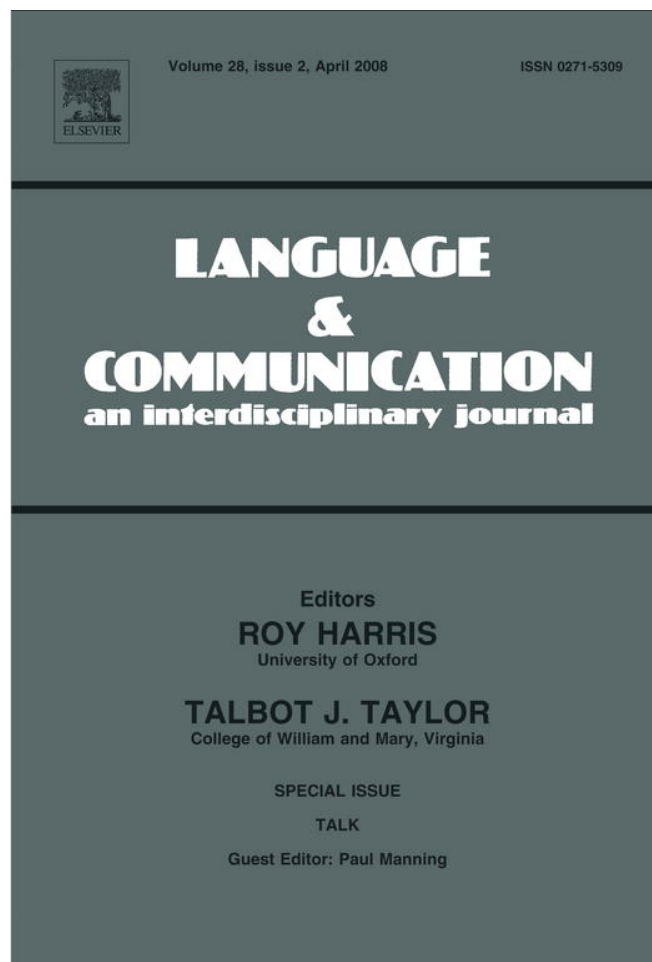


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Barista rants about stupid customers at Starbucks: What imaginary conversations can teach us about real ones

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Abstract

Approaches to the phenomenon of ‘talk’ have been polarized between very different, apparently irreconcilable or incommensurable, antinomic approaches to the phenomenon (and the kinds of data, ‘real’ or ‘imagined’, that can be used), characterizable as ‘technical’ versus ‘normative’, ‘generic’ versus ‘genred’ views of talk. By looking at how Starbucks *baristas* recount dialogs with ‘stupid’ customers as part of ‘rants’ or ‘vents’ about service work, we find that there is a common model of conversation widely shared by both members and analysts based on peer conversation, which serves as an implicit model for barista critique of service interactions and understanding barista rants about customers.

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1. Introduction

The papers in this volume illustrate a rich set of interdisciplinary perspectives on a phenomenon we could gloss variously as ‘talk’, ‘conversation’, or ‘dialog’, ranging from political philosophy, to linguistics, anthropology, cultural history and cultural geography. What is interesting about these papers is not only their different disciplinary origins, but also the range of perspectives they display on ‘talk’. The study of ‘talk’ of course, in linguistic pragmatics and linguistic anthropology, had long been associated with a single dominant approach, Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA), an approach which had

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identified in ‘talk-in-interaction’ a privileged, indeed, primordial, domain for the production of intersubjectivity and human sociality (Schegloff, 1992, p. 1296). By giving the detailed study of transcripts of ordinary talk such an extraordinary analytic importance, CA certainly has broadened the range of data and approaches across all fields of linguistic inquiry, even if in practice the core of CA itself often seemed to end up as a rather dry positivistic analysis of transcripts for emergent sequential relations between utterances (see Laurier, this volume; for a recent assessment of the paradigm see Sidnell (2007)). There is no question that CA has been immensely transformative. It is likely a sign of precisely how transformative CA has been that we cannot begin this discussion without mentioning it, and can say nothing about talk without positioning ourselves critically with respect to it. However, it is not the intent of this volume (or this introduction) to continue by other means a lengthy polemic about the pros and cons of this approach to talk, but rather, to further expand the horizons of what we can talk about when we talk about talk.

The purpose of this volume, then, is to explore new approaches to this traditional fare of pragmatics and linguistic anthropology: talk. As the papers in this volume illustrate, ‘talk’ lives multiple lives, both serving as an imaginary object as well as an empirical activity, embedded in various social and technical domains that mediate it in ways that are not visible in ‘the transcript’: scripted conversations in call-centers (Cameron), Indonesian Interkom networks (Barker), models of political deliberation (Remer), and, of course, the ‘architecture of sociability’ of the coffee shop and the café as idealized loci of conversation (Ellis, Laurier). In these papers, then, the phenomenon of talk serves not only as an empirical object of analysis, but can be shown to be imagined in various ways, and these imaginings have real consequences for the empirical object. Scripted conversations in call-centers imagine conversations in a way that constrain actual ones (Cameron), idealized political models of deliberation are imagined as being based on idealized forms of conversation between peers (Remer), Interkom conversations allow ‘imagined communities’ of a very different kind from those of ordinary publics (Barker), and of course, ideal forms of talk are imagined in relation to an idealized architecture of sociability embodied in the classic coffee-house (Ellis) and the contemporary café (Laurier). As each paper shows, how ‘talk’ is imagined is part of what ‘talk’ is as an empirical object, the phenomenon cannot be understood based only on what can be found on a transcript, no matter how detailed. Other themes unite the papers, of course. The pervasive association of coffee with sociable talk is the theme of two of the papers (Ellis, Laurier), while talk at work the theme of another paper (Cameron), the mediation of talk by institutional, technological or architectural aspects of material culture is another emergent theme (Cameron, Barker, Ellis, Laurier), and certainly, while some of the papers critically engage the influential views of CA on ‘talk’ (Cameron, Laurier), others engage the equally influential views of Jurgen Habermas on ‘dialog’ (Remer, Barker, Ellis, Laurier). I will attempt to introduce the emergent themes of this volume by exploring an ethnographic context where all these various themes seem to be illustrated: barista rants about stupid customers at Starbucks.

