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When routine calls for information become interpersonally sensitive

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1. Introduction

Planning train travel in Slovenia usually begins with researching fares and schedules either online or face-to-face at the train station. Information for international travel in Slovenian requires a telephone service encounter. This paper examines two calls for information on international rail travel where the participants, the agent and the customer, orient to aspects of the information exchange process as interpersonally sensitive. Our analysis points out the practical reasons for this, and suggests that this emergent social dynamics may be partially described in terms of the participants' orientation to each other's "face". However, other contextual factors such as pressures associated with large volume of calls, the customers' disregard of dimensions of asymmetry and differences in the customer's and agent's epistemic domains (Stivers & Rossano, 2012) may impinge on the agent's overall performance. For instance, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2005, 267) found that the opening requests by Greek speakers to the call centre of an airline company are direct and brief and that any departures from such institutional frames may be assessed as impolite by the agents.

To date, most studies of mediated service encounters have focused on facework and politeness.[1] Overall, these studies have provided valuable insights into politeness manifestations, but their objective, unlike ours, was not an examination of interpersonally-sensitive exchanges and how certain actions may be interpreted as cases of impoliteness.

Following the background and methods of the study we present a brief discussion of the characteristics of calls for information and the extent to which they constitute a vehicle to examine interpersonally-sensitive exchanges, in particular (im)politeness and face manifestations. We then look at face manifestations in the two calls for information selected for this study. We focus on the sequences in which interpersonally-sensitive exchanges

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[1] e.g. Márquez-Reiter, 2005, 2006 on (complaint) calls to a Montevidean caregiver service company; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005 on politeness strategies of Greek and British English customers to an airline's call service; Márquez-Reiter, 2008 on service calls to different Montevidean service providers; Márquez-Reiter, 2009 on facework in an intercultural service call; Orthaber and Márquez-Reiter, 2011 on complaint calls to a Slovenian transport company; Márquez-Reiter, 2013 on complaint calls to a Latin American holiday exchange company, cf. Orthaber and Marquez-Reiter 2015 on manifestations of impoliteness and Archer & Jagodziński, 2015 on face attacks in calls for information to transport companies.

become observable as evidenced by the way in which they are interpreted as impolite. Finally, we turn our attention to the role that the broader communicative setting plays in the emergence of impoliteness before presenting our conclusions. The article adds knowledge about the construction of calls for information in contemporary Slovenia and sheds light on what the participants treat as breaches of interactional norms, thus it contributes to identifying and describing those norms (cf. Svennevig, 2012).

2. Data and methods

The main source of data for this study was taken from a corpus of approximately 29 hours of inbound calls to the official customer care department of the Company that deals exclusively with provision of train information. In these calls, prospective passengers enquire about train information. Providing such information is also the agents' main job. The calls used in this study were recorded in October 2009 and permission was granted by the Company to use the data. The call centre has a call distribution system, where an automatic answer to the summons first informs the customers about the number they have reached by revealing the name of the Company, thus recruiting them for participation in the interaction, and informing them of the fact that the calls are being recorded. Although the calls are monitored by the Company, in practice, this is rarely the case. According to the Company, agents working at the call centre respond to about 200 calls for information per day (Uršič, personal communication, 24th November 2009). During this period, the agent whose calls are analysed in this paper worked 12-hour shifts every other day. During this time he managed nearly 400 calls for information (approximately 190 calls per 12-hour shift). The large volume of highly routinized calls makes the agent's task repetitive (Zapf et al., 2003), which is why the maintenance of a friendly and professional interactive environment throughout the working day may not always be achieved.

Our analysis draws on Goffman's (1967, 5) notion of face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact". According to Goffman (1967), social actors need to account for the codes of behaviour in particular situations, in order to support each other's face and thus avoid inconsistencies or threats to face. To achieve this, participants have to co-operate in supporting and protecting the face of the addressee as well as their own face. Thus, facework for Goffman (1967, 12) are "the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing

consistent with face". In the case of this study, the agent's professional face[2] and the customer's face ought to be maintained at any cost and the participants should choose appropriate means to maintain the social equilibrium. One such means is politeness (Shimanoff, 1994). Thus, facework strategies, whether face-saving, face-enhancing or face-threatening, use context as the larger frame of reference when deriving their meanings and can be used to reflect social expectations related to the setting. In explicating facework, the role of emotions, whether positive or negative, plays a critical role (e.g. Shimanoff, 1994).

The article focuses on the ways in which interactants orient to each other's utterances as interpersonally sensitive taking into account the participants' roles and the larger context in which these interactions take place. By closely examining how participants orient to and display evaluations of each other's contributions as (unexpectedly) inappropriate, the article contributes to research on institutional interactions in a language that has received relatively scant attention and to the burgeoning field of impoliteness research. The analysis draws on Goffman's (1967) notion of face, inference (Gumperz, 1999), withholding (Goodwin, 1981), and emotional and attitudinal intonation (Wichmann, 2000). Concepts from Conversation Analysis such as preference organisation (Pomerantz, 1984) and interactional asymmetries (Drew & Heritage, 1992) are used as platform against which interpersonally-sensitive episodes can be fruitfully examined.

The discussion focuses on two telephone conversations managed by the same telephone agent. It concentrates on how the mismatch of asymmetrical properties of interaction, i.e. asymmetry of participation (e.g. the agent's right to holding directorship), asymmetry of epistemic status (e.g. the customers' orientation to whom the knowledge belongs) and the asymmetry of roles (e.g. rights and obligations associated with the role), inhibits sequence progressivity, impinging on the agent's time and effort and, the way in which the agent reacts to it provides fertile ground for the emergence of interpersonally-sensitive exchanges as evidenced by the way the participants, especially the customers orient to them.

