

Responding to direct complaints

The role of MPEs in common ground construction in institutional telephone interactions

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This article examines the role of metapragmatic expressions (MPEs) in constructing common ground (CG) in the call taker's responses to customer direct complaints in telephone interactions in the framework of the socio-cognitive approach proposed and developed by Kecskes (2008, 2010, 2013, 2017) and Kecskes and Zhang (2009, 2013). Based on five extracts drawn from the data of about two hours of 15 recordings of telephone interactions that include successful complaint settlements made between customers and the customer service department of one Chinese airline, it reveals that the call taker mainly employs five types of MPEs as CG construction devices to explicitly manifest intentions of giving accounts and explanations, confirming and checking information, negotiating adequate compensations, establishing close interpersonal relationships, and aligning with the organization. This article enhances our understanding of the functioning process of metapragmatic indicators in complaint settlement in institutional telephone interactions.

Keywords: metapragmatic expressions, common ground, complaint responses, telephone interactions, the socio-cognitive approach

1. Introduction

This article explores the role of metapragmatic expressions (MPEs) in common ground (CG) construction in institutional call takers' responses to customer complaints. MPEs are reflexively used linguistic expressions such as *This is what I meant*, *You are absolutely right*, and *I am going to explain more later*, which explicitly display the speaker's intentions to establish shared knowledge and mutual understanding upon responding to complaints. MPEs, as well as other kinds of metapragmatic indicators, have been studied widely in everyday, institutional, and computer-mediated contexts (e.g. Caffi 1984, Silverstein 1993, Verschueren 1999,

2000, Mey 2001, Hübler & Bublitx 2007, Hübler 2011, Cruz 2015, Kleinke & Bös 2015), but little attention has been paid to the contexts of complaints and complaint responses in business communication.

Complaining is not uncommon in institutional as well as in daily interactions. The term refers to a situation in which speakers point out some transgression or misconduct on the part of the subject who caused trouble and/or performed some complainable action, and such trouble and/or complainable activity usually includes a grievance on the part of the complainer (Drew 1998, Edwards 2005). A complaint in a business context is specifically defined as “an expression of dissatisfaction for the purpose of drawing attention to a perceived misconduct by an organization and for achieving personal or collective goals” (Einwiller & Steilen 2015: 196). Hence, to complain means to express discontent/dissatisfied feelings about some state of affairs, for which responsibility can be attributed to some person, organization or other factors with the intention to achieve specific goals. From the angle of complaint recipients, complaints have been categorized either as “direct” or “indirect” (see Pomerantz 1978). In business communication, it is not easy to tell whether a complaint is direct or indirect. This is because the complaint recipient, usually the customer service department, actually is not directly responsible for the complainant’s problem or issue. However, it is supposed to account for it on behalf of the organization. In this sense, this type of complaint is taken as direct in this article.

A complaining act is conflictive by nature. This is because, by complaining, something that was actually a personally experienced problem or situation is transformed into openly acknowledged interpersonal or institutional difficulties. In addition, a complaining act is often accompanied by other acts, such as accusing, blaming, and criticizing, which may easily cause dissatisfaction and offense. Nevertheless, in a business context, by complaining, customers choose to communicate with an organization in order to receive a solution to an experienced problem or to initiate a change in the current business practices and regulations. Therefore, it gives the organization an opportunity to provide some form of remedy and/or to take some corrective actions. In this sense, complaints can be treated as positive events. But if the organization fails to give adequate responses and satisfy the customers, it may lose them and the organizational image may be damaged as well. Thus, it is vital for the customer service to take care of institutional benefits and image, as well as to maintain solidarity and rapport with customers. This dual orientation is displayed in the way the call takers organize and design responses to complaints, as reflected in language use upon handling complaints.

Previous research on complaints and complaint responses are mainly concerned with factors affecting complaining activity (e.g. Wan 2013, Fan, Mattilab & Zhao 2015, Li, Qiu & Liu 2016), types, strategies, and management of complaints

and complaint responses (e.g. Pomerantz 1978, Schegloff 1988, Dersley & Wootton 2000, Heinemann & Traverso 2009, Bippus et al. 2012, Holt 2012, Selting 2012, Filip 2013), and recipients' attitude towards complaints (e.g. Garín-Muñoz et al. 2016). Most of these studies are conducted in the context of daily and business/institutional communication from the perspectives of marketing management (e.g. Yilmaz, Varnali & Kasnakoglu 2016), conversational analysis (e.g. Drew 1998, Drew & Walker 2009, Holt 2012, Ekström & Lundström 2014), speech act theory (e.g. Akram & Behnam 2012, Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan 2015), genre analysis (e.g. Zhang & Vásquez 2014) and cross-cultural communication (Giannoni 2014, Li, Qiu & Liu 2016). This article adds to our understanding of the role of metapragmatic awareness indicators in complaint responses in institutional telephone interactions in the framework of the socio-cognitive approach (SCA), proposed and developed by Kecskes (2008, 2010, 2013, 2017) and Kecskes and Zhang (2009, 2013).

It argues that MPEs are chosen by institutional call takers to activate, seek, and create shared information and knowledge, which adjusts the salience of particular situational factors to construct CG, hence facilitating complaint settlement. The research question addressed is: In what ways do call takers employ MPEs to construct CG in settling customer direct complaints? The data is drawn from 15 telephone interactions between customers and the customer service department of one Chinese airline. We focus on the MPEs used in the call taker's responses to direct complaints in five cases of successful complaint settlement, as it is assumed that such cases demonstrate unique patterns in using MPEs, which will be explained in Section 3. After a brief review of complaints, complaint responses and common ground theory in SCA, data description and identification are presented. Finally, the functioning of MPEs in CG construction is examined before moving on to a discussion and conclusion.

2. Literature review and research question

2.1 Complaints and complaint responses

Previous studies on types of complaints and complaint responses, and recipient attitude towards responses provide insights into this research. Complaints can be categorized either as "direct" or "indirect" based on the presence of the subject who has caused the complained-of action. The former is defined as "the utterance or sets of utterances that identify a problem or trouble source and seek remediation, either from the person responsible for the problem or from a third person who has the power to affect the situation" (Rader 1977, as cited in Boxer 1993: 107). The latter, indirect complaint is defined as the "expression of dissatisfaction to an interlocutor

about a speaker himself/herself or someone/something that is not present" (Boxer 1993: 106) or external circumstances (Jefferson 1984, Drew 1998). The data for this article can be categorized as direct complaints as the complaints are addressed to the customer service department whose responsibility it is to account for the problems or issues and offer explanations, remedial actions and solutions.

Generally, there are two types of responses to complaints (see Dersley & Wootton 2000: 388): "outright denials" (5% of the cases in their study) and "not-at-fault denials" (85% of the cases in their study). "Outright denials" are defined as unmarked actions, thus a preferred format, while "not-at-fault denials" are seen as defensive actions. By means of outright denials, complainees explicitly and immediately deny their involvement in the activity they are accused of. "Not-at-fault denials" are oriented to the complained-of action as an accountable activity in which speakers align with the complainer's assumption that to some extent they are committed or involved in it. A majority of "not-at-fault denials" would be expected in responses to customer complaints in business communication.

In business and other institutional contexts, specific linguistic devices or strategies are found in complaint responses. In analyzing how large companies handle complaints, Einwiller and Steilen (2015) find that the most frequently applied response strategy is to seek further information. Greenberg (1990) examines one response strategy, i.e. explanation, and classifies it into excuses, apologies, and justifications. Other possible strategies mentioned (see Trosborg 1987) involve minimization of the degree of offense, acknowledgment of responsibility, offer of repair, and expression of concern for the hearer. However, little attention has been paid to the use of metapragmatic expressions in complaint responses.

