“But whose side are you on?” Doing Being Independent in Telephone-Mediated Dispute Resolution

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Abstract

Affiliation is a relevant response to ordinary troubles talk but in the institutional phone interactions examined in this chapter it is a restricted activity. The service providers are required to be impartial producing, in part, the organisation’s purpose of providing independent dispute resolution. This research asks about the practices conciliators use to maintain a neutral stance towards callers’ problems. The empirical work presented follows the trajectory of two calls. In each one the caller presents their concepts multiple times with subsequent versions having upgraded elements of previous ones, showing their orientation to the relevance of responses displaying affiliation. Observable responsive practices that avoid stance alignment include *okay* and *so* prefaced turns that receipt and propose closure on the prior sequence and launch an institutionally relevant activity. It was also found that the required description of service as independent, was occasioned by callers’ pursuit of affiliation. In both calls affiliation did occur at the end of the call, after the institutional business was completed, which supports the idea that alignment between a service user and a service provider is basic for successful progression to call closure. This chapter contributes to an understanding of how, in institutional talk, restricted activities can influence and shape the trajectory of interactions.

“But whose side are you on?” Doing Being Independent in Telephone-Mediated Dispute Resolution

CAL: .hh hh: but whose side are you on? are you

[on (with me)]

CON: [we’re inde]pendent. so we don’t act on your behalf

or on the providers behalf .hh:: hh

**Introduction**

The above extract is a rare example from a corpus of complaint calls to a dispute resolution service for complaints about energy and water where a caller (CAL) explicitly asks about partiality. More typically impartiality is a mundane accomplishment that produces, in part, the institution as an independent organisation – acting on behalf of neither the caller nor the energy or water companies. The present chapter examines how not-taking-sides is managed as a conciliator’s (CON) concern, as they go about the institutional business of listening, assisting and resolving complaints.

A focus of this study is on affiliation as a restricted activity. Affiliation or aligning with a caller’s stance compromises claims of being independent, which would undermine the integrity of the dispute resolution service studied. Institutional quality assurance surveillance policies and processes evidence the importance of conciliators keeping a neutral stance. However, ordinarily recipient displays of affiliation or stance alignment are recurrent elements in troubles telling (Jefferson, 1988), which is commonly the way callers formulate their reasons for contacting the service. Thus, doing being independent is a practical ‘problem’ for the conciliators – a restricted activity as a service provider but a normative response from a troubles recipient.

This research asks about the methods conciliators use to maintain a neutral stance in response to callers’ talk about their troubles. The analysis shows that callers’ descriptions of their troubles are regularly receipted but not assessed by conciliators. Furthermore, conciliator responses launch or further progress activities relevant to the institutional project of resolving disputes. Such responses have little or no implications of affiliation. In cases where a caller is highly upset, the emotional state can be acknowledged by the conciliator. The analysis also suggests that displays of stance (non)alignment are sequentially ordered with respect to the overall structure of the interaction. Affiliation can occur at call closing after the institutionally relevant business has been completed. A contribution this work makes is to show the management of affiliation as a restricted activity shapes the composition of locally responsive turns and to the sequential organisation of the interaction as a whole.

This chapter will begin by considering conversation analytic work on the sequential organisation of troubles talk which includes an important finding relevant to the present study – inadequate affiliation with a troubles telling is consequential for how an interaction unfolds (Couper-Kuhlen, 2009). Research on independence or neutrality in institutional talk will then be considered. Details about the nature of the institution studied will be provided before presenting the analysis, which focuses on two calls, which contain multiple instances of conciliators doing being independent. In both cases affiliation occurs at call closing. A final discussion considers how the this study of affiliation as a restricted activity furthers our understanding of how institutional concerns are addressed in practice and the way they can influence and shape the trajectory of talk.

**Affiliation, troubles talk and complaints**

People talk about their troubles in both mundane and institutional settings. In the later, troubles talk is central to various telephone help-line services. In the corpus this study used, callers’ problem presentations regularly disclosed personal troubles (Dewar, 2011). For some institutions, affiliation with personal troubles can be part of the service provided, for example in a children’s helpline where listening and support are central (Emmison & Danby, 2007). In others, such as those offering mediation (e.g., for problem neighbours; Edwards & Stokoe, 2007) or dispute resolution (as in the present study) affiliation is instead a restricted activity. This research asks how affiliation is oriented to and managed as restricted.

Troubles talk in ordinary conversation has a sequential organisation. Jefferson (1988) described its orderliness as “a series of recurrent, positioned elements…which could be grouped into a rough segmental order” (p. 418). Affiliation was one of the elements that Jefferson identified as being a required property of troubles talk that shaped its trajectory. She found elucidations of troubles were routinely followed by affiliation responses, which evidenced her claim they were basic to the sequences progression to closure. Additional evidence that affiliation is a routine requirement to troubles-telling is a deviant case, where an affiliation response would be pursued in its absence. Couper-Kulen (2009) explicated just such a case where a consequence of inadequate affiliation was a recycling and expanding of descriptions of the trouble.

A further aspect of the sequential order of troubles talk identified by Jefferson (1988) was an alignment of the parties with respect to each other. Jefferson and Lee (1981) showed the orderly progression of a troubles-telling sequence also rested on the parties being properly aligned with respect to relevant membership categories and activities. For example, a displayed orientation to the category of troubles-recipient is aligned with that of troubles-teller but that of advice-giver is not. Reporting an illness is a trouble-telling that could be part of a complaint (e.g. about feeling uncomfortable) or an explanation (e.g. for an absence at work). In institutional talk particular kinds of membership categories (other than troubles-teller and troubles recipient) may operate. Callers to a service may not understand the relevant categories and activities, as the opening extract in this chapter clearly illustrates.

With respect to the dispute resolution service examined in the present study, complaining is a relevant activity. In a study of complaints, Edwards (2005) noted they elude formal definition because complaints are largely vernacular and normative categories of action. In the present study, complaints are caller troubles that fall within the institutionally defined remit of legitimacy (e.g., power disconnection is a legitimate complaint , high power prices are not). Conciliators can properly advise on troubles and progress complaint resolution as it is institutionally defined. Affiliation is not an activity, in the first instance at least, that is a properly associated with the conciliator’s institutional role.

**Independence and institutional talk-in-interaction**

Having an independent or neutral stance is a normative requirement in common forms of institutional talk-in-interaction. For example, displaying neutrality lies at the heart of journalistic interviewing (Clayman, 1988). News interviewers regularly shift footing – the viewpoint being taken – to adopt a neutral stance towards an issue (Clayman, 1992). Maintaining neutrality is also central to various forms of dispute mediation, including the one that is being studied in this chapter, where the institutional role is to impartially assist disputants to reach mutually acceptable agreements. A distinctive contribution of conversation analytic studies to questions of institutional independence is the identification of observable practices that are resources for displaying parties concern with neutrality.