3. Calls for information

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[2] The institutional or professional face, in this case, is the professional persona through which the Company presents itself to its customers: the general public. This face is only on loan to the agent from the Company and, as such, may be withdrawn, should the agent not conduct himself "in a way that is worthy of it" (Goffman, 1967, 10).

Calls for information are linguistic service encounters[3] "between a server who is 'officially posted' in some service area and a customer […], oriented to the satisfaction of the customer's presumed desire for some service and the server's obligation to provide that service" (Merritt, 1976, 321). The customers who contact the call centre do so for a precise reason and expect to have their requests satisfied, i.e. receive train information. This may be reflected in the way they formulate their requests and, in line with their discourse roles display their understandings of situation-specific entitlements and rights.

Previous studies on calls for information (e.g. Lee, 2009; Varcasia, 2013; Orthaber & Márquez-Reiter, 2015) have found that requests involve a number of components, specified through several courses of action and that they are collaboratively constructed by the parties. Requesting information is typically initiated by the customer, who is expected to launch into the request in the reason for the call slot (Schegloff, 2007). Nonetheless, the agents frequently take over control of the activity to meet the necessary conditions for the provision of information. This is typically done through a series of question-answer sequences (Zimmerman 1992), in which the agents, for the sake of efficiency, frequently orient to a particular order by guiding the customer through specific steps to specify the request (e.g. Lee, 2009). It is now fairly well-established that the organizational routine of these types of calls is largely shaped by a computer programme which, in the case of this study, takes the form of itinerary, date, time, number of passengers, and fare classification (e.g. Zimmermann, 1992 on emergency calls; Lee, 2009 on directorship in telephone calls to an airline service in Korean and Kevoe-Feldman's (2015) on telephone enquires about repair status of equipment).

Prior research on telephone mediated service encounters has also highlighted three important dimensions of asymmetry that may arise between the agent, i.e. the professional, and the customer, i.e. the lay person, and can be asserted, negotiated or challenged by the interactants (see Drew & Heritage, 1992 on institutional asymmetries in institutional settings). The first one concerns the agent's perceived right to direct the interaction in organisationally relevant ways. In letting the professional hold directorship over the unfolding interaction as illustrated by their initiating the question-answer pattern (in some cases without the customers' being aware of the purpose of the questions), institutional professionals may strategically direct the talk to change topics or prevent particular issues from becoming topics in their own right (e.g. Heritage, 1985 on news interviews; Tracy, 2011 on legal settings, Tannen & Wallat, 1987 on medical settings; and Lee, 2009, Varcasia, 2013 on service-

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[3] Ventola, (1987) defines them as a genre where interaction is mainly oriented towards requesting and providing information.

oriented settings). For instance, once the departure and destination points are established, the agents may ask customers a number of questions pertaining to the duration of their stay, whether the journey takes place over weekends and the number of passengers so as to establish if they qualify for any of the special offers that may be available.

The second asymmetry relates to knowledge (Drew & Heritage, 1992, 49-50). When requesting train information many customers bring to the conversation a certain degree of knowledge based on prior experience with the company services. This may be observed in the way epistemic status is claimed by the presence of questions formulated as statements or *yes/no*-questions where confirmation only is sought. Finally, the third asymmetry revolves around the interactants' roles (Drew & Heritage, 1992, 49-50), i.e. the relative power that the customers[4] might perceive in relation to the agent, whose responsibility it is to assist them. This means that when customers contact the Company to request information they are likely to display their perceived entitlement to do so in the way they formulate their request (Curl & Drew, 2008). In those cases when the request is legitimate (e.g. the customer does not enquire about, for instance, bus tickets), the agent is obligated to provide the requested information in line with his/her role as service provider. The ways in which the interactants' talk is oriented to these institutional asymmetries coupled with the agent's job characteristics and the monopoly of train services enjoyed by the Company is used as a frame from which to examine the emergence of exchanges which are interpreted as interpersonally sensitive.

In line with the nature and the high volume of incoming calls, the agents tend to treat the customers' enquiries as transactional exchanges, reducing communication to the basic information exchange. They thus expect the customers to be precise and unambiguous in making their requests (cf. Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005) so as to enhance progressivity. In this setting, the exact transfer of information is of paramount importance, particularly for the customers who, for obvious reasons, need to ensure that they obtain the right information on trains. In view of this, it is not surprising to attest a general orientation towards intersubjective understanding over sequence progressivity by the customers. This is illustrated, among others, through understanding checks where customers repeat the information provided by the agents in the immediate prior talk. This creates an environment where the agent has to confirm whether the information was registered correctly or disconfirm it and repair it (cf. Merritt, 1977; Kuroshima, 2010; Svennevig, 2012). When intersubjective understanding is jeopardized or lost (see excerpt 4), the ways in which the

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[4] As prospective (paying) customers

agents orient to it is important. Jefferson (1987) has claimed that repair work has potential implications for the coordination of interpersonal relations between interactants. Schegloff et al. (1977) have pointed out that insertions such as 'I think' address potential sensitivities because they modify the force of the correction. Indeed, research on repair (e.g. Schegloff et al., 1977; Svennevig, 2008; Kitzinger, 2013; Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013) has shown that when initiating a repair a preference principle is to try the least sensitive solution first, i.e. a hearing rather than understanding repair so as to allow the participants to "handle potentially delicate problems in ways that do not expose their face-threatening nature" (Svennevig, 2008, 347). Overt other-initiated repair may be particularly delicate because it may be perceived as a 'put down' or rude particularly if treated as problems of understanding, thus weakening or challenging the other's epistemic status (Heritage, 2013). Thus, any correction of the customer's talk by the agent may be difficult to manage without arousing confrontation. Nevertheless, this can be achieved either by waiting until a possible turn completion and then initiating a repair sequence without supplying the correction, or by using an embedded correction (Jefferson, 1987), i.e. an alternative to the repairable without making it the official interactional business of the turn (Jefferson, 1987; Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013, 217-218). By doing this, the agents would attend to the customers' face (Goffman, 1967, 5) and to their short-term interpersonal relationship (cf. Arundale, 2013).