Specifically in institutional telephone interactions, it is found that certain linguistic and nonlinguistic devices are employed for interpersonal or social and institutional concerns. Based on radio broadcasting discourse, Migdadi, Badarneh and Al-Momani (2012) find that there is often a considerable area of rapport building between callers and hosts, achieved through such linguistic devices as praising remarks and use of informal address forms. Monzoni (2009) demonstrates that in calls to an emergency call center, complaints are typically responded to with not-at-fault denials. It is also suggested that complaints in telephone interactions are the result of a collaborative and progressive move, and they do quite elaborate work to prepare the ground for a potential complaint in order to secure the recipient's affiliation (Drew & Walker 2009). In addition, some nonverbal language, such as laughter, is found to discourage further development of the topic in progress while maintaining social solidarity (see Holt 2012).

Following the line of thought in the studies discussed above, there is little doubt why the recipient attitude towards complaints, mainly dis/affiliation and non/alignment, is a major issue in the study of complaint responses (see Heinemann &

Traverso 2009: 2381–2384), which is also one of the concerns in this article. The choice of dis/affiliation and non/alignment is closely connected to the institutional or personal roles and responsibilities the complaint recipient would or should take. The path taken by the recipient has consequences for the portrayal of self, the institution he/she represents and the relation to other relevant parties (Drew & Walker 2009, Traverso 2009). It has been revealed that recipients of complaint stories are expected and preferred to respond with sympathy and/or alignment and affiliation (e.g. Drew 1998, Drew & Walker 2009). Others (e.g. Traverso 2009) show that though affiliation with a complainant may in general be the preferred outcome, some contexts do not as easily allow for showing affiliation because of other relevancies, for example, the institutional roles and responsibilities may restrict the call takers in displaying affiliation and alignment. In addition, Li, Qiu and Liu (2016) have identified that customers' concern for face can increase the intention to spread negative word-of-mouth information. In contrast, the existence of *guanxi* (interpersonal relationships) between organizations and customers can reduce the intention to terminate transactions. It is even suggested that complaints involve a balance of stance, and the line between affiliation and disaffiliation, alignment and non-alignment is a delicate one (Heinemann & Traverso 2009, Ekström & Lundström 2014). This means that responses can be more or less (dis)affiliative or non/aligning. Furthermore, Stivers (2008) distinguishes between alignment and affiliation in interaction, and points out that aligned responses support the activity in progress, while nonaligned ones undermine it, and with an affiliative response "the hearer displays support of and endorses the teller's conveyed stance" (Stivers 2008: 35), and therefore shows alignment and vice versa as Drew and Walker (2009: 2412) state, "nonaligned responses can withhold affiliating, and hence convey disaffiliation."

2.2 Common ground

In communication, in order for one person to understand another, there must be a common ground of knowledge between them (Clark 1996). CG refers to the "sum of all the information that people assume they share" (Clark 2009: 116), which may include world views, shared values, beliefs, and situational context (Kecskes 2013: 151). CG and cooperation are considered as requirements for successful communication (Kecskes & Zhang 2009) in both a socio-cultural (e.g. Clark & Brennan 1991, Clark 1996) and a cognitive-philosophical line of research (e.g. Giora 2003, Barr 2004, Barr & Keysar 2005, Colston & Katz 2005, Kecskes & Mey 2008). The socio-cultural approach considers much of CG to be the result of prior experience, which tends to ignore the dynamic emergent feature of CG. In the meantime, the cognitive-philosophical line of research argues for the dynamic emergent property

of CG while ignoring the significance of interaction and prior experience. Kecskes and Mey (2008: 4) argue that neither the socio-cultural nor the cognitive approach is wholly convincing by itself, since CG includes “both a priori and post factum elements.” For this reason, Kecskes (2008, 2010, 2013, 2017) and Kecskes and Zhang (2009, 2013) blend these two different approaches into a dialectical perspective which embraces both cooperation and egocentrism, called the socio-cognitive approach (SCA).

In SCA, CG is perceived as “an effort to converge the mental representation of shared knowledge present as memory that we can activate, shared knowledge that we can seek, and rapport as well as knowledge that we can create in the communicative process” (Kecskes & Zhang 2013: 340). Kecskes (2013: 160) distinguishes two sides of CG: *core CG* and *emergent CG*. According to him, core CG refers to the relatively static, generalized, common knowledge and beliefs that usually belong to a certain speech community as a result of prior interactions and experience, whereas emergent CG refers to the dynamic, particularized knowledge created in the course of communication and triggered by the actual situational context. CG between interlocutors is regarded as a dynamic construct mutually constructed by participants throughout the communicative process from prior and emergent elements. It occurs within the interplay of intention and attention, and the processes are driven by relevance to the intention and realized with salience to attention (Kecskes 2013: 166). The more CG people share with each other, the less effort and time they need to convey and interpret information (Kecskes 2013: 151). In terms of CG constructions, it is further argued that it is not the quantity but the quality of CG that counts, and the efficiency of CG constructions depends on their attention-raising quality that must be adjusted to the actual situational context (Kecskes & Zhang 2013: 389). For example, sometimes hearers may ignore the CG that is intended to be activated by an utterance, or they may miss the information updated by an utterance. This may occur when there is a lack of attention, or when other cognitive obstacles or knowledge gaps exist between participants. In such cases, more efforts are needed to channel cognitive resources to CG constructions.

Hence, in order to get their messages and intentions through, participants may employ specific linguistic means to facilitate CG constructions. As Mey (2008: 267) points out, “pragmatic acting basically is ‘using language on common ground,’ involving the other participants of the situation as well as the material and other conditions determining the ‘ground.’” This means that the speakers’ choice of language is based on their understanding of the CG shared by participants. He further specifies that CG involves three things: joint action, communication (linguistic and non-linguistic), and human activity in a broad, general sense (Mey 2008). Thus, in order to communicate messages and intentions successfully, the speakers rely on

the appropriate understanding of the CG shared by the participants, and CG can be established in a joint activity by linguistic and nonlinguistic means.

Regarding CG construction in complaints and complaint responses, Drew and Walker (2009: 2405) propose that the complaint is initiated “cautiously,” and the participants “collaboratively co-construct” the complaint. But for recipients, collaborating in a complaint is also a potentially problematic matter (Holt 2012: 431). Take complaints in the business context as an example. By complaining, the customer indicates that he/she has experienced a loss due to a failure on the part of the recipient, and the relationship becomes unbalanced so that he/she is motivated to seek balance by making complaints. What is more, in responding to complaints, to protect institutional interests and image, the call taker may be reluctant to affiliate or align with the complainant. However, failing to do so is also a socially discordant action that can cause offense and grievance, probably leading to a wide-reaching negative impact on public relations. Thus, handling complaints is an activity “that requires a certain amount of delicacy” (Heinemann & Traverso 2009: 2381), and CG construction is vital in restoring the unbalanced relationship in order to finally settle complaints successfully for the sake of institutional benefits.

2.3 Research question

This article argues that MPEs are employed to activate, seek, and create shared information and knowledge to increase the salience of relevant situational factors for attention. Hence, they facilitate CG constructions in complaint settlements. The research question addressed is: In what ways do call takers employ MPEs to construct CG in settling customer direct complaints in institutional telephone interactions? To answer this question, MPEs used in the call taker’s responses in my data will be identified first, and their referential relationships with the host clauses are examined in order to reveal their discursive status and functions. After data description, the functioning process of MPEs in CG constructions in specific case excerpts will be explored.

