

Talk and *Techne*: Images of conversation and the Starbucks service counter

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Recently I have become interested in a certain speech genre that I will call ‘imaginary conversations’ and how conversation as a whole is imagined as a speech genre. By imaginary conversations I mean conversations that are Bakhtinian secondary speech genres, that is, ranging from reports of real conversations to completely made-up conversations, as opposed to real conversations, by which I mean transcriptions of conversations as primary speech genres. In particular, I am interested in a very specific genre with a very specific historical and cultural context, conversations reported by baristas about stupid customers in Starbucks coffee stores, as reported in a primary speech genre we could call a ‘rant’ or a ‘vent’. I’d like to share an example of such a story with you. In such genres, a monologic primary genre consists largely of an incorporated dialogic interaction as a secondary genre:

Yesterday I had an annoying customer experience I'd like to share. I'll try to remember the details as best as I can.

Stupid lady walks in.

Me: Hi, how are you?

Stupid: Yeah... can I get an.... *mumbles inaudibly*

Me: Excuse me, I didn't catch that?

Stupid: *Looks at me like I'm an idiot* I'll have a no-fat coffee.

Me: I'm not quite sure what you mean.

Stupid: What do you mean? All you coffee places have no-fat coffee drinks now, with all the new drinks you're coming out with all the time!

Me: Well, if you want regular coffee, that doesn't have fat to begin with. Is that what you want?

Stupid: No! That has fat in it once you add the sugar and the whip' cream and the fatty milk.

Me: That doesn't sound like you want a regular coffee, it sounds like you're talking about a latte.

Stupid: No! Once you add the latte or cappuccino it's fatty.

Me: Ma'am, latte's and cappuccinos are drinks we offer. We can make those nonfat if you'd like.

Stupid: Well what would you give to someone who came in and asked for a no-fat coffee.

Me: I wouldn't give them anything until I figured out what a nonfat coffee was. If you came in here and just asked for a regular coffee, I would've given you a regular black coffee.

Stupid: No, I don't want it black. *makes a face of disgust* I don't know how anyone could drink that stuff, it's disgusting.

Me: Did you want us to add milk?

Stupid: No, that makes it fatty.

Me: Ma'am, we could make almost any drink on that half of the menu with nonfat milk.

Stupid: What about her, *points to my coworker, Kristie* can she get me a nonfat coffee?

Kristie: *notices Stupid is pointing to her* Excuse me, what can I get for you?

Stupid: I want a nonfat coffee, and he doesn't know what I'm talking about, and I

know all you coffee places have those nonfat drinks now.

Kristie: Coffee is nonfat to begin with, I guess I don't understand what you're asking for.

Stupid: *sighs loudly* I guess I'll have to ask the manager about this. Who's the manager?

These 'stupid customer of the week' stories, or SCOWs, form a mainstay of online interaction at one barista community web-site (<http://www.livejournal.com/community/baristas/>). I have literally hundreds of examples. They form part of a constellation of genres that people can post replies to, ranging from full-blown SCOW stories to chatty insider questions like 'what does your customer voice sound like: you know what I mean.' I am interested in why people imagine conversations, and whether these imagined secondary speech genres can tell us anything about the primary speech genre they derive from. This primary genre, the 'rant', is a central genre of the internet, a genre that 'vents' opinions that perhaps have no other venue: they are hidden transcripts made visible. They are also ranting monologues that can produce dialogs, uptake, or sharing of similar experiences. They can take other forms, of course, mini-rants about customers like the following, which take the form of a simple narrative (these are from http://starbucks-gossip.typepad.com/_/2005/07/its_time_for_st.html). I warn you now that strong language is involved:

[I hate it when] When some cuntty soccer mom indulges her bratty 8 year old kid with a half-caf-double-decaf-breve-affogato-no-cream and the brat changes his/her mind mid-drink and stares blankly at the board trying to figure out what to order --- with 9,000 people in line behind them.

As a Barista, I used to hate Mr. Bitter old man who would say, "I'll take a coffee." And you'd say, "What size would you like?", and he'd say in a hostile and sarcastic-arsed voice, "I'll take a coffee. Just coffee." Like he can't understand the nerve of me asking him what size he wants. That anything more than just "coffee" is too foo-foo, like even what size it is. So you're getting a short decaf, jerk.

I am interested in why such the pragmatics of such a primary genre should in the case of a SCOW involve simply a stretch of metapragmatic discourse, in this case, a reported conversation.

