

## **Encounters along Micro-Level Borders: Silence and Metacommunicative Talk in Service Encounter Conversations between Finnish Employment Officials and Immigrants**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the interaction between Finnish employment officials and their immigrant clients in service encounter conversations. It employs the concepts of metacommunicative talk, silence, agency and asymmetric interaction situation. Such service encounters between native speakers of Finnish and immigrants going through the integration process and speaking Finnish as their second language constitute situations of institutional interaction, characterised by asymmetry. Asymmetry during the service encounter arises from the roles and power relations between the official and client, a familiarity with the routines associated with service encounters, and the use of Finnish as the language of conversation during the encounter.

This article examines two authentic service encounters, recorded in a Finnish employment office. The encounters are analysed using discourse analysis, combining micro-level analysis of language use and macro-level analysis of the situation. Interviews with the employment officials and background information collected from the officials and clients via questionnaires are used in support of the qualitative analysis.

Officials use different methods of interaction with their clients. In addition, the individual characteristics of officials and clients and their cultural differences influence the construction of interaction during a service encounter. Finnish officials can sometimes handle service encounters with very little talk – sometimes with hardly any talk at all. However, metacommunicative talk can serve as a vehicle for reinforcing the client's agency and supporting the immigrant in learning the language and customs, as well as in establishing a foothold in the new community, and thereby promoting the integration process as a whole.

**Keywords:** Service encounter conversation, institutional interaction, meta-communication, silence, Finnish as a second language, immigrants, integration

## **Introduction: Everyday Interaction Situations in Constructing and Dismantling Borders**

The path by which immigrants progress from being outsiders to becoming members of society and citizens of their new home country can be long-winding and involve several phases. After crossing the physical national border, newcomers face several other borders, such as language and various social, cultural and societal borders. Most people moving to Finland must learn a new language and new ways of interacting. They must learn to understand the underlying principles governing the way in which society functions, and also the services provided by society and its organisations in their new home country. To become a member of the community, they may need to find a place of study or a job, and establish contacts with the native population.

Ordinary interaction with people such as neighbours, study or work colleagues, or authorities forms a vital part of such integration into a new community. Micro-level encounters of this kind enable newcomers to learn the customs, language and communication culture of their new country of residence. The border between outsidership and belonging – or exclusion and inclusion – often becomes visible through interaction.

In recent decades, these partially invisible cultural, linguistic and social borders, the crossing of such borders and bordering processes have become a topic of interest in multidisciplinary border research, due to an increase in worldwide mobility and geopolitical changes (Newman & Paasi 1998; Paasi 2011; Newman 2011). Since the so-called spatial turn of the 1990s and the identification of the mobility paradigm, issues of place, space, borders and mobility have also become a focus of inquiry in linguistic and cultural studies (Blunt 2007: 684; Weigel 2009). In particular, central themes include issues related to the politics of mobility (including the mobility of labour), diasporic and hybrid identities, the processes of inclusion and exclusion, and the related exertion of power (Donnan & Wilson 2001; Sadowski-Smith 2002; Lan 2003; Vila 2003; Schimanski & Wolfe 2007; Berensmeyer & Ehland 2013). Also, the question of so-called dislocated borders, i.e. where the borders to be crossed are defined and located, when moving for example from one state to another, is still topical in border research (Balibar 1998).

This article considers the interactional situation between the official and immigrant client as one arena of border negotiation, where borders are crossed from one's own culture into a foreign culture. By using metacommunicative talk, i.e. by offering the client an explanation of the course taken by the service encounter and of the client's own actions, it is possible that officials could reinforce the client's agency and so facilitate their establishment of a foothold in the new community – 'crossing the border'. On the other hand, it may be asked whether the possible absence of talk by the official excludes the client from the handling of matters that concern him or her, and potentially turn silence into a boundary. This examination

focuses on authentic conversations between Finnish employment officials and immigrants during service encounters.

Such encounters between immigrants and officials involve the drafting of plans and decision-making, which is important not only for the immigrants' integration and future, but also from the perspective of the entire society into which they are being integrated. For this reason, encounters between immigrants and officials form an important research topic (*Kala kuivalla maalla* 2005; Pitkänen 2005; Hammar-Suutari 2006 and 2009). Such encounters mark the starting point of the building of the immigrant client's life in the new country. The early stages of integration involve charting the immigrant client's background and planning his or her future, as well as explaining the practicalities of Finnish society, for example the school system, health care, social services and the duties and responsibilities of various authorities. In particular, communication practices in various types of service encounter conversations in Finland have been studied as part of a project conducted by the Institute for the Languages of Finland (2002–2007). This project examined the practices involved in service encounters in the public and private sectors (*Asiointitilanteiden vuorovaikutuskäytänteiden tutkimus* [Study on communication practices used in service encounters]). Most of the data collected under the project comprises service encounters at the Kela (Social Insurance Institution of Finland) offices and at R-kioski convenience stores.<sup>1</sup> (Sorjonen & Raevaara 2006; Lappalainen & Raevaara 2009). Although relatively little research exists on the interaction between immigrant clients and officials in Finland, Salla Kurhila has examined service encounters and interaction between native and non-native speakers of Finnish in her publications (Kurhila 2001, 2006a and 2006b: 225–228; see also Kupari 2007). With respect to learning the Finnish language and integrating into Finnish society, it is important to note that (besides a Finnish teacher), over a long period of time various officials may be the only communication partners who speak Finnish with the immigrant. So, successful service encounters may play a significant role in the immigrants' integration process (Kokkonen 2006a, 2006b and 2010; Brewis 2008). Moreover, the study of service encounters involving immigrants provides perspectives on the learner language and the conditions of communication in such a language: with the communication partners entering the situation on very different bases – for example, one of them is in the position of just learning to function in a new language and in new situations – how well can communication succeed? It is therefore anticipated that research into this field can also yield more information on the special characteristics of official language and service encounters with officials from the perspective of immigrants.

