

## ***Tianguis Friki: Intracultural Pragmatic Variation of E-service Encounters in a Northern Mexican Community***

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### **Abstract**

Electronic service encounters, defined as an economic exchange over the Internet (McCole, 2002), have recently gained attention with the expansion of the Internet. E-service encounters, similar to face-to-face service encounters (Antonopoulou, 2001; Félix-Brasdefer, 2015; Merritt, 1976) consist of (non)formal institutional talk that involves specific tasks, identities, and relevant procedures that partakers must consider when participating in the interaction (Lind & Salomonson, 2012). This study examines e-service encounters in Spanish that occur in the virtual *Facebook* group *Tianguis Friki* (literally freaky flea market), where people sell and exchange goods and services (e.g. electronics, clothes, and cars). A total of 100 interactions of e-service encounters were analyzed using two of Schneider and Barron's (2008) levels of pragmatic analysis: actional and interactional. It was observed that participants in e-service encounters are very task-oriented, evidenced by the use of only three opening act strategies (elliptical, explicit, and imperative offers), the lack of a pre/post-sequence (e.g. greetings), and the lack of relational talk. Moreover, it was found that some strategies from offline communication (e.g. task oriented strategies) are transferred to online communication, whereas other strategies (e.g. use of relational talk) are not.

**Keywords:** e-service encounters, pragmatic variation, Mexican Spanish variation

## 1. Introduction

Service encounters have been traditionally defined as “an instance of face-to-face (FTF) interaction between a server...in some service area and a customer who is present in that service area” (Merritt, 1976, p. 321). Studies that focus on service encounters seek to analyze the interactions between two or more participants in “commercial and non-commercial settings where transactions are negotiated” (Félix-Brasdefer, 2012). Service encounters have been widely studied across many varieties of Spanish (Félix-Brasdefer, 2012, 2015; Solon, 2013 in Mexican Spanish; Placencia, 2005, 2008 in Madrid and Ecuadorian Spanish; and Ruzickova, 2007 in Cuban Spanish). However, electronic service encounters, defined as an economic exchange over the internet (McCole, 2002), have recently received more attention with the expansion of the Internet (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2015; Placencia, 2015). It is argued in this paper that e-service encounters, similarly to FTF service encounters, consist of (non)formal institutional talk that involves specific tasks, identities, limitations and relevant procedures that partakers must consider when participating in such interactions (Lind & Salomonson, 2012). This study focuses on intracultural variation (i.e. “speakers from the same cultural group, not necessarily from the same language variety” [Félix-Brasdefer, 2015]) of e-service encounters in the online virtual community *Tianguis Friki* (literally freaky flea market), an online environment similar to *ebay* in the United States and *Mercado Libre* in Latin America. Members of the community join this group in order to sell and/or exchange goods (e.g. electronics, food, cars, clothes), advertise local businesses, among other less frequent uses such as discrediting other people, asking for prayers for sick people, and complaining about social injustices.

This investigation examines the discourse structure of e-service encounters in *Tianguis Friki* (henceforth TF) in order to better understand the genre of e-service encounters. E-service encounters were analyzed using two of Schneider and Barron’s (2008) levels of pragmatic analysis: actional (i.e. speech act realization) and interactional (i.e. sequential patterns). The purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive description of online transactions and the discourse moves (e.g. bargaining) that participants use in order to have a successful transaction.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This section briefly reviews the literature of what has been found for FTF service encounters, with a special emphasis on Mexican service encounters. Then, a more detailed account of the literature of e-service encounters is given, followed by the set of research questions guiding the present study.

### 2.1 Face-to-face service encounters

Service encounters are described as interactive processes between two or more participants where tangible and intangible goods are exchanged. These interactions can vary according to the setting in which they are realized (e.g. open-

air or closed settings) and the types of goods that are exchanged (e.g. groceries, electronics, clothing, souvenirs, among many others). Service encounters are generally task oriented; that is, participants have a specific goal such as making a purchase or receiving a service. These types of encounters are heterogeneous and they are seen in terms of continuity, that is, “an entity that begins with an initial set-up of the situation and then unfolds in a constant and predictable manner right up to the conclusion” (Traverso, 2001, p. 441). Nevertheless, variation can be found according to gender, geographical location, and/or setting.

