrary, a specialised formula is frequently used even for everyday low-price purchases:

(7) Hamra, shoe-shop, the two customers are paying

-> SK (to C1) hajj 4 mwwaadān [.] (to C2) hajj 200 mwwaadān
C1 ʾufran
SK ʾahlēn
SK mabrūkīn
C2 ʾalla ibârik fiʾk

Translation
-> SK (to C1) here [are] 4 [be they] compensated [to you] (. ) (to C2) here [are] 200 [be they] compensated [to you]
C1 ʾufran
SK ʾahlēn
SK may they (the two pairs of shoes) be blessed
C2 God bless you

The initial move refers to receiving money from someone within the transaction, and the response move is a thank-you.

(5) Closing routines
When the transaction has been successful, the "mabruk exchange" is repeated in the closing sequence (as in excerpt 7), of which it becomes the main act. The other ritual exchanges found in the closing sequence are:

— Thanking exchange. It is initiated by the customer, who uses the form ʾufran, 'thanks', or, more frequently, a wish: jislamu ḥâdeḵun, 'be your hands preserved' (or its variants jislamu, 'be they preserved', jislamu ha-l-iḏān, 'be these hands preserved'). This wish refers to the actions that have been carried out by the shopkeeper; thus it cannot be reciprocated in the same form (it is role-linked). The response move of the exchange tikrami, 'be you
honoured', is a verb in the optative mood, derived from the root √krm, 'generosity, high-mindedness';

— Closing exchange. It is composed of the customer's move jaṣṭik al-Ṭā‘īj (God) give you health', that is answered by the shopkeeper in the form of the "root-echo response" ʿalla jatientik, 'God strengthen your health'.

— At the very end of the interaction the shopkeeper utters, as a final turn, a wishing formula specialised for the one who stays in the place where an encounter has taken place: maṭa s-salāme, 'peace by you' or ʿalla maṣek, 'God by you'.

(8) Hamidiyyeh, jeweller's 1

C1 jislamu
SK tikrami Ṭajni
C2 jukran
SK tikrami
C1 jaṭīk al-Ṭā‘īj
-> SK ʿalla-jatientik maṭa s-salāme

Translation

C1 be they [your hands] preserved
SK be you honoured "my eye"
C2 thank you
SK be you honoured
C1 (God) give you health
-> SK God strengthen your health peace by you

Several comments should be made at this point. First of all, it is clear that the professional interlocutor in the interaction produces most of the ritual work. This cannot be considered as culturally specific: The study carried out in Lyons on French shop encounters has shown that the salesperson generally produces twice as many ritual acts (thanks, leave-taking expressions and good wishes) as the customer. Concerning this point, which can be called "expected politeness", the fact that the "ritual investment" of the encounter is not the same on both sides can be considered a situational feature.

Our brief summary shows that, in Syria, the ritual formulae signal the successive steps in the script of the interaction in a very precise way: Opening sequence, welcoming, offer of service, acknowledgment of the request, agreement for buying, exchange of money, closing sequence. In addition to this "punctuating" function, the formulae also give information on different aspects of the situation. If they have undoubtedly lost their initial semantic meaning, they nevertheless keep a relatively precise range of relational and situational meanings (in contrast to similar formulae in French, such as the greeting formulae bonjour or adieu, for instance). They may indicate spatial localisation of the participants (who is standing in the location in which the other arrives), ongoing activity and asymmetrical aspect of the roles involved in it.

It must be emphasised that this use of rituals is linked to the type of store we are dealing with (ie. "lengthy exchange stores" and "speech intensive stores"). By contrast, at the grocer's, for instance (ie. in a "short-interaction store", selling everyday foodstuffs), it is usual that the conversation begins directly with the customer's request, and ends without
any formulae. Even in our situation, some of the rituals are more systematically produced than others. The opening and closing exchanges are found in all the recorded conversations and seem to be compulsory, whereas the welcoming formulae and the offer of service are less frequent; the "mabrouk exchange" is produced every time a purchase is completed, but the "compensatory" exchange is not.

