Hospitality language as a professional skill

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Abstract

International travel is a rapidly growing activity entailing cross-cultural communication between hosts and guests from different linguistic backgrounds. There is therefore a growing worldwide need for front-line staff (as hosts) in the hospitality industry who are able to communicate effectively with guests. This paper argues that particular patterns of language are associated with host-guest interaction. This language, corresponding to the different stages of the arrival–departure hospitality cycle, may be termed ‘hospitality language’. The first two parts of the paper investigate hospitality practices and define the notion of hospitality language, outlining its evolution in the context of the United Kingdom. This is followed by an illustration of its use in a case study of four hotels in Southampton. The fourth part discusses some pedagogical implications, with an emphasis on the need to expose learners to actual hotel reception practices. Interviews with hotel staff reveal that some hospitality skills could be developed through in-service training. It is argued that such training could be viewed as an ESP/ EOP requirement of the hospitality profession. The concluding section recommends that communication skills be given more serious attention by human resources managers, researchers and educators in the field of hospitality management. © 2002 The American University. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

One of the many purposes of social interaction is to visit friends, relatives, acquaintances or to entertain visitors in one’s home. This is sometimes known as ‘traditional hospitality’, as it does not involve payment for help or services rendered.

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As tourism and business travel have developed, however, a differentiation in hosting activities has arisen, between those that are extended as a social obligation and those involving payment. In both categories, participants normally observe the etiquette and proprieties that are traditionally practised, and both involve interpersonal and, in some cases, cross-cultural communication. Our concern in this paper, though, is primarily with ‘commercial hospitality’. Hospitality here refers to the cluster of activities oriented towards satisfying guests. To hoteliers, it simply means looking after the guest well; hence, ‘hospitality language’ refers to all linguistic expressions which relate to and represent hospitality concerns.

This aspect of language use has a long history of development, having evolved from expressions of care for visitors and the generosity of the host to present-day commercial practices in hospitality establishments. These establishments compete to provide the best quality of hospitality within a given price range, and such quality is nowadays professionally rated by the licensing or other authorities. In both cases, the host, commercial or non-commercial, must anticipate and provide for all lodging needs throughout the arrival–departure cycle of the guest’s stay. Viewed as a process, hospitality language covers at least four discernible stages: arrival, familiarisation, engagement and departure. Of course, each different situation warrants different types of hospitality, and the cycle does not always follow exactly the same sequence.

Tables 1 and 2 provide an outline of the ideal–typical visit cycle of hospitality practices in private homes and hotels, respectively, beginning with the arrival of the guest and ending with the departure. In the hospitality industry, this cycle is also known as the ‘guest cycle’ (Kasavana, 1993, p. 424).

Table 1
The traditional arrival–departure hospitality cycle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Language used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>Waiting and welcome at arrival terminal or at home. Guests handing over gifts, hosts help with luggage</td>
<td>Verbal welcome and greetings accompanied by hugs, smiles, excitement, pleasantries. Invite guests to make themselves at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarisation</td>
<td>Showing guests around the house. News and story update, getting reacquainted, exchange of experience, small talk</td>
<td>Conversation may break into smaller groups. More questions and answers, exchanging news, expressing interest/concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Mealtime conversation, exchange of business and family information, Activities directed towards fulfilling purpose of visit</td>
<td>Increasingly more interpersonal, balance between happy and sad stories. More serious and realistic communication, which may include laughter and argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>Announcement of departure and preparation for return trip. Farewell and sometimes exchange of gifts. Send-off at home or transport terminal</td>
<td>Exchanges of farewell utterances, hugs, kisses, promises, reassurances, invitations, wishes and gifts. Final thanks and goodbye</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Harun, 1998)
As can be seen, all four stages are usually associated with a certain public understanding of the language used. For example, arrival is associated with greetings, and departure with farewell. Between these two stages, there might be light-humorous exchanges or serious conversation, covering a whole range of communicative activities.

2. Hospitality language

A great deal has been written on hospitality as a cultural practice but a careful reading of the relevant literature suggests that the term ‘hospitality language’ has rarely if ever been subject to serious examination. Given its commonplace occurrence, it is rather strange that so little has been written on the subject. We can only assume that it may have been taken for granted like many other areas of spoken language. This is perhaps understandable, as although hospitality language can be viewed as an area of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), there is a substantial overlap with General Purpose English (GPE).