Certainly, conversations with baristas at Starbucks are for many a project that is undertaken with some trepidation. Formulating the order correctly in an acceptable language, even if not asking for a chimerical non-fat coffee, can be daunting. Evidently the vocabulary field of affordable luxuries such as coffee has converged with winespeak. Therefore, class anxiety is foregrounded in a Starbucks service encounter to an extent we would never find in a Tim Hortons. For Starbucks, too, standardizing the way customers refer to their beverages too evidently is an end in itself, involving both styling or branding the process as being distinctive of Starbucks by using special terminology, 'barista speak', and scripting the order of formulation to increase efficiency. Just as Starbucks sends its baristas to a special university to master the branded script for Starbucks service encounters, so too has Starbucks even gone so far as to provide a script for such formulations for its customers:

How to Order

If you're nervous about ordering, don't be.

There's no "right" way to order at Starbucks. Just tell us what you want and we'll get it to you.

But if we call your drink back in a way that's different from what you told us, we're not correcting you. We're just translating your order into "barista-speak" – a standard way our baristas call out orders. This language gives the baristas the info they need in the order they need it, so they can make your drink as quickly and efficiently as possible.

"Barista-speak" is easy to learn. It's all about the order of information. There are five steps to the process.



Order

1. Cup.

The first thing a barista needs to know is what cup to grab for your drink. If you don't specify, we'll put it in our *to-go* cup. But you can also ask for a *for-here*, *iced* or *personal* cup.

2. Shots and size.

Do you want decaf or extra espresso? Here's something to know: *Tall* (355 mL/12 fl oz) drinks usually come with one shot; *Grandes* (473 mL/16 fl oz) have two. *Venti*® drinks have two (for 591 mL/20 fl oz hot drinks) or three (for 710 mL/24 fl oz cold drinks). If you add a shot to a tall, you're getting a *double-tall*.

3. Syrup.

This is the most popular way to customize. We have many different syrup flavours to sweeten or spice up a drink.

4. Milk and other modifiers.

This is when you tell us what milk you want. And if you want something else, like "extra hot" or "extra foamy."

5. The drink itself.

Don't forget the most important part! Are you having a latte, a mocha – or something entirely different?

There are other ethnographically specific questions here: why specifically is the best way to rant about a stupid customer at Starbucks simply to reproduce the conversation with that customer? It is surely important here that the kind of talk that is being imagined is a ‘service transaction’, a kind of talk that is imagined to be in certain ways different from ordinary talk in interaction. In service transactions talk becomes part of the domain of work, a domain in which, among other things, there are conflicting imperatives between ordinary sociability and technical necessity, politeness and getting the job done. Talk at work, I want to argue, seems in general ways to be imagined as being different from ordinary talk, as being constrained rather than free, transactional rather than interactional, oriented to technical necessities, getting the job done, getting the customer their coffee, rather than pure sociability. Evidently Starbucks service interactions are a special breed, in that the class anxieties of the customer are ramified by the Starbucks branding and scripting of its special transactional style. For the barista, too, there are interactional dilemmas represented in these conversations. The responsibility a barista has to both figure out the order of the customer and maintain a scripted Starbucks ‘brand’ of ordering provides a common interactional motif in these imagined conversations. Here, the customer speaks in fluent ‘Tim-Hortonese’ (where a ‘regular’ is a coffee with cream and sugar already added) as well as McDonaldsese (‘supersize’), but balks at using the terminology of Starbucks:

Me: Hi, What can I get for you today, sir?

Man: A small

Me: You would like a tall what sir?

Man: I said I want a small

Me: Would that be a tall coffee sir?

Man: No I want a small regular, I don't want to supersize my drink.

Me: No sir, tall is small. Here at Starbucks small is tall, medium is grande and large is venti.

Man: Well what I want is a small.

Me: Okay, tall traditional it is *grinding teeth* *get him the drink and give it to him*

Man: *Takes off the lid* I thought I told you I wanted a small regular. This is just black.

Me: Sir, you can find milk and sugar for your coffee over at the condiment bar. We have various types of dairy for your coffee and also many different types of sweeteners.

Man: What I want is a regular small coffee. Why can't you do this for me? Is that too hard for you? At what I am paying for a cup of coffee you should be able to put the milk and two spoonfuls of sugar in for me.

Me: Well sir, here at Starbucks we feel that you are better served by arranging your coffee however you like. That will be \$1.52.

Man: Are you sure? I can't get this for free being that it has taken over 5 minutes just to get me a small coffee and ring me up?

Me: I am sorry that took so long. That will be a dollar and 52 cents for your TALL TRADITIONAL cup of coffee.

Why oh why do we have to go through this EVERY FREAKING DAY!!! Why!!!!