With regards to Spanish, Placencia (2005) investigates intralingual variation of corner shop store transaction sequences in Quito and Manta, Ecuador. Specifically, she took into account three of Spencer-Oatey’s discourse domains: illocutionary, participatory, and stylistic. She found that in general both regions prefer direct and pronominal forms and they show polychromic turn taking. With regards to the illocutionary domain it was found that Quiteños use more internal modification in order to mitigate the encounter (e.g. diminutives and politeness formulas), while Manteños only use *por favor* ‘please’. As to gender differences in the request-response sequence, women from Quito avoid stating the quantity on the first turn whereas men in Manta yell what they want when they enter the store. Informants from Quito show more opening and closing acts, which indicates more individualized forms of small talk or positive rapport which equals more interpersonal work. Moreover, informants from Manta are more task oriented and show more intimacy through shared knowledge, which in turn confirms Wolfson’s (1988) theory that states that intimacy doesn’t require much interpersonal work. Placencia (2005) concludes that informants from Manta show more similarities with informants from Madrid, Spain (data from Madrid comes from her previous study, Placencia, 2008).

From a variational perspective, Félix-Brasdefer (2012) studies pragmatic variation by gender in market service encounters in México. He focuses on three levels of analysis: actional, interactional, and stylistic. The actional level was analyzed using concepts from speech act theory, conversational analysis, and variational pragmatics. Whereas the interactional level analyzed the pragmatolinguistic components in the request-response sequence, and the stylistic level was analyzed with regards to the use of the different forms of address (*tú* vs. *usted*). He found that the imperative was preferred in male-to-male interactions, elliptical requests were preferred in male-to-female and female-to-female interactions, implicit requests were preferred in female-to-female interactions. In the interactional level it is observed that females prefer a pre-sequence. Greetings are barely present in both genders, and closings are also preferred by females, although not as frequently as pre-sequences. Finally, the distribution of forms of address across gender suggests that it is the gender of the addressee what determines which form the speaker will use.

Solon (2013) also situates her study in México, but she focuses on intercultural interactions of two street vendors and their international customers in a touristic venue in Yucatán. Her main goal was to get a general sequential organization of service encounters, analyze the actional moves made by participants, as well as the strategies employed by them using Schiffrin’s (2006)

discourse analytical model by focusing in two planes of discourse: act structures and participation framework. She identified the following sequential structure: 1) optional greeting, 2) medium selection sequences, 3) series of requests/offer solicitation, 4) request for price, 5) negotiation sequence, 6) confirmation of sale, 7) provision or not of service, and 8) optional closing. Similarly to Félix-Brasdefer (2012), she found that for the medium selection vendors follow their customers' medium; that is, they accommodate to the language that their customers choose.

Previous research in FTF service encounters has investigated intralingual, intercultural, and gender variation; however, little is known about variation in e-service encounters. The next section reviews the literature on what has been found for e-service encounters.

## 2.2 E-service encounters

Similar to FTF service encounters, e-service encounters also involve the exchange of tangible and/or intangible goods, the difference being that the latter are located in a virtual community. Since the emergence of the internet, there has been an increase in electronic commerce. E-service is defined as the “deeds, efforts or performances whose delivery is mediated by information technology” (Santos, 2003, p. 341), and they are usually characterized by providing consumers with quality, anytime product information (Santos, 2003), which in turn results in customers' trust, thus increasing business. The present study is situated within the area of Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) where language is analyzed at the level of interaction; that is at the utterance level and above (Herring, 2004, 2011). According to Herring (2004) CMDA often carries over social, contextual, and cultural factors from offline to electronic communication (e.g. instant message breaks are equal to intonation units in speech).

The internet is a very broad space in which many different types of interactions occur, and it is necessary to specify the speech community involved in such interactions in order to get a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied. A speech community is defined as a group of individuals that share a set of norms that observe the evaluation and use of certain linguistic patterns (Díaz-Campos, 2014; Labov, 1972). A speech community is harder to define in a virtual environment since the group of individuals can be from all over the world and they can share an infinite amount of characteristics. A better approach to deal with the community in question is to look at it in terms of genres (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2015; Lange, 2014). Lange (2014) takes Ito's (2009) idea of “participation genres” in order to describe a virtual speech community, which is defined as “the explicit content of focus of an activity as well as the subtle stylistic cues...that help us recognize a specific action as part of a category of practices” (Ito, 2009, p. 14). Lange (2014) studies rants in *Youtube*, in which *Youtube* is considered the participation genre, that is, this community “exhibits structural, technical, and cultural parameters and norms” (p. 55) in which many subgenres can emerge. The subgenre in Lange's study is rants. The present study is situated within the *Facebook* genre, which in turn addresses the subgenre of e-service encounters in a *Facebook* group. It is worth noticing that individuals of this group

are not from all over the world. They are from the same geographical area but their commerce is being mediated by a computer.

Perhaps two of the most popular e-service encounter sites, at least in the United States, are *eBay* and *Craigslist*. These sites are well known for the transaction of goods and services in an online environment. Moreover, and especially in the case of *Craigslist*, what characterizes these sites is that the individuals of the physical and virtual community are in charge of the site. That is, they are in charge of the content being posted and in charge of completing the transactions. White (2012) draws a parallel between the two sites and states that they encourage a consideration “of the meaning of ‘community’ and ‘local’ in Internet settings, the functions of community moderation, the relationship between the sites’ values and members’ identities and desires...and the responsibilities of individuals who are conceptualized as a community” (p. 203).