2. Imagined dialogs with stupid customers at Starbucks

To begin with, I warn that I am going to talk about ‘talk’ using an especially dubious kind of conversational data that would probably not pass muster in a positivistic discourse of the transparent, scientific ‘transcript’ of the ‘real conversation’. I will call such conver-

sations ‘imagined conversations’ in spite of the fact that, like transcripts of ‘real conversations’, both are embeddings of a primary genre (conversation) as a Bakhtinian secondary genre within some other primary genre (internet rant or scientific article) (for the opposition see Bakhtin (1986)). I call them ‘imagined’ primarily to flag that such conversations might very well be ‘made up’ (meaning anything from reconstructed from memory, artfully retold, to entirely fabricated conversations) as opposed to ‘real’ (that is, transcribed from a tape). Therefore they form, from a position of transcript-driven data purism, a dubious form of data that allegedly cannot lead to any interesting insights on the ‘real’ phenomenon (e.g. Schegloff, 1988, pp. 100–104). But I also want to label them ‘imagined’ because by envisioning them we can attend to the imaginative dimension of conversation, which, as the papers in this volume show, is in its way every bit as ‘real’ as the stuff in the transcripts. Certainly, they are real in their consequences. Moreover, the very fact that they can be *recognized* as being of the same species as the stuff in the transcripts shows that imaginary conversations really *are* the same sort of thing as ‘real’ conversations in some way, because they are recognizable as such by members.

I explore these themes by looking at a very specific genre with a very specific historical and cultural context, conversations reported by café workers (henceforth *baristas*) about ‘stupid customers’ in Starbucks coffee stores, as reported on a barista web-site in a decidedly non-dialogic primary speech genre that is usually called a ‘rant’ or a ‘vent’ (in my opinion a very neglected speech genre), although these also bear some resemblance to narrative genres like the anecdote. In such genres, a monologic primary genre (‘rant’ or ‘vent’) consists almost entirely of an incorporated dialogic interaction as a secondary genre. I’ll begin by reproducing an example of such a genre, exactly as written on the web-site:

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?¹

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 found literally hundreds of examples on this and other web-sites. They form part of a constellation of genres that other viewers can post replies to, ranging from full-blown SCOW stories, narratives of work problems not related as dialogs or not involving customers, to chatty insider questions like 'what does your customer voice sound like: you know what I mean'. I am interested in why baristas imagine these conversations, what they use them for (other than entertainment, as with the anecdote one can 'dine out' on them, as most of them are quite funny), and whether these imagined secondary speech genres can tell us anything about the primary speech genre from which they derive. This primary genre, the 'rant' or 'vent', is one that has come into its own in the anonymous or pseudonymous discursive world of the internet, a genre that 'vents' opinions that perhaps have no other venue: they are hidden transcripts made visible.² They are also ranting monologues that can themselves produce dialogs, uptake, or sharing of similar experiences. These rants can take other non-dialog forms, of course, mini-rants about customers like the following, which take the form of a simple narrative (these are from http://starbucksgossip.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.

¹ Baristas sensation, 'stupid ignorant customers', <http://community.livejournal.com/baristas/2004/10/04/>, Electronic document, accessed January 26th 2008.

² 'Rants' or 'vents' about stupid customers and their fumbled orders is not limited to Starbucks, but even coffee chains like Tim Hortons, where the referential field of choices is tiny by comparison, have a huge number of cranky service employee 'how to order' pages that are labeled variously as 'rants' (White, 2008a) or 'vents' (White, 2008b).

But even these narrative mini-rants have a tendency to slide into dialogic format:

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’s say in a hostile and sarcastic-assed 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 a primary genre (‘rant’ or ‘vent’) should in the case of a SCOW (Stupid Customer of the Week story) involve simply a stretch of metapragmatic discourse, in this case, a reported conversation. Why, in particular, do websites addressed to communities of Starbucks service workers (‘baristas’) have so many instances of this genre?

3. Ordering the way customers order coffee: from *non-fat coffee* to *half-caf-double-decaf-breve-affogato-no-cream*

Certainly, conversations with baristas at Starbucks are formidable for many. Formulating the order correctly, even if not asking for a chimerical non-fat coffee, can be daunting.³ Of course, any customer anywhere, when making a request, must do so in such a way that the referent (the good or service desired) is specifically and differentially picked out from all the other potential referents in the contextual field, a pragmatic problem of ‘successful reference’ (e.g. Lyons, 1977, p. 177). At Starbucks, however, the field of potential referents numbers into many thousands. A referring expression that would get one coffee at a restaurant will only identify the taxonomic field at Starbucks (compare Schegloff (1971) for a classic treatment of the same problem with respect to ‘formulating place’). At the same time, Starbucks drinks, affordable luxuries, are relatively prestigious quotidian commodities whose consumption confers prestige on the consumer (see Roseberry (1996) for a political economic backdrop to the emergence of ‘Yuppie coffee’). Thus, while successful reference is enough to get served, it is not enough to lay claim to the prestigious properties of the object one is about to consume. To do that, one must characterize the referent *correctly* (‘correct reference’ (Lyons, 1977, p. 181)). The problem with ordering Starbucks coffee is that the vocabulary of correct reference is enormous. The vocabulary field of affordable luxuries such as coffee has taken on some of the status-indexing qualities associated with the vocabulary field of pricier prestige commodities, like wine or olive oil (Silverstein, 2003, p. 226, 2006; Meneley, 2007; Heath and Meneley, 2007).

However, much as Starbucks coffee lingo self-consciously resembles prestige registers of winespeak (and also martini-speak), there are enormous practical (and pragmatic) differences.⁴ At Starbucks one must control a relatively standardized and branded lexicon of

³ In addition to a 20 odd page Starbucks ‘How to Order’ guide distributed on a massive scale in 2003 (Starbucks, 2003), there are countless web-based guides to guide the anxious customer through the ordering process. The same is now true of the rather plebeian coffee chain Tim Hortons (White, 2008a,b; Turley-Ewart, 2008).

⁴ Starbucks has appropriated the ‘wet–dry’ opposition from Martini culture (for a classic structuralist analysis of the martini and the category of ‘dry’, see Edmunds (1981)), so that ‘dry’ means ‘more foam, less milk’ and wet means ‘more milk, less foam’. Most of the lexical innovations where Starbucks’ terminology differs from antecedent ‘traditional’ coffee terminologies are found in a massive taxonomic proliferation of descriptors in the domain of milk additives, as here, part of what Ellis calls “the lactification of the coffee-house” (Ellis, 2005, p. 258, see also Willson (2005)). Starbucks’ brand is coffee, but its product is mostly milk, as Ellis eloquently puts it “milk is a dormant concept at Starbucks, repressed beneath the overwhelming commitment to the romance of coffee” (Ellis, 2005, p. 254).