The dilemmas of these forms of reported speech, rants about conversations, are also interesting because they show a much more general observation about how conversations are imagined in general, in our society, by analysts and laymen alike. In much contemporary work on conversation, service transactions are treated as a 'special' or 'marked' form of talk because of the way in which technical or institutional considerations extrinsic to the interactional order of pure conversation overdetermine that conversational order. Hence, they can be opposed as a special case to the more general case of conversation without such determining institutional or technical factors, 'non-

business-like' conversation pursued 'for its own sake', conversation as Simmel's 'pure sociability'.¹ There is a special irony that Starbucks markets itself as a place where such pure sociability in the form of conversation can take place, modern day Habermasian coffeeshops that form a 'third place' between work and home, public and private, where one can talk over a cup of coffee with friends. Rudolf Gaudio has recently made a study of the validity of this normative association between coffee and talk, showing various dimensions that this 'naturalized conflation of conversation with the commercialized consumption of coffee' elides important ways that such apparently natural 'coffeetalk' is 'inextricably implicated in the political, economic and cultural-ideological processes of global capitalism'.²

But here I think Gaudio has missed a more obvious target. If one wants to find interactions shot through with political-economic moment, surely one needs to look no further than the bar, for a Starbucks store has far more transactional 'talk about coffee' than it does sociable 'coffeetalk'. And the commodization and branding of the process of ordering Starbucks coffee is surely more salient than the branding of Starbucks stores as third spaces for pure dialog. The point is, that to the extent that analysts of various sorts tend to oppose talk to work, pure sociability between peers to asymmetries between server and customer, the normative order of interaction to the technical order of transaction, these service transactions seem to be a rather exceptional form of talk. At the same time, I believe it is precisely this hybrid quality of service interactions, containing determinations both of a technical, work-related, and a social, politeness related, nature, that are part of the dilemma foregrounded in these reported conversations: technical failings of communication, which prevent the closure of the transaction, routinely become normative threats to face. Talk at work illustrates the interpenetration of the

¹ Simmel, Georg. 1949. The sociology of sociability. *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55.3, 254-261.

² **Gaudio**, Rudolf. **Coffeetalk**: StarbucksTM and the Commercialization of Casual Conversation. *Language in Society*, (2003), 32(5): 659-691

technical and normative orders, the internal contradictions of capitalism, far better than, for example, the commoditization of sociable ‘coffeetalk’ at Starbucks.

By technical I will in general mean that it is something oriented to instrumental or functional factors extrinsic to the normative order of the social, and that we therefore think of talk at work as being in some ways a hybrid of the technical and social orders, not a domain of freedom in interaction, but a primary domain in which interaction is subordinated to extrinsic necessity. The domain of the technical, of *techne*, of work, is itself a borderland between nature and culture, between natural functionalism and cultural conventionalism, between instrumental and normative orders. In general, then, talk at work takes on the features of that domain of that we call ‘work’. And work itself seems like a domain that is also a hybrid of natural and cultural determination, of technical and normative reason, which makes it seem like something that isn’t quite what traditional anthropology should talk about, like expressions of the normative order in ritual. Exploring the technical dimension of talk, the way that talk is both a part of work and itself has a technical ‘work-like’ dimension, was my initial motivation for calling this talk ‘talk and techne’.

I am interested at the outset in two things, then: How conversation is imagined in general, at the metapragmatic level, and how imaginary conversations are used pragmatically. I am interested, of course, in the ways that imaginary conversations might have or lack properties we can find in real conversations, and if they are different things, how we can recognize conversations that are imagined as being examples of the same genre as real ones. Are imagined conversations part of the same phenomenon as real ones, and if they are, how, and if they are not, why do we recognize them as being like the real ones? I also believe that in order to understand the pragmatic function of imaginary conversations, you need to know something about the way conversation, as a genre, is imagined in ideal terms.

So how is talk imagined in general? Conversation is currently imagined by analysts in two rather different ways, and for the sake of rhetorical opposition I will necessarily distort the contrasts. What is interesting, however, is that the two general models I am opposing share some basic presuppositions, and one of those is that ‘non-business-like’ talk, ordinary conversation, sociability, is unmarked or basic empirically, or more preferable normatively, than talk at work. And I believe this cultural apperception of talk is in fact not merely shared by analysts, but also is a broadly shared kind of idea. Whether this cultural construal of the category ordinary talk is valid or not, is not as interesting as the way it seems to inform these rants that I am talking about.

First of all, there is the question of whether conversation is a genre, or is generic. If conversation is treated as generic, that is, prior to other genres, foundational to the sociocultural order, then this is a claim that conversation is more or less technical. Among other things, it is the idea that talk is in some sense more a product of a set of basic foundational technical solutions to interactional problems. If talk in this sense is not exactly natural, it is at least technical, rather than cultural, if we understand the term ‘technical’ to define a sphere defined by interaction with nature, a sphere where human invention and art is constrained by nature and seeks to overcome those constraints. In this sense conversation can be treated much as work under capitalism is conceived of in a Marxian framework, of containing two analytically separable elements, a technical labor process which remains more or less unchanged under various political economic orders, and a historically changing valorization process which involves how surplus is extracted from that labour process, how different technical activities are rendered commensurable in terms of a general economy. Ditch-digging is ditch-digging wherever you find it, as a labour process, but how you get people to do that is variable under feudalism and capitalism.