Further, in these highly routine service encounters one would not expect interpersonally-sensitive exchanges such as impoliteness to become salient given that the telephone agent is a paid employee and is likely to share the same interactional project as the prospective customer. Rather, we can assume that the agent, in line with his or her institutional obligations and responsibilities will not 'intentionally' threaten the face of the customer.

4. Analysis and discussion

The subject of enquiry in both conversations is the requesting of information for international itineraries, which is more likely to become non-routine. Although international train information is available online, it is not in Slovenian. This may represent a problem for many (prospective) customers. Information in Slovenian language, however, can be obtained by directly contacting the Company via email or telephone.

In the first call (excerpts 1 and 2), a female customer enquires about a fare from Ljubljana to Munich. Excerpt 1 illustrates how the agent manages the customer's behaviour in order to provide information requested. He does so by resisting to adapt to her way of requesting, e.g. through disaffiliative actions such as making repair the main interactional business of the turn,

by evoking institutionality through his talk, and simulating the loss of telephone connection. In other words, the agent holds the customer accountable in an implicit way for wasting his time. At the same time, the agent's behaviour including prosodic cues such as hearable in-breaths, competitive talk and volume of speech is open to evaluations of impoliteness on the part of the customer.

Excerpt 1 – Call 1 (duration: 2:24 min) – It's not called that!

A: AGENT (male)

C: CUSTOMER (female)

```
01   A    informacije Ljubljana dober da↑::n
          information Ljubljana he::ll↑o
02   C    dobe:r dan
          he:llo
03   A    °dan°
          °hi°
04   C    iz Sevnice kličem. Ve:te ka:j me zanima:.=
          I'm calling from Sevnica. You kn:ow wha:t I want to kno:w.=
05   A    =ja
          =yes
06   C    za::: er::m tamle:: petindvajseti:::: okto↑ber
          fo:::r er::m the:: twentyfi::::ft Octo↑ber
07   A    °ja°
          °yes°
08   C    vla::k iz:: Lubla:ne za:: Minhen
          a tra::in fro::m Ljublja:na to:: Munich
09        (1.0)
10        kolk pride karta za enga odrasulga pa enga: osem let sta:rga otro:ka.
          how much is the fare for one adult and one: eight year o:ld chi:ld.
11   A    bo to gospa=
          will that be Madam=
12   C    =PA KDA::J GRE
          =AND WHAT TI::ME IT LEAVES
13   A    =.hhhhhhhh
14        (3.0)
15        er: zda:j takole
          er: no:w it's like this
16        (..)
17        želi:te iz Ljubljane al želi:te iz Sevn↑ce ker tudi iz Sevnice so: dire:ktni vlaki
18        za Minhen
          do you wi:sh to travel from Ljubljana or Sevni↑ca cause also from Sevnica there a:re
          dire:ct trains to Munich
19        (1.0)
20   C    er::: zanima:: me::: ne vem:: ena::: er::m ko gremo k njej na
21        obi::[sk se je mal pozanimala]
          er::: I::: want to kno::w I don't kno::w the::: person er::m we're
          visiti::ng[did some research]
22   A         [do::↑bro se pravi da]
               [oka::↑y this means that]
23   C    JE REKLA:: da gre iz Ljubljane en:: evro::pa špecia:l al kako se reče:. vla:↓ku
24                             [čei er ke ke]
          SHE SA::ID that from Ljubljana there is a:: Eu::rope specia:l or what's it ca:lled.
          the tra:↓in        [chei er ke ke]
```

At line 04, following a greeting exchange, the customer gets straight to business, explaining exactly where she is calling from and then by uttering "I want to know" signals that a request

is forthcoming. At line 05, the agent provides a continuer "yes" in latch, thus signalling that he expects more from the customer for the sequence to progress. At line 07, he repeats a continuer (Schegloff, 2007), this time by uttering it softly, given that he cannot action the sequence with the customer's current location and a date only. This triggers the customer to provide further information, i.e. departure and destination places. The gap at line 09 may have occurred because the customer expected the agent to take on the floor, i.e. at a TRP. Given that he does not, the customer specifies the request finishing her utterance with falling intonation, thus indicating that her turn is brought to completion, making relevant the transition to the agent. At this point the agent appears to have enough information for the activity to progress and starts to offers a response (compare l. 09 with l. 11). At line 11, the agent respectfully announces that the second pair-part is coming via the inclusion of the address form "gospa" (Madam), but is cut off by the customer, who takes up the floor by raising her voice considerably with an increment (Schegloff, 1996). That the agent may have perceived that his right of holding the conversational floor was violated, may be seen from his dispreferred response, i.e. a heavy in-breath, followed by a significant delay with silence of three-seconds at lines 13-14. Thereafter the agent asks the customer whether she would like to depart from Sevnica instead and provides an explanation for it. In so doing, the agent shows attentiveness given that the customer had initiated the exchange by offering location identification (l. 04), and fulfils (part of) his responsibilities in his role as the professional participant. However, after a pause of about one second at line 19, the customer disattends to the agent's question by providing a "non-conforming type of response" (Raymond, 2003). The agent, at line 22, orients to this by trying to cut her short, potentially to prevent knowledge based on a third party's experience from becoming a topic. He thus implicitly sanctions the customer's behaviour by evoking the knowledge asymmetry and indicates that he will not adapt to her way of requesting. That the customer perceives this as face-threatening is evident from the way she raises her voice to compete with the agent for the floor and explains what the friend she intends to visit had told her. In doing so, she articulates what Pomerantz (1980) refers to as derivative or Type 2 knowledge, e.g. knowledge known only by hearsay or other indirect means (Heritage, 2013). She displays this knowledge by means of reported speech by mentioning that her friend from Germany had already looked into it. Reported speech was found to be one of the resources with which speakers lay claim to epistemic priority *vis-à-vis* the addressee (Clift, 2006). By telling the agent how things are rather than letting him do the job, she is undermining his knowledge and authority and potentially threatening his professional face. In short, in this excerpt we can observe the