Another particularity of these exchanges is the fact that ritual formulae systematically elicit an appropriate verbal response. This seems to be a recurrent feature in the recorded Syrian conversations and contrasts strongly with what happens in France, where ritual exchanges are regularly truncated. In Syria, completeness is the rule.

Finally, a comment on the use of terms of address is in order as they offer up important clues on how the participants define each situation and their relationship within it. Terms of address are very frequent in Middle East exchanges. Although their paradigm contains only one specific category (the kunja, absent in French and in English, like Abu Ali, 'father of Ali'), the shared categories are used in a much more varied way than is the case in French. In the data, the terms of address are all uttered by the shopkeeper, none by the customers (and fall into the following categories: "Endearment category", ex. "my eyes", 48%, "Madam category", 30%, "family category", ex. "my sister", 17%). This clear-cut distribution is in itself a clue to the asymmetry of the situation.

3.2. Challenging: A reoccurring activity within the recorded conversations

The tendency to challenge during shop encounters is another frequently occurring activity. It is not, however, systematic in the same way as with ritualistic formulae, ie. whereas strong codification is a regular feature of all the conversations in the corpus, the challenging activity occurs only when they are prolonged. It is the general case, but not systematic. Two interactions recorded in the data are very short and proceed in the following way: The customers enter the shop, ask for a product, are told that it is not available, and quickly go away. More often, the interaction goes on for longer (whether the first requested product is available or not) via the use of a range of sequences, in which the main verbal activity is "challenging". Amongst challenging activities, the first that probably comes to mind relating to the Middle East is explicit bargaining, occurring in a wide range of situations.

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14 This feature has also been identified in a totally different type of linguistic exchange (radio phone-ins) and can be seen as constituting a specific type of stereotype in the construction of verbal exchanges. (Traverso, forthcoming).

15 Braun (1988). Terms like 'darling', 'sweetheart', etc., indicate proximity and affectivity. Their use is generally restricted in France to parents or relatives, whereas in the Middle-East they are frequently used in service encounters.

16 I call "Madam category" the type of terms of address that are no longer used as titles, like the French 'monsieur', or the English 'Madam'. In the Middle-East, this category encompasses two series, one with the Arabic terms ('sitt', 'Madam' or 'sayyid', "sir"), the other made of the equivalent borrowed words 'Madam'.

17 "Kinship terms" for Braun (ibid.). Terms like 'daddy', 'mum', 'auntie', etc., that refer to a familial relationship, are frequently used in Middle-East in a metaphorical way for everyday relationships with anybody. In this type of usage, they are chosen according to gender and age.

18 In one conversation in the corpora, the shopkeeper is in fact the customer's uncle, and the use of terms of address is reversed: i.e. the shopkeeper does not use any, whereas the customer does.
It is nevertheless not on these sequences\(^{19}\) that this analysis will be focusing, but rather on other forms of challenging that occur independent of the customer's decision to buy.

### 3.2.1. Challenging related to the product

Challenging over the product is a regular activity found in the recorded conversations. It is carried out in exchanges that have a recognisable structure, starting with a negative assessment uttered by the customer over the goods on sale. It proceeds in the following manner:

C negative assessment  
SK reply  
C upholding and support of the negative assessment

Such a three-move exchange gives the exchange the form of a "pro/con discourse" (for example: "This is solid / this is not solid"), in which each participant argues towards opposite positions, as in excerpt (9):