distinction in reference to order the commodity from a server, while in winespeak the lexicon of distinction is deployed in a peer community of tasters to evaluate the commodity in consumption. Winespeak is an evaluative lexicon of wine consumption, barista-speak is a practical lexicon of coffee production.⁵ Although there are ‘coffee-tasting notes’ alongside ‘wine-tasting notes’ (Silverstein, 2003, p. 227), there is no problem of ‘successful reference’ in winespeak (the vocabulary is not used to formulate an order), only ‘correct reference’. At Starbucks ‘successful reference’ will allow one to get the drink one wants, but customers may take different stances to the problem of ‘correct reference’, that is, not only picking out the referent but also characterizing it correctly. Some customers (the ‘cunty soccer mom’ above) will participate in the Starbucks branding strategy by using the Starbucks lingo for ‘correct reference’, while others (‘Mr. Bitter old man’ above) will rebel at it, attempting ‘successful’ but ostentatiously avoiding ‘correct reference’. Part of Starbucks’ branding strategy relies on the idea that customers do not just want coffee, they want ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu, 1984; Silverstein, 2003, 2006). Distinction is manufactured by the difference between connoisseur-like fluent control of ‘correct reference’ (‘half-caf-double-decaf-breve-affogato-no-cream’) and plebeian ‘successful reference’.⁶ Using the appropriate lexicon of distinction in proper reference ‘confers (indexically entails) an aspect of eliteness-before-prestige-commodities, of which ‘distinction’ is made’ (Silverstein, 2003, p. 226).⁷ Therefore, customer class anxiety is foregrounded in a Starbucks service encounter to an extent we would never find in a Canadian Tim Hortons or its American equivalent, Dunkin Donuts.⁸

Unlike winespeak, Starbucks’ lexicon of distinction is standardized. This standardization strategy appropriates portions of the terminology of an antecedent coffee culture, refashioned as part of the Starbucks’ ‘brand’ of coffee reference (see Ellis (2005, pp. 253–258)). So what constitutes ‘proper reference’ at Starbucks is itself the product of a Starbucks’ brand strategy that both builds on existing Romance language lexicons of distinction involving coffee drinks (Italian, French and Spanish coffee terminology are redeployed [in that order] as part of a distinctive Starbucks’ register) and adds additional brand-specific ones (including using Romance language words as brand-specific names for sizes: ‘grande’ is the word for large, and the even larger 20oz is called ‘venti’). The resulting lexicon, represented in a widely disseminated Starbucks’ ‘how to order guide’ (Starbucks, 2003), runs to many pages.

⁵ Compare Manning (2001) for a commodity with discrete lexicons in distinct languages relating to production and consumption of a single commodity.

⁶ As Laurier (2003, pp. 8–9) notes, a customer who formulates request for coffee using connoisseur terminology like ‘ristretto’ (thus indexing the fact that they really care about their coffee) will sometimes elicit a special ‘connoisseur’ performance from a barista, who may make a show of throwing out a batch of espresso that came out bad and making a new one that has the desired properties.

⁷ See also Manning (2001) for a slightly different way that this distinction between kinds of reference can create ‘distinction’, in this case indexing craft skill in production.

⁸ I note that in delivering this paper in Canada, Canadian audiences virtually always resorted to a kind of ‘brand totemism’ (on which see Manning (2007)) in which Tim Hortons (a donut chain which is a subsidiary of Wendy’s), whose ultra-nationalist branding strategy revolves around conflating consumption of their coffee with Canadianness, figured as the plain-spoken, hockey playing, Canadian underdog to the chi-chi and yet imperialist American Starbucks (and yet, even here, apparently the customers can’t order right, see White (2008a,b) and Turley-Ewart (2008)). The rather obvious misrecognition involved here (including the idea that Tim Hortons is the Canadian equivalent to Starbucks, or that Tim Hortons is ‘Canadian’ at all) surely deserves its own special study.

From the perspective of the Starbucks' brand strategy, standardizing the way baristas and customers refer to their beverages involves both a 'stylistic' discourse of distinction (associating the commodity with both brand-specific and more general registers of distinction) as well as a 'technical' discourse of efficiency. The standardization of barista-speak involves aspects of both branding and Taylorization, customer-oriented commoditization and employee-oriented streamlining of the labor process. To borrow from Deborah Cameron's discussion of phone centers (Cameron, 2000, this volume), the Starbucks' lexicon involves 'styling' ('creating a uniform style of service encounter by regulating small surface details that have aesthetic value' (Cameron, 2000, p. 101)) and scripting the order of formulation to increase efficiency (Cameron, 2000, pp. 93–99). While the template for wine-tasting notes mirrors the gustatory process of consumption, assessing the qualities of the wine in the order in which they address the senses, moving from visual, through olfactory, to gustatory (Silverstein, 2003, pp. 223–224), the Starbucks ordering formula mirrors the process of production, the qualities of drinks are stated in the order required by production, not consumption. The syntax of winespeak is a diagrammatic icon of the process of consumption, while the syntax of barista-speak is an icon of production. Winespeak is evaluative and non-standardizable, barista-speak is non-evaluative and standardized.

As Cameron emphasizes, both 'styling' and efficiency are aspects of a branding process involving notions of standardizing 'quality': on the one hand, the conscious stylization of the process produces the uniqueness of the brand, on the other hand, the scripting and surveillance of the process ensures a uniform customer experience of the brand: 'creating a consistent, distinctive, and easily recognizable identity for... products and services' (Cameron, 2000, p. 100). But unlike the call-centers that Cameron discusses, both the barista and the customer are expected to participate in the construction (via styling and scripting) of the consistent and distinctive experience of the 'Starbucks Brand' (compare Foster, 2005, 2007 on the agencies of producers and consumers in constructing brands). If in the call-centers the consumer-oriented considerations of 'service' are in implicit conflict with the industrial considerations of 'efficiency' (Burke, 1993, p. 103), Starbucks represents both aspects of the process as being in the customers' interests as well. Therefore, Starbucks has a 'civilizing mission' both with respect to its workers and its customers: not only does Starbucks send its baristas to a special university to master the branded script for Starbucks service encounters (see Laurier (2003), for an ethnography of the training process at a European Starbucks competitor), but Starbucks has even gone so far as to provide a script for such formulations for its customers in the form of a widely disseminated guide to ordering at Starbucks (Starbucks, 2003).

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 give it to you.

But if we call your drink 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... (Starbucks, 2003: no page numbers)

The pamphlet then gives a visual diagram of the production process for a single order: (1) cup (a cup for hot, cold, or ‘for here’ drinks), (2) shots and size, (3) syrup, (4) milk and other modifiers, to (5) the (kind of) drink itself.⁹ In principle, then, the descriptors for each of those categories are to be formulated in the same order as they are needed in the production process itself, so that the ‘correct’ order mirrors, or serves as an icon of, the process of production. The Starbucks’ guide illustrates the Starbucks syntax using the following example of a maximally complex coffee order (Starbucks, 2003):

		I’d like to have an		
ICED,	DECAF, TRIPLE,	CINNAMON,	NONFAT, NO-	MOCHA
	GRANDE,		WHIP	
CUP	SHOTS AND SIZE	SYRUP	MILK AND OTHER	THE DRINK
			MODIFIERS	ITSELF
1	2	3	4	5