3. Data collection and description

The data, lasting about two hours in total, is drawn from 15 recordings of telephone interactions that include successful complaint settlements made between customers and the customer service department of one Chinese airline within two months in 2015. Here, *successful complaint settlement* means that the customers finally agree or accept the call taker’s explanations, suggestions, or compensation offerings over the phone. The choice of successful complaint settlements as data

source is based on the assumption that CG construction may demonstrate different patterns when complaints are settled successfully or unsuccessfully, although CG construction is needed in both scenarios. If complaints are settled successfully in the interactions, it is highly probable that the participants have reached a certain level of agreement in terms of relevant knowledge, information, or other interpersonal and personal issues. That is to say, CG may be constructed successfully as desired between the participants in these aspects. This article is intended to explore the motivation and mechanism of CG construction in successful complaint settlements, as reflected in the use of MPEs. The role of MPEs in CG construction or development in unsuccessful complaint settlements deserves a separate study in the future.

The interactions of each phone call have been transcribed verbatim. Each adjacency pair and its turns have been marked so that any quotation can be identified and traced back to the original discourse. Moreover, MPEs used in the call taker's utterances are identified and marked. The airline in question and the callers, as well as other airlines and some place names mentioned, are kept anonymous. Signs X (for person's name) and XX (for organization or place name) are used when they are mentioned either in the extracts or in the data analysis. Five representative cases out of 15 telephone interactions are selected for detailed analysis based on three principles and operationalized in the following way:

1. Distinctive topic: The content of each case should describe a grievance or problem of a distinct kind, that is, the five cases cover five different types of complaints. It is assumed, strategically and linguistically, that the call taker is likely to respond differently when faced with different types of complaints. Thus a wide coverage of complaint types tends to demonstrate the richness in language use, which is of importance to this research.
2. Richness in interaction: After checking the content of each recording among the same type of complaint, the interactions which are relatively substantial in content and interactive in turn-taking and speaker involvement are selected. This is because the more substantial and interactive the interaction is, the easier and more probable it will be to uncover the processes of negotiation and CG construction.
3. Frequent occurrences of MPEs: Within each case, the extract containing the most frequent use of MPEs in the call taker's utterances is selected for analysis. It is impossible to include five complete cases in the data analysis in Section 4, although the frequency of each type of MPE which appeared in these cases is presented in Table 3 in Section 5 as a summary.

The type of customer complaint and the call taker's response in the five selected cases are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Five cases of successful complaint settlement

| Case | Type of customer complaint | Call taker's response/strategy |
|------|---|--|
| 1 | poor attitude | giving accounts and explanations |
| 2 | difficulty in obtaining required information | confirming and checking information |
| 3 | unsatisfactory compensation offering for a cancelled flight | negotiating adequate compensation |
| 4 | a long flight delay | establishing close interpersonal relationships |
| 5 | questioning company regulations/policy | taking non-aligning stance/position |

As discussed in Section 1, MPEs are defined as reflexively used linguistic expressions, which explicitly display the speaker's intentions to create CG in interactions. Here, "reflexively used" is specified as language use that "reflects on the judgment of appropriateness on one's own and other people's communicative behavior" (Caffi 1994: 2464) based on the understanding of CG shared between the participants, more specifically including expressions regarding the control and planning of, reference to, as well as feedback on, the ongoing interaction. "Linguistic expressions" refers to large chunks of discourse, including sentences, clauses, and fixed, semi-fixed, or formulaic expressions, loosely connected to the matrix clauses.

Generally, MPEs are structurally flexible, semantically reflexive, and pragmatically intentional and strategic. All MPEs used in the call takers' utterances in these five extracts are identified and coded mainly based on Verschueren's (2000) and Vande Kopple's (1985) taxonomies. Five types of MPEs recur in our data. In particular, following Verschueren's (2000: 447) distinction of implicit and explicit indicators of metapragmatic awareness, speech-action descriptions and evidentials are identified and named. He defines indicators containing speech act verbs or performative verbs as metapragmatic descriptions. We name MPEs containing speech action verbs and perception verbs as *speech-action descriptions*, such as *I will tell you more about it*. He gives a general term 'shifters' as one type of explicit indicator, and includes evidentials as an example. We find evidentials of a distinct type in our data, which are expressions indicating intentions to describe source of information, e.g. *according to our company policy* and *as what I told you just now*. Vande Kopple (1985) divides meta-discourse markers into textual (i.e. text connectives, code glosses, validity markers, and narrators) and interpersonal (i.e. illocution markers, attitude markers, and commentaries). Following him, but to tailor-make the taxonomy for our data, expressions referring to the upcoming talk, which channels attention resources to the upcoming information, and indicating intentions to explain, elaborate, exemplify, or reformulate information, are named *message glosses*, such as *the thing is like this, for example* and *what I meant is*; expressions

describing personal judgments, opinions, preferences, and evaluations are called *commentaries*, such as *This is not a good idea* and *I don't think so*. Furthermore, a new type, *perspective displayers*, is added to our taxonomy, which are expressions describing the speaker's angle, position, and stance-taking, such as *from my point of view* and *if I were you*.

To answer the research question, the functioning process of MPEs in CG construction is examined by modifying Kecskes' (2013: 151) distinction of three components of CG: information that the participants share, understanding of the situational context, and relationships between the participants. The first component can be considered to be more information-oriented; the third one is people-oriented; the second one concerns the actual situational context which may involve information and/or people. The discussion of the functioning process of MPEs to construct CG is divided into two categories, i.e. the creation of CG of knowledge and the creation of CG of dis/affiliation and non/alignment. Among the five types of cases listed in Table 1, the major task of the first three for the call taker is to achieve shared and mutual understanding of relevant information or knowledge. Thus, they are discussed under the first category, i.e. the creation of CG of knowledge. The major task of the last two is relationship-oriented, so they are explored under the creation of CG of dis/affiliation and non/alignment.

It is unrealistic to think that MPEs used in the case of compensation offering have nothing to do with affiliation or alignment and vice versa. However, our focus and interest is to reveal how MPEs facilitate the construction of CG of knowledge in settling this type of complaint. That is to say, we are concerned with the role that MPEs play in constructing CG of knowledge in this type of complaint settlement.

4. Common ground construction of MPEs in direct complaint responses

4.1 The creation of CG of knowledge

Three extracts are analyzed in this part representing three types of direct complaints: poor attitude, difficulty in obtaining required information, and unsatisfactory comprehension offering. In responding to these types of complaints, the call taker employs MPEs to facilitate the construction of CG of knowledge by manifesting intentions of giving accounts and explanations, confirming and checking information, and negotiating adequate compensations.

4.1.1 *MPEs as indicators of giving accounts and explanations*

In terms of complaints associated with industry or company rules, regulations, and business practices, the call taker on behalf of the airline gives detailed accounts and explanations due to information or knowledge asymmetry between customers and the flight service provider. Moreover, giving accounts and explanations is a preferred response to direct complaints where the recipient is made responsible for the failure (see Monzoni 2009). Nevertheless, it carries the risk of widening the distance between the caller and call taker, as the call taker deals with the problem from the institutional point of view in contrast to the customer's experience. Thus, the call taker would expand accounts to create CG of knowledge, as reflected in the use of MPEs in Extract 1.