Conversation is in this sense a ‘craft’, a techne, in the sense of being a technical set of solutions to a set of natural problems. These are generic in the sense of being

properties of 'verbal exchanges in general'. That is, by locating a genre of interaction that is more basic or 'ordinary'; than other genres, one is in a sense claiming either that it is not a genre, but generic interaction, or that at least it is unmarked with respect to all the other 'marked' forms of discourse.

This view can be opposed to the view that conversation is a historically and culturally locatable genre within a system of such genres, an art, the 'art of conversation'. Here the term art takes on less a technical sense as being the domain of human freedom as constrained by the domain of necessity, nature, but rather art in the sense of artifice, artificial, the purely conventional, ritual, normative aspects of human culture. Here the focus will be on observing the meta-pragmatics of talk, including imagined or model or paradigmatic conversations, conversation manuals, the 'civilizing process' of Norbert Elias applied to talk. To the extent that there has been increased attention to talk, like other forms of everyday behavior, and the pragmatics of talk has undergone systematic modification as a result of some sort of 'civilizing process', then we can see talk as being a historically located genre like any other. At the same time, such approaches tend towards a normative, rather than technical, evaluation of talk, often, in the work of Simmel or Habermas, treating it as a primordial locus of freedom in human interaction unconstrained by technical necessity. For Habermas, dialog is opposed to oratory as an order of pure unconstrained democratic deliberation to the demagogic hierarchical coercion of oratory, which is technical rather than social, after all, oratory has been since the sophists the *techne* of persuasion. For Simmel, conversation stands in both the fields of instrumental action and as a self-valuable end in itself. It is at once the most 'extensive instrument of all human common life' and is, at the very same time, when performed not instrumentally, but as an end in itself, the paradigmatic locus of the development of self-valuable interaction, interaction for its own sake: 'the purest and most sublimated form of mutuality among all sociological phenomena'. Burke's

historical analysis of changing European idealizations of conversation sees an emerging consensus arising within moral discourses about conversation that

“What makes this genre [conversation] distinctive is the relative emphasis on a cluster of characteristics, four in particular. There is first ‘the cooperative principle’... second, the equal distribution of ‘speaker rights’, expressed through an emphasis on turn-taking and ... a ‘reciprocal interchange of ideas’; third, the spontaneity and informality of the exchanges; and finally... their ‘non-business-likeness’.... (Burke 91)³

If one views conversation from the first technical perspective, the possibility of a universalizing perspective emerges, talk is now a systematic product of the technical conditions of its production. However much the solutions vary, there is a standard of comparison in the natural problems that these technical solutions address. However, by focusing on the interaction between the social and the natural, the remainder of the domain of the social drops out of view, talk seems to stand alone, a precursor to other genres. If we view it as an art, we can view it as a historically and culturally located genre, one genre among many, but then the difficulty of identifying any object of comparison across times and spaces becomes a problem. The former view requires us to adopt a narrow view of conversation, only real conversations form our opinion of what conversation is, the latter allows us to take imaginary conversations as being products of the same artifice as real ones.

For all this apparent difference, the approaches agree that one form of conversation, ordinary informal conversation between equals, is either empirically or normatively the core of the phenomenon. It is true that Conversation Analytic

³ Burke, Peter. 1993. *The Art of Conversation*. Cornell University Press.

approaches are full of technical terminology, talk being proposed to be the product or achievement of interactional work, involving technical operations of ‘repair’ and so on. It is also true that the normative model of talk specifically opposes it to such technical instrumentalism. Rather, talk becomes an expression of Simmel’s sociability, interaction as an end in itself. And yet, the specific generic features that Burke finds in his talk manuals as becoming increasingly diagnostic of the civilized ‘art of conversation’ are among those explained in technical terms by Conversation Analysis, Conversation Analysis treating many of them as interactional achievements rather than constitutive features of a genre.

This conversation about talk has been had before. The most famous exchange on this theme is the ‘eristic conversation’ had between Goffman and his students, especially Emmanuel Schegloff, who for his part was in part answering for what Harvey Sacks might have said. This conversation was not finished because most of the people involved in it were already dead, but it might be worth seeing how this exchange brings to the fore the two sets of views of talk I am interested in.

Goffman began the conversation in his article *Replies and Responses*, itself a reply and response to the work up to that point (1976) that had been done by Sacks and his students. Goffman’s replies and responses is, in large part, a critique of the basic unit of CA analysis, the adjacency pair. It also differs from the work in CA in that the basic data for Goffman’s work is, as Schegloff points out, purely imaginary, as opposed to the painstaking transcripts of real conversations that characterize CA work. I think this is not merely a matter of taste, but in some sense a product of this same antinomic way that talk presents itself. Lastly, Goffman made a division within the sorts of constraints that define talk into ‘systemic’ and ‘ritual’ constraints, but he might just as well have said ‘CA’ and ‘Goffman’ constraints.