## Conversation During Service Encounters and Key Concepts

This article examines interaction in conversation during service encounters, employing the concepts of ‘metacommunicative talk’, ‘silence’, ‘agency’ and ‘asymmetric interaction situation’. In an asymmetric interaction situation, the parties have different resources in terms of their knowledge or skills – for example language skills – which affects their abilities to participate in and influence the situation and also the course of the conversation. The parties may also have different rights and responsibilities that affect their participation in the interaction. This is typical of institutional interaction situations, such as service encounters with officials, where the professional and institutional identities of the parties have a bearing on the situation (Drew & Heritage 1992: 3–4; Raevaara & Ruusu-vuori & Haakana 2001: 16–23).

Recent critical research on institutional interaction situations such as service encounter conversations, has aimed to counter prevalent assumptions that clients visiting state offices possess uniform and sufficient communicative skills and the knowledge required to take care of their business. Officials, for their part are not always able to take account of their clients’ individual needs and life situations (Codó 2011: 725; Hammar-Suutari 2009: 62–63, 146–147). The asymmetry of the relationship between the expert and client can be analysed from existential, epistemic, legal and ethical perspectives. On the existential, human level, the expert and the client are equals and their encounter is symmetric. However, on the epistemic level or the level of knowledge and expertise, their relationship is asymmetrical. This also applies to the relationship at legal and ethical levels, since experts always have more responsibilities and power than their clients in terms of legislation, regulations and professional ethics (Gerlander & Isotalus 2010: 3–19; Hammar-Suutari 2009: 120). Asymmetry in institutional interaction has been studied using the concept of the gatekeeper (Erickson & Shultz 1982; He & Keating 1991; Chew 1997a; Chew, 1997b). For example, the official may be viewed as a gatekeeper who possesses knowledge of the administrative practices of the institution, practices related to service encounters and the structuring of interaction during the service encounter, accompanied by the power to either share or not share these resources with the client. Asymmetry is present in many forms in service encounters between immigrants and employment officials. It arises, for example, from the roles of the official and client, the language used (Finnish as a native language – Finnish as a second language), and from power relations (expert knowledge Vs layman’s knowledge, access to expert information).

Metacommunicative talk is used to explain and regulate interaction. This is usual in classroom communication and so-called ‘teacher-talk’, for example. The purpose of metacommunicative talk is to ensure that the matter is understood, to direct attention to either something or to the actions of the parties involved in the interaction, to regulate turn-taking, to summarise and correct, and to negotiate

meaning. Metacommunicative talk is usually employed by the person with the power to regulate interaction in the situation (Stubbs 1976: 162; Moutinho 2014: 119–120). In the analysis of examples cited in this article, metacommunicative talk (hereafter ‘metatalk’) refers to explaining actions and reinforcing understanding through talk: the official explains his or her own actions and structures the situation and the course of the service encounter for the client via talk. Broadly speaking, within this context metatalk belongs to the group of metadiscursive strategies (see Luukka 1992: 22–26).

Existing research provides several typologies of silence which occur during social interaction (Kurzon 2007: 1673; Ephratt 2008: 1909–1910). Within the linguistically oriented approach, silence has been viewed as a psychological, interactive or socio-cultural phenomenon (Bruneau 1973: 20; Kurzon 1995: 57). Psychological silence refers to very short pauses in a conversation, reflecting deliberation or thought, or deliberately slowing the pace of speech in order to ensure the addressee understands what is being said. Interactive silence is longer than psychological silence and is related to interaction, for example turn-taking, whereas socio-cultural silence refers to phenomena such as the social and cultural practices that underlie both psychological and interactive silence, and which influence their duration. Silence has also been examined as eloquent silence, a rhetorical silence that serves as a linguistic sign similar to speech (Ephratt 2008: 1910–1911).

In most Western cultures, talk is understood as something which connects people, however, such cultures may even view silence as intimidating. Silence can become a border that separates people and increases the distance between them by giving rise to emotional uncertainty, fear and feelings of inferiority, all of which can contribute to preventing integration into a new community. In other cultures, talk may be considered a factor which separates people, and silence may be viewed as safe. Features of both notions can be identified with respect to communication within Finnish culture (Salo-Lee 1996: 46; Carbaugh 2009; Wilkins & Isotalus 2009). Scollon & Scollon (1995) distinguish between two different types of linguistic politeness strategies, related to the amount of talk and silence: involvement strategies and independency strategies. Involvement strategies include being voluble, acknowledging the other person (for example, by using his or her language or dialect) and expressing mutual views, mutual knowledge and empathy. Independency strategies, on the other hand, include being taciturn or reticent and increasing distance, leaving the other person alone and respecting their privacy. Expectations with respect to the amount of talk vary in different situations, however, volubility is usually perceived as ‘warm’ and ‘intimate’, whereas taciturnity may be viewed as ‘cold’ and ‘unintimate’ (Scollon & Scollon 1995: 39; Salo-Lee 1996: 52).