Another important feature of sites like these is the prevalence of visual imagery that serves the purpose of portraying “unique items” and once-in-a-lifetime events (White, 2012). Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2015, p. 26) notes that ‘information has replaced personal interaction,’ that is, consumers in virtual environments rely on the product’s images and descriptions, and customer-provider interactions are secondary or nonexistent. However, her data comes primarily from self-service sites such as *Amazon* and *eBay* where transactions can be completed without any human interaction, whereas sites such as *Craigslist* and *Tianguis Friki* require human interaction in order to be completed. Thus, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich’s findings about e-service encounters cannot be fully generalized to the present study’s context.

McCole (2002) studied the role of trust in e-service encounters of intangible goods (i.e. travel itineraries) through a focus group research. He analyzed customer’s trust based on Butler’s (1991) ten dimensions of trust: availability, competence, consistency, discreteness, fairness, integrity, loyalty, openness, promise of fulfillment, and receptivity. He states that e-service encounters involve a multidimensional trust construct, which in turn causes the specific person to purchase the intangible good from the internet. Finally, he advises that the main components of a goods provider are open and convenient access, real-time specialist information, transparency of processes, fair pricing, choice, and control of information. If such components are missing, customers may go elsewhere to make their purchases. Gefen (2000) studied the role of familiarity and trust in book transactions in the retail website *Amazon* and also found that familiarity with the website and with its procedures increment the chances of complete transactions.

More recently, Placencia (2015) studied the use of forms of address in e-service encounters in Ecuadorian Spanish of e-service encounters in *Mercado Libre* a commerce platform that she describes as a “question-answer structure that allows prospective shoppers to ask for additional information, make an offer, and/or arrange face-to-face contact before proceeding with the purchase” (p. 44). Her data came from 230 interactions between 22 sellers. She found that the use of *usted* (‘you’ formal) is used with more frequency than *tú* (‘you’ informal); however, there is an increase in the use of the informal form and she attributes this

to the uncertainty “about what pronominal address is appropriate” (p. 59). This uncertainty is also observed in the use of null address forms that results from an avoidance strategy or from the need for brevity. She says that there is a tendency in the data to move away from formality to informality, which is seen in the increased use of *tú*, the use of friendship terms such as *amigo* ‘friend,’ and greetings such as *hola* ‘hi’ with the formal *usted*. She concludes that in virtual environments “the ethnic or socioeconomic background of the participants, or their age or gender, seem to become irrelevant. The result is a less personalized service encounter...” (p. 60).

Overall, e-service encounters are an understudied genre that deserves more attention. The present study focuses in business-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer transactions (Nemat, 2011) in the virtual *Facebook* community *Tianguis Friki* in which vendors and consumers buy and sell goods. It is assumed that sellers and buyers are familiar with the procedure and that they trust that the e-service encounters will be realized completely without major issues. Based on previous research and using two of Schneider and Barron’s (2008) levels of analysis actional (speech act) and interactional (sequence), the rest of the study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How are e-service encounters structured at the actional level?
- (2) How are e-service encounters structured at the interactional level?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 *Tianguis Friki* context

The data for the present study were extracted from the virtual *Facebook* group named *Tianguis Friki* whose members come primarily from a Northwestern U.S.-Mexico border city of Agua Prieta, Sonora. Members of the community join the group in order to sell and/or exchange goods, advertise their local businesses, among other less frequent uses such as discrediting other people, asking for prayers for sick people, and complaining about social injustices. The group is open to anyone, that is, anybody who can send in a request to join will be accepted. Once you have been accepted to the group, you can freely post and respond to posts. TF was created approximately in the summer of 2012, it has 70,519 members, and the researcher has been a member for about three years. Of importance is the fact that only people who live in the city or in the neighboring areas sell goods because people either deliver what they sell or pick-up what they buy. It is an environment similar to *Craigslist* but more interactive because many different people can respond to the same post and everybody can see everybody’s responses. The services and goods that are sold include but are not limited to clothes, cars, groceries, pets, electronics, hair extensions, and beauty products. Generally, every post is accompanied by a picture of the item being sold (Figure 1). When this is not the case, a picture is demanded by people who are interested.



**Figure 1.** Example of transaction in TF

### 3.2 Procedures for data collection

In order to collect the data for the present study, a quasi-ethnographic approach combined with a discourse analytic approach was taken. The researcher is a member of the physical and virtual community, but in order to get more acquainted with the dynamics of the group and before data collection, she spent about fifteen minutes a day in the group's site for about two months. During this time, she viewed posts and took preliminary notes in order to get familiarized with the dynamics of the group.