In a conversation analytic study of community-based dispute resolution, Garcia (1995) found mediators regularly represented disputants’ views by paraphrasing, extending and replacing elements of their formulations. She suggested mediators’ modified representations were constructive for neutral dispute resolution in so far as they moderated emotive description. Atkinson (1992) reported on a study of arbitrator’s practices for displaying neutrality in a small claims court, where disputing parties represented themselves. Question sequences launched by the arbitrator were identified as a central practice for establishing the facts of each case. Atkinson noted the arbitrator avoided affiliation with question recipients by acknowledging receipt of an answer but not assessing it. Simple receipt of information effectively avoided a range of possible responses which are commonplace in everyday conversation and have generally affiliative implications (e.g., second assessments).

The present study is also concerned with neutrality. More specifically it considers how affiliation is observably oriented to as a restricted activity, the practices for managing that and its impact on how the interaction unfolds. The analytic work largely focuses on the trajectory of two interactions drawn from a larger corpus of calls to Australasian independent dispute resolution services for complaints about energy and water providers. Extracts from two further calls are used in the analysis of the conciliators’ delivery of the explanation of the service provided.

**The institutional context of the present study**

This chapter is part of an ongoing project examining calls made by members of the public to one of two institutions (one New Zealand-based, the other Australian) that offer dispute resolution services to consumers for complaints about their utility providers (electricity, gas and/or water). At present the corpus includes 42 calls to the New Zealand service, where ethical permission was needed to record the calls for research purposes and 120 calls to the Australian service where calls are routinely recorded and only institutional permission was needed for inclusion in this study. All names are pseudonyms and identifying information changed in the transcripts.

The organisations whose calls were recorded are non-governmental, not-for-profit bodies. Their services are free to consumers. They are funded by utility companies who are required by law to provide independent as well as in-house means for dealing with customer complaints. The dispute resolution services are promoted as ‘independent’ because they are neither consumer advocacy nor for the direct benefit of the utility companies. The institutions recognise that many callers do not fully understand they are not consumer advocates. As a result call-takers, titled conciliators (and represented as CON in transcripts) are required to provide an explanation of the service to each caller, which includes a definition of it as being independent (examples of this are shown in the analysis). Quality assurance officers in the Australian service check sample recordings to ensure conciliators are giving the explanation of service and processes in each call and also not ‘siding’ with the caller, which is an impressionist rather than analytically based judgement.

The institutions aim to differentiate themselves from the utility providers’ call-centres, which are criticised by consumers as being impersonal and rather unhelpful. Some ways in which the dispute resolution services practice a more personal approach is that conciliators provide their first name in call openings and the same conciliator will typically follow a case through the dispute resolution process. However, a flipside of the personal approach is it provides the potential for utility companies to complain that the independent service tends towards consumer advocacy. Thus, conciliators have a delicate balance to maintain – to be friendly and helpful showing understanding and appreciation of the complaint without endorsing the caller’s stance on it. This research asks about the practices that manage stance alignment as a restricted activity.

An institution’s interactional project is accomplished when participating parties orient to its relevance as a progression through a series of activities (Robinson, 2003). Activities constituting dispute resolution were problem presentation – typically delivered as a troubles-telling, taking details for the record, diagnostic questioning about the problem, establishing and acceptable resolution, explanation of service and process and determining a plan of action. The plan of action recurrently involved the caller contacting their provider because that was a first necessary in the institution’s dispute resolution process. If the caller could not get satisfaction from the company directly then a formal complaint is lodged. If the problem is still not resolved then the complaint is further investigated by the service and ultimately a commissioner can make a decision about a fair resolution that is binding to companies.

**Independent dispute resolution in practice**

The empirical work of this chapter follows the trajectory of two calls from the initial formulation of the problem through to call closing. The first call, from the Australian service is titled MS sufferer and is about 10 minutes long. The caller is ringing about the poor service he received from his utility provider when he called them for assistance with his overdue payments. The caller discloses early in the call that he has multiple sclerosis. The second call, from New Zealand, is much longer – 30 minutes – and is titled Harassed. The irate caller is claiming harassment from the utility company. He is also complaining about their attempted unauthorised removal of a medical dependency tag from his electricity meter and unreasonable back pay demands.

The calls were selected because they are similar in so far as they both require assistance establishing an acceptable payment plan and they both complain of the company call-centre’s treatment of them. Both callers present their concerns multiple times with subsequent tellings having recycled and upgraded elements – a pattern that Couper-Kuhlen (2009) found was a consequence of inadequate affiliation by a troubles-recipient. A recurrent practice in both cases is the conciliators use of *okay* and *so* prefaced utterances in response to troubles telling. The *okay* is sequence closing, registers acceptance of stance and avoids the kinds of responses which have more stance aligning implications (Beach, 1993; Schegloff, 2007). The *so* is used to launch the progression of institutionally relevant activities and is other attentive (Bolden, 2006) in so far as they move the caller’s problem through formal dispute resolution processes. In the longer call the conciliator also uses B-event type statements (description of a matter in another’s experience; see Labov & Fanshel, 1977) about the caller’s emotional state – a practice that functions to recognise the caller’s affective stance without actually endorsing its legitimacy it. Finally, in both cases affiliation occurs at call-closing.

**Responding to the initial formulation of trouble**

This first analytic section presents two extracts from early on in each of the two target calls. They show the conciliator’s first full response to the caller’s initial presentation of why they contacted the service. In each case, the callers clearly display an emotional stance towards their problems, which makes a display of affiliation relevant from an aligned troubles recipient (Jefferson, 1988; Jefferson & Lee, 1981). However, in both cases, the conciliators respond by registering and accepting the trouble in a way that proposes sequence closure and by launching into a next institutionally relevant activity. The responses display the relevant membership categorisation for the conciliator – that of “service supplier” (Jefferson & Lee, 1981, p. 410) whose institutional responsibilities, in the first instance at least, preclude affiliation or stance alignment.

Extract 1 is from the call titled MS sufferer. It begins after consent for recording the call has been granted. Arrows in the extract point to the two, full, conciliator’s turns, which are similarly positioned as a third turn to a sequence after its second pair part. The turns also take similar forms - an *okay* followed by a *so.* The *okay* functions to receipt the second pair part and the *so* launches a new institutionally relevant activity. However, the caller’s turns that are being responded to in a similar manner by the conciliator are very different – one provides factual information – a postal code, the other is a troubles telling, housing a complaint about poor service from the energy provider.

Extract 1 MS sufferer – first trouble telling

42 CON: and the postcode

43 CAL: five two zero five

44-> CON: .hhh okay so what are your concerns?