Extract 1. (CT: call taker; CM: complainant, the customer.¹ The customer was dissatisfied with the flight attendant's attitude when he was asked to check in his luggage. The call taker is explaining why he was asked to do so.)

CT: 是这样子的, 先生, 首先第一呢, 我想说, 很感谢你配合我们这个工作, 对于刚才说的这个东西, 确实是, 也是你们在配合我们的一些工作。当然呢, 对于我们现场的工作人员来讲, 他让你把这个行李托运可能也是出于安全的考虑, 并不是说出于他自己的一个单方的, 他自己想怎么着, 但是他这个表达可能存在有, 就是说, 让你感觉到很不舒服, 或者就是你刚刚说的, 谢谢你的配合, 或者是表示下感谢啊, 你可能会觉得这个东西, 就你说的, 我可以托, 也可以不托, 我托的话也托的很开心对吧? 所以说在态度上这一块呢, 我们也很抱歉, 可能他的语言表达方式是存在一定问题, 所以呢, 我们意思是, 谢谢你反映这个问题。然后稍后呢, 我们不光是对这个工作人员, 可能其他的工作人员, 这边呢, 我们也都会做个提示。但是, 就像我给这位X女士, 应该是你的朋友是吧? 解释的, 因为这是一个...

CM: 唔, 哦, 是我妻子。

CT: 哦, 是你爱人啊, 刚跟你解释的, 因为目前呢, 咱们航空公司对超大行李确实有一些规定, 就是说, 现在对这些方面卡的比较严了, 再一个, 就是我刚刚讲的, 因为前期可能发生一些事情吧, 现在必须让航空公司飞机上都要配这个, 这个救生艇, 所以说可能空间现在就变小了。

CM: 这些原因他后来, 那个机组人员跟我们航班...

CT: 也跟你解释了哈。

CM: 我完全能理解。

1. In all extracts discussed in the article, CT stands for the call taker, who is a female employee; CM stands for the caller, the complaining customer.

- 1 CT: **The thing is like this**, Sir. First of all, **I want to say**, we are very grateful for your cooperation. **As to what**
 2 **we talked about just now**, you were cooperative with our work. Of course, to our staff on duty, he asked you to
 3 check in the luggage for the sake of safety, not his personal reason. **But the way he talked to you may have**
 4 **been inappropriate, that is to say**, he made you feel uncomfortable. **Or as you mentioned just now**, he should
 5 have thanked you for your cooperation. You may feel that, **as you said**, you can check in the luggage, or choose
 6 not to do so. If you check in the luggage, you should feel happy to do so. As to the attendant's attitude, we feel
 7 sorry for this. **Maybe he did not express himself properly**. **So what we mean is**, we wanted to thank you for
 8 letting us know this. We will let the attendant know this and maybe other staff as well. But, **as I explained to this**
 9 **lady**, she is your friend, right? Because this is...
- 10 CM: Well, oh, my wife.
- 11 CT: Oh, your wife ah, **just as I have explained to you**, because now we do have regulations in terms of the
 12 oversized baggage. **That is**, at present the regulations are quite strict. **And as I just said**, this may not have been
 13 a problem in the past, but because of past tragedies, airlines must carry lifeboats, and the cabin space is now
 14 smaller.
- 15 CM: The crew told us this.
- 16 CT: They also told you this, right?
- 17 CM: We fully understand.

From a personal communication with the manager of the customer service of this airline, I know that the call takers are trained on a regular basis in terms of the communication rules and behavioral norms in responding to customer complaints. At the beginning of this extract, the call taker expresses thanks and admits mistakes without taking a defensive attitude. Three MPEs are used jointly to draw the customer's attention to her upcoming explanations. The message gloss "The thing is like this" (Line 1) indicates the speaker's intention to expand explanations and elaborate on the issue under discussion; the speech-action description "I want to say" (Line 1) pre-announces her speech action of expressing gratitude; the evidential "as to what we talked about just now" (Lines 1 and 2) reflects on the preceding information and incorporates it into the ongoing talk. These expressions activate and seek relevant information of the preceding talks and direct the customer's attention to the subsequent thanks-expressing action, facilitating CG construction for mutual understanding of her explanation.

Another three MPEs indicate her intention to align with the customer. MPEs are used as an apology strategy to acknowledge responsibility as well as to offer explanations. The commentary "But the way he talked to you may be inappropriate" (Lines 3 and 4) is intended to convey sympathy in terms of her colleague's service; the message gloss "that is to say" (Line 4) indicates her intention to reformulate and make herself understood; the evidential "Or as you mentioned just now" (Line 4) for the second time brings the customer's words into the ongoing interaction. All these MPEs indicate the call taker's intentions to show alignment with the customer and establish CG of knowledge by activating and seeking relevant situational information.

Then she gives accounts of the industry regulations to mitigate the negative impact of her colleague's inappropriate behavior, although she accepts the customer's blame. The evidential "as you said" (Line 5) activates the customer's preceding claim, showing her alignment with the customer, while the perspective-displayer "As to the attendant's attitude" (Line 6) shifts attention to her colleague's poor attitude. Then she uses the message gloss "So what we mean is" (Line 7) to repeat her intentions.

In this extract, the call taker employs five types of MPEs to respond to the complaint of the attendant's poor attitude. The use of speech-action descriptions, evidentials, and message glosses indicate her intentions to activate and enhance the salience of company regulations and normal business practices so as to arouse the customer's awareness of institutional constraints. The commentary and perspective-displayer convey her positive attitude and affiliative stance towards the customer's blame, as reflected in her apology on behalf of her colleague, i.e. confessions of responsibility for unsatisfactory service provided (see Greenberg 1990). She attempts to establish CG of knowledge by balancing the institutional goal, which is to make company regulations and business practices understood, and the interpersonal goal, which is to align with the caller by criticizing her colleague. At last, the customer shows his understanding and terminates the interaction.

4.1.2 *MPEs as indicators of confirming and checking information*

In the following case, the customer complains about lack of help from the attendants when he was told that his flight was cancelled. The call taker attempts to seek detailed information to confirm his accusation; however, the customer is unable to provide precise information and details concerning the exact counter and the person involved. MPEs can facilitate the process of information confirming and checking.

Extract 2. (The call taker is seeking specific information concerning the customer's complaint about the difficulty in obtaining required information at the check-in counter.)

CT: X先生,我想问一下,你当时是到我们的,确定是我们XX的值机柜台是吧?

CM: 对,你想我是国际航空,不是XX柜台,我怎么可能呢?

CT: 我就是跟你确认一下这一点,那当时您问的是男士女士呢?

CM: 应该是女的。

CT: 哦,应该是女的,是吧?

CM: 对。

CT: 因为我们柜台都有监控的,那就因为我们现场的当天值班,那个我们也问了一下,你大概是几点到的柜台?

CM: 其实我还真忘了,你说我,都过去这么...

CT: 因为这个东西, 确实要问一下我们现场的, 就是说, 因为, 肯定这个我们要去落实, 因为你误机的话, 应该会告诉你说, 后续该怎么去做, 然后我们也要问一下。

CM: 哦。

CT: 现场的值班的, 你听我跟你讲, 我们问了一下值机员, 这个情况我们也挺重视的, 也不想看到你这个损失, 我们也想给你, 就是说是, 弥补一下或怎么地, 但是这个实际情况我们必须要有, 还原它这个事情到底是怎么回事, 问了一下线上的值班, 就是说, 那个值机员, 都说没有印象, 也不太清楚, 所以我就反映说, 就你当时你到的大概是哪个柜台? 我们这边可以看看监控录像, 具体说一下你是怎么表述的, 因为这个让员工...