Small pauses form a natural part of interaction. In natural everyday conversation however, such pauses are usually very short, with a duration of less than a second to a few seconds (see e.g. Jefferson 1984). In this article, silence refers to

pauses in the service encounter that have a longer duration than in everyday conversation. In a broader context, silence is understood as an absence of talk; a lack of talk in asymmetric situations, during which the official would be able to reduce the level of asymmetry by reaching out to the client and supporting the client's understanding of the situation by explaining it, rather than remaining silent. Within this context, silence refers to human silence, and silence as the absence of talk (Schmitz 1994). It is a period characterised by an absence of talk that can be measured in time, for example due to the official having to update the customer's information on the computer during the service encounter, print out various forms, or use the computer to search for the information required by the client. Sometimes the beginning of the service encounter can involve a long, silent moment, during which the client has arrived but the official is still entering the previous client's information on the computer before serving the new client. At other times, silent moments occur when the client is thinking of what to say – or how to express his or her thoughts in Finnish. In addition, the absence of talk can constitute 'thematic silence' related to a certain topic (in this context, knowledge concerning practices related to visits to the employment office) (Ketola et al. 2002; Kurzon 2007). In this context, silence does not therefore refer to absolute silence, since periods with no talk can be filled with other sounds, resulting from actions (see for example Kurzon 2007: 1683).

Within sociological research, agency is frequently used to refer to goal-oriented action by an individual, and the individual's free will and ability to act (Jyrkämä 2008: 191–192; Gordon 2005). According to Jyrkämä (2008: 193), the concept of agency is strongly linked to structures, i.e. social factors that create limitations and obstacles to human action, but which also provide opportunities. Agency is also contextual and tied to time and place; it is interactive and negotiable: agency is realised in relation to other people in a given situation (Jyrkämä 2008: 196). Within interaction situations, agency has been examined e.g. as the 'practical, contextual actions taken by an individual to influence the course of the situation in the moment, and its outcome' (Wallin et al. 2008: 157). In this article, agency refers to the opportunities the interacting parties have to participate in the handling of the matter in question, and to influence the course of action and decision-making. Despite the asymmetry that is present in the situation, immigrant clients are not passively subject to the official's actions; where possible, they are an active, equal party to the interaction, with the ability and free will to take goal-oriented action.

To be able enter the community of his or her new home country, the newcomer must understand how to behave in the new environment. Only those who master the discourse can take action or participate (Corner & Hawthorn 1989). However, on their own, newcomers cannot necessarily discern the practices and customs of their new home country. They may need the help of natives in order to understand the division of duties between various organisations in the new society, or how to

correctly interpret various communication situations. For this reason, silence, absence of talk or leaving things unsaid may create an invisible boundary to the newcomer's integration into the new community, and subsequently, his or her active agency. Metatalk, on the other hand, can provide the opportunity to cross this invisible boundary by means of interaction. Small talk on casual topics unrelated to the service encounter can also serve the same purpose (Salo-Lee 1996: 52–53).

## **Immigrants Integrating in Finland**

Immigrants with varying backgrounds can take highly different paths towards settling down and integrating in Finland. The reasons for immigration have also become more varied: in the 2000s, an increasing number of people immigrated to Finland due to work, study or family ties, while in the 1990s immigration largely occurred on humanitarian grounds. At the time, immigration to Finland particularly tended to consist of asylum seekers, refugees, and so-called returnees which refers to Finnish citizens living outside Finland or people of Finnish origin (expatriate Finns) who return to Finland, as well as people of Finnish origin from the former Soviet Union (*Return and expatriate Finns*).

It is clear that an illiterate refugee arriving in Finland needs a different kind of support and guidance compared to a person with a vocational or academic education who has moved to Finland for work-related reasons. Such divergent backgrounds have a major impact on the entire integration process and the immigrants' opportunities for engaging in successful interaction, including encounters with various officials. Account should therefore be taken of various immigrant groups and their needs during the provision of public services. In addition to services aimed at immigrants, a growth in immigration also increases the need for special measures promoting integration. In Finland, the integration of immigrants is governed by the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (1386/2010). The purpose of the Act is to support integration and the immigrants' opportunities to play an active role in Finnish society, on equal grounds to the rest of the population (*Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration*).

A key point of contact offering public services for immigrants is formed by the employment and economic development offices or labour force service centres (hereafter referred to as *employment offices*). Integration services provided specially for immigrants include guidance and advisory services, initial assessments and the preparation of integration plans, as well as integration training. Study of the Finnish or Swedish language features strongly as part of integration training, in which the necessary literacy skills are also taught. Training can also involve vocational courses or practical training. Integration training aims to provide immigrants with the readiness to enter work or further training, as well as societal,

cultural and other abilities that promote their integration in Finland (*Public employment and economic services*).