45 CAL: ah my conce:rns are that they um ahh- nothing that

46 they’ve done wrong other than provide a shocking ah

47 service I mean .hh I-have never and I don’t know how

48 genuine this: er complaint would be .hh ah I-I-I was

49 a senior manager in my past life ah (0.2) I suffer from

01 M.S? (0.2) I struggle to: talk for a: l-longer period of

02 time? (0.2) [I ha]ve been on the telephone for (.)

03 CON: [ºahaº]

04 CAL: exactly one hour

05 CON: mhm

06 CAL: and I have gotten absolutely nowhere [u:m ]and .hh the=

07 CON: [okay]

08 CAL: =assistant when I ring not the most user friendly .hh

09 then I ring up hh [ th]ey said no wrong department=

10 CON: [.hh]

11 CAL: =w- we’ll put you through (0.4) I better explain the

12 whole story (.) they put me through (0.2) .hh nope

13 wrong department I explained the whole story (.) I get

14 some person up in india somewhere (0.2) struggling to

15 understand what I’m saying (0.2) I(h)’m trying to get

16 um some assistance with (.) the payments on my (.)

17 both of the accounts they are both behind we are

18 struggling financially .hh a(h)nd that I (0.2) struggle

19 to(.)get much work and I struggle to generate an income

20 with my illness (0.2) um and then um in the end he just

21 hung up

22 CON: (typing)

23 CAL: a[n-]

24-> CON: [ok]ay .hh so you- are you seeking a payment plan?

25 CAL: ah I am

The conciliator’s first fill turn at line 44 begins with “okay so”. The action this turn accomplishes is a shift in activity from taking the caller’s details – in this case getting the caller’s postal code - to finding out why the caller has rung. *Okay* has multiple discourse functions (Gaines, 2011) that depend largely on its position in talk. After question-answer adjacency pair sequences, *okay* marks or registers acceptance of a response without articulating any particular stance being taken towards it (Schegloff, 2007). A stance can be shown towards something even as mundane as a postal code – for example, noticing of a number pattern – but it is not normatively required. The *okay* at line 44 is simply receipting the information that had been previously requested (at line 42). It is a minimal post-expansion of an adjacency pair sequence designed to propose sequence closing, which Schegloff (2007) notes may be aligned with or not.

In the same first, full turn at line 44, *so* prefaces an invitation to the caller to present their problem. *So,* in a sequence initial position has been identified as a practice that can launch a new, other-attentive course of action (Bolden 2006). The conciliator is being attentive to the caller here because it cedes the conversational floor to them. In some calls, the reason for contact is offered spontaneously, but in extract 1 it is requested after the business of getting consent to record the call and taking caller details have been successfully completed.

The conciliator’s second full turn, prefaced with *okay so* occurs at line 24. The *okay* marks receipt of the problem and the *so* launches a new institutionally relevant activity – a resolution proposal. Here, the turn initial “okay” is produced as a separate unit produced in overlap with what might be, but doesn’t become more trouble telling “a[n-] ”. Producing *okay* as a turn constructional unit in its own right rather than as part of a larger intonation unit launching a new action, as occurred at the beginning of the extract, makes provision for further telling that in line 24 wasn’t taken up.

The caller’s negative stance towards what has happened is clearly displayed in the problem presentation. It is described in emotive terms as “a shocking service” (line 46-47). Negative observations and extreme case formulations also indicate his dissatisfaction. Examples in the above extract include “I have never”(line 47); “gotten absolutely nowhere” (line 6); “not the most user friendly” (line 8); “some person up in India somewhere (0.2) struggling to understand what I’m saying” (line 14-15) and “in the end he just hung up” (line 20-21). The disclosure of his health problem “I suffer from MS?” (lines 49-1) and reporting trouble with doing ordinary things like talking (line 1) and everyday finances (lines 18-21) add a personal aspect to the trouble telling.

The conciliator’s *okay so* prefaced response to the caller’s trouble simply receipts but does not affiliate with the trouble. The repair from “so you- “ to “are you” in the responsive turn that also offers a remedy proposal is notable in terms of question design. The “so-you” formulation claims the speaker already knows the answer. The repair solution adjusts the epistemic gradient (Heritage & Raymond, 2012) in order for the conciliator to display less epistemic access to the answer. The caller confirms that he is seeking a payment plan and in turns following extract 1, not shown here, is a discussion of the details of it.

As mentioned earlier, in mundane settings a preferred response to a trouble telling is affiliation – or recipient alignment with the teller’s stance (Couper-Kuhlen, 2009; Jefferson, 1988). However, for an independent dispute resolution service, endorsing the caller’s stance is a restricted activity because it could be seen to be compromising neutrality. The above extract shows the conciliator orienting to their membership as an independent service provider - collecting relevant information and progressing institutionally relevant activities. The conciliator’s response to the troubles telling has almost exactly the same form as to the provision of a requested piece of factual information such as a postal code. That is simply registering receipt of what is said, proposing sequence closure and launching an institutionally relevant next action, which in the above extract proposes an institutionally relevant solution to the dispute - establishing a payment plan.

The next extract is taken from the call titled Harassed. This extract also shows the caller completing an initial problem presentation and the conciliator responding in a way that gives no hint of affiliation. An arrow points to the conciliator’s first full responsive turn to the problem presentation. It takes the same form as was identified in Extract 1 – an *okay* followed by a *so.*

Extract 2 Harrassed - first trouble telling

30 CAL: I wanna tell them to go get f:-stuffed .h: nicely

31 and politely they’re gonna accept the sixty dollars

32 h which is m:o:re than enough=that’s more than I use

33 to get rid of the overdue that I have. .h:: in other

34 words (0.3) be reasonable (.) be nice (.) .h: stop

35 harassing me. (0.4) because mail every week (0.2) .h

36 telling me I’ve not been keeping a- (.) to

37 agreement >WHEN I HA:VE< (0.6) is (.) harassment (.)

38 and I’ve had a gutfull.

39 (0.3)

40 CON: okay. .H [c-]

41 CAL: [s ]orry I’m j’st-=

42 CON: =that’s okay

43 (.)

44 CAL: you can hear that I’ve p-=.h::[::] (.) I’m past=

45 CON: [y-]

46 CAL: =it [ a y e . ] mh::=

47 CON: [did you- ]

48->CON: =that’s okay >.H< <okay so let me explain who we are

49 and what our complaints process is and then we’ll

50 go into more detail about your- (0.2) [particular]=

51 CAL: [ m h m ]

52 CON: =complaint oka:y [.h:] we are an independent neutral=

53 CAL: [mhm]

54 CON: =scheme set up for dispute resolution .h[: :]: (.)

55 CAL: [yep

.

. ((10 lines omitted))

.