\(^{19}\) They are described in Traverso 2001b.
Translation

1 CD have you got skirts?
2 SK sorry
3 CD skirts […]
-> 4 CM the skirts you have are fine but the lining is of very bad quality\(^{20}\) the second time you wear it it tears
5 SK why?
6 CM w-alla now "that means" only uh the lining (.) the material [is] of good quality\(^{21}\) but the lining of very very bad quality
7 CD (searching the changing room) here?
8 SK yes
9 (CD enters the changing room Silence)
10 CM that means you are being generous in taking money from me (inaud.) well buy lining of good quality
11 (Silence. The shop-keeper phones. Silence)
12 CM four skirts all of them the second time you wear it the lining tears
13 SC well why the lining [was] tight "that means"?
14 CM yes a little tight "that means" in comparison with the skirt (.) much tighter than the skirt perhaps that's the reason (.) and its material [is] of bad quality []
15 SC [well the lining []
16 SM ["that means" like a paper as soon as you make that you find it tearing
17 SC well the lining (.) [is] foreign (.) I myself have it come [from abroad] madam
18 (he switches the radio on)
19 CM what?
20 SC here it comes as foreign stuff we fit it in (.) the lining
21 CM no
22 SC what no? now I'll show it to you
23 CM no wa- bad quality (Ind.)
24 SC all of it [][Ind.]
25 CM [myself I know because I buy [regularly] from you []
26 SC [we are not disagreeing\(^{22}\)]
27 CM (Ind.) "that means" how much I have been buying from you
28 SC look at it (.) the lining that I've got (.) on all the colours (.) here [is] a skirt touch it from the beginning to the end [it is] the same lining (silence)

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\(^{20}\) Litt. "very tired".
\(^{21}\) Litt. "heavy material".
\(^{22}\) "mā χταλάνα" is a very common discourse marker.
The basic structure of critical exchanges is easily identified in this sequence:

CM lines 4, 6, 10, and 12, negative assessment: "you have bad quality lining"
SC line 13, reply: "it [this skirt] was too tight" (ie. it is not a question of quality but a question of size)
CM upholding of the criticism, line 14

In this excerpt, the shop-keeper seems to participate in this interactional game with a minimum of involvement. Although he answers the customer's talk, he deals with it speaking warily, delaying his turn to respond directly (line 5), then he makes a phonecall instead of answering (line 11). After a first reply and an explanation obtained finally (line 17), he turns the radio on quite loudly, thus provoking a disruption in the communication. This non-cooperative behaviour does not prevent CM from upholding her negative statements continuously until the shopkeeper succeeds in provoking a topic shift (line 28). In spite of this minimal involvement, many devices used in this excerpt are representative of what happens in a challenging exchange.

We find:

- The repetition of one's own position (7 occurrences of the assertion 'the lining is of bad quality')
- The continuous support of this position without taking into account the addressee's contribution in the exchange (line 6)
- Directness in the formulation of face-threatening speech acts (line 4 'the lining is of very bad quality', 'the lining of very very bad quality', line 6). By using a formulation that is devoid of any face-work device, the customer defines the speech activity that is being initiated as possessing its own rules with respect to the way in which the participants will treat one another. She thus produces a clue indicating that the usual avoidance or redress of FTAs is momentarily suspended. Directness in formulations is used throughout the sequence (ex.: The challenge on the quality/price link, line 10, the use of the imperative, etc.).
- The repetitive use of a non-preferential response, for instance:

  20 SK here coming from outside we fit it in the lining
  -> 21 CM no
  22 SK what no now I show it to you
  -> 23 CM no wa-lla bad quality (inaud.)

23 A more detailed analysis of the rhetorical aspects of these exchanges is presented in Traverso (2002).
Here both the truth of the shopkeeper’s talk (the lining material is imported) and its relevance in the ongoing exchange are challenged.