The number of immigrants in Finland has grown steadily. At the end of 2012, there were 195,511 foreign nationals living permanently in Finland, in comparison to only 98,600 in 2001. Statistics show that the size of Finland's foreign population has nearly doubled during the 2000s. However, these figures do not include all people with an immigrant background who permanently reside in Finland. For example, people who have moved to Finland from abroad and obtained Finnish citizenship or asylum seekers are not included in such statistics. For this reason, the number of people with an immigrant background residing permanently in Finland is significantly higher than the figures provided above would indicate: at the end of 2012, 285,471 people who had been born abroad were living in Finland. Of these, 62% were foreign nationals, and Estonians and Russians constituted the largest groups of foreigners (*Maahanmuuton vuosikatsaus 2012, Annual report on immigration 2012*). In citizens' everyday lives, increasing immigration means that a rising number of native Finnish speakers encounter immigrants – as neighbours, colleagues and clients – who are learning Finnish. Alongside growing immigration, multiculturalism, multilingualism and a diversity of values and customs will become an increasingly visible element in Finnish society. Integration is thus a two-way process that requires commitment and interaction from both immigrants and members of the receiving society.

## **Two Service Encounters and their Analysis**

Two recordings of authentic service encounters between immigrants and employment officials have been created as part of a broader collection of data on service encounters in one Finnish employment office, particularly in the unit offering integration services for immigrants.<sup>2</sup> Most of the clients using this service point have not lived in Finland for very long, and are included within the sphere of integration measures, i.e. they participate in Finnish language training or apply for various vocational training or practical training placements in accordance with their integration plans. During the initial years in Finland, the aim is to learn the language, practices and customs of the new home country. At this stage, integration services provided by the employment office can be a vital source of support. When analysing recordings of service encounters within the unit in question, it should be borne in mind that the recordings were made during the early stages of the immigrants' integration process. This may therefore influence the extent to which clients require some explanation of the practices associated with the service encounter, or the division of duties between various authorities.

Two different service encounters have been selected for analysis in this article. These encounters are examined from the perspective of silence and metatalk, employing discourse analysis. The aim is not the broad generalisation of the observa-



tions; instead, a detailed qualitative analysis aims to picture and understand two different service encounters and the varying methods used by officials in encountering the client. The analysis combines observation of language use at micro-level and observation of the service encounter at macro-level. In addition, background information collected from officials and clients based on questionnaires is used in support of the qualitative analysis. The analysis also utilises interviews with officials in order to gather background information, and observations made in these interviews regarding interaction during service encounters. The interviews with officials revealed that officials too can view service encounters with immigrant clients as significant arenas of integration: meeting an official and speaking with him or her can provide the client with an opportunity to take a further step towards becoming a full member of society (See e.g. the interview dated 30 August 2012).

This article draws on both the interactional and constructionist traditions of discourse analysis. Interactional discourse analysis examines real, individual interaction situations and their progress. The aim is to understand and interpret situations based on what happens during the interaction situation (Luukka 2000: 148). Highly empirical and inductive in nature, conversation analysis takes an interactional approach to the study of discourse. As the analysis proceeds from the phenomena found in the data to a more common level, the approach is highly data-oriented (see e.g. Kurhila 2000: 360; Luukka 2000: 149; Raevaara & Sorjonen 2006). In line with the constructionist approach to discourse analysis, this article does not examine interaction situations as if they are detached from the broader contexts of language use. Instead, the micro-analysis of interaction is linked to the broader, social and cultural macro-level (Drew & Heritage 1992: 17–19; Luukka 2000: 151; Moutinho 2014: 213).

Interaction between the official and client is examined on the basis of two service encounters: do any problems arise during the interaction, and how are they solved? What roles do silence and metatalk play in service encounters? The chosen service encounters are typical examples of conversation between an official and an immigrant in such a situation. In both service encounters, the clients come to the office in order to provide the official with documents needed by the authorities in order to process issues relating to their clients. One client brings a certificate received on the completion of a course, and the other a contract for a practical training period. The official must process the documents brought by the client and record the client's information on a computer. In both cases, the official schedules the next meeting. These two service encounters provide fruitful opportunities for parallel examination, particularly due to them both representing a short, highly routine service encounter. However, for several reasons the interaction involved in the two situations develops in very different directions: while one service encounter involves plenty of talk, the other involves very little.

Silent moments due to the official's actions are particularly interesting to the study, as during such moments, the client must wait for the situation to progress. Moments of this kind render the routines related to the service encounter visible, alongside the power used by the official to structure the situation. Will the official allow the client to wait in silence – leaving the silence open to the client's own interpretations – or will the official fill the silence, for example by explaining to the client what she is doing and why? Instead of being an empty space in the conversation, a pause is filled with conclusions – and in an interaction situation, pauses and silences are also subject to interpretation. For this reason, a pause constitutes action, and silence is filled with action even if nothing is said. If the client is familiar with the routines of service encounters with Finnish officials and acquainted with the characteristics of Finnish communication culture, she is likely to be able to interpret the silences punctuating the official's actions in the right way: 'the person is concentrating on handling my matters'. If, on the other hand, the client is an immigrant who is unfamiliar with visiting Finnish offices, and based on her earlier experiences (for example, they may have left their home country to flee the authorities), then officials evoke feelings of fear or distrust, and the silence may be interpreted very differently.

The service encounters examined in this article are brief in duration.<sup>3</sup> In the first example, the total duration of the service encounters is 3 minutes and 15 seconds. The official and client are mainly silent: the service encounter includes only 45 seconds of talk. The official enters the client's information into the computer in silence, while the client waits for the situation to progress. In this example, the duration of the longest uninterrupted period of silence is two minutes. In the second example, the total duration of the service encounter is 2 minutes and 30 seconds. The second service encounter does not include any pauses lasting longer than a few seconds. Instead, the official continuously explains to the client what she is doing and why, or what the client must do next. In these examples, silence and metatalk can be viewed as two different approaches employed by the officials, each influencing the course of the encounter in its own way.