65 CON: tch [s o] we’re not advocates for either party but=

66 CAL: [yup]

67 CON: =(.) .h:: but um we do have complaints processes for

68 customers

In the above extract, the caller is legitimising his complaint against his energy provider. He claims to be keeping to an agreed payment plan, which is defensive from possible accusations of wrongdoing. He describes relevant facts; the amount he is paying is quantified as sixty dollars and also described in terms of its adequacy – it covers his current energy usage and reduces the amount he is in arrears (lines 31-32). He claims receiving repeated, regular demands for more money from his energy provider – establishing them as the unreasonable party in the complaint and justifying his accusation they are harassing him. He reports reaching the limits of his civility (he pulls back from saying fuck) “I wanna tell them to go get f:-stuffed” and describes being at the end of his patience with the power company. “I’ve had a gutfull”, after which is a short silence that indicates he has completed his reason for the calling the service.

The conciliator’s response to the caller’s trouble is “okay”, which only marks receipt. It avoids taking any stance, even though an aligning stance or affiliation is a relevant response to a troubles telling. The conciliator’s response – even avoids treating the information as news. A loud in-breath (line 40) indicates the conciliator is about to take another turn but the caller self-selects as next speaker and offers an explicit apology (line 12) that acknowledges his displayed aggravation – a negative emotional state - as being a breach in acceptable conduct for the present interaction . The account that he is “past it” conveys he is beyond being reasonable. The conciliator’s responds to the apology with “that’s okay” (lines 42 and 48), which acknowledges the possible offense and claims none was taken (Robinson, 2004). None of the conciliator’s responses show affiliation with the trouble even though in ordinary talk a display of affiliation would be relevant.

The caller’s telling does provide the conciliator with some relevant information – for example, that a payment plan is in place and there was been repeated contact with the energy provider. As shown in extract 1, establishing a payment plan is a possibly relevant next matter the conciliator can legitimately offer assistance with. Another possibly relevant next action is to establish whether the caller has contacted the energy company directly. A further relevant next activity and the one launched by the conciliator in her first full turn in extract 2 is the institutionally required explanation of the service and its processes. It is an activity where institutional neutrality is made explicit. The question of what occasions its delivery will be considered in the next section.

So far the analysis has examined conciliators’ first responses to initial formulations of the callers’ concerns in two different calls. There was no affiliation or stance alignment in either case. *Okay* in turn initial position was used to receipt the information provided in the problem presentation in a neutral way and *so* prefaced utterances launched institutionally relevant next actions. In the first case presented the conciliator’s response to the trouble telling had the exact same construction (i.e. turn initial *okay* so followed by the launch of a next institutionally relevant activity) as a response to receiving a purely factual piece of information, evidence that it is a resource for maintaining a neutral stance when a stance aligning response is relevant.

**Explanation of the service as independent**

Institutional policy requires that each call provides an explanation of the service provided, including that it is independent. In Australia, quality assurance officers regularly monitor a sample of each conciliator’s calls to ensure compliance. With very few exceptions (e.g. when the caller has rung the wrong service) the calls in the corpus included the explanation. However, the exact formulation of the explanation varied, as did its sequential placement. Both the form of the explanation and its position may be resources for action. A further claim of this study is that its placement was used as a resource to avoid affiliation or other stance aligning responses. As evidence, two additional cases are presented below that show the explanation being used as a response to callers who are observably pursuing agreement.

With regard to the form of the explanation in the corpus – it was found to be more or less recipient designed. In some calls it had a completely routinized form. For example, on one occasion a new conciliator was observed reading the explanation off a post-it note stuck on their workstation. In extract 2 from Harassed, the explanation has been fitted to the particular call and points to conciliator concerns about the caller. For example, perhaps in the face of the caller’s heightened emotional state, the conciliator describes the service as both independent and neutral (see line 52). The more routinized explanation only uses the former of those two adjectives. In the part of the explanation not shown in extract 2 the conciliator offers a further analogy designed for understanding, which was the service as like a court system or disputes tribunal, which are also impartial.

In extract 2 from Harassed, the explanation of service was the first activity launched by the conciliator. In MS sufferer, it occurs after a third round of complaining with about poor call-centre service (see extract 5). The upgraded elements in the complaining are evidence that a troubles teller is seeking affiliation from a troubles recipient (Couper-Kuhlen, 2009). In the two additional cases presented below, the callers are also clearly pursuing a stance aligning response from the conciliator, which occasions in each case the explanation of service.

Extract 3, is the first additional case of the explanation of service being used as a practice to avoid stance alignment. The caller is concerned that a door-to door salesperson touting for an alternative billing company misinformed her about the pricing differences between energy companies. The extract begins with the conciliator explaining that it is up to the power companies to set prices – energy charges are not within the jurisdiction of the dispute resolution service. The caller continues to seek stance alignment on the nonsense of the pricing information she was given. The conciliator avoids the relevant aligning response by delivering the explanation of service, starting at line 18.

Extract 3 Indian Gentleman caller

O1 CON: so up it’s up to the retailer how much

02 profit they’re gonna add on to it so to

03 speak .hh

04 (0.4)

05 CON: does that make sense?

06 CAL: well yes it does but it just didn’t make

07 sense to me the big gap

08 CON: mhmm

09 CAL: you [know]? [yea]h I m[ean] that’s a=

10 CON: [okay] [.hh] [so-]

11 CAL: =that’s a big that’s like going and buying

12 a pair of shoes .hh for twenty when the price

13 is two hundred and fifty .h

14 (0.4)

15 CAL: just doesn’t make sense that [th]ere’s that=

16 CON: [o-]

17 CAL: =big gap in betwee[n you know?]

18 CON: [.h h h h h ]h okay so I’ll

19 explain to you(h)um what our role is and I’ll

20 let you know what we can do: [to ] um assist

21 CAL: [mm?]

22 CON: =you? u(h)m now we are an alternative dispute

23 resolution body .hh and we investigate complaints

24 between customers and their energy and water

25 providers [.hh we ]’re independent so=

26 CAL: [°m h m°]

27 CON: =we don’t act on your behalf or: the provider’s

28 behalf [.hh ] our role is to assist in finding an=

29 CAL: [°mhm°]

30 CON: =outcome which is fair and reasonable to both

31 parties

In the above extract, the caller is pursuing some kind of agreement with her assessment that the price difference being claimed by the door-to-door salesperson makes no sense. Despite the conciliator explaining profit margins are up to the retailer, the caller repeats her assessment that the about the price (lines 06-07) that was part of her initial problem presentation (not shown above). The conciliator receipts the repeat assessment with “mhmm” – a weak acknowledgement token that lacks any agreeing valency (Gardner, 1997). The caller explicitly seeks an aligning response with “you know” and then begins to reformulate her assessment with “I mean” (line 09). At line 10 the conciliator uses the *okay so* practice, previously described to attempt, in overlap, to launch an institutionally relevant activity. However, the conciliator cedes the floor to the caller who proposes an analogy with show pricing in order to further legitimate her assessment of the nonsense of the big price gap quoted by the allegedly bogus salesperson.