In this pamphlet, Starbucks attempts to defuse the nervousness of the customer in the face of the discourse of ‘styling’ and attendant distinction by reassuring the customer that there is no ‘right way to order at Starbucks’ (hence, no distinction between successful and correct reference). The pamphlet reassures the customer that the barista’s act of repeating the customer’s order in Starbucks terminology and using Starbucks’ syntax is *not* a face-threatening act of ‘correction’ within a discourse of distinction (because, after all the customer *is* always right) but a purely technical act of ‘translation’ to facilitate efficiency, the expediter translating the customer’s ‘order’ into a ‘call’ addressed to the barista (after all, everyone wants their coffee right away, and there are other people in line too): ‘It’s all about the order of information’. And this does appear to be true, a customer *order*, after all, is a referential act of description of a *thing* (a specific good or product), but this thing does not actually exist until it is made by the barista, so it must be translated into a *call*, which is a description of a *service* or a labor process of making that thing. To paraphrase Eric Laurier’s excellent ethnography of barista training, customers immerse baristas ‘in the field of action with their orders’ (Laurier, 2003, p. 13). The arcana of the Starbucks ordering process is revealed to be not an invidious social discourse of distinction, but a technical craft knowledge related to industrial efficiency, used for efficient communication between fellow skilled workers (see Laurier (2003) generally on barista work as skilled labor), which the customers are invited to participate in: ‘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’ (Starbucks, 2003).¹⁰ The baristas, it appears from reading the SCOWS, largely

⁹ The following Starbucks’ website guides you through forming the proper syntactic statement of your favorite drink using these ordering principles, and then download an artistically stylized version of same as a wallpaper or icon (<http://www.mystarbucksstshirt.com/>).

¹⁰ Elsewhere, Starbucks tries to make the proliferation of possible coffee-commodities implied by the lexicon of barista-speak a means by which customers can express their individuality through participation in the Starbucks brand, so that brand ‘styling’ becomes a component of personal ‘style’ (for a discussion of this interplay in branding in general see Foster (2005, 2007) and Manning and Uplisashvili (2007)). This is implied by the title of the guide to ordering: ‘Make it your drink’ (Starbucks, 2003), which presents the learning process as having the goal of helping each customer find their own ‘perfect, personalized Starbucks’ drink’.

agree. One way a customer can be ‘stupid’ is not merely that they do not know how to talk about coffee, or willfully refuse to do so (‘correct reference’), but also that they refuse to allow the barista to ‘repair’ their order so that the order can be filled (‘successful reference’).

4. Enter the stupid customer: talk at work

But anxious customers are probably right about one thing, that their fumbled orders will make them seem stupid. This brings me to the next question about imagined conversations at Starbucks: 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 (Silverstein, 2003, p. 199). For example, in a service transaction there are technical goals that must be accomplished (orders must be made so that they can be filled) and at the same there are significant asymmetries between interactants (‘the customer is always right’).

For workers in the field of CA, there is a sense in which ‘ordinary talk between peers’ plays the unmarked ‘plain vanilla’ role to the more robustly flavoured ‘institutional talk’: unmarked in the sense that they are opposed as ‘everyday conversation between peers’ (unmarked) versus ‘institutional talk’ (marked), in that the latter involves various forms of institutional constraints and goals that are absent (one supposes) from purely sociable interaction between peers (Drew and Heritage, 1992, pp. 21–22). Presumably, this can imply that ‘ordinary talk between peers’ is closer to instantiating the properties of the universal category of ‘talk-in-interaction’. However, at the same time, both of these are subsumed as specific genres of the universalizing category of ‘talk-in-interaction’ or ‘verbal exchanges in general’ (Drew and Heritage, 1992, p. 4). So, in a sense, sociable talk between peers is ambivalently elided into ‘natural, non-genred’ talk (in effect, closer to the universal category of ‘talk-in-interaction’), while institutional talk is ‘genred’ by virtue of having extrinsic constraints and goals located in the institutional, and not interactional, order (for a critique see Gaudio (2003)).

Certainly the ontological foundations of this opposition are covered critically in this volume. One paper in this volume (Cameron’s) is a sensitive exploration of precisely what sorts of dilemmas such institutional ‘top down’ imperatives have for the ‘bottom up’ construction of conversation. But work is not the only ‘institutional’ context relevant to talk, as various papers in this volume suggest, ‘ordinary talk between peers’ is also imagined in normative terms as being ideally associated with certain kinds of institutional contexts, especially 18th century coffee houses (Ellis) and contemporary cafes (Laurier), including Starbucks, as well as other non-localized ‘architectures of sociability’, such as the Interkom lines discussed by Barker. Finally, ‘ordinary talk between peers’ itself serves as a largely unanalyzed ground for the imaginative construction of idealized models of democratic procedure (‘dialog’), including presumably institutional ones (Remer).

To be fair, Drew and Heritage present the opposition between ‘ordinary’ and ‘institutional’ talk in terms of the above-mentioned factors as part of the ‘*participants’ orientations* to institutional contexts’ (ibid. original emphasis). That is, both analysts and members would probably agree that in service transactions talk becomes part of the insti-

tutional 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 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, efficiency, getting the job done, getting the customer their coffee, rather than pure sociability.¹¹

Evidently Starbucks' service interactions are a special breed even here, 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 deriving from the institutional context. The responsibility a barista has to both figure out the order of the customer (a problem of successful reference) and maintain a scripted Starbucks' 'brand' of ordering (a problem of correct reference) provides a common interactional motif in these imagined conversations. In the following rant, the stupid customer speaks in fluent Tim Hortonsese (where, apparently, 'regular' means 'with cream and sugar' (Turley-Ewart, 2008)) and McDonaldsese ('supersize'), but balks at using the branded 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.

¹¹ By naturalism I will mean, generally following the discussions in [Descola \(1996a,b\)](#) and [Viveiros de Castro \(2004\)](#), a generally dualist ontology ordered around the opposition between 'nature' and 'culture', where the former is the 'unmarked' or 'absorptive' and the latter 'marked', term of the opposition. Nature is not only opposed to culture as a domain of order and necessity autonomous from human agency and will, but also tends to be privileged as forming the objective, causal determining environment or conditions of possibility in which culture is found. As a result, human socio-technical interactions with nature, glossed under the general rubric of 'work' or 'production' (including categories like skills, labor, labor processes, technology, crafts and so on), have long been treated as being very unlike the remainder of human 'culture' inasmuch as they seem to be dominated by an extrinsic causal necessity imposed by nature (the 'technical' order) in a way that, say, 'symbolic' or 'ritual' activities are not (see below). For anthropological perspective why this conception of work or production that separates the technical (natural) from the symbolic (cultural) is not universal see for example [Vernant \(1983\)](#), [Descola \(1996b, pp. 284–307\)](#) and [Viveiros de Castro \(2004, pp. 477–478\)](#). Importantly, the very definition of labor or work under capitalism recapitulates the basic outlines of this naturalist ontological divide: on the one hand 'work' tends to mean concrete human productive interactions with nature (what is often called a 'labor process of production'), on the other hand it denotes any kind of activity at all that is performed not for itself but for wages or salary, an abstract category of activity that can only be defined with respect to a purely conventional set of social relations between humans (including Marx' 'valorization process') ([Godelier, 1980, p. 835](#); see also [Manning \(2001, 2004\)](#)). From the first perspective work (like talk) seems like rather concrete kind of human universal, from the second perspective, following Marx, work or labor is a rather abstract category that only becomes meaningfully 'real' within a very specific historical system of exchange (see [Godelier \(1980, p. 832\)](#) for an exposition of Marx' views on this).