Frequently, when the participants are both prone to spending time talking, these sequences also display a game-like feature and exploit language itself as a resource:

(10) \textit{Jisr, shoe-shop, two customers, the mother (CM) and her (adult) daughter (CD) with the shop-keeper (SK)}

\begin{verbatim}
1 CM (to CD, about the shoes that she is looking at) mitēl kandartek taba娴 al-šām 2-әla-mādi [(.) hadīk jilli kənti ?āxāditājā u-rāh kaʿībā]
2 CD [hm hm]
3 SK hadīk yajr al-modēl hadāk
4 CM (to CD, without paying attention to the shop-keeper's talk) jūfijā [.] mū hajj
5 CD ma baʃrif
6 SK madām modēlō mitēl hāda jilli ?āxādetō kandarta (.) ?al-kaʃb әm-mdawwər
7 CM (to CD) ?ē lēkā (.) hajj
8 SK (LAUGHTER) hajj modēl u-hadīk modēl kƏlī jī ?ilō tarkīb
9 CM ?ē hajj mitēl hajj jilli ?āxādetā
10 SK ?ē (.) yajr modēl kullijan (.) jū faṭētā? ?ana faṭētā yajr fī
11 CM kaʃbā bībəja faʃnī
12 SK jīn faʃtī?
13 CM waʃla səʃto tār ṭartēn maʃhā
14 CD (LAUGHTER) tār ṭartēn
15 SK ?iza hijje bəthārībh ?ana jū ?aʃməl ?
16 CD lā mə biʃhārəb bəmʃjī
17 SK bəmʃjī (.) ʃūfī hajj mnəʃəqat, fī minnō ?ala bənnī ?iza [baddik
18 CM [m bəddī bənnī (.’)
\end{verbatim}

Translation

\begin{verbatim}
1 CM (to CD, about a pair of shoes that she is looking at) [they are] like your last year’s shoes [ (.) which you bought and whose heel has gone
2 CD [hm hm]
3 SK this one [is] another model than that one [those of last year]24
4 CM (to CD, without paying attention to the shop-keeper's talk) look (.) isn't it this one?
5 CD I don’t know
6 SK madam the model of these ones is like the one she took (her sandals) the heel [is] round
7 CM (to CD) yes look (.) [it is] this one
8 SK (LAUGHTER) this is a model and that is a model (.) everything has its own structure
9 CM this [is] like the one she bought
10 SK yeah (.) it [is] a totally different model (.) what did I give her? I gave her something else
11 CM that means that their heels [will] stay
12 SK how do you find them?
\end{verbatim}

24 The pronouns are “distal demonstratives” (as opposed to “proximal demonstratives”, cf. Cowell 1964: 552). In the context, the first can be interpreted as referring to the shoes that the participants are talking about (which are on display), and the second to last year’s shoes.
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13 CM w-alla I've seen them fly away twice with her
14 CD (LAUGHTER) fly away twice
15 SK if she makes war what can I do myself?
16 CD no I don't make war I just walk
17 SK you walk (.) look at these the [polka] dotted ones they come in brown if you [like
18 CM [I don't want brown

The pro/con discourse situation is being set between lines 1 and 8. Then, for a time, the customer supports her position while the shopkeeper strengthens his with the help of utterances of a general nature (ex. line 9: 'everything has its [own] structure'), and strengthened utterances (ex. line 10: 'it [is] a totally different model'). Insofar as each participant sticks to their position and keeps repeating the same statement, the exchange has no way of progressing. It then transforms into a sort of verbal sparring match, where the issue of the veracity or falsity of the initial assessment is abandoned and the verbal challenge becomes the main purpose in itself. This verbal sparring match, at the end of which one will win and the other will give up, is characterised by the use of games using the language itself. In our example, the mutation between transactional talk and the verbal sparring match starts at line 11 ('that means that its heels [will] stay'). Afterwards the exchange is built with outmatching devices and several plays on words are used.

For example:

- Lines 12-13, play on the concrete ('to see', 'to perceive') vs abstract ('to find' in an attributive construction) meanings of the verb $\text{fāf}$: 'how do you find ($\text{fāf}$) them? — (w-alla) I've seen ($\text{fāf}$) them fly away twice with her',

- Lines 13-14, the metaphorical use of the verb $\text{fār}$, whose literal meaning is 'to fly, to fly away'. If, in some contexts, it may also signify 'to go away', in this excerpt, it seems to be heard as a vivid metaphor and, as such, makes the recipient laugh.