There is a discernable gap at line 14 where the conciliator could have responded to the analogy but doesn’t, which occasions the caller to repeat for a further time her assessment that the energy price difference she was quoted makes no sense and to again pursue a response this time using a tag question “you know” (line 17). The conciliator tries to self-select as next speaker at the first transition relevant place in the repeated assessment (see line 16) but the caller continues with her turn, which is clearly pursuing agreement. The conciliators long in-breath in the next transition relevant space displays her readiness to take a turn, which she uses to launch a rather routinized form of the explanation of service (lines 18-31). So, in this extract the caller’s repeat assessments of the nonsensical price differences and her use of the tag question *you know* evidences she was pursuing an agreeing response. The conciliator avoided making an aligning response by first using a token that lacked any implication of agreement (i.e., mhmm) and then moving to launch the explanation of the service as independent.

In the next extract, as in extract 3 above, the caller is clearly pursuing an agreeing response from the conciliator. In this case the caller’s electricity has been cut off because repeated demands for payment have not been meet. The reason the caller gives for non-payment is that the bills have been addressed to the wrong person, albeit to the correct household – a mistake that the billing company has been told of but failed to rectify. At lines 31-32 the caller directly asks the conciliator why she should pay a bill that is not in her name, which is responded to with the explanation of service.

Extract 4 Asthma kids

24 CON: okay .hh so you didn’t pay any of the bills

25 CAL: oh well they’re not- it’s not actually

26 my NAME!

27 CON: oh okay so you were waiting for them to

28 change the name befor[e you p]ay them

29 CAL: [exactly]

30 CON: (y)ok[ay]

31 CAL: [it]’s not even my name so why should

32 I pay if it’s not in my name?

33 CON: okay [.hh]

34 CAL: [tha]t’s the dispute I was arguing with

35 them

36 CON: okay .hh alright now I’ll just advise what

37 our role and process here is u:m (.) .h we’re

38 an alternative dispute resolution body

39 here so [we ]investigate complaints between=

40 CAL: [mhm]

41 CON: =customers and providers .hh we’re an

42 independent body so we don’t act on your

43 behalf or on behalf of Victoria electricity

44 .h[h ] but we’re here to help yourself and=

45 CAL: [mhm]

46 CON: =Victoria electricity reach an outcome that

47 is fair and reasonable for yourself .hh and

48 also for them

At the beginning of the above extract the conciliator gets confirmation that the caller hasn’t paid her bills yet because they haven’t been addressed using her name. The caller clearly expresses her view that she should only pay bills that are properly directed at her by asking a question as if the answer is obvious “it’s not even my name so why should I pay if it’s not in my name? (lines 31-32). An aligned troubles recipient would endorse the caller’s stance. Instead the conciliator’s “okay” merely receipts it. The caller continues by describing that her view is the nub of the dispute with the power company, which occasions the conciliator to deliver the explanation of service.

The above two extracts are two further examples of a practice observed in the target cases of Harassed and MS sufferer, where the explanation of service is delivered when stance aligning or affiliating response is observable relevant at least for the caller. The explanation’s form – describing and institution as an independent dispute resolution service and it’s sequential deployment – displays the conciliator’s orientation to stance alignment as a restricted institutional activity.

**Launching institutionally relevant actions**

The explanation of the service is an institutionally required action in each call and the previous section showed that its delivery is a practice for avoiding a relevant stance aligning response. This section shows other institutionally relevant courses of action being launched, displaying the conciliator’s orientation to the caller’s trouble as a complaint to be resolved rather than a trouble to be affiliated with. The following extracts also provide further instances of the use of *okay*  and *so* as a recurrent practice for the neutral receipt of the caller’s turn and the launching new, institutionally relevant courses of action.

The next extract returns to the call titled MS sufferer. It comes after the discussion about payment plans that followed the first troubles-telling shown in extract 1. It shows further telling was occasioned by the conciliator’s request for confirmation the caller had been in contact the utility provider about the payment plan – a necessary step in the formal dispute resolution processes. An *okay* and *so* prefaced utterance requesting a resolution proposal is arrowed at line 32. The analysis following the extract highlights the recycling and upgrading of elements from the previous telling, which indicate the caller’s orientation to the conciliator’s response so far as insufficiently affiliative.

Extract 5 MS sufferer – seeking a resolution proposal

10 CON: (typing) .hh (0.2) so then you called >was it today<

11 to talk to them about establishing another payment plan?

12 CAL: ah yes I’ve been on the phone since u:m [ ah half ]

13 CON: [((typing))]

14 CAL: three so (.) one hour

15 CAL: .hhh

16 (0.4)

17 CAL: and then then I get another girl this afternoon I said

18 can I have the omb-man’s ah cellphone number she finally

19 found it (0.2) said do you not have a customer relations

20 department where I can ring and just sort of (.) press

21 my concerns about people hangin’ up (0.4) a-nd a n-not

22 understanding what one’s saying

23 CON: (typing) (1.2)

24 CAL: just repeating myself I’ve never in my li:fe I mean I had

25 a hundred and eighty staff when I was healthy (0.5) and

26 everyone was just professional as and .hh here’s ah

27 people wh(h)o are the rudest er- (.) whatever .h (0.2)

28 and then struggle like to communicate with people as if

29 I’m ringing someone on mars

30 CON: ((typing))

31 CAL: (Gil toss)

32-> CON: ka:y .hh so what are you seeking as a resolution to this?

33 CAL: well I just would like someone o- to to ring me I don’t

34 want my electricity and gas disconnected [whic]h it’s=

At the beginning of the above extract the conciliator asks for confirmation that it was today the caller had contacted the energy providers about establishing a new payment plan. The confirmation request is *so* prefaced showing the present turn is connected to what has come prior. This *so* prefaced question is not launching a new action here but marking an inferential upshot (Bolden 2006; Raymond, 2004). The caller provides the confirmation requested and then complains further about the long length of the conversation with the call-centre and the reasons for it.

The latter part of the caller’s telling (lines 24-29) in the above extract is formulated as a repetition “just repeating myself” but actually upgrades elements of the previous version, which is evidence that, for the caller, there has been an inadequate response to this aspect of his trouble (Couper-Kuhlen, 2009). At line 24 the caller states “I’ve never in my li:fe”, which is an expanded version of “I have never” in extract 1 (line 47). In lines 28-30 the caller complains the Utility company people were rude and struggled to communication “as if I’m ringing someone on mars”, which is an upgraded version of lines 14-15 of the previous extract when the company person was “up in India somewhere”.

The conciliator’s response to the intensified complaint about the call-centre’s telephone manner begins with “ka:y” marking a possible completion point of the telling and claiming acceptance of its content (line 32). The new action launched is a *so* prefaced question that asks the caller for resolution proposal. By *so* prefacing the question the conciliator displays other-attentiveness – establishing what is an acceptable solution for the caller. However, it does not display stance alignment, which would be a relevant response to this upgraded formulation of the trouble.