The group has a list of members that is available to the public. The interactions that were chosen for analysis came from the first 100 members of the group that had a completed transaction, that is, they showed signs of a purchase. Generally, service encounters are analyzed regardless of their completion and the present study seeks to see how a successful transaction is realized. Completed transactions could be either posted by the person or they appeared in the person's wall because they had commented and/or bought something from someone else. These posts were posted on different dates at different times. If a member did not have a completed transaction, then a different member was chosen. Four types of transactions were present in the data: completed transactions that were evident in the group's wall, transactions that were said to be completed via inbox (i.e. a private message), transactions where either a pick up or a delivery was implied, and transactions where it was not clear if it was completed or not (see Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5 for an example of all four transactions). Overall, for most transactions it was not clear if the transaction had been completed or not because there were no

indicators of completion such as explicit ‘sold’ statements or delivery arrangements. Only transactions where it was evident that the transaction was completed (Figures 2, 4, and 5) either in the group’s wall or via inbox were selected for further coding.



Figure 2. Completed transaction



Figure 3. No clear completion





**Figure 4.** Inbox completion



**Figure 5.** Pick up implied because it asked for the seller's address

A screenshot of all transactions was taken and then stored for analysis. In order to ensure participant privacy, all names and identifying information were blurred out. Similarly to Placencia (2015), the data for this study comes from an internet site that is available to the public and it conforms to the ethical recommendations of the *Association of Internet Researchers*. No personal information was exposed and the present study does not do any harm to the individuals.

#### 4. Data analysis

For the discourse analytic portion, the data were analyzed using two of Schneider and Barron's (2008) levels of pragmatic analysis: actional (speech act realization) and interactional (sequential organization). The actional level was divided into two categories: vendor offers and customer requests, and it sought to identify the different ways in which these two speech acts were realized. Vendor offers and customer requests were analyzed according to the type of offer/request in question, Tables 1 and 2 summarize the strategies used to analyze the data.

**Table 1.** Customer request strategies

<b>Request strategy type</b>	<b>Example</b>
Elliptical	<i>Alguna blusa talla L o XL BBB y unos huaraches #5 mex x fa</i> (‘some blouse size L or XL BBB –in good condition, pretty, cheap- and some sandals #5 Mexican please’)
Direct question	<i>¿Quién tiene, me urge?</i> (‘Who has (milk), it is urgent?’)

**Table 2.** Vendor offer strategies found in the data

<b>Vendor offers</b>	<b>Example</b>
Imperative	<i>iphone 4s ofrescan</i> (‘iphone 4s, make an offer’)
Elliptical	<i>leggings UNITALLA seminuevos! \$\$</i> (‘leggings UNISIZE semi-new! \$\$’)
Explicit offer	<i>Se vende xbox con un control bien Cuidado info inbox o al XXX-XXX-XXXX en \$600</i> (‘For sale xbox with a control very well taken care of info inbox or at XXX-XXX-XXXX in \$600’)

The interaction domain analyzed the speech act sequences and the discourse moves. Moreover, the use of internal modification strategies was analyzed and it included the use of emoticons, and the use of relational talk operationalized as tagging someone else and/or the use of memes or other visual aids. Gender was coded as a tertiary variable, either female or male when the sex of the participant was evident in the name or it was categorized as business if the gender was unknown. Since it is a virtual environment, sex was determined by the looking at the user’s name and/or picture, if it could not be determined it was labeled as a business buying/selling something. Furthermore, data was coded for the type of goods being sold: groceries, clothing, beauty products and accessories, cars, electronics, and miscellaneous (e.g. piñatas and electro domestics).

## 5. Results

The results of the present study come from a total of 100 successful interactions, out of which only three were initiated by a customer and 97 were initiated by a vendor. Overall, an overwhelming majority of the data comes from vendor offers due to the fact that very few customer-requests were completed encounters. Table 3 summarizes the distribution of the data according to type of interaction at the actional level and sex. It can be noted that females initiated 61.8% of the interactions, 26.8% were initiated by men, and 11.4% were initiated by a business. Since the data between females, males, and businesses is not balanced no further generalizations will be made with regards to sex.