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!!!!¹²

These rants about conversations are also interesting because they show a much more general observation about how conversations are imagined in our society, by analysts and members alike. As we have seen, even within universalizing perspectives like CA, service interactions are sometimes 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 category of conversation without such determining institutional or technical factors, 'non-business-like' conversation between peers pursued 'for its own sake', conversation as Simmel's 'pure sociability' (Simmel, 1949). 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 or Oldenbergian 'third places' between work and home, public and private, where one can talk over a cup of coffee with friends (see Ellis and Laurier for perspectives on the Habermasian idealized linkage of coffee and talk). 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' (Gaudio, 2003, p. 659).

While Gaudio usefully frames an important aspect of the Starbucks' 'branding' of both coffee and talk within broader political economic contexts (see also Roseberry (1996)), it seems to me that if one wants to find interactions shot through with political–economic moment at Starbucks, surely one needs to look no further than the counter, for a Starbucks store has far more transactional 'talk about coffee' than it does sociable 'coffeetalk' (Laurier, 2003, this volume). And the commoditization, stylization and standardization, in short, the branding of the process of ordering Starbucks' coffee is surely just as salient as the branding of Starbucks' stores as 'third spaces' for sociable dialog. The extent that analysts and members both 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 an exceptional form of talk. It is precisely this perceived hybrid quality of service interactions, containing

¹² baristas larksong, <http://community.livejournal.com/baristas/2004/10/04/>, electronic document, accessed January 26th 2008.

determinations both of a technical, work-related, and a social, politeness-related, nature, that are part of the problems surfacing 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 at once the opposition and the interpenetration of the technical and normative orders.

5. Analysts' imaginations of talk

One reason to fret at length about the peculiar imaginary status of 'talk at work' as a kind of 'hybrid' of technical and moral orders is that tells us a lot about how talk itself is disputed between these orders at the analytic level. The imagined opposition between speech genres glossable as 'institutional talk' or 'talk at work' and 'sociable talk between peers' replicates a pervasive analytic opposition between two very different ways of imagining 'talk' in general, what I will call the 'technical' and 'normative' models, or 'generic' and 'genred' models of talk. I am rehearsing the oppositions between these models here not to take sides, because I believe the opposition is an antinomic one that tells us more about the dualistic naturalist ontology that underlies them both.

For all their differences, the two models share some basic presuppositions. 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. The other is that both recapitulate the basic ontological divide of our naturalist ontology, placing conversation either squarely in the 'natural' field of the technical or the 'social' field of the normative order.

But even if these two perspectives agree on so much, they still disagree on whether talk will be seen as belonging to a technical or moral order, whether it is universal/generic or historical/genred, situationally emergent or socially constructed. If conversation is treated as generic, prior to other genres, underlying or foundational to the sociocultural order, something that is relatively culturally and historically invariant, possibly even being a species-specific universal (see for example Sidnell (2007, pp. 230–231)), then this is a claim that conversation is more or less technical in the senses above (see Hutchby (2001) for a broad-ranging discussion of the metaphoric and metonymic relationships of talk to technology).¹³ Indeed, Harvey Sacks specifically characterized conversation as a 'technology' in his earliest lectures (Hutchby, 2001, p. 78) and CA literature has been rife with technical and technological metaphors ever since (e.g. Schegloff, 2000, p. 208). This was probably what led Goffman, in his 'Replies and Responses' (1976), to characterize the CA view of talk as consisting of a series of 'Systemic constraints', which deal 'with talk as a communications engineer might, somewhat optimistic about the possibility of a culture-free formulation' (Goffman, 1976, p. 265). These constraints are pan-cultural, drawing their rationale from the 'sheer physical requirements and constraints of any communication system' (Goffman, 1976, p. 265). In many ways the list resembles (and overlaps) Hockett's famous 'design features of language' list (Hockett, 1960), but instead, we might call them the 'design features of talk'.¹⁴

¹³ For a recent useful characterization of the 'generic' position, see Sidnell (2007), for an extensive critique.

¹⁴ Hockett's list of the 'design features of language' (1960), which lives on a curious half-life in textbooks of first year four-field anthropology and introductory linguistics courses, if nowhere else, has the goal of locating human language within a naturalist evolutionary ontology characteristic of received versions of both four-field anthropology and linguistics: the lesson is that language both shares evolutionary 'design features' with animal non-language (nature) but also transcends them forming a category which is 'distinctively human' (culture).

Systemic constraints, then, are explicitly technical, they stand at the interface of culture and nature, so to speak. Goffman really introduces them as a foil for normative constraints on this purely communicative engine, what Goffman calls ‘ritual constraints’ which are as surely addressed to the Durkheimian normative order, maintenance of social situations and the social properties of persons, face, as the systemic constraints are addressed to the technical underpinnings.¹⁵ To the extent that Goffman believes in both of these, he has reproduced the naturalist distinction between culture and *techne*, conventional and natural, ritual and technical spheres, and made talk once again a hybrid between these two spheres, a dual parentage expressed in the opposition between the pan-cultural 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’ while in the normative universe of ritual constraints, one speaks of ‘remedy’ and ‘redress’. Repair operates 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.

Since ‘technical’ properties of objects or processes belong to the ‘nature’ side of a naturalist nature/culture dichotomy, such a view is one that leads to ‘talk’ being informally characterized with the adjective ‘natural’. 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 (Sidnell, 2007, p. 231). If talk is not exactly natural, it is at least technical, rather than cultural, if we understand the term ‘technical’ (in a naturalist ontology) to define a sphere defined by interaction with nature, virtually identical to the sphere of ‘work’ or ‘production’, a sphere where human invention and art is constrained by nature and seeks to overcome those constraints (see above note 11).

Conversation is in this sense a ‘craft’, a *techne*, a kind of ‘work’, in the sense of being a technical set of procedural solutions to a set of natural problems of communication. These are generic in the sense of being properties of ‘verbal exchanges in general’. 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 (belonging to the constituted or historical order), but truly generic interaction (a natural by-product of technical means to the end of communication), or that at least it is unmarked with respect to all the other ‘marked’ forms of discourse. Part of the claim seems to be that we really do not need to define ‘talk’ or ‘conversation’ itself because it is immediately recognizable as a priori. As a result of this ‘technical’ view of talk, we can see why ethnomethodology also applied its approach to ‘conversation’ (resulting in CA) almost immediately to the domain of ‘work’ as well (Garfinkel, 1986), again, without a definition with which one was to recognize ‘work’ in general (see note 11). However, because such a technical view of talk means that it is locally organized, actual institutional ‘talk at work’ ironically becomes a marked version of talk.