Starting with a criticism, challenging sequences develop up in a recurring structure. In addition to their material stake, they also present, when all the participants are prone to spending time discussing, a more symbolic stake, in which an important skill has to be displayed: Their quickness at repartee.

3.2.2. Challenging exchanges on expertise

A second kind of challenge within our shop encounters revolves around the notion of expertise. During the exchanges, the shopkeeper represents, not only the person who sells the material product, but also the person who possesses expertise on the product and can give advice (Goffman, 1969). On the other hand, the customer can also be considered an expert in so far as only they know what they want or like. In the data, the issue of expertise frequently arises and, in the course of challenging exchanges, it may become a central topic, be it in an implicit or explicit manner, as in excerpt (11):

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25 It is especially the case in our corpora where the shop-keeper is often also the manufacturer.
There is negative assessment (line 1), a reply (line 2), and support (line 3). The topic of expertise is explicitly stated (line 5) by the shopkeeper, in order to assert that he is the expert. Very quickly, the customer gives up (line 6), and everyone returns to their original positions. In excerpt (12), it is the customer's lack of expertise that becomes the topic.

The three main components of the already-scrutinised challenging exchanges are also present in this excerpt: There is negative assessment (line 1), a reply (line 2), and support (line 3). The topic of expertise is explicitly stated (line 5) by the shopkeeper, in order to assert that he is the expert. Very quickly, the customer gives up (line 6), and everyone returns to their original positions. In excerpt (12), it is the customer's lack of expertise that becomes the topic.

(11) Jisr, shoe-shop 1, over a pair of shoes
1 CM mû ẓələd höða ʕala mʃəmaʕ
2 SK ẓələd ẓələd mā fi mʃəmaʕ ʕəndi
- 3 CM lēkā ʕafiatā ʕala mʃəmaʕ ʔana
   (silence)
5 SK ?ē fi ʔantī jaʔnī ?(.) lēj ʔantī jaʔnī btaʃrifī bi-ʃ[-m]aʃlah [-a] ?(.) ẓələd ʔabiʔi
   fari
6 CM jaʔnī ẓələd lamnii( .) bətlaʃjēf taʃrif ʔək ʕəm bəʔəl-lak
7 SK ?ë: bass mū mʃəmaʕ mā ʕəndi mʃəmaʕ( .) mā bəl-wā 1-mʃəmaʕ bi-məhəlli
8 CM (to CD, in a low voice, about another pair of shoes) bass hayj mā btaʃla
   ʕalēki

Translation
1 CM [it is] not leather [that it is] artificial
2 SK leather, leather there is no artificial by me [in my shop]
- 3 CM look at them I see them artificial myself
   (silence)
5 SK well what you "that means" ?(.) why you "that means" you know about
   the craft? (.) natural leather honour me [and look] (he gives her the shoe)
6 CM that means shiny leather (. ) you have it shined it's what I'm telling you
7 SK yes but not artificial I have no artificial (. ) I don't get artificial goods in
   my shop
8 CM (to CD, in a low voice, about another pair of shoes) but that will not last
   long with you […]

(12) Hamidiyyeh, a cosmetics shop. After a long discussion, the customers (a Syrian girl, C1, and myself, C2) agree on buying the proposed product (khôl). Their debate within the discussion concerned the quality of the product, and especially the fact that it was not wrapped as it is usually, but simply put in a small plastic bag
1 C2 ʔē ʕatjeb
2 C1 māʃī m nāʔzod wāhde
- 3 SK1 (to C1) ʔantī bint af-ʃām lâzim tafri fi (. ) mu min-af-ʃām ḥaʔdərtek ?
   (silence)
5 SK1 ʔē lázim taʃrifī lakan
6 C1 ʔē bass ʔawal marra bʃūfā ʔək bi-kīs (. ) bi-ʃ[-l]aʃde blaʃijā bi-ʃeqbe
7 SK1 bihaṭ tɔhā (. ) fī ʔalăm bithɔttə bi-ʃdaʔa w-ʃibbifik jahā ʔək
8 C1 ʔē
9 SK1 bass fī huwwe l-ʔuʃūl (. ) lázim ʃeqi ʃihje la-ʃahl w-ʃihje la-ʃahl
10 SK2 łaʔkin ʔeqi ʔək al-ʔuʃūl
11 SK1 al-mǎdāʔa bəddek jā ?