An examination of the literature suggests that writing on hospitality can be divided into three categories: prescriptive, descriptive and analytical (see Table 3 for a selection of hospitality-related writings). Prescriptive writing usually belongs to the didactic category, covering manuals and instructional materials for nearly every aspect of the hospitality industry. Many of the descriptive works appear in documentary form, although there are also novels and films produced with the hotel as the setting. These works generally cover the cultural history of hospitality (e.g. Heal,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>The commercial arrival–departure hospitality cycle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage</td>
<td>Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival</td>
<td>Pick-up service in some hotels; luggage may be carried by porters; registration at the reception. All services are commercial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarisation</td>
<td>Receptionist briefs guest on what and where in-house facilities are available, and on meal and check-out times; guest may also read in-house brochures and ask questions about hotel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Independent use of facilities in rooms and in different sections of the hotel. Popular items include: TV, restaurant and bar, pool, gymnasium, sauna, disco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departure</td>
<td>Luggage transfer, preparation of bill, perfunctory farewell conversation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Harun, 1998)
1990), the operations of the various activities in the hospitality industry, and accounts of hospitality experienced by past travellers as narrated in the travelogues. Analytical works include work in the various disciplines which are intended to explain the structure, operation and behaviour of the hospitality industry, either as a whole, or with reference to particular components or elements in its organisation.

In all three categories, there is a consensus that there is a proper way to welcome guests. In the hospitality industry, eye contact means being attentive and thus caring for the customers. It also indicates politeness. Verbal and non-verbal messages are conveyed and exchanged, and both host and guest conform to certain predictable behaviour when addressing each other. This is a far cry from the way in which Laurie Lee describes the welcome he received during his travels in Spain in the 1930s:

In the village square I came upon a great studded door bearing the sign ‘Posada de Nuestra Señora.’ I pushed the door open and entered a whitewashed courtyard hanging with geraniums and crowded with mules and asses. There was bedlam in the courtyard—mules stamping, asses braying, chickens cackling, and children fighting. A fat old crone, crouching by the fire in the corner, was

Table 3
A selection of hospitality-related writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author &amp; date</th>
<th>Objective of writing</th>
<th>Type of writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beavis and Medlik (1967)</td>
<td>Hotel reception manual</td>
<td>Prescriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worsdall (1979)</td>
<td>Instructions for workers in hotels/travel agencies</td>
<td>Prescriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McIver (1979)</td>
<td>Guide on English for travel</td>
<td>Prescriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastwood (1980)</td>
<td>Training materials for travellers</td>
<td>Prescriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blanton (1981)</td>
<td>Analyses need for language skill in hospitality</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revell and Stott (1982)</td>
<td>Training materials for hotel workers</td>
<td>Prescriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binham et al. (1982)</td>
<td>Instructions for hotel workers and travellers</td>
<td>Prescriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohen and Cooper (1986)</td>
<td>Discusses the impact of tourism on language use</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown and Levinson (1987)</td>
<td>Extensive coverage of language of politeness</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robinson (1989)</td>
<td>Discusses hotel English as ESP</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heal (1990)</td>
<td>Discusses the evolution of English hospitality</td>
<td>Descriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pechenart and Tangy (1993)</td>
<td>Discusses language training in Irish tourism</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood (1994)</td>
<td>Identifies English as part of the hotel culture</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WTO (1994)</td>
<td>Sees the need for English training for hotel staff</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shin Qian Wei (1995)</td>
<td>Guide on how to communicate with tourists</td>
<td>Prescriptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dann (1996)</td>
<td>Analyses the language of tourism</td>
<td>Analytical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a For a complete citation of the works listed see the References section. Source: Harun (1998).
stirring soup in a large black cauldron, and as she seemed to be in charge I went
up to her and made a sign for food. Without a word she lifted a ladleful of the
soup and held it up to my mouth. I tasted and choked; it was hot, strong, and
acrid with smoke and herbs. The old lady peered at me sharply through the
fumes of the fire. She was bent, leather-skinned, bearded and fanged, and
looked like a watchful moose. I wiped my burnt mouth, nodded my head, and
said ‘Good’ in clear loud English. She took a long pull herself, her moustached
lips working, her eyes rolling back in her skull. Then she spat briskly into the
fire, turned her head abruptly and roared out in a deep hoarse voice - and a
barefooted boy, dressed only in a shirt, came and tugged my sleeve and led me
to see the bedrooms. (Lee, 1969, pp. 49–50)

In terms of structure, hospitality language sometimes involves more than two
parties: there might be an intrepreter or another intermediary. Then there are the
main actors (namely host and guests as both speakers and hearers), the physical
frame (the home or hotel), status protocols and role expectations. Hospitality lan-
guage is often formal, though it depends very much on the level of acquaintance
among participants themselves. For example, when hosting official dinners, inter-
national conferences and wedding ceremonies, the hosting arrangements are more
formal, compared with more casual encounters among neighbours and friends.
Irrespective of function, there is a wide variety of terms dealing with hospitality in
most cultures; the hospitality register for the English language is quite extensive.