tension in the way the participants go about pursuing their interactional goal and how they negotiate their role-specific rights and obligations. On the one hand, the customer displays her understanding of how to perform a request, i.e. hold control over the requesting process. On the other hand, she limits the agent's perceived right to direct the request in organizationally relevant ways. The tension thus arises as both sides resist adapting to each other's way of going about the business of the call.

In the sequel to Excerpt 1, we see how this challenge plays out in an interpersonally sensitive exchange, including an agent outburst that reclaims epistemic authority.

Excerpt 2 – Call 1 – It's not called that! - [continued]

```
25    A    .hhhhhhhhh
26         (1.0)
27          ne [reče se]  tako  te::mu  reče  se  pa  tako [ponu]::dbi m[inhe]n special
28         ((nejevoljno))
           it's [not cal]led tha::t this is the name of the [offe]::r M[unich] special
           ((annoyed tone of voice))
29    C                                                        [er::]         [er::]
30    A    to je pa ponudba če se potnik vrne: gospa: v prej kot v enem mesecu je upravičen
31         do:: er::::  ka↑rte ki je dvainsedemdeset evrov štrdeset centov.
           this is an offer if the passenger retu:rns Mada:m within one month he is entitled
           to:: er:::: a tick↑et which costs twenty seven euro forty cents.
32    C    .hhhh
33    A    >TO JE:: PONUDBA MINHEN SPECIAL VLAKI SO PA EUROSITY INTERSITY ALI MEDNARODNI
34         VLA:KI VSI:: NAČELOMA PODO:BNO VOZIJO<
           >THIS I::S AN OFFER MUNICH SPECIAL THE TRAINS ARE EUROCITY INTERCITY OR
           INTERNATIONAL TRA:INS THEY BASICALLY A::LL RUN SIMILARLY<
35         (..)
36         DOBRIH ŠEST UR DO MINHNA
           SIX GOOD HOURS TO MUNICH
37    C    ja?
           yes?
38    A    so pa trije direktni na dan.
           there are three direct trains a day.
39         (1.5)
40    C    aha. in to iz Ljubljane er al er: al [tut iz Sevnice]
           oh. and from Ljubljana er or er: or [also from Sevnica]
41    A                                         [tudi iz Sevnice]
                                                [also from Sevnica]
42    C    tudi iz Sevnice?
           also from Sevnica?
43    A    °tudi iz Sevnice ja°.
           °also from Sevnica yes°.
44    C    aha::
           o::h
45    A    °°ja°°
           °°yes°°
46         (1.0)
47    C    er::::: jaz bi rabla:: karto samo v eno:: sme:r ke:r erm: gremo nazaj z drugim
48         [prevozom]
           er:::: I'd only ne::d a si::ngle ticket a:s erm: we're coming back with another
           [transportation]
49    A    [do:bro pol]    bova pa takole rekla?
           [o:kay then]    we'll say the following?
50         (..)
51          pri[poro]ča:::m   č[i::m]-
           I re[comm]e::nd as [so::on]-
```

```
52   C          [ja:]            [ja:]
                [ye:s]           [ye:s]
53   A          halo:::?=
                hello:::?=
54   C          =JA.
                =YES.
55   A          priporočam čimprejšnji obi:sk medna:rodne blagajne?
                I recommend you vi:sit the interna:tional ticket office as soon as possible?
[…]   […]   […]
```

The agent, at line 25, implicitly signals his annoyance and impatience with a sigh and a one second pause. That the customer had threatened the agent's professional face by questioning his expertise and his perceived right to control the topic development, may be seen by his reaction at lines 27-28, where he explicitly corrects the customer's inaccurate use of terms in an annoyed tone of voice, and without any attenuation devices. Other-initiated repairs are clear examples that index the vulnerability of face, especially from the service-provider to the customer, given that it is the agents' job to provide a repair should they locate a trouble in the customer's talk. Indeed, at lines 30 to 36, he gets technical, thus evoking and orienting to the institutional nature of the setting (Drew & Heritage, 1992) and to his knowledge *vis-á-vis* that of the customer. He does so by using hyper-formal style[5] thus distancing himself from the customer, and a formal form of address "gospa" (l. 30). By using an address term in the midst of a TCU the speaker projects continuation (Clayman, 2012) indicating a negative attitude towards the recipient or the topic (e.g. Lerner, 2003; Rendle-Short, 2007). Following the customer's in-breath at line 32 in the midst of the agent's turn, the agent gives the impression of competing with the customer for the floor[6] to keep control over the topic of the talk as evident from his marked rise in volume and rushed delivery of speech, followed by an increment in roughly the same fashion (l. 33-36). With such moves the agent indicates that he interprets the customer's behaviour as annoying and tries to get her to accommodate to the institutional procedure.