CM: 我确定, 我确定, 因为我真忘了, 因为我当时我去看了你们值班机的柜台, 当时值班机的柜台人多, 我就没往值班柜台走。

1 CT: Mr. X, **I would like to ask**, at that moment you were at our check-in counter, weren't you?

2 CM: Yes, my flight was an international one, how could I take the flight if I didn't check in?

3 CT: **I just want to confirm with you about this**, and then, was the attendant a man or a woman?

4 CM: Should be a woman.

5 CT: Oh, should be a woman, right?

6 CM: Yes.

7 CT: We have surveillance cameras. So we can ask the attendants on duty that day if necessary. In fact, **I have**
8 **already asked them**. When did you arrive at the counter that day?

9 CM: Actually, in fact I forgot, really, you know, it has been a long time ago...

10 CT: As to this, I have to ask the attendants on duty that day. **That is to say**, this is because, we have to confirm this
11 because if you missed the flight, the attendants should tell you what to do. We would find out. We would ask...

12 CM: Oh.

13 CT: The attendants on duty. **Listen to me. We have talked to the attendants on duty**. We take your complaint
14 seriously. We don't want you to suffer a loss. **That is to say**, we want to offer you some compensation. But we
15 would know what was really going on that day. We asked the attendants on duty, **that is**, the attendants at the
16 counter that day, they told us they did not have any clue, so, as **I told them**, can you tell me which counter you
17 went to? We can check the surveillance camera. **In a more detailed way, can you describe it?** How did you talk
18 to them?

19 CM: I'm certain about it, I'm certain about it, but really, I cannot remember it. Because it was so crowded, I did not
20 go to your counter.

In responding to the complaint, the call taker attempts to seek more information before she can repair the situation. The two speech-action descriptions "I would like to ask" (Line 1) and "I just want to confirm with you about this" (Line 3) announce her intentions to find the truth and also to justify her actions. She then provides additional information, i.e. the surveillance cameras and her own investigation, which can give her the upper hand. When she realizes that the customer actually is not certain about the check-in counter and person he contacted that day, the call taker's attitude seems to be more aggressive, as reflected in the use of the speech-action

description “Listen to me” (Line 13). This expression activates and highlights her more powerful institutional role. She also uses message glosses “that is to say” (Line 14), “that is” (Line 15), the evidential “as I told them” (Line 16) and the commentary “In a more detailed way” (Line 17) to further press the customer to provide proof. However, as shown in the interaction, the customer fails to do so. At last, he admits that, in actuality, he did not go to the check-in counter.

The call taker, to protect the institutional interest, is not willing to admit the mistake and take responsibility before she gets concrete evidence. MPEs in this extract are intended to facilitate the process of information confirming and checking. The message glosses and evidentials indicate her patience and professionalism; the speech-action descriptions indicate her explicit stance-taking as an institutional agent, aggressive attitude, and expectations of concrete evidence. Their use can be regarded as searching and questioning strategies, leading to the revelation of and elaboration on crucial information. The CG of knowledge is constructed at last, i.e. there is no evidence that the customer ever tried to seek help from the attendants in one way or another, so the complaint is unfounded. The call taker’s response to this groundless complaint belongs to “outright denials” (see Dersley & Wootton 2000).

4.1.3 *MPEs as indicators of negotiating adequate compensation*

Naturally, due to the conflict of interests, though the call taker admits that the complainable action has taken place, she would still try to minimize the responsibility or shift the blame onto others if possible. When customers complain, they usually have specific expectations of adequate or acceptable compensation to cover their psychological, financial and time costs. Normally, they would like to get higher or better compensation if possible. In the following extract, Mr. X asks for a higher compensation for a cancelled flight, however, the call taker insists that what she has offered is the best according to company regulations. MPEs facilitate the construction of CG of knowledge in persuading the customer to accept the compensation.

Extract 3. (They are discussing the compensation for a cancelled flight.)

CT: 是这样, X先生, 我大概也给您看了下您的客票, 我看您的客票是333购买的, 对吧?

CM: 对。

CT: 然后我这边给您查询了一下, 如果您客票要退的话, 如果按照我们公司这种备降航班退运政策呢, 相对跟这个正常退票是不一样的, 所以他们大概给您估算可能就退300元左右。

CM: 对。

CT: 也不是很那什么, 所以.....另外一个呢, 就关于您这个, 是自己乘坐这个高铁去的XX, 关于这块呢, 我们也跟领导说了, 确实这个也是我跟您讲过, 一个不可抗拒的原因, 但是呢, 我只把情

况已经给我们领导说了, 包括我们的同事上午跟您沟通, 您对这个的情况, 所以我们领导这边呢也同意, 就是说, 如果那个相应的话, 我们这边给您再补偿100元的一个交通补助, 这也就是我们最大的一个那啥了, 但是这确实说, 当然这100块钱不能说交通补助, 因为我们这个航班确实不是我们航空公司的原因, 的的确确是一个, 是个不可抗拒的原因, 可以说, 这确实是XX航空的问题。

CM: 你看啊, 我跟你说明啊, 我这个到XX的火车票, 站票啊95块5。

CT: @@

CM: 然后我在航站楼再打车去那个高铁站, 对不对?

CT: 但是, 但是, X先生, 这个确实是已经是, 我的意思说, 不给您说那个票九十几块, 因为这个确实是、已经是, 怎么讲, 其实您也知道, 我们做航空的4到8小时延误呢, 就是赔偿100, 8小时以上是200, 这个也是有一定规定的。所以, 这100也确实, 我一直是今天上午一直跟我们领导在这谈这个事情, 所以, 而且包括我们同事, 你不是说这个, 我以这个方式, 就以这个理由才能要, 要不然的话, 这个是绝对是没有赔偿的。其实当时你也称, 这个航班将近100名旅客就没有赔偿, 一个旅客都没有, 就您是这航班的唯一一位。

CM: 哦, 好吧。

1 CT: Mr. X, **the thing is like this**, I have checked your ticket, and found that it cost you 333 yuan, right?

2 CM: Yes.

3 CT: **I made an inquiry for you**, and found that if you want to get a refund, and **according to our company policy**
4 concerning the standby flight, the refund policy is different than a normal flight. They would refund around 300
5 yuan.

6 CM: Yes.

7 CT: It is not that **here is another issue**, this is about... you took high-speed rail to XX yourself, as to this, I
8 **have talked about it with our leader**, and in fact, **I have talked with you too**, this is a Force Majeure. But, I
9 **have reported it to our leader**, and our colleague talked with you in the morning. **As to your problem**, our leader
10 also agreed that we would give you a compensation of 100 yuan for transportation, which is the highest
11 compensation of this kind. Of course, this 100 cannot be taken as transportation subsidy because this is not our
12 fault, this is Force Majeure. This is indeed caused by XX Air.

13 CM: You see, ah, I tell you ah, my ticket to XX cost me 95.5 yuan.

14 CT: @@

15 CM: Then I took a taxi from the terminal to the high-speed rail station, right?

16 CT: But, but, Mr. X, this is, indeed, **I mean, I have told you that** the ticket is about 90 yuan, because this really is, indeed
17 indeed, **how to say it? In fact, you have already known**, in the airline industry, there is a regulation that the
18 comprehension is 100 yuan for a delay of 4–8 hours, 200 yuan for a delay of more than 8 hours. **This is our policy**.
19 So, this 100 is indeed... **I have been talking about this matter with our leader this morning as well as our**
20 **colleagues**. This is the only way I can get this amount of money for you. Otherwise there is absolutely no
21 compensation. **In fact, you also said that** there was no compensation at all for the 100 passengers on the flight,
22 and you are the only one.