Our own experience demonstrates that English is widely spoken in hotels in Eur-
ope, Asia and Latin America, sometimes, to our embarrassment, even by employees
in very lowly positions, presumably with fairly limited education. There can be little
doubt that English is the most commonly used language of hospitality and the lingua
franca of tourists and travellers worldwide. Thus, in many parts of the world, the art
of greeting, soliciting information, thanking and bidding farewell requires some
measure of familiarisation with the relevant English expressions before a person can
serve effectively as a receptionist, telephonist or in other guest-contact capacities.
Even though in countries like Malaysia there is a tendency to use the mother tongue
when communicating with those from the same linguistic background, English is
still regarded as important in multiethnic contexts such as hotels and leisure clubs
(Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, 1995).

Whether in English or another language, there is an identifiable cluster of lan-
guage skills which staff dealing with hotel guests should have already acquired. At
the very minimum, these skills include:

- how to address a person;
- how to solicit and give the necessary information;
- how to respond to questions/requests;
- how to use prompts;
- how to use gestures (a more sensitive area than is often realised—see Hauge, 2000);
- how to deal with difficult customers;
- how to appease complainants.
It is interesting to note that the hotels in this study do not provide systematic training in these important skills. Receptionists are expected already to know how to communicate with guests when seeking a job. Observations on how fellow receptionists execute the job are carried out once the person is employed. The average 3 months’ on-the-job training is presumed to be a matter of further polishing and perfecting their hospitality skills. Language use is treated as implicit, and hence taken for granted. The hotels in the study are viewed as simply providers of hospitality and not as institutions for training in communication skills. Although it might be expected that there would be a great demand for language courses of this type, whether pre-service or in-service, we have not been able to find any comprehensive training that includes the skills discussed above. In some contexts, it may be important to have developed a level of communicative ability and to have a familiarity with the relevant terms in another language such as Japanese, Korean, Spanish or German. In the United Kingdom, foreign language skills are not normally required of hotel employees, who are assumed (not always justifiably) to have at least an adequate command of English. Yet there are large numbers of tourists from continental Europe and the Pacific Rim who would love to be greeted and to be able to carry out basic exchanges in their mother tongue. Employees with even a limited command of foreign languages could be a very valuable asset to hotels, and language instruction could therefore be an important component in both pre-service and in-service training.

Making people feel welcome is indeed an art, and a key to success in the hospitality industry. It has now become a standard feature of commercial hospitality practices. In the context of an increasingly globalised world, there has been some standardisation of hospitality language. The language of hotel encounters, for instance, comprises functional aspects of hospitality language that are understood worldwide. These functional activities include check-ins, check-outs, information and queries, and miscellaneous requests.

3. The case study

To investigate this language in more depth, a case study of reception encounters at four hotels in Southampton was carried out (Harun, 1998), ranging from a four star hotel to a guest-house. The observation period lasted about 1 month. During this period, a large number of conversations were recorded. On the advice of the relevant managers these took place during the two peak periods: between 07:30 and 10:00 h, a period which covers mainly check-out times, and between 17:00 and 19:30 h, when the main activity is checking in. In each case, a micro-cassette recorder was placed on the counter together with a notice to guests indicating the purpose of its being there. An ethnographic approach was adopted in this study of the hotel situation (van Maanen, 1995). Most of the time the researcher sat or stood near the reception counter, pretending to be another guest deeply engrossed in reading a popular magazine. Being an observer-cum-participant meant that she was always treated as a hotel guest (coffee and breakfast were served during morning observations at two hotels).
In addition, four receptionists and two hotel managers were interviewed. It was felt that this might shed interesting light on the subject, as they are the ‘insiders’ (Widdowson, 1998). Interviews covered issues such as the requirements of the job, pre-service and in-service training, the need for local knowledge and attitudes to foreign languages. The interviews were informal, and were carried out on the spot, when it was convenient for the hotel staff.

Recording of conversation yielded about 32 hours of taped data. To avoid excessive repetition and redundant information of the routine type, it was decided to analyse only a representative sample of 40 conversations (some of which involved more than one communicative activity). The sample conversations were transcribed following the conventions of conversation analysis adapted by Bailey (1997). Table 4 shows a percentage distribution of functional activities drawn from this case study of reception encounters.

The dominant functions are clearly transactional and informational; and as is to be expected, the check-in and check-out functions are reflexive, the volume of exchanges for the two functions being almost equal, even though they inevitably take place on different days. Miscellaneous requests include asking for change, leaving a message, asking for a taxi, asking for a comb and leaving luggage, which reflect the variety of needs of the guests that the receptionist has to address. Queries and requests for information, accounting for almost one-third of the exchanges in the corpus, were a little less predictable, though even here there were a number of recurring themes. Finally, the hotel receptionist inevitably has to face occasional complaints and criticisms, though it is to be hoped that there might also be occasional compliments.