In contrast, there is the view that conversation is a historically and culturally locatable genre within a system of such genres, that there is an ‘art of conversation’. Here the term

¹⁵ The largely Durkheimian opposition Goffman invokes here between ‘technical’ and ‘ritual’ aspects of activities (in which, implicitly, only the latter were ‘social’ and therefore appropriate objects of study) bedeviled the social anthropological literature on ritual. For earlier debates on the subject within social anthropology see for example Barth (1964); Peters (1984); and references there, for critical perspectives on the opposition see Galaty (1983) and Asad (1988). See Pfaffenberger (1992) for a broader critique of the opposition between ‘social/symbolic’ and ‘technical’ dimensions of objects and activities.

'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 is on observing the metapragmatics of talk, including imagined or model or paradigmatic conversations, conversation manuals, Norbert Elias' 'Civilizing Process' applied to talk (Burke, 1993, pp. 90, 113). To the extent that there has been increased metapragmatic attention to talk and the pragmatics of talk has undergone systematic modification as a result of some sort of metapragmatic 'civilizing process', then we can understand 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, as in the work of Simmel or Habermas, conversation is treated as a locus of freedom in human interaction unconstrained by technical necessity or social status. For Habermas, dialog is opposed to oratory as an order of pure unconstrained democratic egalitarian deliberation to the demagogic hierarchical coercion of oratory (Remer), oratory having been conceived since the Ancient Greek Sophists, after all, as being in effect a *techne* of persuasion (Vernant, 1983, pp. 286–287). In popular political discourse, of course, the term 'dialog' is so typically found in collocations like 'peaceful dialog' or 'civilized dialog' that it becomes almost synonymous with 'peace' and 'civilization' as opposed to 'violence' and 'chaos': hence the way that otherwise seemingly incongruous calls for 'dialog' are issued whenever a political situation descends into violence and chaos. 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 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' (Simmel, 1949, p. 259). While Habermas' ideal of free conversation is strongly associated with 'reason' (Remer), and for Simmel the sociable conversation is rather associated with 'play' (Barker), it remains that both of them are similar in seeing conversation pursued for its own sake, and not for external or instrumental ends, as a paradigmatic expression of freedom. Certainly the shared idealization of conversation between Habermas and Simmel is itself a historical product. Peter 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, 1993, :91)

Obviously, if one views conversation from a technical perspective, the possibility of a universalizing comparative perspective emerges, talk is now a systematic product of the local technical conditions of its production, and therefore indifferent to the tides of broader historical forces. However much the solutions vary, there is a standard of comparison in the natural problems that these technical solutions address (for example Sidnell (2007, pp. 230–231)). By focusing on the interaction between the social and the natural, the remainder of the domain of the social drops out of view. Talk-in-interaction seems to stand alone, the generic 'infrastructure' to other genres (Schegloff, 2006). In addition,

there is the strong assumption that dialog, talk or conversation is universal. This same view must posit a rather extreme epistemic and ontological divide between ‘real’ conversations and imagined ones. The former are bottom-up emergent products of talk-in-interaction, while the latter are not. Any similarity between them is by definition illusory, from such a naturalizing perspective, one might as well study the comparative biology of fabulous beasts as study made-up transcripts of talk (Schegloff, 1988, pp. 100–107). In fact, Schegloff makes exactly this claim with respect to Goffman’s ‘made up’ data. In comparison with the ‘real’ data of CA, Goffman’s data, including made up snatches of conversation which are designed to illustrate what is ‘typical’, cannot surprise him since he made it up himself, it contains no ‘stubborn, recalcitrant, puzzling details that will not go away’ (Schegloff, 1988, p. 103). Parenthetically, one might argue here (with Goffman) that the two kinds of data illustrate the two kinds of constraints on talk: ‘made-up’ data, after all, illustrates normative *typifications*, metapragmatic regimentations of the pragmatic order of talk, ‘ritual constraints’, while ‘real’ data shows us that part of talk which ‘flies below the radar’ of metapragmatic awareness (Silverstein, 2001), the messy, recalcitrant and surprising world of ‘systemic constraints’.

By contrast, if we view conversation 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 cultures, times and spaces becomes a problem. With this view, however, real and imaginary conversations, ordinary talk and print culture idealizations thereof, can be placed in some sort of dynamic historical relationship of the sort studied by Burke (1993). The former view requires us to adopt a narrow empirical view of conversation, only real conversations (by-products of narrow technical constraint) form our opinion of what conversation is, the latter allows us to take imaginary conversations as being products of the same kind of conscious artifice as real ones.

For all these apparent differences, the approaches agree that one form of conversation, ordinary informal conversation between peers, Burke’s ‘non-business-like talk’, is either empirically or normatively the core of the phenomenon: the specific features that Burke finds in his talk manuals as becoming increasingly diagnostic of the civilized ‘art of conversation’ are among those explained in functional or technical terms by CA, which treats many of them as emergent interactional achievements rather than historically constituted features of a genre. Thus, both parties seem to converge on the implicit idea that there is something empirically or normatively preferable about sociable talk between peers as a model for talk in general. Such talk is ‘natural’ in the classical Liberal sense of being an expression of a universal human nature, unshackled by extrinsic despotic institutions and feudal hierarchies of status (e.g. Metcalf, 1995, p. 29). In particular, such talk is a self-organizing form of discourse, independent of extrinsic status variables of the participants and extrinsic institutional constraints or goals, very much like the liberal imagining of a ‘public’ (Habermas, 1991; Warner, 2002). In such a view, too, talk that is not self-organizing, that has both institutional constraints and goals, where status attributes can be relevant, in short, ‘talk at work’, wouldn’t really tell us much about talk except insofar as it was a distortion of this model. But these categories are as much members’ categories as analysts’ categories. I want to argue that baristas rants are informed by two separate ideal models of talk, both of which are found mangled horribly in the transcript. One of these is a technical script based on craft knowledge possessed by the baristas which contradicts the notion that ‘the customer is always right’ (discussed above). The other is a normative egalitarian model of talk between peers in which the barista deserves also deserves

the same treatment as is normatively expected by customers. The dystopian quasi-feudal world of 'service' is critiqued both from the perspective of a extrinsic script of technical efficiency (which posits the barista as a skilled worker relative to the ignorant customer) as well as a normative model of egalitarian conversation between peers (in which the barista lays claim to the same social properties of abstract equality in public already enjoyed by all customers, even stupid ones).

6. The rant of the service worker: skilled baristas and stupid customers

'Talk' is something that members talk about, and part of the 'members' definition of talk is that that talk at work is not a very good example of talk. Reproducing dialogs with stupid customers ('SCOWS') illustrates what is wrong with service work in general, and therefore counts as a 'rant'. The normative model of ordinary conversation between equals, never achievable in the institutional context because 'the customer is always right', forms a normative position of critique against which SCOW service 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 (on which see [Laurier \(2003\)](#)).