**Example 1** [see Appendix 1 for translation and Appendix 2 for notation glossary]:

Asiakkaana 29-vuotias nainen, äidinkieli venäjä, asunut Suomessa 1 v  
Virkaileija 1  
3 min 15 s  
27/06/2005

Asiointitilanteen alussa asiakas täyttää tilanteen tallentamiseen liittyviä tutkimuspapereita tutkijan kanssa ja juttelee niistä muutaman sanan myös virkaileijan kanssa. Kun tutkimuspaperit ja -lupa on täytetty, asiakas aloittaa varsinaisen asioinnin näin:

- 01 A: no niin. öö, minun kurssi (.) [on /loppu/, OJENTAA PAPERIN VIRKAILIJALLE  
02 V: [joo?  
03 A: (täs)se on /todistus/, OJENTAA TOISEN PAPERIN VIRKAILIJALLE  
04 V: kiitos? ALKAA KIRJOITTA TIETOJA KONEELLE  
(120.0)  
05 V: ole hyvä, onko sinulla tällasta asiakas (.) korttia. OJENTAA PAPERIT TAKAISIN ASIAKKAALLE  
06 A: joo. OJENTAA ASIAKASKORTTINSA VIRKAILIJALLE  
07 V: olet kyllä hakenut syksyn kursseille mutta (.) kun ei vielä ole tietoa kuka pääsee  
08 ja kuka ei ni laitetaan sinne,  
09 A: minä haluu (.) suomi kaks? \*minä=en tiedä\*,  
10 V: niistä ei ole tehty vielä valintoja (.) ei ole valittu vielä (.) sinne suomi kaksi kursseille (.) siitä  
11 tulee tieto sitten kotiin. ALKAA KIRJOITTA TIETOJA KONEELLE JA ASIAKKAAN KORTILLE  
(26.0)  
12 V: elikkä heinäkuun lopussa tulee kirje kotiin siitä että oletko päässyt kurssille vai (.) suomi kaksi  
13 [kurssille. OJENTAA ASIAKASKORTIN ASIAKKAALLE  
14 A: [joo? kiitos. /moi/. PAKKAA PAPERITA LAUKKUUNSA, NOUSEE JA LÄHTEE  
15 V: moi=moi. JATKAA TIETOKONEELLA KIRJOITTAMISTA

In this example, attention is drawn to two long periods of silence, during which the interaction between the official and client is broken – one period of silence lasts for two minutes, and the other for nearly thirty seconds. These silences are very long during a conversation. Action by the official conceals the absence of talk: the silence is filled by the tapping of the official’s keyboard, as she updates the client’s information. Prior to the two-minute silence, the official has uttered only two words to the client: *joo* (yes) and *kiitos* (thank you). During the periods of silence, the official types on the computer while the client is idle, sitting and waiting. The official does not inform the client of what information is being recorded and why. There is no further discussion about the client card either – to understand the purpose of the card, the employment office client needs to know that the date of the next appointment at the employment office is indicated on the card. On lines 7–8, the official seems to refer to the client card and the next appointment to be marked when she mentions that the client had applied for courses held in the autumn: ‘kun ei ole vielä tietoa kuka pääsee ja kuka ei ni laitetaan sinne’ [...] (‘there is no information about who will be selected and who will not so let’s put there...’); however, this sequence is not completed, and the official does not make either the next appointment date or what she was going to write on the card explicit.

The official’s explanation on course admissions, given on lines 7–8, seems initially unclear to the client, since she interrupts the official by beginning to talk about a Finnish language course she has applied for. This shifts the focus of conversation from the client card, to student selections for the Finnish language course. On lines 10–13, in her longest sequence, the official attempts to articulate the fact in two different ways in order to make the matter understandable to the client: that student selection for the course has not yet been completed (‘niistä ei ole tehty vielä valintoja’ and ‘ei ole valittu vielä sinne suomi kaksi kursseille’) (‘the selections have not been made yet for the Finnish Two courses’), and that a

letter will be sent to the client to inform her of the student selections ('siitä tulee tieto sitten kotiin and elikkä heinäkuun lopussa tulee kirje kotiin siitä että oletko päässyt kurssille') ('the information will be sent home and so at the end of the July, a letter will arrive home on whether or not you have been selected for the course'). Interestingly, the official breaks up this sequence concerning student selection for the course with a silence lasting nearly thirty seconds, in order to continue typing on the computer. At the end of the service encounter, although the official mentions the point at which information on student selection for the course will be sent to the client, no mention is made of the client's further plans or of the next date at which she is expected to report to the employment office – or of what she should do if she is not admitted onto the Finnish language course.