26 Passive participle of the verb ʃəmamaʕ, "to shine sth." (Litt. "to wax"). I propose the translation "artificial", as mʃəmaʕ which refers in the above to shiny artificial (plastic) stuff.
**Translation**

1 C2 yes well
2 C1 it’s okay we’ll take one

-> 3 SK2 (to C1) you’re a girl from Cham? you have to know (. ) aren’t you from Cham “your presence”?
4 C1 of course [I am]

-> 5 SK2 yes you have to know then
6 C1 yes but [it is] the first time [that] I see it like that in a bag (. ) generally I find it in a box

7 SK? they put it (. ) some people put it in a box and sell it like that
8 C1 yes
9 SKx but there are principles (. ) it must come this on [the] one side and this on another side
10 SKy but “my sister” those are the principles
11 SKx the box you want it?

Challenging over expertise is a face-threatening activity (more so than challenging over a product) because it is the people themselves that are being singled out. In this last excerpt, the customer is nearly taught a lesson by the shopkeeper.

The main conclusions arising from the above analysis can now be drawn together.

First of all, I would like to insist on the fact that challenging is a time-consuming activity for the participants. It must also be stressed that it is not necessarily linked, in a direct way, to the business of buying / selling: Among the above examples, some transactions went ahead, some did not end with a purchase. Sometimes, challenging occurs over products which the customer does not wish to buy. Hence, challenging is a part of the game. If it is not a direct part of the transaction, it remains at the very least a habitual, or possibly expected component during exchanges within shops.

As has been shown, challenging possesses a characteristic and recognisable sequential structure, and can be described according to the argumentative devices used by the participants in the course of the exchanges.

On the level of the structural organisation, the closing phase of these sequences also present recurrent features: They occur rapidly and, most of the time, contain an explicit definition of the participants’ roles accompanied by formulae, as in excerpt 13:

(13) Hamiddijeh, material 2, the customer insists on getting a red dotted material that is not available.
*After a time the shopkeeper says*

-> 1 SK2 law fi bi-fjûni w-râsi bêχdâmek ju “aifod 7âna 7âm sâwi 7îlek
   wa-lâ la-yajrek fjûni
2 C taslam
   *(some time later, the shop-keeper proposes another product)*
3 SK2 haji 7âhla btaṣâ (.) fârâki jâhâ
4 C 7e bas mu 7akîd 7âŷdâ bass la-ŷûfâ

-> 5 SK2 (inaud.) 7îza ḫtarêti 7ahlên w-sahlên w-7îza ma ḫtarêti 7alla maṭek fjûni
   bêχdâmek bi-ŷûjûni w-râsi heh

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27 “Cham” is the vernacular name of Damascus. It is also the classical name of a “region” of the “dar al-Islam” (the House of Islam), which included present-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

28 *mdâd* literally means "a pestle".
Here, the discussion concerns mainly expertise and highlights the ability (or not) of the shopkeeper to get the desired red-dotted material that is not available. In order to close the challenging sequence, the shopkeeper (re)defines the situation: "I am the shopkeeper, you are the customer, my only aim is to have you (and any customer) satisfied" (line 1 then line 5, arrowed). It could be said that this is a way of coming out of the challenging game and of (re)initiating the transaction game. The use of formulae in his turns is noticeable, in so far as they contribute in themselves to the redefinition of the situation. They also imply that, in accordance with the "completeness principle", the customer produces the expected responses (line 2, line 6). With these two exchanges, the challenging sequence is closed and the conversation can proceed.