‘Systemic constraints’, according to Goffman, deal ‘with talk as a communications engineer might, somewhat optimistic about the possibility of a culture-

free formulation', and as Schegloff notes, they contain a large number of things that CA has traditionally concerned itself with. These constraints are pan-cultural, drawing their rationale from the 'sheer physical requirements and constraints of any communication system' (265). In many ways the list resembles (and overlaps) Hockett's famous 'design features of language' list, but instead, we might call them the 'design features of talk'.

Systemic constraints, then, are explicitly technical, they stand at the interface of culture and nature, so to speak. They are really introduced in a sense as a foil for normative constraints on this purely communicative engine, what Goffman calls 'ritual constraints' which are as surely addressed to the normative order, maintenance of social situations and the social properties of persons, face, as the systemic constraints are addressed to the technical underpinnings. To the extent that Goffman believes in both of these, he has reproduced the distinction between culture and techne, conventional and natural, and made talk once again a hybrid between these two spheres, a dual parentage expressed in the opposition between the pancultural systemic constraints and the culturally variable universe of ritual ones. The idioms used in the two kinds of constraints betray the differences, in the technical world of systemic constraints, one speaks of 'repair'; in the normative universe of ritual constraints, we speak of 'remedy' and 'redress'. Repair operates, so to speak, on utterances and relations between them, properties of things, while remedy is something that operates on properties of persons and relations between them, face-work. The question is whether the division is itself one of those antinomies we inherit from our naturalist ontology, that rigidly opposes natural to social forms of explanation, with the technical order a kind of odd hybrid, expressing its position on the frontier between nature and culture. I'd like to suggest that, in effect, it is the opposition between real and imaginary dialog that is at the same time the opposition between systemic and ritual constraints in dialog.

This brings us to the methodological issue, that CA uses transcripts, exceptionally detailed in their way, of real conversations, and Goffman, as we know, made all his

conversations up, that is, the ones he didn't draw from a motley array of observation, newspaper clippings and vignettes from spy novels. This brings me back to my original distinction between primary, 'real' conversations and secondary 'imagined' conversations. I hope to show that this methodological divide is linked to the opposition between systemic constraints, or technical view of talk, and the ritual constraints, or normative view.

Schegloff correctly points out that Goffman's choice of data is related to his theoretical perspective, but I want to draw that out a bit more. Perhaps the answer is a fairly simple one that would go like this: In effect, we can learn very little about systemic constraints from made-up data, because things like repair, preference organization, overlap, back channel cues, and so on, are things that we normally disattend, and seldom remember clearly. The technical scaffolding of interaction is forgotten as soon as its work is done, in the absence of any memorable technical failures, all one remembers is the normative 'content'. We are talking with systemic constraints about things that fly below the level of metapragmatic awareness. If this is so, there is a sense in which they are, in effect, less susceptible to metapragmatic reflection and therefore, less able to be changed by reflexivity and metapragmatics. Systemic constraints could be defined, somewhat circularly, as whatever we *don't find* in imaginary conversations but *do find* in real ones.

So far we have focused on two analytic perspectives on differing processes at work within a single genre, ordinary talk, which can be analyzed either from the perspective of technical or normative orders. What then happens to the model when the technical order is really distinct, and not just analytically distinct, from the normative order, that is, when talk is part of a broader stream of activity, service interaction. In service transactions, talk forms part of a whole which is over-determined by extrinsic factors related, for example, to the way that conflicting imperatives like technical efficiency versus normative customer satisfaction, are experienced not as analytically

distinct components of a single phenomenon, but conflicting components of a complex phenomenon. I would like to argue that it is precisely in the conflict between technical and normative constraints in the order of service interactions, at various levels of analysis, that one finds the reason for rants that involve simply reproducing imagined dialogs. The normative model of ordinary conversation between equals, never achievable in the institutional context because ‘the customer is always right’, I believe, forms a normative position of critique against which some of these interactions are implicitly evaluated. At the same time, the transactional order of efficiency and following the script also forms a position of critique, allowing the unrepairable idiocy of the customers fumbled order for nonexistent goods and services to be recognizable as obvious stupidity, when compared to the technical craft knowledge of the barista.

Imaginary conversations

I have so far opposed two *images* of conversation, two analytic visions of conversation, one of which focuses on its technical, foundational quality as a primordial form of sociability, the other of which focuses on its specifically historically and culturally locatable normative relationship. In the first conversation is either generic or at least a foundational ‘unmarked’ genre, in the latter it is merely one genre among many. This opposition is an antinomic one, in that both approaches are logically antithetical, and yet logically valid arguments can be made in each case for a technical or a normative approach. The opposition is also recursive. The opposition between kinds of talk, instrumental or technically oriented transactional talk versus talk pursued as an end in itself, talk as pure sociability, finds an homologous opposition between analytic approaches to any single instance of talk, a primarily technical orientation to systemic constraints versus a primarily normative orientation to ritual constraints. Talk then is a hybrid of incommensurable analytic domains, nature and culture, necessity and freedom, technical and moral reason. In this sense talk resembles work, which is also imagined as

a hybrid of technical and cultural orders of determination, a labor process and a valorization process. When talk becomes work, the intrinsic properties of talk as labor process are modified by their subordination to an extrinsic valorization process, labor discipline, just as surely as digging ditches for wages differs from doing it for your own fields.