In the first example, the official serving the client is relatively inexperienced. At the time of the service encounter, she had been working with immigrants and as an employment official for only four months (Interview on 28 June 2005). The official's lack of experience may have resulted in the need to focus closely on the administrative tasks involved in the service encounter, for example updating the client's information in the client records. This may have created periods characterised by an absence of talk during the service encounter, as the official needed to take a 'timeout', so to speak, from their interaction with the client while focusing on typing. It also seems that the official and client do not know each other in advance, which may contribute to the situation's formal atmosphere. The client has just completed her first Finnish language course, and it is noticeable from the interaction during the service encounter that she does not yet speak Finnish very well. The client's language skills may therefore influence the amount of talk during the service encounter. However, attention is drawn to the fact that, despite having lived in Finland for only one year, the client seems fairly familiar with routines related to employment office visits. It seems the client knows that she must report to the office after completing the Finnish language course, and the routines related to the client card are familiar – so perhaps no further reference is made to the card for this reason. This may partially explain the absence of talk on the part of the official.

In the second example, the client is visiting the office for a second time on the same day. He is going to begin a practical training period in a car repair shop. On his previous visit however, he did not bring along the practical training contract to be signed before training begins, in order to render his insurance cover valid.

**Example 2** [see Appendix 1 for translation and Appendix 2 for notation glossary]:

Asiakkaana 21-vuotias mies, äidinkieli venäjä, asunut Suomessa 3 v 6 kk  
Virkailija 3  
2 min 30 s  
01/11/2005

01 A: LÄHESTYY VIRKAILIJAN PÖYTÄÄ, [OJENTAA PAPERIN JA ISTUUTUU  
02 V: [no /nyt/ on uusi paperi sulla (.) kiito:s? (4.0) eli nyt siä olet  
03 siellä sitten: marraskuun ja joulukuun.  
04 A: [mm, \*niinku pari kuukautta\*.  
05 V: joo? tästä päivästä.(.) ne vakuutukset ov=voimassa (.) sittev=vasta kun tää (.) sopimus  
06 on täälä virallisesti tehty niin sen takia on nyt hätä saaha sulle (.) paperit kuntoon. ALKAA  
07 KÄSITELLÄ ASIAKKAAN PAPEREITA JA SELITTÄÄ SAMALLA  
08 A: mikä todistus mun piti vielä tuoda.  
09 V: no sitä et (.) kun se harjottelu loppuu (.) sitten sun pitää pyytää Pentiltä (.) todistus? (.) jossa  
10 Pentti kertoo et milloin sinä olet ollut harjoittelussa (.) ja mitä sinä olet siellä tehnyt.  
11 A: joo.  
12 V: ja siihen ei ole mitään lomaketta että Pentti voi (.) jos se löytää sieltä firmasta puhtaan  
13 >puhdasta< paperia niin kirjottaa [sille.  
14 A: [ASIAKAS NAURAA (- -) voi käsin kirjoittaa.  
15 V: mutta se nyt riittää kun sä tuot (.) näistä molemmista jaksoista sen saman todistuksen sitten (.)  
16 [tammikuussa. LYÖ LEIMOJA PAPERIEHIN  
17 A: [joo.  
18 V: onko sulla se meidän kortti? (.) työvoimatoimiston kortti.  
19 A: ei.  
(2.0)  
20 V: no missäs [se\_on.  
21 A: [no mä en >muista missä se\_on.<  
22 V: OTTAA UUDEN ASIAKASKORTIN JA ALKAA KIRJOITTA SITÄ ASIAKKAALLE (- -) no mä annan  
23 sulle (.) laitait sen lompakkoon? sitte=talteen ja (.) sit sä aina (.) joka ilta sä katsot sitte tähä et  
24 (.) mikä päivä se oli millon piti tulla työvoimatoimis[toon.  
25 A: [£joo£. NYÖKYTTELEE  
26 V: eikö [niin.  
27 A: [mm.  
28 V: ja täss\_on nyt sun uusi osoite SANOO OSOITTEEN ÄÄNEEN SAMALLA KUN KIRJOITTA SEN  
29 KORTTIIN (9.0) ja tuo on toi sun henkilötunnus? (.) ja ensimmäinen päivä tammikuuta  
30 toimisto on kiinni niin mä laitan tähän toinen ensimmäistä ja nollakuus? ja (.) kirjotan tähän  
31 todistus? (.) ja sitte=mä laitan tähän meidän puhelinnumeron? (4.0) jos tarvitsee soittaa? (.) ja  
32 nyt joka ilta katsot sitten (.) tähän kort[tiin,  
33 A: [NAURAA £joo£.  
34 V: ja muistat että [toinen päivä,  
35 A: [£muistan kyllä£.[NAURAA  
36 V: [muistat tulla työvoimatoimistoon [papereitten kanssa.  
37 A: [£joo£.  
38 V: okei? (.) mie annan tästä sinulle (.) sun oman (.) kopion (.) OJENTAA ASIAKKAALLE HÄNEN  
39 KAPPALENSA HARJOITTELUSOPIMUKSESTA ole hyvä? ja mie laitan sen koneelle ja mie  
40 lähetän Pentille postissa sen.  
41 A: joo (.) kiitoksia sulle. NOUSEE JA LÄHTEE JO OVEA KOHTI  
42 V: selvä kiitos /hei=hei/.