The last point concerns the use of terms of address. In the challenging sequences, the shopkeeper alternates the categories of terms very quickly and skips from the most usual "endearment category" to the "family" one, then to the "madam category", and may even in some cases use the pronoun ḥadārtek, 'your presence' (as in excerpt 12, line 3), which indicates distance. Here is another clue to how the local modification of the activity takes place, as if the participants’ definition of the situation was itself becoming uncertain during the sequence.

Because of their frequency and their length, challenging sequences cannot be considered as "trip ups" within an exchange, but rather, must be seen as alternative ways of conducting the transaction. In the next part, I will shed light on how ritualistic conversational devices are often mixed in with challenging strategies as a shop encounter unfolds.

4. The double-sided nature of the Syrian service encounters

Being driven mainly by their overall purpose (buying/selling), shop encounters are generally represented as constructed in a fixed, predictable fashion directed at the resolution of the main interactional sequence they contain: The "request-realisation/payment"
sequence. The point I would like to discuss in this concluding section regards how this "predictable model" appears to be somewhat inaccurate when applied to the Syrian shop encounters – which have a more complex double-faceted nature.

4.1. Ritual routines: The codification of a fixed, predictable exchange

The use of routines and their high rate of frequency can be interpreted from a number of perspectives. I will concentrate on the levels of interpersonal relationships and interactional structural unfolding of the exchanges.

On the level of interpersonal relationships, the highly codified nature of the exchanges initially offers a picture of a number of conversations in which the ritual attention paid by each participant to the other is of ongoing concern to everyone. As my analysis has shown, on this level, the ritual formulae highlight:

- The spatial dimension and the symbolic value given to personal territories, with the access routines and the welcoming greetings.

- The asymmetrical aspect of the service relationship that is continuously made explicit via the meaning of the formulae.

On the level of the overall structural unfolding, the codification devices are precise indicators as to how the interaction will be run, taking in each successive step. They signal a repetitive and predictable exchange, in which everything occurs in its time accompanied by its appropriate verbal behaviour. In addition to their face work value, ritual routines are also a way of avoiding negotiation and challenging in the exchanges. As stated by Tannen and Ostek, these stereotyped interactional elements: “[...] afford their members the tranquillity of knowing that what they say will be interpreted by the addressee in the same way that it is intended [...]” (1981: 46). They are thus a way of smoothening out (any potential differences within) the unfolding of an exchange.

4.2. Challenging: A case of shifting strategies

In contrast to the calming reassurance of ritual routines, challenging evokes an interaction in which nearly every component of the situation is likely to become a topic of discussion and confrontation.

My Syrian informants, when asked about challenging behaviour, systematically distinguished between verbal activities that fall within the field of bargaining (activity designated as mufāṣala, on the root √fsı, 'to separate, part, divide' or mukāṣara, on the root √ksı, 'to break', that may also designate the game of arm-wrestling), and the other...
challenging activities that are not necessarily linked to bargaining, and that they call \(\mathcal{A} \chi d \ u-\mathcal{A} \tau \alpha \). This expression literally means 'the fact of taking and giving', and globally refers to the verbal exchange itself. Some informants insisted on the fact that this activity implies spending time talking, others stressed the use of discourse expansion devices, and others underlined the teasing component within this activity. The main feature emerging from this perspective is that there are a range of possible strategies that are used in the challenging sequences which contrast dramatically with what is achieved via the regular use of routines.

On the level of interpersonal relationships, these sequences start with a direct face-threatening act (negative assessment, criticism, confrontation, etc.), that is made without any minimising device, and, regularly, with added strengthening devices. In fact, everything takes place as if, in uttering such an act, the speaker was indicating that the general principle of avoiding or minimising threat on the participants' faces is (momentarily) suspended. Moreover, during these sequences, the speakers' positions fluctuate: The plain asymmetrical positions displayed by the usage of routines transform into positions of opposition in which, if the asymmetry does not totally disappear, the challenge itself becomes the main purpose of the exchange.