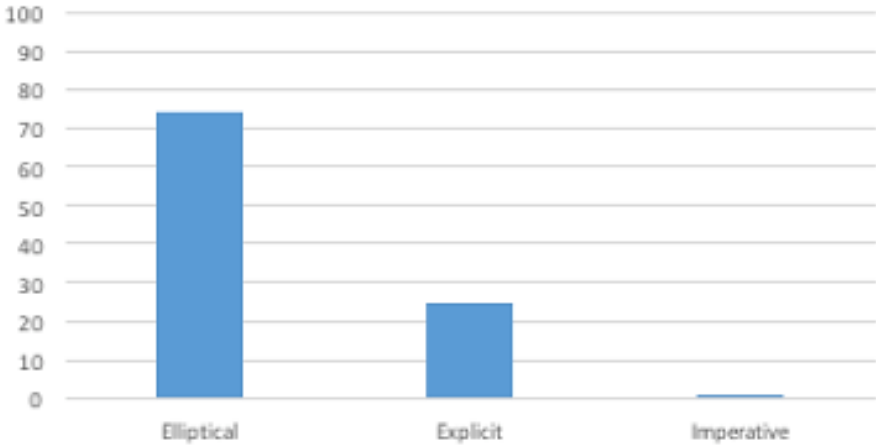
**Table 3.** Distribution of the data by gender and type of interaction

Type of interaction	Gender	Total number	%
Customer requests	female	3	66.7
<i>Total</i>		3	100
Vendor offers	female	60	61.8
	male	26	26.8
	business	11	11.4
<i>Total</i>		97	100

### 5.1 Actional level

This section outlines the results that answer the first research question: how are e-service encounters structured at the actional level? As Table 3 demonstrates, there are only three encounters that were initiated by the customer. This is not entirely surprising because the nature of TF recreates a FTF environment in which vendors are selling products and customers interact with them only if they see something that interests them. Out of the three customer requests, one was made using an elliptical strategy and the other two were made through a direct question, and all three were made via mention of the product needed and some other sort of additional information. For example, in *Alguna blusa talla L o XL BBB...* the customer states that she needs a blouse and a pair of sandals with the three B's, standing for *buena*, *bonita* and *barata* ('good, pretty, and cheap').

The vendor offers constitute the majority of the data (97/100), out of which the products being sold included five food products, seven cars/car products such as car stereos or car batteries, 17 electronic products such as televisions and videogames, 27 shoes/clothing products, and 41 miscellaneous products ranging from beds, water filters, guitars, nebulizers, among many others. Figure 6 shows the frequency of the three strategies used for vendor offers, of which 74.2% (72/97) were realized via elliptical expressions, 1.1% (1/97) through an imperative command, and 24.7% (24/97) used the explicit verb *vender* (to sell) in any of its conjugations (Table 2 above contains an example of each strategy).



**Figure 6.** Distribution of vendor offers in *Tianguis Friki* (N=97 interactions)

Elliptical offers were by far the most common transactions (74.2% [72/97]) where the product in question was introduced via a photograph and it could be accompanied by the name of the product, the price, and some type of additional information. Figure 7 shows an example of an elliptical offer in which a nebulizer is being sold where the seller uploads a picture of the item, states that it is a nebulizer, the price, and finishes with the expression *en buenas condiciones!!* (‘in good condition!!’). It is worth mentioning that not all elliptical offers had all characteristics: some just contained a picture, some contained a picture and a mention of the product, some contained a picture, a mention of the product and the price, and some contained a mention, a picture, the price and additional information.



**Figure 7.** Elliptical transaction

Explicit offers were the second most used strategy for vendors (24.7% [24/97]), where they used any form of the verb *vender* (to sell). Figure 8 shows an example

of a television antenna where the vendor explicitly states *en venta* (for sale) and then mentions the product, plus an invitation to make an offer. All explicit offers were grouped under the same category regardless of any additional information such as price, mention of the product, and/or a command. This was done because the explicit offer trumped any other strategy that was used since in every case where it was present it was the first thing that appeared in the post. Furthermore, Figure 9 shows an example of an imperative offer where the vendor is ordering the customers to offer a price: “*ofrezcan.*”



**Figure 8.** Explicit vendor offer



**Figure 9.** Imperative offer

Finally, it is worth mentioning that only 12/97 (12%) of the vendor offers had an internal modification which was made through an emoticon (8/12; 67%), a hashtag (3/12, 25%), and one *x fa* ('please,' 8%); and 10 of the 12 modifications were made by women (83%), whereas the other two were made by a business (17%). More data with internal modification is needed in order to make any general conclusions about internal modification in e-service environments.

## 5.2 Interactional level

This section presents the results for the second research question: how are e-service encounters structured at the interactional level? Since only a very small number of customer-initiated interactions were found in the data, this section only analyzes the interactional level of vendor offers. Each interaction was completed in an average of 20 turns with an average of 8 participants. Table 4 shows the sequential distribution and discourse moves of the opening, negotiation and closing sequences.