In the second service encounter, there are no long pauses. The longest pause (on line 29) lasts nine seconds, while the official prepares a new client card for the client. Even while writing, the official keeps reading the client information recorded on the card out loud to the client. This also serves as a revision of the vocabulary frequently needed in official contexts: ‘osoite’ (address), ‘henkilötunnus’

(personal identity code), ‘todistus’ (certificate), ‘puhelinnumero’ (telephone number), ‘työvoimatoimisto’ (employment office). At the beginning of the service encounter, attention is drawn to the official’s explanation to the client, regarding the reasons for the need to bring the training contract to the employment office before the practical training period begins – rather than merely entering the contract details on the computer. At the end of the service encounter, the official informs the client of what will be done with the practical training contract: the client will receive one copy, another copy will be sent by mail to the practical training instructor, and information on the practical training period will be recorded in the employment office’s client files. Based on the official’s actions, we can infer that, in addition to the actual matter at hand – receiving the practical training contract – the official aims to reinforce the client’s agency during the practical training period, by supporting the client in understanding what kinds of administrative procedures are related to the training.

This service encounter involves plenty of humour: this can be heard in the official’s expressive tone of voice and in how the official instructs the client on obtaining a certificate after the training period and carefully storing the new client card. The client is about to begin his practical training period in a car repair shop, which happens to be used by the official for car repair services. This explains the informal reference made to the client’s practical training instructor. Also, a potential conflict (on lines 18–37) is dealt with by employing humour: the client has apparently lost the employment office’s client card, and so the official has to prepare a new one. The official jokingly provides the client with instructions on the careful storage of the new card: humour is communicated by the exaggerated stressing of certain words, and the instructions make the client laugh. In the interviews conducted with her, the official mentioned that she deliberately uses small talk and humour to establish a connection with the client (Interview on 30 August 2012).

The official in the second example has long experience in the role: at the time of recording, she had been working as an employment official for immigrants for over nine years (Interview on 31 October 2005). As the client happened to be embarking on practical training in the car repair shop used by the official, this provided an opportunity to discuss the training on more familiar terms, in a more informal atmosphere. In addition, the official and client were apparently already acquainted, as the client had lived in Finland for a relatively long period and had visited the office on previous occasions. The official had an understanding of the client’s language skills: it seems that she was able to evaluate the manner and pace at which she could speak to the client.

## Discussion: Little or Plenty of Talk?

In the service encounters examined in this article, both clients' matters are handled despite clear differences between the encounters in terms of their structure and atmosphere. Different meanings can be attributed to silence during such situations. Provided that the client has sufficient knowledge of the routines underlying service encounters with Finnish officials, the functioning of Finnish society and its service system, and the division of duties between various authorities, explanatory metatalk is not required. In such cases, silence or absence of talk can be expected and considered unproblematic during a service encounter; it demonstrates that the official is focusing on taking care of the client's matters and not on supporting the client's integration via interaction. Nevertheless, silence or the absence of talk can form a boundary to integration if the client is unfamiliar with the customs and practices of his or her new home country, and if these are not explained. Metacommunicative talk can therefore provide support, and ease the entry into and learning required to understand a new culture.

In the first example, the encounter involves very little talk: the official does not explain her own actions to the client, nor does she explain what is being recorded on the computer or on the client card, or how the client should proceed during the autumn if she is not admitted onto the Finnish language course. Silence dominates the service encounter: its total duration is 3 minutes 15 seconds, of which talk accounts for only approximately 45 seconds and silence for 2 minutes 30 seconds. When the official has turned away from the client and is typing on the computer, the client silently remains seated, flicking through her papers. To an external observer, the silence feels uncomfortably long, since the official provides no explanation for the silence. Despite this, the atmosphere during the situation is friendly and business-like – it could be even described as formal. The official uses rather polished standard language (for example, 'onko sinulla asiakaskorttia', 'olet hakenut syksyn kursseille', 'niistä ei ole tehty vielä valintoja', 'oletko päässyt kurssille') ('do you have a client card', 'you have applied for the courses this autumn', 'the selections have not been made', 'whether or not you have been selected for the course'). The official seems to be solely focused on providing an answer to the client's question, and her actions are consistent with typical institutional interactions – conforming with expectations, characterised by task-oriented action and limiting the talk to certain, task-related topics (Drew & Heritage 1992: 24–25; Wilkins 2009: 78–81).

In the second example, the situation has a different atmosphere: while business-like, the encounter is friendly and relaxed. It includes more characteristics typical of normal everyday conversation: there are only a few, short pauses and some overlapping talk, dialectal expressions are used (for example 'mie', 'hätä saaha kuntoon'), and there is variation (for example 'siä' ~ 'sinä' ~ 'sä'; 'mie' ~ 'mä'; 'harjottelu' ~ 'harjoittelu') and colloquialisms (for example 'sulla', 'tää

sopimus’, ‘toi sun henkilötunnus’, ‘millon’, ‘nollakuus’). The use of humour also makes the atmosphere more informal. These features suggest a transition between so-called transactional and interactional speech: in other words, a transition from conversation centred on the exchange of information, to everyday conversation (such as discussing feelings and sentiments) which bridges the gap between the parties (Chew 1997b: 210). This is more atypical during institutional interaction (Drew & Heritage 1992: 24). The total duration of the situation is 2 minutes and 30 seconds, of which short pauses account for a total of 20 or so seconds. Despite the amount of talk and humorous use of language by the official, the atmosphere remains business-like and the main focus is on handling the client’s matters.