As for the overall structural unfolding, challenging sequences constitute episodes possessing specific opening and closing devices (the negative assessment and the redefinition of the transactional situation with the help of formulae), and following a recurring pattern.

4.3. An exchange prone to "metamorphosis"

It is a well-known fact that, in any verbal exchange, the participants will continuously negotiate or adjust their view on what they do and what they stand for. It is, for instance, well known that participants' positions are not static, but may change within the unfolding of a conversation (footing, Goffman 1987). Similarly, we all know that the activities achieved within a given speech event are not homogeneous, but fall into different recognisable categories. In spite of this recognised heterogeneity, an exchange as a whole, especially when it is task-oriented, is mainly viewed in terms of continuity, i.e. as an entity that begins with an initial set-up of the situation (stage of adjustment) and then unfolds in a constant and predictable manner right up to the conclusion. Given this perspective changes in the participants' conversational strategies (as in the above examples) could be seen as variations on "accidents" that break the continuity. But that would be missing the point.

The way Syrian service encounters unfold does not fit into this predictable schema. They are not made up of an initial negotiated definition of the situation, followed by a smooth, steady set of exchanges until the realisation of the transactional aim is reached (and during which small talk may occur from time to time). The numerous fluctuations that Syrian service encounters contain do not seem to result from phenomena such as the participants switching from a functional relationship to a personal one, or from the transformation of a transactional exchange into a conversational one. In the Syrian version of the shop encounter one finds two main options on offer that the participants exploit according to their liking, switching from one to the other via the use of specific strategies. This exchange appears to be prone to a kind of "metamorphosis", as if it is possible to play a number of games at the same time. Participants thus subject themselves successively to
exchanges that belong to one or another of these games. In so doing, they transform the
tone and form of the exchange from ritualisation to spontaneous invention, from tension
to consensus, and from formality to familiarity.

References


Transcript notation

In the Arabic corpora, the API transcript does not claim to correspond to the most complete and comprehensive phonetic version
  – vowels: Brief vowels i, u, e, o, ʰ; long vowels ī, ū, ā, ē.
  – consonants: b, t, s, ʒ, h, ɬ, d, z [d], r, z, s, f, s, t, z, ɣ, ɣ, q, q /q, k, l, m, n, h, w, j.

In my use of a phonetic transcription and a translation, the transcript notation has been simplified. Given that phenomena like emphasis, vocal variations, lengthening, or registers, etc. could not be translated, except artificially, we decided not to record them.

C means customer, SK means shopkeeper. In the interactions where the mother and her daughter participate, they are called CM and CD. When several shopkeepers are present, they are numbered (SK1, SK2).

The numeration of lines are set out so that the numbers in the Arabic and English translations correspond.

[ ] is used for simultaneous utterances and overlapping utterances.
= is used for contiguous utterances within a turn. Silences (between turns) are noted (silence).

Vocal productions are noted within parentheses, in small caps (LAUGHTER)
Non verbal actions are described within parentheses, in italics.

The turn where the described phenomenon is found is arrowed (->), if necessary the precise phenomena is in italics.

(inaud.) notes an inaudible passage.
[...] indicates that a part of the dialogue has been cut out.

About the translation

In the translation of excerpts, I have avoided morphological comments, and have chosen a non literal translation. The literal translation is given in the text itself for the utterances that are analysed or in the footnotes when it seems necessary. Elements needed for a proper English syntax but not in Arabic (such as 'to be') are noted between square brackets. Nouns of address whose literal translation is kept are noted between quotation marks (ex. "my eye"). The discourse marker 'w-alla' (lit. 'by God') is not translated but kept in its Arabic form, in order to limit the impression of an over religious discourse which would be misguiding:

Today's common use of w-alla is a discourse marker more than an oath. The marker jaši (lit. 'that means') is noted between quotation marks: This marker assumes various subjective and interactional functions, to which different translations could correspond: 'Well', 'that is', 'I mean', 'you mean'. In the absence of a precise study on its usage, choosing just one of these possibilities would be risky.