At line 38, he offers a summary and the customer (at line 40) marks receipt of new information (i.e. 'oh-prefaced' (Heritage, 1998)) before the departure point (i.e. Ljubljana, the departure point given by the customer (l. 08) v. Sevnica, the departure point offered by the agent based on the customer's identification (l. 04)) is confirmed (e.g. l. 40-45). When the customer, at lines 47-48 attempts to explain why she is interested in purchasing a single ticket only, the agent, at line 49, comes in too early with "okay then", trying to cut her short,

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[5] He uses a depersonalized term "passenger" at line 30 rather than addressing the customer directly as he had done up to now (cf. excerpt 1, l. 11 with *gospa*) including the use of the formal second person plural (excerpt 1, l. 17-18).

[6] The customer may have wished to cede her turn at line 32 with an in-breath and after the agent has used a falling tone on "cents" (l. 31).

indicating that he is not interested in this information. This is followed by a "we-inclusive" phrase in dual form: "we'll say the following". The database contains numerous occurrences of "we^{DUAL}'ll" / "we^{PL} say the following" (and various combinations of it) when the agents deliver dispreferred turns. Frequently, these phrases were preceded or followed by the address term *gospod/gospa* or a token "well", "okay" or "look". Particularly when used together, they highlighted the customer's prior action, expressing a negative stance towards it, but also delaying the production of a dispreferred turn and potentially mitigating its face-oriented nature. In other words, they indicate that the agent's patience is running out.

That this is in fact the case can be seen at lines 51-54, where face concerns emerge as the agent treats the customer's acknowledgment tokens from line 52 as interruptive as evident from the way he orients to it by dropping out of the overlap. Moreover, without any gap he utters "hello" with rising intonation, which serves to check if the telephone connection had been lost. Given that the agent had produced a "hello" immediately after the overlap shows that this is not what had happened. Typically, a pause of several seconds ensues before one of the participants check for a lost connection. The fact that such behaviour on the part of the agent was observed in at least five other calls when a chain of overlaps occurred, suggests this is one of the strategies the agent has developed while handling similar calls and as such works as a useful tactic that resolves his interactional needs. Similar behaviour was identified by Svennevig (2012) who examined the development of hostility in emergency calls and found that the operators produced a summons in the middle of the conversation to indicate that something was wrong with the caller's alignment to the conversation and that this move serves as a reproach for violating some norm of demeanour (e.g. turn-taking norms). Thus, with this strategy, the agent may be orienting to the caller's behaviour as problematic and in need of repair, e.g. as a violation to the system of turn-taking (Sacks et al., 1974) with presumed accurate knowledge.

With a verbal continuer, the customer confirms her presence and shows no orientation to the agent's behaviour as problematic. Here, socioeconomic factors such as the fact that the state-owned Company enjoys a monopoly and has an outdated organizational structure may play a role here (e.g. the only means of getting information is via telephone and email whereas tickets can only be purchased at train stations).

The excerpts show that when sequence progressivity, and thus efficiency is at stake the agent uses various (face-oriented) strategies to restore and sustain it, that is, for getting back on track and to force the customer to adapt to his directorship. Interpersonally, he does so by creating a competitive interactional climate through marked rise in volume and rushed

delivery of speech to avoid being interrupted. We have seen how paralinguistic features such as heavy in-breaths are used before offering a response. This conveys a patronizing attitude, which stands in contrast to perfunctory politeness forms (use of second person plural forms for polite address "vi" or "you[PL]" (e.g. Corbett, 2000), or greetings and leaving takings). In other words, the agent performs impoliteness indirectly, i.e. by using masking politeness features (formal forms of address, hyper formal style, job-specific terminology), which has the effect of re-entering (e.g. use of greetings) the state-of-talk and re-establishing the service frame on an even keel.

In the second call, a female customer contacts the Company to enquire about trains to Sarajevo. In line with the previous call, the agent orients to the customer's way of enquiring as interpersonally delicate. This is evidenced by his reaction to it. He cuts the customer short and overtly repairs her contribution, triggering, evaluations of impoliteness on the part of the customer.

Excerpt 3 – Call 2 – (duration: 1:55) – I'm not criticizing anything!

A: AGENT (male)

C: CUSTOMER (female)

```
[…]   […]   […]
08    C     ja dober  dan   za  Sarajevo   vla:k   tisti  ki  je  ob  petnajst  čez  šesto
09          zjutri er pele pa [popoldne]
            yes good afternoon to Sarajevo that tra:in that is fifteen past six am er and
            goes   in   the   [afternoon]
10    A                         [ta:::ko].
                                [ri:::ght].
11    A     tako
            right
12    C     um sam slišala sem da je nek remont proge v A:vstriji a je to še vedno?
            um I heard that there are some rail works in A:ustria are they still?
13    A     j↑a s tem da niti ni tok hudih zamud ee tako da jz mislim da je to popoldne je
14          sigurno izvedljivo ne.hhh pa tud zjutraj °sam mome[nt 4499 ma°]
            ye↑s just that there aren't any major delays ee so that I think that this
            afternoon it's definitely manageable right.hhh but not also in the morning
                                                 °one sec[ond 4499 is]°
15    C                                               [torej ujame] tistga v Zagrebu
                                                      [so it catches] the one in
            Zagreb
16    A     eee tudi jutranji vlak je bil reden danes tako da uja↓me, uja↓me
            eee the morning train was also on time today so yes it d↓oes, it d↓oes
17    C     e ta bolj ziher je pa popoldne ne?
            e the more reliable one is in the afternoon right?
18          (1.0)
19    A     a↑li tudi lahko ja tako, °tako°
            o↑r also you can yes right, °right°
20    C     no:: ve↑ste kaj
            ca::use you kn↑ow what
21    A     ja.
            yes.
22    C     ker to bi pač res er mogu tisti ki bo šel er
            cause the one going really er has to go er
23    A     ja
            yes
24    C     res m(h)o(h)ra p(h)rispe:↑t ker so zelo ene pomembne stvari ki jih mora-
```

```
            really h(h)a(h)s t(h)o ge:↑t there cause it's some important things that have to
            be-
25    A     ja ni problema lejte ta:↑le vlak zjutraj je danes bil reden a ne kdaj se pa
26          potuje pri vam to?
            yes no problem look t↑he: morning train today was on time right when are you
            travelling?
27    C     ju:tri
            tomo:rrow
```