In the interaction following extract 5, the caller discloses financial matters relevant to his ability to manage a payment plan and the conciliator asks for some further details that are institutionally required for record keeping. The next extract begins as the caller is providing one such detail - his account numbers. It shows the caller start into what is now a third round of complaining about the poor call-centre service. In response to this further pursuit of an aligning response the conciliator launches the explanation of service. So the case here is a further illustration of the explanation of service, being used to avoid giving the kind of affiliating response that the caller is orienting to as relevant.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |

Extract 6 MS Sufferer – what our role

23 CAL: eight seven eight three

24 CON: yes .hhh oka:y

25 CAL: the thing that sort of got me was with the last girl she

26 says oh but it’s Friday and it’s late afternoon .hh and

27 people in our customer relations area aren’t in this

28 building I said that’s okay just give me a number I’ll

29 ring them um no they’re probably won’t be answering the

30 phone they’re not there it’s late Friday afternoon

31 ha hh h I couldn’t believe what I was hearing (0.4) I

32 honest to god almost fell off my chair (0.2) the people

33 are supposed to work till five I used- stayed at work

34 till nine o’clock

35-> CON: ((typing)).hh kay .hh alright so I’ll explain to you what

36 our role is and I’ll let you know what we can do to as-

37 um assist from here. so we are and alternative dispute

38 resolution body .hh and we investigate complaints between

39 customers and their energy and water providers .hh we’re

40 independent so we don’t act on your behalf or new energy’s

41 behalf .hh our role is to assist in finding an outcome

42 which is fair and reasonable to both parties

The caller’s indignation at the way he has been treated by the company’s call-centre is evident in the above extract by his reported disbelief “I couldn’t believe what I was hearing” (line 31) and his response at the time “I honest to god almost fell of my chair”. The descriptions of outrage suggest the call-centre’s treatment of the caller is a key aspect of his complaint that hasn’t yet been adequately responded to. At this point, there are no remaining matters the conciliator can provide practical assistance or advice on. What the conciliator does is, to claim acceptance of the complaint with “kay”. The “alright” following it may be a further indicator the conciliator is proposing sequence closure – then the conciliator launches into a *so* prefaced explanation the service’s role and its processes.

The previous two extracts show subsequent complaints from MS sufferer with each subsequent formulation further expanding or elaborating the caller’s outrage at the way he has been treated by the call-centre. The conciliator receipts the end of each telling with *okay*, which receipts the information and proposes closure of that sequence. *So* is used to preface the launch of each new institutionally relevant activity – seeking a resolution proposal from the caller and delivering the explanation of service. The conciliator’s responses do not attend to or align with the less institutionally relevant and more subjective element of the complaint, which is the poor customer-service.

The next extract is from the call titled Harassed. It shows the caller further describing the energy company as making unreasonable demands about payment. The arrowed *okay* and *so* prefaced response shows the conciliator launching a course of action that seeks to clarify the facts of the complaint.

Extract 7 Harassed – getting the facts right

49 CAL: they haveºn-º (0.4) dictated (0.2) .H::: (0.5) to me

50 (.) that I should b- (0.4) I should <pay the current

51 PLUS!> (0.8) the extra forty per week which is

52 >YKNOW< (.) it’s (0.3) three or four hundred dollars

53 a w- (.) a mo:nth (0.2) .h: [and I c-] >who comes

54 up=

55 CON: [ a h - ]

56 CAL: =with four hundred dollars a month for the

57 power< (.) no one! .HHh:::

58->CON: okay so one thing, >.h< uh that I need t:- #uh#

59 some clarification on il- >Cos I wanna make sure<

60 I get all the fa:cts right. .h[: ]

61 CAL: [ye]p

In the above extract the caller further complains about the utility company. He construes them as inflexible by using the term “dictated” (line 49) and their demands as unreasonable because no one would be able to meet the level of payments they are asking for. The caller sounds very upset in the above extract. The long, loud in breaths, pauses, changes in speed and increased volume on some words are features marked in the transcript to capture some of the phonetic characteristics associated with heightened affectivity.

The conciliator does not explicitly respond to the negative assessment of the company or the payment demands. Neither does she acknowledge the caller’s emotional state. Her *okay* and *so* prefaced response functions receiptsthe caller’s expressed stance and launches a new institutionally relevant action – clarifying the “fa:cts” of the case, a word selection that displays her concern with the objective not the subjective aspects of the complaint. Following the above extract are around eight pages of transcript where the conciliator’s clarifying questions occasion further complaining and the conciliator works to get the caller’s agreement on all its aspects. The next extract shows the end of the rather lengthy process of crystallising the aspects of the complaint that is legitimate in terms of the dispute resolution service.

Extract 8 Harassed - getting the complaints down

05 CAL: (>sorry</so) it’s NOT just one complaint.=I got SEveral

06 complaints no:w .h:

07 CON: okay. so it looks like we’ve go:t=we’ve got it down to

08 three

The above extract shows the caller summarising his trouble as comprising of not just one complaint but several. The conciliator’s response claims acceptance of that description with “okay” but she enumerates them exactly as three. The conciliator’s use of the pronoun ‘we’ construes the result as being a collective effort between the caller and herself. The *so* preface at line 07 is an upshot marker but it also anticipates a new next action, which is soliciting the caller’s agreement to the three aspects of the complaint that will become the formally recorded ones.

Not shown above, are the complaints the conciliator describes. These are a lack of notification about an energy provider representative coming onto the property, the energy company wanting to install a glow bug (pay as you go electricity) and multiple letters claiming insufficient payments. The caller agrees to those complaints, which means they are the ones that will be submitted in writing to the utility company who will need to resolve them satisfactorily with the customer.

In this section, the analysis has shown what happens when the callers show the relevance of a response displaying affiliation – conciliators receipt what has been said and propose closure of the troubles telling and they launch institutionally relevant activities such as clarifying the details of the complaint and establishing what would resolve the complaint for the caller. The conciliators’ responses are doing the institutional business of independent and neutral dispute resolution thereby avoiding the restricted activity of affiliating with callers troubles.

**Acknowledging emotional displays**

Regularly, callers to the dispute resolution service are in a heightened negative affective state. Their upset is displayed in many ways as is evidenced by the extracts from the two calls already presented. For example, affectivity is shown through emotive description, emotional reporting and phonetic characteristics such as breathiness- often times in or around the reported cause of the trouble. The analysis so far has shown one practice - the launching of institutionalised dispute resolution activities - that avoids making other relevant stance aligning responses. A further practice that was observed, particularly when callers were highly emotional was an acknowledgment of feelings via a B-event type statement – an other-attentive response that also avoids affiliation.