23 CM: Oh, all right then.

In this case, the call taker makes her stance definite and firm: The company cannot offer a higher compensation. Her response is typical of excuses (see Greenberg 1990), i.e. giving explanations that remove the organization from responsibility. MPEs, as well as nonverbal language, i.e. laughter, indicate her strategic consideration in constructing CG of knowledge to negotiate with the customer. The interaction ends with the customer's acceptance of the offering.

The message gloss "the thing is like this" (Line 1) indicates the call taker's intention to give detailed explanations. The speech-action description "I made an inquiry for you" (Line 3) activates the relevant information of what she has already done for the customer; the evidential "according to our company policy" draws the customer's attention to the refund policy. The message gloss "here is another issue" (Line 7) directs his attention to the second issue she would talk about. Three speech-action descriptions, "I have talked about it with our leader" (Line 8), "I have talked with you too" (Line 8) and "I have reported it to our leader" (Line 9) and the commentary "in fact" (Line 8) jointly create a situation in which the call taker has tried her best to help the customer solve his problem. When the customer continues with his complaint, she uses non-verbal language, i.e. laughter, to display a somewhat disaffiliative and non-aligning stance with the customer.

Given the fact that the customer still insists on getting a higher compensation offering, the call taker uses several message glosses and evidentials to stress and highlight the fact that the customer should have known the situation well. The expressions, such as "I mean" (Line 16), "This is our policy" (Line 18), and "you have already known" (Line 17) are intended to establish CG of knowledge at this moment of interaction. In addition, the two commentaries "in fact" (Line 17 and Line 21) can strengthen the impact of these evidentials. In this extract, MPEs are employed as an evasive strategy to support CG of knowledge construction in terms of institutional agenda and restrictions by blaming others and maximizing self-efforts. In the end, the customer accepts the offering.

4.2 The creation of CG of dis/affiliation and non/alignment

The two cases examined in this section are looking for better solutions for a long flight delay and questioning the reasonableness of regulations. The call taker displays a clear and determined intention to take care of interpersonal relationships in the first case and a strong intention to take a non-aligning stance with the customer in the second case. It is worthwhile exploring how MPEs support the call taker to achieve the communicative goals in CG construction.

4.2.1 *MPEs as indicators of establishing close interpersonal relationships or guanxi*

It is said that Chinese people attach great importance to using their personal networks to achieve competitive advantages in business competition, as Li, Qiu and Liu (2016) find that the establishment of harmonious interpersonal relationships between the organization and customers can reduce the possibility of terminating business relations. The concept *interpersonal relationships* in Chinese is *guanxi*, referring to the “concept of drawing on connections to secure favors in personal relations” (Luo 1997: 44). However, unlike the Western concept of networking/business relationship, which is typically impersonal and basically at the organizational level, *guanxi* is personal (Chan 2006), initially built by and consistently based on personal relationships (Luo 1997). In the telephone interactions in question, there are occasions when the call taker makes attempts to develop a close interpersonal relationship with the customers. The following case illustrates the delicacy of dealing with complaints in institutional interactions, that is, how the call taker maintains her institutional role by repeating suggestions for a solution on behalf of her institution. At the same time, she explicitly displays strong affect with the customer and makes an attempt to establish a close interpersonal relationship at a personal level.

Extract 4. (The customer is dissatisfied with the solution offered for a long delay of the international flight she took. The call taker is offering alternative solutions.)

CT: 这个您想想, 您家人要去XX, 你也在路上也不放心, 然后由我们在这边, 在这边无微不至的照顾, 到XX以后, 我也可以让我们在XX的工作人员去接我们父母, 这个, 你到时候在XX要工作或上学有学业, 或者要上班的话, 没有那么多的时间去照顾他们, 你会特别操心的, 这个时候, 只要你把你父母交给我们, 你就放心吧, 你就只等在你住的地方接, 多放心啊, 你说是不是? 我们就图个放心嘛, 尤其是父母出门, 是不是啊, 我们做子女的又不放心, 出门在外, 在国外的语言又不通, 路又不认识, 对不对啊? 所以, 我觉得这对于您来说, 我认为我要是您的话, 我会选择这个, 因为我很放心啊, 而且这时间就是金钱啊, 我浪费那么多的精力跟时间, 是一个道理, 对吧?

CM: 嗯。因为这个实在是太往后了, 我都没有想到那么多。

CT: 但是, 你现在想想, 现在都三月份啦, 12月份也就不到一年的时间, 我把手机号给您, 您可以随时, 随时打电话跟我联系, 有什么问题, 不管您是在XX机场问题, 还是什么问题, 哪怕咱交个朋友呢, 私人的问题也可以啊。

- 1 CT: **Think about this**, if your family goes to XX, you are concerned and worried, and then we can give them
- 2 meticulous care. After their arrival at XX, I can also ask our staff at XX airport to take care of our parents, you
- 3 work or study in XX, and you do not have much time to take care of them, you will be particularly worried, but as
- 4 long as you put your parents under our care, you will not need to worry. You could stay at your place waiting for

- 5 them. How good is it! Don't you think so! We don't want to be worried, especially when our parents travel abroad.
 6 We cannot rest assured. They are away from home in a foreign country and don't understand the language, and do
 7 not know the way, right ah, so **I think, if I were you**, I would select this because I wouldn't feel worried, ah,
 8 and ... my time is money ah, I waste so much energy and time, that is, **it is a reason for it**, ok?
 9 CM: ah. I, I have not thought so much because it will be quite a long time.
 10 CT: But, **you think about it now**, now, it is March, December is less than a year's time, I'll give you my phone
 11 number, feel free to contact me no matter what problems you have, whether it is about XX airport or a private issue,
 12 we can be friends.

The customer complains about a long delay of an international flight she took. The call taker repetitively tells her what her company can offer, but the caller seems uninterested. In this extract, the call taker's manner of talking can be regarded as a positively affective speech action in which she tries to establish a close interpersonal relationship and avoids disagreement with the customer, as reflected in the use of MPEs, invitation for friendship, informal address forms, and affiliative stance-taking.

The call taker displays an emotionally involved manner by telling a story, which makes her affiliative stance-taking vivid and easily recognizable. The speech-action description "Think about this" (Line 1) is intended to prepare the caller for her story telling. Then she not only describes what the company can offer, but also draws a nice, warm picture of her parents' trip abroad under the care of the company. The speech-action description "I think" (Line 7) and the perspective-displayer "if I were you" (Line 7) jointly activate a clear foot shifting to align and affiliate with the customer. The message gloss "it is a reason for it" (Line 8) also indicates her alignment with the customer. In addition, the address term "our parents" (Line 5) is a clear switch of personal reference from an outsider to an insider as a family member. And the two exclamatory sentences "How good is it!" and "Don't you think so!" (Line 5) manifest a strong emotional involvement.

These linguistic devices can be regarded as proactive remedial strategies to facilitate the creation of CG of affiliation and alignment for negotiating a satisfactory solution to the problem in question. Faced with the call taker's seemingly overwhelming emotive involvement and support, in particular, her offering of personal phone number and help for private issues, and reference and foot manipulation, the customer at last accepts the suggested solution. In this case, the call taker may not sound very professional. However, it is not uncommon in Chinese culture where interpersonal relationships or *guanxi* always count in business, and it is established at a personal, not an organizational level on many occasions.