But what about *imagining conversation*. What then, aside from purely negative data like this, are imaginary conversations good for? Why do people report them?

First of all, the conversations found in renaissance manner books going under the title of ‘the art of conversation’, studied by Peter Burke, which have classical antecedents, of course, especially in classical literature on speech appropriate for symposiums, are not **empirical models of actual conversations**, but rather **normative models for conversation**. They are paradigmatic, models for imitation, print culture products that ironically have effects on spoken culture. To the extent that these metapragmatic models from print culture have an effect on spoken culture conversation, we are in the presence of Elias’ *civilizing process* in the sphere of conversation. And of course, the four features of the emergent consensus in Europe listed by Burke as to how to characterize conversation are clearly normative features. When we think of dialog (imagined dialog), these are the features that we imagine them to have, even if they are often absent from real talk. The model of conversation that emerges from such normative images of conversation is an idealized one, a model to aspire to. Note that Simmel treats the art of conversation as pure sociability, as a special historical achievement, that differs from the normal conversation that is shot through with instrumentality and not always pursued for its own sake.

Such is the vision of talk that is unconstrained and pursued as an end in itself, normative model of talk which in many important respects overlaps with the analytic category of talk that is sometimes called ‘ordinary conversation’. Imagined conversations that take this form can serve as positive normative models for talk. But

the conversations I have reproduced above are neither imaginary conversations that involve pure sociability, nor are they positive models. They are representations of a kind of talk, service interactions, or institutional talk, which has not been seen as being empirically or normatively central to our imagining of conversation. Moreover, they are representations of specifically bad conversations of this type. I want to argue that these two things are not related by chance, rather, it is specifically because they are service interactions that leads to the kind of conversation that is imagined and reproduced in the context of a rant for normative evaluation be one in which the norms are broken, rather than obeyed.

Service encounters have often been treated as an unproblematic given in our society, however, the proliferation of service work as a proportion of all work within capitalist economies, its participation in labour hierarchies of capitalism constituted in part by reference to perduring status attributes of workers, such as regimes of gender, race, ethnicity, class background, and efforts to subordinate the ‘locally managed’ labour process of talk to extrinsic forms of technological or social labour discipline, indicate that the service encounter is anything but an unproblematic given. But the way service encounters enter into the sociological literature on talk is not only as a ‘second best’ version of ordinary conversation, one that is complicated by extrinsic ‘institutional features’, but also to illustrate other rather prosaic features of talk in general. For Goffman in his replies and responses period, the service encounter emerges as a good prosaic example of the way that the verbal and non-verbal, words and things, interaction and transaction, can be woven together:

Quite routinely the very structure of a social contact can involve physical, as opposed to verbal (or gestural) moves. Here such words as do get spoken are fitted into a sequence that follows a non-talk design. A good example is

perfunctory service contacts.... Words can be fitted into this sequence [of non-linguistic action]; but the sequencing is not interactional. (1976: 283)

Here Goffman draws attention to the ways that talk in a service encounter obeys extrinsic necessities from the world of work: service transactions serve as an example of the technical order, both the calibration of verbal and non-verbal interaction, as well as the way that such talk at work is constrained by the work of which it is a part.

Elsewhere, the service interaction figures quite differently as a crucial example of certain basic ways that liberal civil society problematically achieves the decoupling or the loosening of the coupling of perduring social status from the order of ordinary interaction. The service interaction is not only a place where the fundamental equality of words and things, verbal and non-verbal activities, within sequences is demonstrated, but also a place in which we can see the fundamental achievement of liberal civil society, that of the microecological equality of the customer irrespective of perduring diffuse social status attributes, is routinely achieved, not merely because of the basic normative liberal principles so enacted, but also because such equal treatment is technically more efficient:

In almost all contemporary service transactions, a basic understanding seems to prevail: that all candidates for service will be treated 'the same' or 'equally', none being favoured or disfavoured over the others....All things considered, this ethic provides a very effective formula for the routinization and processing of services'⁴

This over-arching liberal principle of equality is, of course, the product of historical changes accreted over time. The other equally fundamental 'liberal principle' is more

⁴ Goffman, Erving. 1983. The interaction order. American Sociological Review 48: 1-17.

directly normative in content, whereas the first includes simple transactional matters (systemic constraints) such as lines and precedence within them, often regulated by the customers themselves, the second involves more obviously ‘ritual constraints’, this is that the one seeking service will be treated with ‘courtesy’, as a result of these two rules:

Participants in service transactions can feel that all externally relevant attributes are being held in abeyance and only internally generated ones are allowed to play a role, e.g. first come, first served. And indeed, this is a standard response. But obviously, what in fact goes on while the client sustains this sense of normal treatment is a complex and precarious matter.