In the rest of this paper we shall look at some of the data, consider the degree of predictability of both the functions/communicative activities and of the language used, and investigate some of the pedagogical implications.

Conversation at the counter may be initiated either by guests or receptionists. In some cases openings are marked by short, common phrases like “Hello” to either guests or receptionists, “How are you?” to familiar guests, “Excuse me” to receptionists, or even “Can I help you at all?” to guests waiting at the counter. The two encounters below provide examples of these openings (in both cases the opening is followed by a request). Utterances, or rather moves, are identified by a conversation number followed by a move number.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional activities at hotel reception</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information and queries</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous requests</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check-ins</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check-outs</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaints and criticisms</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Source: field data from hotel survey, Southampton (Harun, 1998).
A conversation on the telephone involves a similar structure, with the receptionist doing the openings. This is a typical characteristic of telephone encounters, where the receiver always speaks first: “...a distribution rule for first utterances is the answerer speaks first” (Schegloff, 1972, p. 94). A typical pattern observed in all the hotels is given below. The company’s identity is provided, usually after a greeting, followed by a reply to the call:

Good evening. X Hotel. How may I help you?

In face-to-face situations, either the receptionist or, more commonly, the guest may go straight to the point without any polite preliminaries, e.g.:

1/1: Checking out, sir?

9/1: Er... parking in Southampton, do you pay and display, or do you pay on your way out?

14/1: Can I have my room, please?

39/1: The name’s Wood.

These requests demand answers, and generally we find that the responses are quick, and normally followed by actions:

1/2 Yes, that’s right.

1/3 The name’s ( ).

9/2 It’s mostly pay and display, sir.

14/2 The name, please.

39/2 ((checks)) Mister George Wood?

As pointed out earlier, most of the utterances are short, direct and purpose-driven. They rarely consist of more than one clause, and are invariably linked to the goals of the interlocutors. Each participant assumes expected roles and acts within the rules of the commercial game. And the rule of the game here is that receptionists concentrate on attending to guests’ needs. The receptionists’ utterances, apart from greetings and politeness indicators (phatic communion), are mostly based on or influenced by what guests say. Such responses are, for the most part, strictly functional.
These kinds of utterances displayed at hotel reception can be described as formal and commercial-like. There are few interruptions, and most utterances are either one-word utterances or complete sentences. They are sequential and balanced. Fillers are unusual (except for occasional cases), which suggests that receptionists are aiming to demonstrate their professionalism by being prompt and efficient. Silences are not unusual, but most of them are accompanied by actions; for instance, when receptionists carry out transactions, attend to bills and so on. The utterances are mostly predictable and dyadic; they tend to consist of adjacency pairs: greeting–greeting, question–answer, apology–acceptance and request–assent (action completed). These are demonstrated in the following encounters:

33/1 Can I borrow a hair dryer, please?  
33/2 Yes, can you fill in this form, please?  

37/1 What’s the name, please, sir?  
37/2 ((softly)) Boujou.  

40/6 I don’t have any more details about him, that’s about it.  
40/7 That’s okay, that’s okay.  

There are, however, conversations which do not strictly conform to the above patterns. For instance, questions will also be followed immediately by another question for identification and clarification purposes; requests are followed by the actions being carried out on the spot, either through verbal response or non-verbal act:

19/1 Can I have a taxi, please?  
19/2 Where to, sir? (signals to telephonist)  

Guests, as mentioned elsewhere, are of the utmost importance in hotel encounters, and the way receptionists address guests is vital as it gives an impression of the attitude of the establishment as well as of the individual receptionists. This is clearly stated in most of the literature on hotel operations (Table 3). In the conversations observed and recorded, “Sir” or “Mr” followed by the surname is mostly used to address male guests, while female guests are referred to as ‘Madam’. Unfortunately, there are very few examples of the latter, as most guests encountered were either unaccompanied businessmen or tourists with partners. In the case of the tourists, it is generally the male partners who initiate the exchange. Surnames are normally used to address guests rather than forenames, showing “formal respect” and “certain genteel politeness conventions” (Maybin, 1996, p. 13). Polite phrases such as “Would you”, “Can I”, “Could you”, are ways of asking guests to carry out a particular task, for instance, to sign forms, check bills, fill in registration cards and so on. “Please” and “thank you” are frequently uttered when action is required of and performed by guests.