The two extracts below from Harrassed show the practice of using a B-event type statement where the conciliator provides an interpretation of the caller’s feelings about the problem. Both the examples presented below occur well into the call. Extract 9 comes about 22 minutes into the 30 minute call after the caller has agreed to the conciliator’s formal description of his complaint. His trouble now concerns the management of his accounts and taxes if the payments to the energy company are directly deducted from his social security payments (WINZ is the government department responsible for social security), a matter that falls outside the purview of the Institution.

Extract 9 Harassed – I see that this is frustrating you

08 CAL: So [if I’m] not getting the accounts?

09 CON: [ e h- ]

10 CAL: (0.3) .h [how am I] supposed=

11 CON: [n’ they-]

12 CAL: =to sort out my t#a:#x?=

13->CON: =ri:ght and I ºguesºs so I see that this is frustrating

14 you on a lot of levels. .h there’s some- >I mean< (0.2)

15 as far as winz, >and the paperwork and stuff that’s

16 something that< we- (.) >y’know< (.) is not our area?

17 (0.2) .h but um, I wi::ll (0.4) uhm record all the

18 fa- >All the information that you’ve given me toda:y<

19 .H: did you wanna go into the complaints process

20 ↑today?

21 (0.6)

22 CAL: HHh::

23 (0.3)

24 CON: did you wanna start that?

25 (1.4)

26 CAL: YEAH>cos as far as I’m concerned< if nothing else it

27 has be- definitely been harassment.

The caller is clearly upset in this extract – captured in the transcript by the hash symbols in ‘tax’ (see line 12). The restart at the beginning of the conciliator’s utterance (line 13) indicates some trouble speaking perhaps with the formulating of her response to a trouble that is not relevant to the role on the institution. Her response is a B-event in so far as it is her perception of how the caller is feeling – frustrated.

At line 26 the caller agrees to starting the formal dispute resolution process. His turn at lines 26 and 27 repeats his claim that he has been harassed. The insertion repair at line 27 from “it has be-“ to “it has definitely been” is an epistemic upgrade and is a further display of his intense stance towards his problem. Extract 8 follows on almost immediately from the previous one, as the caller is telling for another time of the fraught, repeated and unwanted contact with the utility company. As in the previous extract, the conciliator responds by offering how the caller is feeling - in this case exhausted.

Extract 10 Harassed - exhausted and taking details

29 CAL: The amount of time that I’ve had to consu::me.(.)

30 spending >y’know< HA:lf an hour¿ .h[:]

31 CON: [m]m

32 (0.2)

33 CAL: sitting on the phone.

34 (0.2)

35 CAL: EVERY WEEK

36 (0.4)

37 CON: ºmm.º

38 CAL: º>y’know<º CATHerine (.) is our agreement still

39 standing? (.) ↓Y::e::s (0.3) .h ↑GREA::T

40 (0.3)

41->CON: =[so you re a bit,] (.) exhausted by the,=

42 CAL: =[so I can just ignore ‘er-]

43 CON: =whole process¿=

44 CAL: =I am <totally and utterly exhausted. .H I’ve just lost

45 another half a day <effectively> of work that I could

46 be Ea:rning!<t’ PAY their bloody bi:ll.

47 (0.4)

48 CAL: an’if they just BUGGERED off! an: (.) stopped harassing

49 me then I’d be able to GO to work >and pay the bill a

50 lot fa:ster in actual fact<

51 (0.2)

52 CAL: º.h::º in other words BACK off and you’ll get your

53 money faster. (0.2) .h:::

54 (.)

55->CON: okay so what I’m gonna do¿ is (.) um >get your

56 information from you?< (0.2) .h and then I’ll get this

57 all typed up for you today=So what is you::r (.) your

58 na:me address >things like that?<

59 (0.7)

60 CAL: .Hh u:h it’s Brad Bangles which is,(.)<bee aye en:,gee

61 elle ee es Hh.

The caller does not bring any new aspect of the trouble to light in this subsequent telling about but he is clearly very irritated. The conciliator’s response at line 41 offers her perception of the caller’s feelings – that he is exhausted. The caller agrees with that interpretation by upgrading that assessment – he is “totally and utterly exhausted” (line 44). Following that agreement he continues with an emotive description (e.g. “bloody bill”, “if they just buggered off”) of a possible future where the caller could get back to work to pay his bills, if only the energy company left him along. The conciliator’s response to this telling is an *okay* and *so* prefaced launch of a preliminary account of the activities that the conciliator wants to complete – getting the caller’s personal information and then getting the details of the complaint typed up. It shows the conciliator’s orientation to progressing the institutional project of the call.

**Affiliation prior to call closing**

The analysis so far has shown two practices (*okay* and *so* prefaced launches of institutionally relevant activities and B-event type statements about feelings) that the conciliators use in response to callers’ complaints. Both practices display an orientation to the interactional project of independent dispute resolution and avoid other relevant responses for a troubles recipient. The final two extracts show how each of the calls close. In both cases the conciliator does affiliate with the caller but it is only after the institutional business is over so affiliation here does not comprise the independence or neutrality of the dispute resolution process itself, because that is completed.

The first extract below is from MS sufferer and shows the conciliator sympathising with the caller regarding his illness. The extract begins as the conciliator is giving the caller his case reference numbers. At this sequential point, all the institutional business has been successfully completed.

Extract 11 MS Sufferer – call closing

21 CON: .hh and the gas reference number i:s g (0.8) two double

22 zero nine (0.6) .hh nine two (0.6) eight nine

23 Cal: hang on I just have to collapse h .HH alright hh thank you

24 very much I’ll wait for the-

25 (0.4)

26 CON: okay (0.2) are you alright?

27 CAL: ah yeah I’m alright s’jus that I’ve been talking for

28 long and on the phone and it’s warmed up and I(hh)- go

29 and have a lie down .hh

30 CON: okay

31 CAL: it’s not easy having multiple sclero[sis] I’ve got two=

32 CON: [no:]

33 CAL: =degrees behind me and (.) I was a high flyer and then

34 hit a big brick wall Ha .hh

35 CON: oohh:

36 CAL: just life .hh alright then?

37 CON: okay .hh alright um as I said if you need any further

38 assistance give us a call back

39 CAL: ºI willº thank you very much for your time and help

40 CON: your welcome thank you for your call

41 CAL: bye bye

42 CON: bye .hh

The beginning of the above extract shows the caller delaying his receipt of the reference number and confirming what he will do next, which is to wait for the energy company to contact him. The delay is reportedly to “collapse” (line 23), which occasions the conciliator to initiate a personal state enquiry sequence. The caller’s response includes a formulation of his health problem that is expanded and upgraded from what has been given earlier in the call – compare “it’s not easy having multiple sclerosis”, line 32 with “I suffer M.S.?” extract 1, line 1), which shows the caller’s orientation to the conciliator not yet displaying the kind of affiliative response the caller is seeking. In a limited display of affiliation, the conciliator agrees with his trouble by affirming it “no” (line 32). That affirmation is in overlap with the caller’s further description of the end to his successful career brought on by his illness.