And indeed, it is common enough for those who are being served to sustain serious senses of injury because of perceiving different ways that they have not received these two rules of equality and courtesy in fair and equal measure as others. And this is because the service interaction, like other forms of conversation, seems to instantiate for us the basic principles of liberal egalitarianism within the form of the interaction itself. Precisely in such contexts as a conversation or being treated in the proper manner as a customer one enacts and displays the basic achievements of liberalism as ones own personal attributes, as Horkheimer puts it: “Even the man in the street experiences in the act of buying a little of his own freedom and of respect for himself as subject.”⁵

But unlike non-businesslike conversation, ordinary conversation between peers, in service transactions the customer is only equal to all the other customers: there is no corresponding sense of equality for the server. As Horkheimer notes, the basic categories

⁵Max Horkheimer. 1964. Feudal Lord, Customer, and Specialist
The End of the Fairy Tale of the Customer as King. *Critique of Instrumental Reason*. Max Horkheimer.
Published by Continuum 1974 (<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/horkheimer/1964/customer.htm>)

of bourgeois liberalism are simply feudal categories that have been transposed and universalized: The customer is simply the feudal lord writ large, equal to other customers as peers, standing in a relation of absolute ruler to the server. “Bourgeois culture was deeply influenced by the dignity, honor, and freedom of the feudal lord and, in the last analysis, of the absolute ruler; it transferred these attributes to every individual man and especially to anyone who was well-off.” And again, an irony of liberal civilization is that, unlike feudalism, the persistence of hierarchy and domination are not to be explained in essentialized relations between estates or perduring social status attributes or relations, but rather “are its freely adopted form”. That is, the unfreedom of the workplace is freely chosen. No one forces you to work, and the unfreedom of work as a server is compensated by the freedom as a consumer during leisure.

In service work, of course, this unfreedom involves as it were, a double subordination, not merely the subordination of the worker to the employer, but also, in service transactions, the subordination of server to customer. If the role of customer is simply the feudal status of the lord writ large, so the role of server is simply the feudal status of servant transposed: “But where such a person did buy, he was served, and the reference to a bygone servant-relationship which the very word “Service” implies was not without influence on the manner in which the simple act of buying and selling was performed.” Indeed, the basic principles of equality and courtesy that Goffman treats as being the basic, if problematic, achievements of the service encounter, which efface the perduring and diffuse, feudal, status attributes of class, race, gender, age, and replace them with a locally managed liberal equality of persons with respect to the line up and the server, are achieved by a generalized *quasi-feudal* subordination, of course, of the server to customers in general: “The principle which every employer tried to drum into salesmen and salesgirls — “The customer is always right” — derives in substance from the time of the absolute ruler.” Between customers the aristocratic equality of peers holds just in case all servers are autocratically subordinated to each customer in turn as

servant to autocratic ruler. The following stupid customer of the week story illustrates the latent aristocratic character of the category of 'customer' and the fact that it is a contingent and problematic 'achievement':

Today after my shift ended I decided to do some christmas shopping. I pick up large 4 bottles of various flavoured syrup and 4 lbs of whole bean coffee. I am standing at the register as the partner is ringing me in. I am the only one in the store. This woman walks in and stand behind me, waiting to be rung up. Our store is 10 years old and the registers are pretty slow sometimes. After waiting about 1 1/2 minutes the following occurs:

Woman: You know, you could ask me what I want (directed at me, and the other partners)

Register Partner (shocked): I'm sorry, I'll be with you in a minute

Woman: Thats really rude, you're standing here laughing and joking and doing nothing and you don't even ask me what i want (more towards me now) I'm a customer!

Me: I'm a customer, too

Woman: No you're not, you work here

Register Partner: What can I get for you (to the bitch)

Woman: You're in starbucks clothes (to me, ignoring the register partner asking for her drink)

Me: I'm off the clock, and I'm a customer just like you. Anyhow, you don't have to be so rude

Woman: I'm not being rude, I think this is messed up, you're all messing around, laughing and joking, you need to wait on me

Off the clock partner: (not in uniform) Whats wrong? Did I miss something??

Me: No, This lady thinks that 2 minutes is too long to wait for her coffee. (as i walk

away, transaction complete)

Woman: (still hasn't ordered) It was longer than 2 minutes, more like 10 minutes, blah blah blah

Off the clock partner: What happened?

Me: Nothing, that lady is just a bitch.