Hotel encounters present clear examples of routine types of interaction as shown in the transcriptions. Routines in this case refer to the receptionists’ basic responsibilities,
and most deal with specific purposes and needs such as check-in and check-out, dealing with any special requirements (e.g. smoking or non-smoking room, wake-up call, newspaper), reservations for a meal, directions to rooms and so on, which are mostly predictable. Even moderately predictable encounters may require the receptionist to be informative and resourceful, which is not the case in the following encounter:

12/1: G: Could you tell me how many people live in Southampton?
12/2: R: ((pause)) Mhm ... I don’t know exactly.
12/3: G: Why, would you like to know?
12/4: R: ((after checking in the office behind he counter)) About forty thousand.
12/5: G: Really?
12/6: R: About, forty thousand.
12/7: G: It can’t be.
12/8: R: I still can’t believe it.
12/10: G: Are you expecting more?
12/11: R: Yes ((pause)) about one million?
12/12: G: Oh, it might be more, I don’t know.
12/13: G: (leaves, but still talks about it with his wife and friends on the way out))

Even though population size may not be a common everyday topic, receptionists as professionals need to have this kind of information readily available for future reference. In this instance, the receptionist understated the population size of Southampton by six times, stating 40,000 instead of the actual 230,000, whilst the German tourist overestimated it by four times.

Less predictable routines include the following encounters:

5/1: G: I just would like to tell you that I will be in my room upstairs. ((pause))
5/2: It’s cold, isn’t it...? ((starts to write message for a friend))
5/3: and I’m going to the Isle of Wight. ((continues to write message))
5/4: R: ((smiles))

This encounter does not actually involve any verbal response on the part of the receptionist, but it does require a command of language that would generally be classified as GPE rather than ESP, as does the following encounter between a female guest and a male receptionist:

18/1: R: Hello.
18/2: G: Hello, Morris.
18/3: R: Morris?
18/4: G: Yeah.
18/5: R: Mm I’m sure that’s your last name?
18/6: G: It is.
18/7: R: It is. Yes.
18/8: G: Mind you I do know somebody called Maurice Morris ... [((Would you
believe?))]
18/9: R: [ Morris, Morris? ]
18/10: G: = Yes. It can be M-a-u-r-i-c-e, and then M-o-r-r-i-s (h-) ((laughs)).
18/11: R: O:kay, and why not?

The next encounter takes place between a regular male guest and a female
receptionist:

27/1: R: Mornin’ ((closes cash till))
27/2: Hi:!
27/3: G: How’re you?
27/4: R: [ Or’right.]
27/5: G: [ Ju:st all right?
27/6: Not- ve:ry good?
27/7: And lo:vely, or ((pause)) but you’re a:lways lovely, aren’t you ?

This encounter is not about serving customers in the normally accepted sense, but
merely greeting a regular guest and responding to rather familiar chat. The inform-
ality of the conversation suggests the receptionist’s familiarity with the guest—her utterances of Mornin’, Hi and Or’right are perhaps not typical of hotel encounters,
at least in the UK.

The next encounter is quite long, but is very interesting, as it involves substantial
amounts of general chat (GPE) interspersed with transactions that are typical of
hotels (ESP):

36/1: G: ((sighs))
36/2: R: Hi!
36/3: G: Hi!: My name is [ Mrs Beale ].
36/4: R: [ That’s better ].
36/5: G: = and I’d like to check in. Jolly good.
36/6: ((sighs)) Oh de:ar! ((sighs again))
36/7: R: O:kay, can you write down your address there, please, and signature
down there?
36/8: G: ((sighs and fills in form))
36/9: R: ( ) no?
36/10: G: ((shakes her head then chats about her experience, which is inaudible))
36/11: R: Yeah?
36/12: G: Y:es. ( ) ...and I’ve been travelling up here for tw:o years. ((pause))
36/13: He’s ordered me to meet him at Ki:ng’s Cross ((pause))
36/14: Mind you I had to wait for a ta:xi to take me there (h-) ((laughs))
36/15: and there, we got to take another ta:xi to go to Waterloo Station to see
my (children) disappear.
36/16: R: Oh de:ar!
36/17: G: [ ((laughs))}
36/18: R: [ (laughs)]
36/19: G: ( )
36/20: R: Your son-in-law says he’s picking you up at quarter to [ (six) ].
36/21: G: [ (six) ].
36/22: = Yes.
36/23: R: O:kay. Here’s your charge card.
36/24: Your room’s 202 ((gives key)).
36/25: Just round the corner, up the stairs, o:kay?
36/26: Do you need help with your bag?
36/27: G: Ye:ah, I think, if it’s possible. Otherwise, I can be standing here all day (h-) ((laughs)).
36/28: R: Yes. I’ll get someone to send it to your room. ((then attends to work))
36/29: G: ((sighs and bends down as if she wants to carry luggage))
36/30: R: Just leave it there.
36/31: I’ll do it.
36/32: G: Ye:ah, okay. ((looks around for direction and walks ahead towards restaurant))
36/33: ((softly spoken)) 2-0-2.
36/34: R: Round here. ((points to left))
36/35: G: Am I going the wrong way?
36/36: R: You are inde:ed.
36/37: G: (h-) ((laughs))