The “oohh:” at line 35 is clearly and hear-ably an empathetic response. Here, the parties are aligned for the first time in the call as troubles-teller and troubles-recipient respectively – an alignment that Jefferson (1988) suggested was basic for progression to closure. The caller then does move to call closure using an idiomatic expression “just life” (see Drew & Holt, 1998). The conciliator then further progresses into call closure by finalising arrangements. The parties express mutual appreciation and then terminate the call.

The final extract in this chapter shows affiliation in the call titled Harassed at call closing. As in the previous extract the display of affiliation and alignment with the caller as a troubles recipient only occurs after the institutional business, which required independence and neutrality is completed. At the beginning of extract 10, the caller is complimenting the conciliator’s handling of the call.

Extract 12 Harassed - call closing

19 CAL: our conversation’s been an ↓awful

20 lot better than the last conversation I

21 had with Oxygen. .h[: : : h : ]

22 CON: [o::h. (0.2)] well it sounds l-U:m (.)

23 >that you are a bit frustrated.=so I can<((tap))=

24 CAL: =>I was more than a little frustrated.=and there was quite

25 a few of the,< (0.4) tch (0.2) the wo:rd that begins (.)

26 with the fifth letter o- (.) <Sixth letter of the

27 alphabe:t .H:: [hhº*h*a ha ha ha ha º ]

28 CON: [ºha=ha=ha=ha=ha=ha.º]=.h::A*hhh*lright (.)

29 >w*h*ell Brad you [have a ni-<]

30 CAL: [rugd- (.) u]sed repeatedly! .h[: :]=

31 CON: [mhm!]

32 CAL: =(0.2) with vigor. h .h::=

33 CON: =well you try to have yourself a good day okay?

34 (0.2)

35 CON: and I’ll get this stuff posted o:ut to you.

36 (0.4)

37 CAL: great.

38 CON: ↑okay?

39 (0.2)

40 CON: ri[ght.=>have a] good one<

41 CAL: [ thank you ]

42 CON: >bye!<

43 CAL: bye!

The conciliator receipts the caller’s compliment about the call going well by offering an evidentially based (i.e. “it sounds”) interpretation of his emotional state – being frustrated – to account for his interactional style . Her utterance is project-ably on its way to ‘so I can understand it’, which would be explicitly affiliating but she cuts off before completion. The caller jokingly disagrees saying that he was more than a little frustrated by how badly the call with the energy company went, and he obliquely describes his profane telephone manner - a matter that he had apologised for at the beginning of the call (see extract 2). Returns to the start of a topic or sequence is a resource for initiating closing and jokiness is routinely part of that practice (Holt, 2010; Schegloff, 2007). The conciliator reciprocates with laughter showing affiliation and appreciation of his oblique reference to his bad language. She then starts a well-wishing turn using his first name, which give a sense of informal friendliness. She completes the well wish, summarises what she will do next and initiates the pre-closing sequence that is responds to with an appreciation token of thanks.

**Discussion**

A definitive aspect of the institutional setting examined in this chapter was a concern with independence or neutrality – that is, not siding with the caller. The original empirical work described how the callers showed the relevance of an affiliating response and what conciliators did to avoid giving them that. The relevance of affiliation for the caller and that of avoiding it for the conciliator was sequentially organised with respect to the overall structure of the interaction. The conciliator moved to align with the caller at the end of the call, displaying affiliation when the business of independent dispute resolution had been completed.

In the two calls examined as case studies there were multiple versions of the complaint presented. Each subsequent version repeated or expanded elements of previous presentations. A feature of subsequent formulations was an upgraded affective stance, which has been previously documented as a consequence of inadequate affiliation with a troubles-teller (Couper-Kuhlen, 2009). Also it indicates that the parties were not properly aligned with respect to their relationship or the appropriate activity (Jefferson & Lee, 1981). The callers showing their orientation as trouble-tellers, the conciliators as doing activities that produce the institution as an independent dispute resolution service.

One recurrent practice in the two calls was the use of *okay* and *so* prefaced responses. Schegloff (2007) showed *Okay* in third position neutrally receipts a caller’s response and proposes sequence closure. The extracts illustrated *okay* functioning just as Schegloff identified. Having proposed sequence closure *so* was used to launch institutionally relevant activities including clarifying the complaint and establishing a resolution proposal. Without exception, the new actions launched by this practice were activities further progressed the institutional project of dispute resolution.

One institutionally relevant activity in particular was a resource for managing stance alignment as a restricted activity – that of the explanation of service. It’s form explicitly refers to the institutional role being an independent one. Its placement was occasioned by the caller pursuing stance alignment with their trouble – this was shown in the two case studies and by showing clear cases of its occurrence in two further calls.

A further practice documented in the analysis for avoiding affiliation was the use of B-type statements (Labov & Fanshel, 1977) about the caller’s emotional state.

If non-stance aligning responsive practices could be arrayed on a continuum of levels of affiliation or emotional stance alignment, then it would seem reasonable to suggest that B-type event statements about a troubles-teller’s emotional state are more affiliative than *okay* and *so* prefaced utterances. Nevertheless, B-type event statements do not strongly show affiliation because they recognise but do not sympathise or empathise.

In mundane talk, as opposed to the institutional variety examined in this chapter, affiliation is a preferred response to a troubles-telling and basic to its progression to closure. Given that, it is perhaps unsurprising to find affiliation at call closing for each of the cases presented after the business of independent dispute resolution had been completed. In MS sufferer, the ill-health of the caller was responded to with empathy. In the call titled Harassed, the conciliator affiliated with shared laughter. Importantly for the theme of this volume, the restricted activity of stance alignment was shaped by the overall structure of the interaction, affiliation occurring after the business of the call was completed. Furthermore, this study shows again what Jefferson (1982) noted – activities (restricted or otherwise) are closely bound to locally relevant membership categories.

In sum, the institutional setting of telephone-mediated dispute resolution examined in this chapter was one where the activity of affiliating was oriented to as a restricted activity. Neutrality was accomplished by responsive practices that receipted the callers’ evaluative or emotional stance but did not align with it. Those responsive practices were regularly followed by the launch of a new activity that used *so* prefacing to mark it as attentive to the callers’ concerns. The new activities launched cohered into a course of action that constituted the interactional business, effectively talking it into being. The analysis also pointed to aspects of doing neutrality that had a sequential organisation. They included explanations of the service as independent being occasioned by emotively told versions of the complaint and arguably stronger displays of stance alignment occurring after weaker ones. However, perhaps the biggest contribution of this study to existent literature is the identification of a particular practice - *okay* and *so* prefaced utterances – for managing stance alignment and progressing institutionally relevant activities.

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