SCOW (Stupid Customer of the Week stories), as a kind of imagined conversation, are at first glance somewhat different from the kinds of imagined conversations studied by [Burke \(1993\)](#). The imagined conversations found in Renaissance manner books going under the title of 'the art of conversation' are paradigmatic models for imitation, print culture images of speech that in turn have effects on spoken culture (in a sense no different from the scripts found in Cameron's discussion of 'top-down talk'). And of course, the four features of the emergent consensus of how to characterize conversation in Europe listed by Burke are clearly normative features. When we imagine dialog, these are the features that we imagine dialog to have, even if they are often absent from real talk. They are the characteristics that mark a 'good conversation'. The model of conversation that emerges from such normative images of conversation is an idealized one, a model to aspire to. [Simmel \(1949\)](#) 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. [Habermas \(1991\)](#), by contrast, treats such conversation between peers as a normative locus for a particular kind of rational political deliberation, which is not instrumental inasmuch as 'the political' is pursued as a self-valuable end in itself (for this contrast and critiques of this latter position in particular see [Barker, Ellis, Laurier and Remer](#)).

Such is the vision of talk that is unconstrained and pursued as an end in itself, the normative model of talk which in many important respects is co-extensive 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, 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 has often been treated as an unproblematic given in our society, lumped together in the collocation ‘goods and services’, it is usually assumed that we know what it is without a definition (Manning, 2006). Again, like other terms, such as ‘talk’ and ‘work’ it has a kind of spurious concreteness, undefined except by a kind of ostensive ‘you know it when you see it’ sort of definition. What is true of ‘service’ is true of ‘service transactions’, which enter into the literature in pragmatics as if one could talk about them without any further specification of, say, what the service was, or where (compare the very different treatment of the same transcript in Levinson (1983, p. 305), where the fact that it *is* a service transaction is not mentioned, with that in Silverstein (2003, pp. 198–201)). Obviously, I have been arguing here that Starbucks service interactions are imagined implicitly as being different from those at Tim Hortons or Dunkin Donuts (even if servers apparently have rant-worthy grievances against customers, and vice versa, at all these establishments). And clearly, corporate efforts to subordinate the ‘locally managed’ labor process of talk to extrinsic forms of technological or social labor discipline (as discussed by Cameron) indicate that the service encounter is anything but an unproblematic given any more than the ‘talk’ or ‘work’ that service seems to nearly always involve are. But the way service encounters enter into the sociological literature on talk (including CA) is not only as a ‘second best’ version of ordinary conversation, one that is complicated by extrinsic ‘institutional features’, but as just another generic form of talk that can illustrate other rather prosaic features of talk in general. For Goffman in his *Replies and Responses* period (Goffman, 1976), 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 (a matter discussed with some delicacy by Laurier):

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. (Goffman, 1976, p. 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 for Goffman 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 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. (Goffman, 1983, p. 14)

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 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. (Goffman, 1983, p. 15)

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 measures. This is because the service interaction, like other forms of conversation, seems to instantiate for us the basic substantive principles of liberal egalitarianism procedurally, within the *form* of the interaction itself. Precisely in such contexts being treated in the proper manner as a customer one enacts and displays the basic achievements of liberalism as one’s 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” (Horkheimer, 1974).

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 suggests, the basic categories 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” (Horkheimer, 1974).¹⁶ And again, an irony of liberalism is that, unlike feudalism, the persistence of hierarchy and domination are not necessarily to be

¹⁶ In North America, the category of ‘service’ is almost coterminous with by category of exchange called the ‘tip’: while non-service workers are paid a simple wage, the opposition of wage versus tip articulates the server’s double subordination to both employer (who gives wages for ‘work’) and customer (who gives tips for ‘service’). If wages define an activity as work, tips define an activity as service. Moreover, if the wage is imagined as being essentially in the bourgeois-liberal realm of commodity and contract, the tip is imagined as a fundamentally aristocratic category of largesse or gift, one the customer gives or withholds on whim. One is not allowed to have an opinion on what to pay, this is listed on the bill, but there are wide ranges of opinions and options on when and what to tip, at the same time, knowing when and how much one should tip is itself a marker of ‘aristocratic’ properties of the customer. One notes that many stories of ‘stupid customers’ end with an observation that there was ‘no tip’.

explained in essentialized relations between estates or perduring social status attributes or relations, but rather “are its freely adopted form” (Horkheimer, 1974). That is, the unfreedom of the workplace is freely chosen. No one forces you to work (at any *specific job*), 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 (a problem explored in detail by Cameron (2000) and Laurier (2003)). 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 from a relation of status to one of contract: “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” (Horkheimer, 1974). 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 feudal status attributes of class, race, gender, age, and replace them with a locally managed liberal equality of persons with respect to the line 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.” (Horkheimer, 1974). 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 latently aristocratic character of the category of ‘customer’ and the fact that ‘being a customer’ 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 min 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.¹⁷

Once 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 it is the presupposition that the customer is always right even if factually wrong that produces the inability of the barista to repair or redress the unsuccessful 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, and this formulation must be made in an intelligible fashion. These are problems of successful reference. 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. Since 'successful reference' appears to belong more or less to the 'technical requirements' of communication and getting the job done, we might classify this sort of repair under the rubric of the technical order.

But the technical order is at the same time a social one: here it is important to note that baristas are skilled workers, and technical skill is a matter which commands social prestige (Manning, 2001, 2004, 2006). Thus, 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, skill, *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 distinction, respect and autonomy at work in non-service industries (for example Quam-Wickham (1999); Manning (2001, 2004)). Starbucks employees (at least on the web-site in question) view themselves as being *skilled workers*, who take pride in their work, and part of their skill is displayed in their command of craft terminology (a craft terminology which is also 'sold' as a branded commodity to the customer as part of a distinctive Starbucks service encounter).¹⁸ This is a claim to distinction based in produc-

¹⁷ Baristas verbal assault, 'the scenario: will I be fired?' <http://community.livejournal.com/baristas/2004/12/03/>, electronic document, accessed January 26th 2008.

¹⁸ As one of my students recently reminded me, even those service jobs that seem unskilled have discrete skill sets (as a technical fact, one might say, true of all labor processes). Whether these skills will be 'recognized' socially as skills, which is something involves both intrinsic properties (for example, firm-specific skills that do not have an external labor market are unlikely to be seen as true 'skills') as well as active social construction (see Quam-Wickham (1999), Manning (2001, 2004) and references there). Baristas everywhere have a similar baseline set of socio-technical skills that are elicited, one might say, by their interaction with a fairly similar set of technologies as well as customers, but as the Herzfeld quote below illustrates, an identical technical process with effectively identical industrial technology (usually of Italian design and origin) can be seen as 'skilled craft work' or 'unskilled/deskilled dumb automaton work' depending on whether it happens in an Italian café or in a North American Starbucks.

tion which is somewhat different from the claims to distinction made in consumption, for example, by a yuppie consumer, though both display this property in similar acts of reference to Starbucks' products. As an example of this, we find that as Starbucks' baristas become customers, they may, in the process of giving an order slowly and carefully, treat a working barista as being a relatively unskilled worker, as in this entry labeled 'rant!':

Weirdest customer tonight ...