As we have seen, there are a number of cases where receptionists behave quite informally towards guests. These encounters demonstrate that formality does not necessarily characterise all the language of the hotel counter. It depends very much on the way host and guest perceive and relate to each other. “Yeah” was frequently used while serving a guest in one instance, instead of “Yes”; and “Oh, there’s no problem” instead of some more formal utterance. “Hi” was sometimes used instead of the usual formal “Hello”. Utterance 36/4 (“That’s better”) was a comment made on the guest’s ability to remember or articulate her name after a tiring journey. Similarly, 18/3 (“Morris?”) and 18/5 (“Mm I’m sure that’s your last name?”) were remarks directed to the guest who had just identified herself. However, all these utterances were spoken with pleasantries from the receptionist, and guests seemed to respond positively to the informality shown.

The language of hotel encounters comprises mostly functional aspects of hospitality language. The ultimate motive is to make guests feel happy with the service provided. Interestingly, very little of the language or actions observed could be described as welcoming in a formal sense: there was no porter to carry the luggage (except when requested, in which case somebody would be paged); nobody was waiting at the door to welcome new arrivals; guests were often made to wait, even if only for a few seconds; a number had to initiate the exchanges. The parties involved, particularly the receptionist, tended to focus more on business transactions than on the welcoming aspect. Yet it may be that the informal, friendly behaviour and language which we found to characterise some host–guest interaction, including the
general chat and occasional jokes, contribute to making guests feel welcome to a greater extent than a formal welcome might do. Thus, as far as British guests are concerned, we felt that the way in which staff helped the guests to feel welcome was generally appropriate. However, from the point of view of foreign guests, especially those for whom English is a foreign language, we wondered whether more could have been done to make the welcome explicit. Furthermore, the observation data suggest that some receptionists tended to be reactive rather than pro-active when responding to queries and complaints from guests, especially foreign guests. To make foreign guests feel at ease, care could have been taken in the responses by perhaps being more elaborate and explicit. This explicit attention to needs or wants is one aspect of what Brown and Levinson (1987) have termed ‘positive politeness’. We suggest that receptionists would benefit from cross-cultural awareness raising in order to communicate more effectively with foreign guests.

Although most of what was observed seemed to reflect good practice in the hotel industry (and this was confirmed by guests who took the opportunity to talk to the observer), this lack of initiative in dealing with foreign guests was an area that we felt could have been improved upon. The other aspect that emerged from our study as meriting close attention was receptionists’ lack of general knowledge of the surrounding area. The data suggest that it is not uncommon to find guest-contact personnel not knowing local taxi fares, directions or even a rough estimate of local population. These two aspects could be easily remedied at little cost to the management, and this could certainly boost customer satisfaction. During the interviews these findings were discussed with hotel staff, who agreed that they merited closer attention.

Despite these minor deficiencies, the foreign tourists interviewed in this study appeared to be generally happy with their stay. There were no profound social or cultural problems resulting from their encounters, a scenario that is quite different from the kind of ‘culture shock’ reported by some writers (e.g. Krippendorf, 1987). However, front-line hotel staff should always be looking for ways of pre-empting any communication problems that might emerge, and helping foreign guests to feel that the hotel is truly a home away from home. This of course raises questions about language use in hotels—in particular, varieties of English and perhaps the use of other languages.

Despite the informal language and behaviour that we have observed earlier, we have noted that the language used to serve guests is often quite formal. It is a rehearsed and staged language with its own rules and norms. Similar key words and related actions are repeated with different individuals. The structure of hospitality language is, therefore, very straightforward. The communication is normally quite brief and balanced in terms of turn-taking. Yet, even rehearsed, polite utterances can be spoken in a friendly, helpful and welcoming manner. Hospitality English, as we have seen, deals largely with various types of service. It is socially directed and information or service driven. The way the conversation is managed is influenced by the status of the participants, which then governs the turns they take. Both guest and host follow certain rules and conventions of business encounters. The language of the interaction is intertwined with the social roles of the interlocutors; that is, customer and provider. For these business transactions to take place, both parties need
to play their roles well. Self-presentation and impression management, as observed by Goffman (1959), are bound up in the roles. These, combined with the host’s command of hospitality language, determine the quality of the interaction or of the hotel service.