At lines 08-09 the customer provides a brief acknowledgment token "yes" and greets the agent before elliptically stating the reason for the call (using only "to Sarajevo that train"), which is a preliminary establishment of a reference for which the customer can then subsequently ask the question (l. 12). That the agent also treats it as such is evident from his confirmation at lines 10-11, which serve as a go-ahead token (Schegloff, 1996), given that the customer has not yet articulated how the agent can help her. At line 12, the customer formulates a polar question, with which she displays her epistemic stance, i.e. high-level of informedness about construction works. With this she makes relevant the agent's dis/confirmation of her understanding. The agent responds by confirming but also unpacks the meaning and makes an inferential leap. He provides information about delays, which may result from the construction works. The customer further displays her epistemic stance, i.e. in case of a delay a connection might be missed, at line 15 (and 17), where she formulates "statement questions", to which the agent orients by referring to the fact that the morning train was on time. Instead of fully specifying what she actually wants from the agent, the customer enquires about which of the two trains is more reliable. Because the agent does not provide the response she was hoping for, at lines 20-24 she offers an account (Antaki, 1994), potentially revealing why the delays caused by construction work may have bad news for her: "really important things" that need to be taken care of. She delivers her account in bubbling laughter (Jefferson, 1985), but abandons her turn in progress. According to Shaw et al. (2013) bubbling laughter can be used to modulate potentially disaligning actions, in this case, an implicit negative assessment of the Company as far as reliability is concerned, which she hesitates to address explicitly. In other words, with her formulation, the customer orients to the delicate nature of explicitly addressing such an issue, thus leaving it up to the recipient to recognise it (Haugh, 2015). The agent, however, disattends to the potential complaint that may have surfaced from the customer's formulation (l. 24-25) yet acknowledges it by reporting that the morning train was on time. This is not surprising given the nature of the request and its implications, i.e. the agent cannot guarantee that a train will run on time nor should he undermine the quality of service the Company provides.

In this context, a request cannot be granted unless it is clearly and fully specified. Equally, the requester cannot fully specify what she wants unless she knows what can be granted (Lee, 2009, 1255). Although the customer is likely to be aware of the fact that the agent cannot provide information regarding punctuality or reliability, she still attempts to force a promise out of him. This is evident from the way her request is built tactfully over several turns with polar and statement questions. By designing the questions in such a way (cf. l. 8-9, 12, 15, 17) the customer fails to get to the core of the reason for the call inhibits sequence progressivity. Importantly, with her interactional style, she potentially also challenges the asymmetry of participation. Previous findings from service encounters have examined how participants manage particular role-specific activities (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Agents typically take an initiative in unpacking components of the request or take action to have a switch of directorship (Lee, 2009). However, as can be observed, in excerpt 3, the agent displays no resistance and adapts to the customer's way of enquiring. Moreover, he disattends the potential negative assessment or complaint on the part of the customer by aligning with it, i.e. addressing the customer's concern by offering an alternative (e.g. Excerpt 4, l. 28-29).

Excerpt 4 – Call 2 – I'm not criticizing anything! [continued]

```
28    A    jutri. ja zdej upajmo da bo jutr tud ne drugač pa >osemnajst petintri:deset je
29         pa tud dokaj reden tako da ni problema ne<=
           tomorrow. yes let's hope that it's on time tomorrow too otherwise >eighteen
           thirty-five is relatively on time so no problem right<=

30    C    =čakte kako osemnajst petintrideset.
           =wait how come eighteen thirty-five.

31         3.0

32    A    <.HHHH GOSPA IMASTE DVAKRAT NA DAN MOŽNOST POTOVATI V SARAJEVO NE?>=
           <.HHHH MADAM YOU HAVE TWO POSSIBILITIES A DAY TO TRAVEL TO SARAJEVO RIGHT>=

33    C    =ja
           =yes

34    A    ENA VARIANTA JE ZJUTRAJ ŠEST PA PETNAJST PRESTOP PRESTO SE PRAVI ZAGREB
35         NASLEDNJA VARIANTA JE OSEMNAJST oziroma er ja osemnajst petintrideset presto↑p
36         Zagreb.
           ONE OPTION IS SIX AND FIFTEEN A.M. CHANGE CHANGE IN ZAGREB THE NEXT OPTION IS
           EIGHTEEN or er yes eighteen thirty-five cha↑nge in Zagreb

37    C    °no jz sem to ponovila samo zato ker se mi zdi da je bil okrog sedemnajste ure,
38         ne ob osemnajst petinpetdeset°= ((čustveno, tresoč glas))
           °well I only repeated this only because I believe that it was around seventeenth
           hour, not eighteen fifty-five°= ((emotional, voice shaking))

39    A    =GOSPA NE PETINPETDESET ampak pet[intri↑:]deset
           =MADAM  NOT  FIFTY-FIVE  but  th[irty-fi↑:]ve

40    C                                    >[ja ja]<
                                           >[yes yes]<

41    A    osem-najst petintrideset
           eight-een thirty-five

42    C    ure:::du ure:::du ((nejevoljno))
           fi:::ne fi:::ne ((annoyed))

43    A    tako
           right

44    C    sam nekaj se je spremenilo ker ni ker sem jaz potovala s tem vlakom
           but something has changed cause it's not cause I travelled with this train

45    A    mhm
```

```
           mhm
46    C    pa ni blo leto pa pol ne
           and it wasn't a year and a half right
47    A    letos je že celo leto tak vozni red ja
           this year the timetable has been the same yes
48    C    ure::du
           fi::ne
49    A    okay
50    C    saj vam nč ne kritiziram sam hočem ponovit da se prepričam torej osemnajst
51         petintrideset popoldne, zjutri petnajst čez šesto
           I'm not criticizing I just want to repeat to make sure so eighteen thirty-five
           p.m., fifteen past six a.m.
52    A    ta↑ko
           ri↑ght
53    C    ure::du hvala lepa
           fi::ne thanks very much
54    A    prosm. lep dan
           you're welcome. good day
55    C    nasvidenje
           goodbye
```