A girl comes through drive through and I take her order... and she says it REALLY slow.

Crazy girl: I want a grande....

...3 pumps white chocolate....this is going to confuse you i can already tell....

half pump mocha..... and extra hot!

Me: Okay, so that was a grande, half pump mocha, extra hot, 3 pump white mocha?

CG: Yeah, that sounds right!

Me: Okay, you're total is \$x.xx, see you at the window!

CG: Oh, wait I have partner numbers, hon!

Me: Alright, I'll take those when you get to the window.

So she gets to the window, and isn't even LOOKING in my direction, she's staring at the passenger side floor. I'm expecting to get older numbers (older than 144 i mean) and when I ask, she tells me 147.

And I'm thinking, 147. you've been here less time than i have. unless she's a rehire... either way, what the HELL... she was treating me like a child when she was on speaker/at window. And then she starts asking questions about who my manager is... blahblah... and she was actually looking for the manager of the Starbucks down the street a few blocks.

At any rate, I was annoyed because she obviously WORKS for Starbucks, so she should know that we're capable of taking "complicated" orders at a rate much faster than molasses.¹⁹

As we have seen above, many or most stupid customer stories seem to revolve around unsuccessful reference of various kinds and valiant but futile barista attempts at repair, as the attempted *technical* repair of the customer order by the server (to achieve 'successful reference') is taken to be a face-threatening 'correction'. The irony of Starbucks is, of course, that many customers resent or resist the fact that the barista, on one level a low-paid service worker, is in some sense more classy, sophisticated, winespeakier in a *techne* of distinction, than they are. The Starbucks ordering scene involves a basic role-reversal when compared to the ordinary service encounter. Rather than an aristocratic customer to whom is imputed universal knowledge of commodities and a server who merely fulfils 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 and distinction. 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 (Laurier,

¹⁹ Baristas lyssafae, 'rant!' <http://community.livejournal.com/baristas/2007/11/25/>, electronic document accessed January 26th 2008.

2003). This intimidates customers who are anxious and unsure of their knowledge, leading to resistance and resentment when the expediter ‘corrects’ their successful order (a matter of routine when ‘calling’ the order to the barista) or attempts repair on an unsuccessful one. But, the situation is different because, after all, Starbucks baristas really are relatively low end *service* employees (service work, skilled or not, historically always seemingly defining the low end of any labor hierarchy) and cannot take the high line as easily as, for example, a chef. And, indeed, they are frequently treated as being deskilled automata when compared to real Italian craft workers, as in this excerpt by a noted anthropologist (who reproduces a global hierarchy of value in which Italy figures as the prestigious source of the real and authentic sociable *gemeinschaft*-y ‘slow food’ by comparison with which all automated *gesellschaft*-y ‘fast food’ imitators like Starbucks are equally tawdry perversions [see Meneley (2004)]):

Think, for example, of the Italian *barista*, who almost simultaneously prepares several cups of espresso, hauls down bottles of liquor and measures out a couple of glasses, stows used crockery in a miniature counter-top dishwasher, and banter with his customers while watching out for potential thieves and troublemakers. By contrast, in virtually any American chain coffee-house such as Starbucks a beep announces that one of the carefully measured amounts of variously complicated espresso-based hot drinks is ready for pouring into a pre-marked cup, while the employee at the case register calls out, “One *doppio* for here,” eliciting the well-trained response, “One for-here *doppio!*” A very successful *Gesellschaft* has brought Max Weber and Henry Ford together in an Italianate coffee-shop. But the original Italian model that this staging purports to imitate still effortlessly reproduces *Gemeinschaft* amid the swirl of congested traffic and incessant cyber-chatter. Both are rituals; but one embodies sociability, while the other celebrates automation. (Herzfeld, 2007, p. 207)²⁰

Leaving aside the highly romanticized (and invidious) opposition between the Italian *barista* craftsman and the deskilled Starbucks *barista*-bot (see Laurier (2003) for a less impressionistic ethnographic depiction of the complex skill set of the average chain *barista*, all of whom, after all use the same or similar equipment), and the completely inscrutable opposition between rituals of sociability and rituals of automation, there is the germ of a common interactional scenario here: a customer formulates an order, making successful but not proper reference to a drink, and the expediter either repeats this order or calls out this order (to the barista) in ‘correct form’. This sounds like a ‘repair’, however, and the worst (most ‘dispreferred’) kind of repair, other-initiated other-repair (Levinson, 1983, p. 341), which appears to be cross-culturally associated with threats to face (Sidnell, 2007, p. 239).²¹ The customer now feels aggrieved because as a customer, they are always

²⁰ How a heavily industrialized country like Italy, which pioneered the industrialization of coffee as a kind of ‘fast food’ (called *espresso*, after all (Ellis, 2005, p. 227)), can be continually seen as part of a ‘slow food’ antithesis of industrialization, is a baffling but perduring cultural apperception (on which see Meneley (2007)). I would like to thank Anne Meneley for bringing this quote and its relevance to my attention.

²¹ However, Levinson (1983, p. 360) discusses a service transaction in a hardware store where the customer accepts a repair in reference partially because the repair is not given its own turn sequentially, but *also* because the person doing the repair is [apparently self-evidently?] an ‘expert’ (!). The barista diatribes reveal that the social construction of skill and expertise is surely, among other things, an interactional achievement, particularly for a ‘service worker’.

right, but distinction at Starbucks is manufactured precisely by the difference between successful and correct reference, and here the barista always has the advantage and is always the arbiter. Mutual resentment can only result, as in this example, where the drink order is in fact completely unintelligible.:

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 frappuccino 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.²²

Because of the way that Starbucks overlays class anxieties (objectified in different capacities for 'correct reference' to a prestige commodity) on an already fraught customer–server relationship, some customers treat the attempt at repair to be in itself a face-threatening act of 'correction', 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 presuppositions about the hierarchical nature of the service 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 owed the courtesy that is normatively accorded customers in general. Here the normative position of critique

²² Baristas mothinfight, 'happy freaking new years', <http://community.livejournal.com/baristas/2005/01/02/>, accessed February 1st 2006.

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. But this difference is normative. Each of these transcripts of rants about customers is haunted by the normative, but absent, image of ordinary talk between equals. It is the tacit comparison to such an imagined normative model of talk that makes these SCOWS legible as rants. Since the customer is always right in the moment of interaction, only on the internet can one relieve and redress the inequality of the encounter with the customer in a dialog with peers.

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