Our findings generally seem to support the notion that hospitality language has its own definite rhetorical patterns, which typically correspond to the four-stage cycle detailed in Table 2. Following this cycle, check-in activities mark the arrival of guests, who are registered and assigned to their individual rooms. Within this entry-stage encounter alone, several functions may be operating simultaneously, leading into the familiarisation stage. Guests may initiate exchanges to elicit information, for example, on the in-house restaurant, or directions to various sites of interest. Requests are sometimes made after the service/facility has been made known to them by the receptionists during check-in. During the engagement stage there may be further requests for information or for services, and this is when the language sometimes becomes less formal and less predictable. Finally, during the departure stage, the language again becomes more formulaic, as there are a number of precise but routine tasks to be accomplished.

4. Pedagogical implications

The teaching of hospitality language, either pre-service (in further and higher education institutions) or in-service (organised by hotels’ own staff development departments), seems to have been relatively neglected. As we have already mentioned, there is a substantial volume of prescriptive writing on hospitality, which includes references to hospitality language. Although these references point to the need for proficiency in language among guest-contact personnel, very little descriptive work has been done on what characterises the language of hospitality.

This study indicates that proficiency in hospitality language is important and ought therefore to be included in hospitality management programmes regardless of whether trainees are operating through their mother tongue or a second or foreign language, or both. Hospitality language may not be part of the previous experience of trainees, and they must learn to follow certain professional conventions and procedures when serving all types of guests, including foreigners.

Due to the rapid growth of tourism and the hotel industry, it is important to consider offering relevant courses to students at the tertiary level, for two reasons. Firstly, there is a need to equip those seeking entry into the service industry, particularly those who will be operating through a foreign language, as employees are required to have a good command of this language. Secondly, it is arguable that everybody ought to know hospitality language because at some stage in our life, we may all have to be a host or a guest in a variety of cross-cultural situations. Having some exposure to this kind of language enables us to achieve our goals and attend to our obligations when travelling or receiving visitors from abroad. This is not only important for social purposes in an increasingly interactive world but also as part of business management skills, where business people are
expected to negotiate deals often either as hosts or guests. At the more inclusive level, then, hospitality language may be directed towards the entire population of a country, and not only those whose work relates to guests’ and/or tourists’ needs. Hence hospitality language is a topic that could be taught as part of general language studies in school and that could be incorporated in other subject areas too.

Granted that such skills are needed, we suggest two approaches. First, hospitality language should be included in general purpose foreign language courses. This already happens to some extent, but it could be dealt with more systematically. Second, more specialised courses in hospitality language should be offered for those who plan to work in hospitality-related areas. Such courses could be offered both in the mother tongue (for the purposes of awareness raising) and in foreign languages, and not exclusively English as a foreign language.

Hospitality language should be included in all professional hospitality programmes at least so as to raise awareness of issues in cross-cultural communication. Learning how to speak clearly to non-native speakers without sounding patronising, thinking about how to make the message more explicit, and considering some of the problems involved in cross-cultural communication would be of value to anyone who might have to deal with foreign guests.

English is the most commonly used language in the hotel industry worldwide, and there has been some universal standardisation of linguistic requirements at the hotel counter, though with a great deal of local variation. In countries where English is not the mother tongue there is clear scope for including at least two languages in hospitality management programmes, and in English speaking countries hospitality English could provide a measure of cross-cultural awareness training. In addition, serious consideration should be given to including other languages as a basic hospitality requirement. After all, there can be few ways of demonstrating hospitality more effectively than to greet guests and try to communicate with them in their own language.

In many hospitality programmes, students are expected to acquire a certain amount of work experience in hotels and restaurants before they graduate. There may be some value in building the language element into this practical work experience so as to learn how it works in practice (Schiffrin, 1994). Students-cum-receptionists can learn how to conduct themselves properly on the job, as there is a fine line between hotel staff being intrusive and hospitable. By actually seeing the guests approaching other receptionists, certain behavioural and speech patterns can be studied. The only disadvantage of this is that existing hotel staff may not always provide the best model, especially when they are operating in a foreign language.

Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, language can be introduced into hospitality courses. The conversations recorded in this study, although probably not suitable for pedagogical applications in their current form, could nevertheless be modified or adapted to provide some useful models. As Louhiala-Salminen (1996, p. 50) stresses:

... in course design, business communication should not be treated as something separate from the real business, not as a skill separate from other professional skills, not as a store of phrases and idioms, but rather as a thread which is interwoven in everything that happens in businesses.
In view of the growing importance of hospitality activity, it is becoming increasingly important to consider the language needs within hospitality establishments, along with other aspects of professional training.