**Table 4.** Sequence and discourse moves found in vendor transactions

<b>Sequence</b>	<b>Discourse moves</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Opening: product information</b>	Product	<i>16 vestidos</i> ('16 dresses')	7/97
	Product + price	<i>Winnis y bolonia en 20 pesos cada una</i> ('Winnies and bologna 20 pesos each')	12/97
	Product + additional information	<i>\$\$\$\$ talla grande...gruesa con peluche por dentro muy calentita</i> ('\$\$\$\$ size large...thick with plush inside very warm')	24/97
	Product + additional information + price	<i>Nebulizador \$250 en perfectas condiciones!!</i> ('Nebulizer \$250 in perfect condition!!')	23/97
	Product + make an offer +	<i>iphone 4s ofrescan</i> ('iphone 4s make an offer')	8/97
	Price only	150 pesos	4/97
	Picture only		4/97
	For sale (in any of its forms)	<i>Se vende</i> ('for sale')	15/97
<b>Opening: response</b>	More information about the product/availability inquiry	<i>Cuántas colchas king tiene?</i> ('how many king size quilts do you have?')	32/97
	Request for price	<i>En cuanto</i> ('how much')	40/97

Direct offer/counter offer	<i>400 pesos</i>	10/97
Inbox inquiry/request for phone number or address	<i>Te mande inbox ('I sent you an inbox')</i>	
Direct delivery/pick up information inquiry	<i>Lo trae a domicilio ('do you deliver')</i>	13/97
Exchange inquiry	<i>Te lo cambio x un ps3 pero no tengo juegos ni control ('I'll exchange it for a PS3 but I don't have games or a control')</i>	2/97

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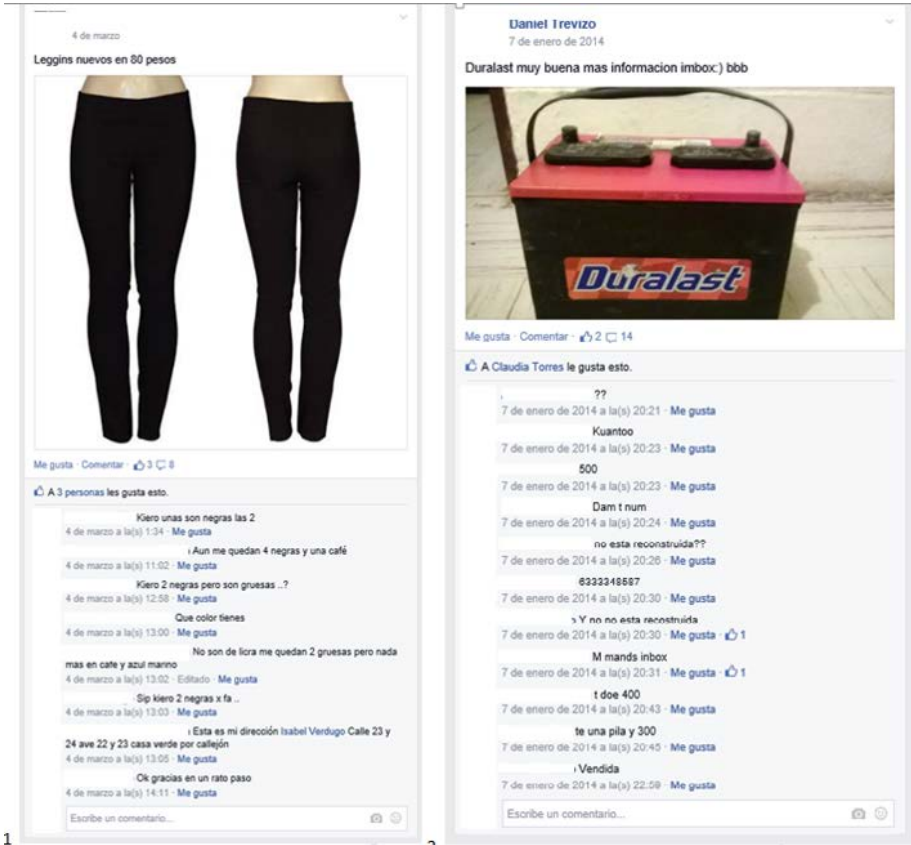
<b>Negotiation</b>	Logistic inquiries (i.e. address, phone number)*	<i>Direccion ('address')</i>	53/97
	Bargaining	<i>Aceptas \$400? Y la puedo ver en Ley o Coppel ('Would you take \$400? And I can see you at Ley or Coppel?')</i>	29/97
	Offer reformulation	<i>Chicas aun está disponible si les interesa manden un inbox para pasarles la direccion ('Girls it is still available in case you are interested send an inbox to give you the address')</i>	31/97
	Relational talk	This coded for tags	45/97

<b>Closing</b>	Explicit sale consolidation	<i>Vendida</i> ('Sold')	69/97
	Inbox (i.e. private message)	<i>Inbox</i>	4/97
	Pick-up/delivery agreement	<i>Ok gracias en un rato paso</i> ('OK thanks I'll be there in a short while')	11/97
	Personal information	<i>Uno x fa rosa calle XXXX troque rojo afuera</i> ('One please pink address XXXX red truck outside')	3/97
	Post-sequence (i.e. thanking)	<i>Gracias</i> ('Thanks')	10/97

*Note.* Some information might seem similar but it occurred in a different part of the sequence (e.g. opening vs. opening response).