4.2.2 *MPEs as indicators of balancing dis/affiliation and non/aligning stance*

The call taker does not always affiliate and align with complainants. Sometimes, the call taker would keep his/her distance, characterized by such responses as taking a

neutral, non-affective stance, a strategic or token display of sympathy and affection, and repeats of the suggestions given, with explicit invitations to accept them. In the following case, it seems that the customer's purpose in questioning company regulations is not to gain economic compensation, but to vent dissatisfaction or frustration. The call taker avoids criticizing the customer and is very patient in repeating and explaining the relevant regulations and suggestions, although she takes a non-aligning stance, as reflected by the use of MPEs to support the construction of CG to balance dis/affiliation and non/alignment.

Extract 5. (The call taker takes a non-aligning stance to persuade the customer to follow regulations.)

CT: 提前四十分钟,就是说,四十分钟之内确实就是办不了了。过了四十分钟,就是说,您晚来了,就确实就是办不了了。就是每个航空公司都是这样子的。就刚跟你说,就是,如果你之前能碰,肯定是飞机晚了一会,就是说,飞机不是按时点的,但是你这个飞机是按时点的,所以必须提前那么长时间关舱。

CM: 所以我觉得,咱们这边的后台,如果说对这些你们...

CT: 您放心,我懂您的意思。如果说下次我们的飞机要是晚的话,我们也会晚一点,比如说,可能没有到四十分钟就停止,可以协助你。但是这种情况很少,所以我建议,您还是按照正常时间去办理,因为,有的飞机可能从前面飞过来,比如说,这个飞机要飞四五段,有可能今天晚了一会,十分二十,都是很有可能的。但是有的飞机可能在本场,有可能飞机早已经就在弦从弦就走,所以这种情况,我建议,您还是按照规定时间去办理手续。

CM: 但是你们飞机起飞的时间是固定的。是啊,你们飞机起飞的时间是固定的,那我那时候觉得可以啊。

CT: 不是您觉得可以,女士。因为时间,必须按照它的,就是说,航班提前多长时间关舱,航班提前多长时间办手续,航班都是有时间限定的。不是说您认为这个时间,四十分钟你觉得可以进去。因为你还要过安检,我跟你讲过,提前四十分钟办手续这是整个机场的一个行为,不是某个航空公司的,我们是按章操作。到了点肯定航班就关闭了,我们...就是您说的,XX航,XX航等等各个航空公司,都是要依照机场的行为去做的,不是说我们航空公司,XX航肯定也没有权利说怎么怎么样,都是这样,都是按照机场的行为去做的。像你说,你认为可以,但是这个时间后台都关闭了,不是某个人认为可以就能行。因为关闭以后就做不了了,就像银行取钱或者是什么一样,系统关闭以后那就任何人都操作不了。

CM: 所以我对...反正是咱们这边的像这些延误,或者其他的你们没有一个合理的解决,反正我还是觉得对旅客来说还是会感觉心里不舒服。

CT: @@@ 对,因为是自身原因,我觉得这种情况我刚跟你说过,所以像这种情况,还是建议你,早点到机场办理手续。虽然就像你说的,不可能到提前两个小时或者什么样,但你必须至少提前一个小时吧,因为你还要排队过安检,找登机口。所以尽量让自己时间充裕点就不会有这种情况了。

- 1 CT: at least 40 minutes ahead of the taking-off time, **that is to say**, it is impossible to check in in less than 40
 2 minutes. **That is to say**, if you are late, you cannot really catch the flight. All airlines have the same regulations.
 3 **As I told you just now**, **that is**, if you have not met this before, that is because the plane has not arrived on time,
 4 **that is to say**, the plane cannot take off on time. But your flight was on time, so the check-in counter was closed
 5 according to the schedule.
- 6 CM: So I think that we were here at the check-in counter, if you say that...
- 7 CT: Please rest assured. **I understand what you mean**. If our plane is late next time, you don't have to come early,
 8 **for example**, the check-in may not end earlier. We can help you. But such kind of situation is rare, so **I suggest**
 9 you follow the regulations, because some plane may arrive here from other places, **for example**, the plane may fly
 10 four or five different places, it may be 10 or 20 minutes late. This is possible. But other plane may be landing here,
 11 and it is ready to take off. Considering these situations, **I suggest** that you should come on time.
- 12 CM: But your flight's taking-off time is fixed. Yes, your flight's taking-off time is fixed, and then I think I have
 13 time.
- 14 CT: **But this is not what you think**, Ma'am. As to the time arrangement, it must follow regulations. **That is to say**,
 15 how long in advance the plane should stop check-in and close the cabin, when you should finish the check-in and
 16 boarding. Not what you think, you think you can finish it within 40 minutes, but you also have to go through
 17 security. **Let me tell you**, 40 minutes before the take-off time is a regulation of the entire airport, not one airline,
 18 we are operating according to the regulations. **As you said**, XX Airline, XX Airline, etc., all airlines have to follow
 19 the regulations, not only our airline. Other airlines cannot break it either. **As what you said**, you think you can, but
 20 at that time the system is closed, no one can operate on it. Just like what you do when you withdraw money from
 21 bank. When the system is shut down, nobody can operate on the system.
- 22 CM: So I ... anyway, as to some situations, such as delays or others, you have not offered a reasonable solution, I
 23 still feel as a passenger, still felt not good.
- 24 CT: @@@ Yes, **this is your personal issues**, **I think**, as **I have told you the reason**, as **I just told you**, as to this case,
 25 **I suggest** you arrive at the airport early. Although **as you said**, it is impossible to come to the airport two
 26 hours ahead of the take-off time, but you need to go there at least one hour in advance, because you have to wait in
 27 line to go through security, and find your departure gate. So try to leave plenty of time, and then you would not
 28 meet this situation.

This extract illustrates the delicacy and difficulty that the call taker is faced with when suggestions offered are recurrently dismissed by the customer. On the one hand, the call taker makes efforts to maintain her institutional voice to repeat suggestions; on the other hand, she shows her understanding and responds with adequate display of affiliation.

Four message glosses “that is to say” (Lines 1, 2 and 4) and “that is” (Line 2), and the evidential “as I told you just now” (Line 3) indicate the call taker's intentions to construct CG of knowledge in terms of check-in time at the airport. However, the customer would not accept the explanations. The call taker then employs the commentary “I understand what you mean” (Line 7) and the message gloss “for example” (Line 8) to activate her affiliation and alignment with the customer, she repeats that the customer should better follow the regulations.

Several speech-action descriptions “I suggest” (Lines 8, 11, and 25) are intended to communicate a non-affiliative and non-aligning stance taking. This becomes more explicit and definite when the customer refuses the suggestion once again. The negative commentary “But this is not what you think” (Line 14) strongly displays her negative evaluation of the customer’s idea in which affiliation is actually missing at this stage of communication. And then, several evidentials “that is to say” (Line 14), “as you said” (Line 18), and “as what you said” (Line 19) and the speech-action description “Let me tell you” (Line 16) jointly manifest the intentions to expand justifications of her evaluation.