5. The interview study

Results of the interviews conducted with hotel staff suggest that language is an area normally taken for granted, at least in the UK. The situation, though, may be very different in other countries, especially those where hospitality language is commonly articulated through non-native tongues. In the UK it appears that there is usually no specific in-house training on how best to deal with guests. Receptionists are generally recruited on the basis of their working experience, personality and potential commitment to the job. Once employed, receptionists are normally given 3 months’ training at the counter, which involves a variety of duties, observations and some training in the use of computers. Materials from the transcripts do not indicate any serious problems arising for the native-speaker receptionists. We would however, argue that customer satisfaction could be increased through some carefully planned training in customer relations, including hospitality language, which could take place in-house.

6. Hospitality language and ESP

It may be argued that hospitality language as discussed in this paper is another branch of ESP/ EOP. The scope of hospitality English is quite wide as there are several hospitality providers to choose from, e.g. hotels, travel agents, restaurants, information centres and tourist attractions. It is also possible to distinguish hospitality language in private and public domains. Just as EAP can be divided into English for general and specific academic purposes (EGAP/ESAP) and EOP consists of both general and specific occupational purposes (EGOP/ESOP; Blue, 1988, p. 96), and just as English for business purposes (EBP) can be divided into English for general and specific business purposes (EGBP/ESBP; Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 55), so we suggest that hospitality English can be divided into English for general hospitality purposes (EGHP) and English for specific hospitality purposes (ESHP). ESHP would focus on the language of one particular hospitality setting and, in our case, might include the language used for checking into a hotel, giving information about hotel facilities, meal times, etc. EGHP, on the other hand, would include giving directions, requesting and giving tourist information, and other communicative activities that can take place in any hospitality setting. There will inevitably be some areas of overlap, and in both cases hospitality language is likely to shade off into GPE. We would certainly counsel against too narrow a definition of hospitality language.

Although it is possible to focus on some of the common patterns and regularities of hospitality language, it is important to recognise that the language used in one situation may not be readily transferable to another context, because notions of
propriety, politeness, courtesy and gratitude are to some extent culture-bound. There are considerable differences between English-speaking countries such as the UK and the USA, and these differences are of course even greater when considering countries where English is a second or foreign language. Thus, each situation will require an approach that reflects a measure of local, cultural orientation.

There are three essential elements of hospitality for front-line staff, as revealed by the study of four hotels in Southampton. First, there is an attitudinal element, for example, the art and skill of being attentive, courteous, polite. Second, there is the functional language element, where the host and the guest assume particular dyadic roles and act accordingly. As well as being able to carry out regular transactions, receptionists must know what facilities are available and how to gain access to them, and should have a good knowledge both of the hotel and of the local area. Third, there is a cultural knowledge element: knowledge about hotel culture is often wrongly presumed to be adequate among host and guests. Front-line staff ought to know how to behave appropriately in the different contexts they find themselves in and to have some understanding of cross-cultural communication. These three elements all contribute to the notion of service.

A hotel is perhaps the most suitable place for the exploration of hospitality language. It is rich in standard vocabulary, greetings, and so on, but also contains many elements of GPE. Anyone designing a language course for hotel employees needs to take a comprehensive approach; such a course should cover the essential ingredients of hospitality language but should go beyond the stereotypical. Though there are several textbooks which deal with hospitality language for hotel staff (e.g. Binham et al., 1982; Harkess & Wherly, 1984; Yates, 1991), most are very basic; the language is often simplified and does not always seem to reflect authentic hotel encounters. Language learners need to be exposed to real hotel data, including discourse markers like, *uh*, *um*, *uhm*, *well*, *I mean* and *yeah*, which do not usually appear in textbooks. The Southampton study may provide a good source for authentic hotel language, at least in the British context.

7. Conclusion

This paper has explored the sociolinguistic aspects of hospitality with a focus on receptionist-guest exchanges at the hotel reception counter. Based on the literature review and field observation, it is argued that there is a loosely constituted but identifiable linguistic specialism which we have called ‘hospitality language’. Hospitality language arises from a combination of procedural, behavioural and linguistic acts, verbal and non-verbal, direct and indirect. In its commercially constructed character today, hospitality language has assumed a standardised universal form with its own register of specialist terms. Clearly, there is a need for further work on hospitality language, and some of the tentative observations made earlier on language at the hotel counter may need to be re-examined in the light of evidence from different contexts. However, this study has enabled us to isolate some of the underlying linguistic patterns that characterise hospitality language.
There is ample justification for including hospitality language (both in the mother tongue and applied to foreign languages) and cross-cultural communication in hospitality programmes. As travel becomes more and more commonplace across the globe, a greater need will arise for hospitality personnel with a thorough knowledge and understanding of host–guest communication. There is a place for some local colour, emanating from the national culture, to be added to the universal norm of hospitality language, and this applies whether the language in use is English or another national or foreign language. Thus there will always be not just a multitude of languages used for hospitality purposes but also a multitude of hospitality Eng-

References


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