As it can be observed in Table 4, there were eight types of opening moves, out of which 51.4% (50/97) were offers without any additional information, that is, they only included the necessary information (the product and/or the price), and 48.5% (47/97) presented some kind of additional information about the product. Number one and two in Figure 10 exemplify the type of additional information that was found in the data. The offer in Figure 4 number 1 above adds *nuevos* ('new') to the product information. This modification is sometimes necessary due to the fact that new and used items are sold in TF, therefore, adding the fact that they are new and relatively cheap (80 pesos or 4.64 dollars at the current exchange rate) makes them more attractive to possible customers. This strategy seems to have worked because the immediate response is a direct buy *kiero unas son negras las 2* ('I want a pair are both of them black?'). The car battery shown in Figure 10 number 2 states the fact that it is in very good conditions and that it has the three b's (*buena, bonita y barata* 'in good condition, pretty, and cheap'). This was a common strategy found for used items, in which the use of additional information mitigates with the fact that it is not new.





**Figure 10.** Opening acts with internal modification made through the use of additional information about the product.

Another notable element of the opening sequence is the lack of price specification in 59.8% (58/97) of the data, as it can be observed in example number two of Figure 10 above. Members use this strategy in order to get more customers' comments and more customers interested. This is noted in the fact that the average of turns of transactions with the price stated in the opening sequence is 18 and the number of participants is 6, whereas in transactions where the price is not stated, the average number of turns is 20 and the average number of participants is 9. Even though it is only a difference of a couple of numbers, it is important to note that every time someone comments in a post, such post moves to the top of the group's wall, which in turn means that the post has more probabilities of being seen by someone else, thus increasing the chances of the product being sold.

The opening response consisted of six discourse moves, out of which 41% (40/97) were a request for price specification. This is in line with the opening act, in which the majority of the moves did not include the price in them. Also, the next most frequently used move was a request for more information about the product with 33% (32/97) of the total response moves. This is also in line with the strategy used in the opening act in which 51.4% of them did not provide

additional information. The other less frequently used moves were direct offers (10/97), inbox inquiries (13/97), and exchange inquiries (2/97).

The negotiation moves found in the data include logistical inquires in which customers requested information about pick-up/delivery options and/or phone numbers (86% [83/97]), bargaining (30% [29/97]), offer reformulations (33% [32/97]) and relational talk (46% [45/97]). There were two types of bargaining moves: a direct counter offer or a direct question *cuánto es lo menos?/es lo menos?* ('what is the least that you would take for it?'/ 'is that the least that you would take for it?'). Out of the 29 bargaining moves 22 were of the former, while three were of the latter, and four transactions contained both types of bargaining. Offer reformulations were present when the item being sold was not sold immediately and the seller wanted to let the public know that it was still available. Relational talk was present in the form of tagged people (see 1 in Figure 10) in which other members of the community tagged someone they knew that needed the product being sold. However, this tagging never resulted in the tagged person commenting on the post. Finally, there were five closing moves (see Table 4), out of which the majority (71% [69/97]) consisted of an explicit affirmation of the unavailability of the item through the use of the verb *vendido/a* ('sold'), as it is exemplified in example number 2 in Figure 10. Eleven percent ended in an agreement of pick-up or delivery and only 10% included a post-sequence (i.e. thanking).

## 6. Discussion

Many studies have investigated FTF service encounters; however, there is a limited amount of research about e-service encounters. This section discusses the results in light of previous research in FTF service encounters and e-service encounters. The present study sought to identify the structural and sequential organization of e-service encounters in *Tianguis Friki*, a virtual *Facebook* group whose members live in a Northern Mexican border community. Results are discussed with regards to each research question.

The first research question sought to analyze the structure of e-service encounters at the actional level. Vendor offers and customer requests were examined and an overwhelming majority (97/100) of the interactions were vendor offers, which is in line with Solon's (2013) analysis of intercultural interactions from two street vendors and their international clientele in Yucatán, México. She found that the vast majority of the transactions (30/40) were initiated by the vendors. In this study, there were many customer requests; however, only three of them resulted in a completed transaction. It is important to note that the context in the present study and in Solon's study is different: intracultural and intercultural, respectively. However, regardless of the context, both contexts show similar patterns, which suggests that there are some patterns that can be generalized to human interaction. This is also in consonance with Herring (2004), where some characteristics of offline communication transfer to electronic communication