Establishing the customer's desired time of travel (l. 28-29), the agent provides the exact departure time for an afternoon train in case the morning train is delayed. This is the first time the exact departure time of the afternoon train has been provided (cf. l. 9 and 17). Upon hearing this, the customer, at line 30, produces a surprise token "wait", indicating that news in the prior turn is unexpected in some way (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006). She initiates a repair "how come eighteen thirty-five", which is uttered in fast pace and with interrogative intonation. She thus questions and challenges the agent's epistemic trustworthiness, potentially threatening his professional face. In line with his role in a customer-oriented context, the agent's responsibility in the next turn would be to produce a repair solution tacitly by providing clarification (Kitzinger, 2013, 252) to restore intersubjectivity. However, the agent abruptly changes footing (Goffman, 1981) by withdrawing his earlier alignment. He does so by orienting to the customer's initiation of repair from the prior turn by pausing for approximately three seconds before producing a hearable in-breath, implying a dispreferred turn is on the way. He then responds in a louder than normal tone of voice (l. 32), signalling that he treats the customer's utterance as problematic. This is evident from the way he makes the target repairable the official interactional business of the turn, implicitly holding the customer accountable for her prior inquiring behaviour, e.g. dissembling epistemic status. In so doing, he reinforces the sensitivity associated with the nature of the repair. This is further signalled by the inclusion of the address term "gospa" (Madam) in turn initial position coupled with an intonationally prominent step-up in pitch and slow speech rate in the delivery of repair.

That the customer orients to the agent's repair as impolite is evident from a number of elements present in her response that are typically associated with dispreference (Pomerantz,

1984; Schegloff, 2007). First, her response is delivered with a preface 'well' in turn initial position. Second, she provides an account, with which she disputes accountability for the offence (l. 44, 46) implied by the agent. Third, in delivering the utterance she uses lexical ('just') and prosodic (quieter tone of voice, shaky voice) mitigation devices. However, in doing so, she experiences a slip of the tongue, which the agent, at line 39, once more treats as in need of repair. Here, his response is loaded with a polemic tinge as evidenced by his re-using of the address term "gospa" and from the way he, once again, seems to make the repair the official interactional business of the turn, repeating the target repairable twice, thus distorting the customer's epistemic status.

The agent's face-oriented behaviour insofar as the cognitive preserves of the customer are concerned is oriented to as interpersonally delicate by the customer. This is evidenced in the way she repeats the adverb "fine" twice, lengthening out the vowels, delivering it with a marked difference in intonation. That offence had been taken is seen from her reaction, with which she aims to repair the damage caused to her face by disputing the grounds on which offence has been taken. In other words, she is suggesting that the offence taken by the agent is not warranted (Haugh, 2015). Moreover, to repair the damage done to her face she takes another opportunity for an affiliative response, i.e. asserting that her inference rests on past experience (l. 44, 46). Following the agent's non-affiliative responses (l. 43, 45, 47), e.g. minimal response tokens and weak disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984), which put the customer's epistemic status and her face at stake, the customer produces a further "fine", stretching the vowels, thus implying that the agent's behaviour is inappropriately uncooperative (l. 48). By producing an indirect apology, i.e. her intent was not to criticize, and an account, i.e. the aim was to secure intersubjective understanding, which had been lost (l. 50-51; see also the use of softener "just" at line 50), the customer aims to minimize the severity of how the prior action may have come across and be understood. That offence had been taken by the agent's behaviour is further illustrated by her emotional prosody, with which her utterances are delivered, and her intention not to offend metapragmatically stressed, i.e. *criticizing, repeat, make sure*, after which she repeats the two departure times. By conveying that her intent was not to criticize she topicalises the agent's perceived emotional state caused by what she claims was a misinterpretation of her intentions. In doing so, she offers a negative assessment of the agent's behaviour with which she registers and sanctions a perceived offence. However, the agent continues to display resistance with the customer's ongoing talk as evident from his minimal, closing-implicative responses (l. 49, 52). The

customer, yet again, in a hostile manner, responds with "fine", stretching the vowels and moves to a close by uttering her appreciation "thanks very much".