When it seems hopeless for her to change the solution, the customer changes the subject, talking about delays or other problems. The ongoing complaining about company regulations on check-in time triggers new complaints. The call taker’s nonverbal response, i.e. laughter, and the commentary “this is your personal issues” (Line 24) are intended to resist further development of new complaints. This commentary is a verbally explicit negative assessment and a strong display of non-aligning stance and disaffiliation involvement. So together with laughter, it can disengage from the complaint in question, and thus contributes to topic termination. After that, the call taker returns back to the old subject, and repeats her suggestion. The speech-action descriptions “I think” (Line 24) and “I suggest” (Line 25) and the evidentials “as I have told you the reason” (Line 24), “as I just told you” (Line 24), and “as you said” (Line 25) work together to activate the previous talk and previously mentioned information as well as the institutional stance the call taker is taking. The activated information and knowledge facilitate the construction of CG of non-aligning and disaffiliative stance with the customer.

In this extract, MPEs function as contradictory strategies to facilitate the construction of CG of non-alignment and disaffiliation with the customer so as to defend the company regulations.

5. Discussion

Based on the authentic data, we investigate the role of MPEs in CG constructions to facilitate complaint settlement in institutional telephone interactions, which is lacking in the extant literature. Despite their pervasiveness in daily and institutional discourse, the functional analysis of MPEs from the SCA has been overlooked in the research on metapragmatics, and complaints and complaint responses. The present article is a modest attempt to redress this omission based on a small sample of five extracts of institutional telephone interactions. In particular, in the context of responding to complaints in institutional telephone interactions, this article explores

the functions of MPEs to construct CG of knowledge in the first three cases, and CG of a balanced dis/affiliation and non/alignment in the last two cases. The findings are briefly summed up in Table 2.

Table 2. Functions of MPEs in CG construction

| Case | Types of complaints | Functions of MPEs |
|------|---|---|
| 1 | poor attitude | indicating intentions to give accounts and explanations to create CG of knowledge |
| 2 | difficulty in obtaining required information | indicating intentions to confirm and check information to create CG of knowledge |
| 3 | unsatisfactory compensation offering for a cancelled flight | indicating intentions to negotiate adequate compensation to create CG of knowledge |
| 4 | a long flight delay | indicating intentions to offer repair and show concern to create CG of affiliation and alignment |
| 5 | questioning regulations | indicating intentions to defend institutional interests to create CG of disaffiliation and nonalignment |

Five major types of MPEs are recurrent in the data. The frequency of each type used in the five cases is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Type and frequency of MPEs in complaint responses

| Type of MPEs | Frequency | Example |
|----------------------------|-----------|---|
| speech-action descriptions | 23 | I will tell you more about it; I suggest you do this |
| message glosses | 15 | for example; what I meant is |
| evidentials | 14 | according to our regulations; what you said earlier |
| commentaries | 10 | this does not sound like a good idea; this is my personal thought |
| perspective displayers | 3 | from my point of view; if I were you |

As indicated in the above table, the most frequent one is speech-action descriptions (23 times). Their use indicates the speaker’s intentions to reflect on the ongoing speech actions, which can enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of CG construction. This is because these expressions manifest the illocutionary forces or points of the ongoing speech actions and thus activate, create, and communicate desires, plans, and requests to guide or shape the construction of CG in complaint settlement.

The second is message glosses (15 times). They indicate intentions to explain, exemplify, or reformulate information or knowledge. In response to complaints, their use can activate and create the necessity for more detailed illustration, expansion, and elaboration, so they can help to construct CG by improving the

effectiveness of negotiations and problem resolutions. Next come evidentials (14 times), which indicate intentions to describe sources of information. In response to complaints, they activate and seek relevant contextual information, mainly mutual experiences, previously mentioned information, and company regulations. Their use can build CG for adequate understanding by regulating information reliability and acceptance.

The fourth one is commentaries (10 times), which describe personal judgments and evaluations, so they can facilitate CG construction by activating and creating preferences and expectations in responding to complaints. The least frequently used one is perspective displayers (3 times). They describe the speaker's angle, positioning, and stance-taking in response to complaints. These expressions activate and highlight specific perspective taking or foot shifting, which can help construct CG to guide the understanding and acceptance of explanations and solutions in complaint responses.

Apart from linguistic devices, the analysis also reveals that the call taker sometimes deploys non-verbal language, such as laughter, as a means of modulating and mitigating disagreement or non-alignment upon responding to complaints. As Holt (2012: 430) points out, laughter as a response can discourage further development of the topic in progress while maintaining social solidarity. This article shows that the combination of MPEs and non-verbal laughter has a similar function.

Out of the five cases, four responses belong to "not-at-fault denials" (cf. Dersley & Wootton 2000), in which the call taker aligns with the customers and accepts the accusations to a certain extent. She only denies the accusation in the last case. Nevertheless, she makes efforts to respond to all cases patiently. The data analysis shows that, faced with different types of complaints, the call taker employs MPEs to construct CG to address the issues differently. For complaints in which the customers have suffered concrete economic losses, for example, a cancelled flight (e.g. case 3), it is crucial for the customers to know the relevant company and industry regulations and business practices. Then MPEs, mainly speech-action descriptions, message glosses, and evidentials are used to build CG of knowledge in order to understand the situations and solutions available. Her goal is to minimize financial losses for the company while making the customer feel satisfied. As to other complaints that the customers have suffered non-economic losses with concrete evidence, for example, the attendant's poor attitude (e.g. case 1) and a long delay of an international flight (e.g. case 4), the call taker makes attempts to construct CG of knowledge for a better understanding of the actual situation and to construct CG of affiliation and alignment for close interpersonal relationships, which can soften the dissatisfaction and grievance, as reflected in the use of speech-action descriptions, message glosses, evidentials, and commentaries. As to other types of complaints with non-economic loss and no adequate evidence (e.g. case 2), the

call taker explicitly manifests intentions to seek relevant information to construct CG of knowledge, as reflected in the frequent use of speech-action descriptions, message glosses, and evidentials. In those cases in which the customers do not have good reasons to complain (e.g. case 5), the call taker shows a non-aligning and disaffiliative stance, as reflected in the use of negative commentaries and explicit perspective displayers. One thing that needs to be pointed out is that a display of a certain amount of affiliation and alignment can close the distance between the call taker and customers, and can therefore help to prevent complaints from expanding. Even if the call taker thinks that the customer has no good reason to complain, she also, to a certain extent, displays alignment and affiliation. Generally, responding to complaints comprises a delicate balancing of stance in which contrasting positions can be managed strategically.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to existing research in two ways. First, previous research (see Silverstein 1993, Verschueren 1999, Caffi 2007, Hübler & Bublitz 2007, Penz 2007, Liu & Ran 2016) has revealed that metapragmatics is associated with specific functions such as managing, stipulating, framing, monitoring, interfering, anchoring, resolving, and manipulation. In the framework of the SCA, this article focuses on another new function of metapragmatic awareness indicators: CG construction. Second, prior studies have provided valuable insights into factors affecting complaining activity (e.g. Fan, Matilab & Zhao 2015), types, strategies, and management of complaints and complaint responses (e.g. Dersley & Wootton 2000, Holt 2012, Filip 2013), and recipients' attitude towards complaints (e.g. Garín-Muñoz et al. 2016). We extend this knowledge by providing an understanding of the functions of MPEs in constructing CG in handling institutional complaints. To do so, we build a link between successful complaint handling and the SCA, which can help to reveal the functioning process of CG construction in complaint responses. For future research, a large sample should be included in the analysis, and the functions of different types of MPEs in constructing CG, as well as their distinct manners of activating, seeking, and creating contextual factors to build and develop CG deserve some exploration.

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