There were only three strategies used in the data: elliptical expressions, imperative commands, and explicit offers made using the verb *vender* ('to sell') in

any of its forms. The majority of the vendor offers were made via an elliptical strategy, followed by explicit offers, and only one imperative command. This reduced amount of strategies reflects a knowledge of the necessary tactics used in virtual environments in order to have successful transactions. One participant in Placencia (2015) said that he reads what others write and copies their style of interaction. This could mean that people are not interested in being creative in their language use; they are more concerned with getting the task done. They see what has worked for others and imitate it. In other words, it seems that certain familiarity with the group's dynamics is required for a successful transaction and vendors seem to be aware of this as demonstrated by the lack of innovative language use. The role of trust (McCole, 2002) could also explain the dearth of vendor strategies. People tend to trust what they know, what they are familiar with, and any change in the expected vendor behavior can potentially prevent a sale from being completed.

The second research question addressed the sequential organization at the interactional level. The interactional level analysis revealed a four-level sequence that included 1) the vendor offer, 2) the offer response, 3) some type of negotiation, and 4) a closing, which were in turn realized through the use of different discourse moves. It was observed that the majority of vendor offers consisted of additional information in order to make the product more attractive and sellable. This also shows that the interactions in this setting are direct and to the point with almost all of them showing the same patterns, which again contributes to the argument that individuals copy others' behavior and are not interested in being creative with the language. That is, they just want a successful transaction and they want to convey it to their potential customers. This can also contribute to Garcés-Conejos Blitvich's (2015) idea that personal interaction in e-service encounters is absent, but to a lesser degree. Personal interaction is present in this study, but the results indicate that participants are not interested in establishing any kind of personal relationship. They just want to sell their products.

Another notable strategy that was used in the vendor offers was a lack of price specification, which in turn resulted in a high number of price requests in the response sequence. The more posts an item gets, the more it gets bumped to the top of the group's wall, which results in higher chances of people seeing it and buying it. This specific strategy shows that vendors are aware (consciously or unconsciously) of the necessary moves to have a successful transaction. The negotiation moves included requests for logistic information that took place either before or after an agreement of the sale was achieved. If it was made before the agreement, it was in order to establish if the interested customer was going to be able to either pick it up or if the vendor was going to be able to deliver it. The concern for delivery method before reaching an agreement shows that the customers do not want to waste their time with transactions that cannot be completed, even if they could potentially reach a good deal, which is an indicator of the need for an efficient transaction. Other noteworthy negotiation moves were the two types of bargaining moves: counter offers in the form of a question and direct counteroffers that just stated the new price. The majority were direct

counteroffers, which again is an indicator of a need for task efficacy. Finally, the most commonly used closing move was a statement declaring that the item had been sold. This closing move serves as an indicator that the item has been sold and alerts other potential customers to not respond to the post anymore. This could be due to the fact that posts are rarely deleted.

The few actional strategies and the data from the sequential organization (no greetings, no relational talk, and direct closing statements) reveal that e-service encounters in TF are very task oriented in which participants are focused in completing the transaction. This is in line with other studies in FTF interactions that have found that generally people tend to be task oriented (Placencia, 2005, 2008). This is another behavior that could be generalized for service encounters regardless of the context. On the other hand, this focus on task can also be observed in the lack of greetings, internal modification, and relational talk, which are nearly absent in all transactions. This contrasts with what has been found in previous FTF studies such as in Antonopoulou (2001) and Félix-Brasdefer (2015) where relational talk is present in the encounters and it serves as a politeness strategy. The lack of FTF interaction combined with the unknown identity of the participants could be the main reason why no relational talk is present. This is in consonance with Placencia (2015) where she found that sellers have to answer to multiple posts, which limits them to provide only the necessary information “thus not paying much attention to the interpersonal relation...” (p. 59).

## **7. Conclusion**

The present study sought to analyze the actional and interactional levels of analysis of e-service encounters in order to contribute to the growing field of CMDA and to the study of service encounters in general. The present study contributes to our understanding of this relatively new setting by delineating the specific strategies that online vendors and customers use in order to have a successful transaction. Previous studies had studied (e)service encounters regardless of the completion of the encounter, and the present study contributes a more in depth analysis of completed encounters. The majority of the data consisted of vendor offers and it was found that, contrary to FTF encounters, e-service encounters show fewer actional strategies. The sequential organization is very task-oriented where the main goal is to complete the transaction. Finally, no gender differences were observed, and this was attributed to the virtual environment, which creates a “genderless” transaction, at least for the actional level.

With more data and in order to get to more robust conclusions, future research should look deeper into how gender plays a role in virtual environments and how it conditions interactions in such settings. Also, future studies could look into the other three levels of analysis (formal, topic, and organizational) in order to get a more detailed perspective on how e-service encounters are conditioned. Other studies could also look at dialectal variation to see how the results from the present study compare to other regions of the Spanish-speaking world.

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