Excerpts 3 and 4 demonstrate how a routine telephone call can become interpersonally delicate when intersubjective understanding is lost and the agent, in line with his obligation needs to provide repair. The customer's repair initiation triggers hostile behaviour on the part of the agent, because progressivity is suspended. In other words, he interprets her prior behaviour as dissembling of epistemic status and assigns full responsibility for the communicative breakdown to her by making repair the main interactional business of the turn. The agent's reaction, however, was also perceived as impolite by the customer as evidenced from her emotional orientation to it (prosodic cues: stretched out words, stress, punched up prosodic contour) and her metapragmatic account of the interaction (l. 50-51), with which she interactionally manages to dispute having been seen as offensive. Contrary to the first call, in which the customer makes no explicit orientations to the agent's behaviour as impolite and adapts to his way of managing requests, this customer, as shown by her defensive behaviour, took offence and tried to repair the damage caused to her face. To prevent further conflict, the agent disattends the customer's reaction despite her attempts to elicit one from the agent.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper we examined (potentially) interpersonally-sensitive exchanges in routine conversational sequences in calls for information to a public utility. To this end, excerpts from two inbound calls were selected. They showed how the interactants' conflicting preferences (Pomerantz & Heritage, 2013), i.e. the agent's preference for adherence to an interactional order that will facilitate progressivity vs. the customers' preference for maintaining intersubjectivity and displaying epistemic stance, jeopardized the achievement of the interactional goal and triggered evaluations of impolite behaviour.

In certain contexts such as a service encounter a particular frame is invoked, bringing about a set of expectancies, from which the understandings of interpersonal sensitivity such as evaluations of impoliteness arise. In other words, impoliteness tends to follow pre-existing patterns of behaviour associated with such a frame (Kádár & Haugh, 2013), which is also characterised by the situation-specific interactional asymmetries between participants, particularly the asymmetry of participation, e.g. the professional's perceived right to hold directorship over the unfolding of request to meet the necessary conditions for carrying out the task (e.g. Drew & Heritage, 1992; Tracy, 2011; Lee, 2009; Varcasia, 2013) and the asymmetry of differential states of knowledge, e.g. customers' claiming of epistemic status in

situations where they do not have equivalent access to the information as the agent or intruding into the agent's epistemic territory.

As the episodes examined in this study have shown the agent's behaviour is geared towards facilitating progressivity to meet the interactional goals. This finding is in line with the patterns identified in institutional interaction (e.g. Lee, 2009), i.e. that the agent not only prefers to strategically direct the talk when engaging in question-answer sequences, but also that he will cut short the customers' attempts to talk about topics that are irrelevant to his performing the task (e.g. Tannen & Wallat, 1987). This suggests that the customers' disregard of the asymmetry of participation, e.g. holding of directorship and disregard for the one-speaker-at-a-time rule (e.g. excerpt 1, l. 22-36) triggers potentially interpersonally-sensitive behaviour as illustrated by his reactions, e.g. production of heavy in-breaths and withholding (excerpt 1, l. 13-14; excerpt 2, l. 25-26; excerpt 4, l. 31-32), cutting the customer short (e.g. excerpt 1, l. 22; excerpt 2, l. 49; excerpt 3, l. 25), dropping out of the conversation (e.g. excerpt 2, l. 51) or when these moves were not successful, simulating the loss of telephone connectivity with the objective to resolve the chain of overlaps and take over the directorship (excerpt 2, l. 53). With this, he shows that he treats such behaviour as normatively unexpected, holding the customers accountable for it. The measures he resorts to with the objective to negotiate the institutional asymmetries are reminiscent of those identified in some other institutional contexts particularly medical and legal settings. The agent's other face-oriented contributions included rushed or slowed down speech, patronising tone of voice or increased loudness, depending on his objective (to compete with the customer for the floor, e.g. excerpt 2, l. 33-36, or to provide repair, e.g. excerpt 2, l. 27-38; excerpt 4, l. 32-36, 39). Repair of trouble source in particular was delivered in a highly face-threatening manner, as it was made the official interactional business of the turn, causing embarrassment (excerpt 2, l. 27-38; excerpt 4, l. 32-36, 39). By means of exposing the interpersonally-sensitive nature of repair in this way, the agent challenged or distorted the customers' epistemic stance, e.g. bringing to light its incompatibility with their claims so as to assert his own superior epistemic status, thus suggesting that it is non-negotiable (cf. Heritage, 2013).

Both examples have shown that the customers' behaviour triggered the agent's impolite actions. However, given his obligations as a service provider, his sanctioning of the customers' behaviour is implicit in that it is implemented in a way that unwanted implications can be disputed should the customers hold the agent accountable for his behaviour. While the first customer made no explicit orientation to his behaviour as impolite and succumbed to his inquiring logic, the second customer oriented to the agent's behaviour as impolite and

disputed the implicated offence on the part of the agent, causing interpersonal sensitivity to arise.

The agent's behaviour is likely to respond to internal and external contextual factors, particularly the job characteristics of telephone agents such as the large volume of calls and 12-hour shifts, coupled with the agent's interactional style which may result in behaviours such as impatience as a means of coping with the work environment. Moreover, the type of service the Company offers, i.e. train information, also plays a role, particularly when the customers fail to treat the calls as transactional and thus in any way inhibit sequence progressivity.

Although the analysis identified (potentially) interpersonally-sensitive exchanges in the two calls, the same agent resorted to the same (potentially) face-threatening strategies in a number of other calls, particularly withholding by means of perturbations and pausing, simulation of the loss of telephone connection or other-initiated repairs based on expert knowledge. It is hoped that the present analysis will provide a better understanding of how when and why interpersonally-sensitive exchanges come about in highly routinized interaction, particularly in institutional, customer-oriented settings.

Transcription symbols

[ ]	overlapping speech
(1.5)	numbers in brackets indicate pause length in seconds
(.)	micropause
:	lengthening of the sound of preceding letter
-	word cut-off
.	falling or final intonation
?	rising or question intonation
=	latching utterances
Underlining	contrastive stress or emphasis
CAPS	indicates volume of speech
°°	markedly softer speech
↓↑	sharp falling/rising intonation
><	talk is compressed or rushed
<>	talk is markedly slowed or drawn out
( )	blank space in brackets indicates uncertainty about the speech

(( ))   described phenomenon, for instance ((cough))

[. . .]   talk omitted from the data segment

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