Once the basic the basic identification of who is a 'customer' and who is a 'server' has been achieved, the principle that the customer is always right, of course, is usually a central problem in these Starbucks narratives. Because the customer is always right even if factually wrong that produces the inability of the barista to repair or redress the orders of the customers. This in turn leads to many problems, some of them technical, some of them normative.

From a technical point of view, an order must be formulated for something that exists, a problem of successful reference, and this formulation must be made in an intelligible fashion. If neither of these things happens, the barista has little choice but to attempt some sort of repair, either by adding new turns at talk for clarification, or, by simply translating the order into something that is an intelligible formulations. The story I started with, the request for 'non-fat coffee', is an illustration of this sort of thing.

Imaginary conversations that highlight such technical problems are ones in which the customer is simply wrong, or is not communicating, but they are always assessed by reference to the craft knowledge of the barista about products and the knowledge of more efficient scripts for getting an order done. In essence, in some of them the customer is simply stupid, but in other cases the barista is making a claim to craft knowledge, *techne*, and a concomitant claim to respect due a person who has superior craft knowledge, claims very similar to those that have historically formed the basis for claims to respect and autonomy at work in non-service industries.

The irony of Starbucks is, of course, that many customers resent or resist the fact that the barista is in some sense more classy, sophisticated, winespeakier in a *techne* of distinction, than they are. There is a basic reversal of the roles imputed to both. Rather than an aristocratic customer to whom is imputed universal knowledge of commodities and a server who merely fulfills that desire, the customer confronts the Starbucks barista as a aristocrat manqué, someone desiring the distinction of a connoisseur but where the server is actually the possessor and arbiter of taste. So in some sense a Starbucks barista's position with respect to the customer is not like a normal low end service employee and more like a high end connoisseur, a chef, a wine expert, sommelier, interior designer. This intimidates customers who are anxious and unsure of their knowledge, leading to resistance and resentment. But, the situation is different because, after all, Starbucks baristas really are low end service employees and cannot take the high line as easily as, for example, a chef. Mutual resentment can only result, as in this example:

Next up: Middle aged couple.

i'm expediting at this point, and I'm calling the line and I get to them.

Man: "i just want a large cup of coffee"

Woman "I'd like one of those frozen chocolate chip drinks"

Me: "Did you want the one with coffee, or without coffee?"

Woman: "Oh you know, the frozen chocolate chip drink with the chips on top!"

Me: "okay - we have two drinks - one is with coffee, one is without coffee - both have chips inside"

Woman: "I want the one with the chocolate chips on top"

Me: (now i'm getting freaked out) "Okay - did you want coffee or not?"

Woman "I want the chocolate chip drink! I don't know why this is so hard for you to understand!"

Me: "well, ma'am, it's just that we have two different drinks w/ chips, and i'm trying to figure out which one you want."

Man "Just get the first one with coffee in it"

Woman "does it have chocolate chips on top?"

Me: "They both have chips on the inside, with whipped cream and chocolate sauce drizzled on top, there are no chips on top"

Woman "yes there are! i get it all the time here! it has chips on top"

Me: "i'm sorry, we do not do that drink here ... it just has sauce on top"

Man "DO NOT CONTRADICT HER! SHE KNOWS WHAT SHE GETS!"

Me: "okay fine."

So I put her drink in line: a grande java chip frappucino with CHIPS ON TOP. the two partners on drinks were like "WTF is this?" i said "just make it".

I hope she liked her drink.

Because of the way that Starbucks overlays class anxieties on a relationship already fraught with class conflict, any attempt at repair can lead from the strictly technical dimension of attempting to solve problems of reference in such a way that the order can be filled, to more general normative conflict. Some customers treat the attempt at repair to be in itself a face threatening act, or will obstinately refuse to cooperate, or will continue to blunder forward in confusion, leading the conversation to a place where the issue is no longer a technical crisis, but a normative one. At such points the most explicit statements of the hierarchical nature of the relationship will be found, attempts will be made by customers to achieve by stipulation the respect it is felt are due all customers at the expense of the respect which is generally not felt to be due the server. The recrudescence of the aristocratic memory that haunts all service interactions is the focus here. The basic claim that is being made is that servers in service interactions also are due

the courtesy that is normatively accorded customers in general. Here the normative position of critique against which the reported conversation is being compared is not the technical script, but the normative model of ordinary conversation between peers, and the ritual constraints that form the basis of this model. And here, to conclude, I would like to suggest, service workers might basically agree with analysts of conversation, that there is an obvious difference between ordinary conversations between peers and service transactions. Each of these transcripts of rants about customers is haunted by the normative, but absent, image of ordinary talk. It is the tacit comparison to such an imagined normative model of talk and the order of 'ritual constraints' that makes these SCOWS legible as rants. Since the customer is always right in the moment of interaction, only on the internet can one relive and redress the inequality of the encounter with the customer in a dialog with peers.