In the second example, in addition to solving the client’s problem the official seems to concentrate on explaining practices to the client. She explains the connection between the training contract and validity of insurance cover, provides instructions on preparing a training certificate, explains the purpose of the client card and discusses who will be informed of the training contract and how. Explaining one’s actions and practices to the client – why things are done as they are – instead of merely updating the client information and recording the reason for the visit without explanation, can create and reinforce trust between the client and official. Rendering the official’s actions and the employment office’s practices understandable to the client may increase the client’s agency in the handling of his or her own matters: when the information required is not merely in the official’s hands, the client has the opportunity to meet the official on more equal ground. By gaining an understanding of how Finnish society, services and organisations function, it is easier for the client to become a full member of society. The availability of information on visiting various offices, and the demystification of the practices and processes involved in dealing with the authorities and society at large, can therefore be viewed as an emancipatory process for immigrants (see Chew 1997b: 219–220).

Based on the examples presented, when examining them from the perspective of integration, in the first example, language – or more precisely the lack of it, the absence of talk, and silence may form a boundary to, or at least unnecessarily slow down the process of becoming a full member of society. How can a newcomer learn the practices related to dealing with authorities, or to navigating the maze of various interacting organisations, if such practices and connections are not explained? Moreover, explaining practices can reduce the asymmetry of interaction and support the newcomer in gaining a foothold in the new society.

When comparing the clients’ backgrounds, one’s attention is drawn to the fact that the client in the first example has lived in Finland for only one year, whereas the client in the second example has already lived in Finland for three and a half years. In the first example, the client is applying for her second Finnish language course. The second client however, has already obtained a practical training position in which he must be able to manage using Finnish. The clients’ Finnish lan-



guage skills therefore probably influence the amount and type of Finnish used by the officials in the situation. If the client speaks only a little Finnish, it is most probably rather difficult to explain the situation to the client in Finnish. In such cases, it can be practical and beneficial to the client if the official speaks just a little Finnish, using the most simple and unambiguous expressions possible. In most cases it is possible to use an interpreter, or use non-linguistic means of communication or any languages common to the client and official.

## **Conclusion**

In every situation, the parties to interaction have many borders to cross before a genuine encounter is possible. This particularly applies to interactive situations related to the integration process – in everyday encounters with neighbours or colleagues, or during service encounters.

In asymmetric service encounters, metacommunicative talk could function as a tool for reinforcing the client's agency. During her interview, the official in the second example mentioned that she first explains to the client why she is about to ask questions related to e.g. family relations, before actually posing the questions, and why such information was needed. She also pointed out that, by doing this, she gave the client the opportunity to prepare an answer and to consider how much he wished to reveal. The same official also spoke of the computer's role during the service encounter, saying that she provides the client with a great deal of description of what she is typing on the computer. She felt that it was important that the client understood what information was being recorded and why this was being done. With respect to the role of metatalk, the official brought up the aspect of learning Finnish: 'I find it important that the client hears spoken Finnish. This is extremely important, and I might be the only one who speaks Finnish to the client during that day.' (Interview on 30 August 2012).

Officials employ different methods when encountering their clients. In addition, the individual characteristics of officials and clients and their cultural differences influence the construction of interaction during a service encounter. Finnish officials can handle service encounters on the basis of very little talk – sometimes with hardly any at all. This can constitute an efficient and appropriate method: for example, if the client speaks only a little Finnish, then silence can provide relief, a break during which the client has no need to struggle to understand what the official is saying. On the other hand, some clients may consider an absence of talk on the part of the official to be rude and impolite. When examining various service encounters in a broader context, as part of the immigrants' integration process – as steps towards becoming a full member of society – metacommunicative talk can support the learning of the language and customs, and therefore the integration process as a whole. However, during asymmetric interaction situations in particu-

lar, silence, or a lack of explanation of new or foreign practices can exclude the newcomer from the community.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> R-kioski is a chain of convenience stores mainly selling a range of everyday items.
- <sup>2</sup> The service encounters have been recorded on video for the author's ongoing doctoral dissertation. The data includes a total of 130 service encounters. The situations involve 145 different immigrant clients and three female employment officials who speak Finnish as their native language. The majority of clients included in the data speak Russian, Kurdish or Dari as their native language. However, the data features clients with a total of 35 different native languages from all over the world, for example Russia, Estonia, Iraq, Turkey, the United States, Spain and Germany. The clients included in the data comprise 60 men and 85 women. Since the language used in the service encounters is mainly Finnish, the data does not include immigrants who are in the very initial stages of their integration process, nor does it include service encounters in which interpretation is used. In addition, the data includes interviews with officials and questionnaires filled in by the clients and officials in order to provide background information. Most of the data was collected in 2005 and complemented with interviews in 2012. The data has been collected and is being stored by the author of this article and MA Tuija Särkinen from the University of Eastern Finland. All informants participated in the study on a voluntary basis.
- <sup>3</sup> English translations of the examples and explanations of the symbols used in the transcription are included as appendices.

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Interview on 30/08/2012. Interview with official 3. Interviewer Tarja Tanttu. Transcribed. Stored by the interviewer.

Video recordings of the service encounters examined. Recorded 27/6/2005 and 1/11/2005 by Tarja Tanttu and Tuija Särkinen. Stored by the recorders.

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## Appendices

### APPENDIX 1: Examples in English

Abbreviations:

A = client  
V = official

#### Example 1

The client is a 29-year old woman, mother tongue Russian, has lived 1 year in Finland  
V1  
3 min 15 s  
27/06/2005

At the beginning, the client is still filling in the papers about video recording the encounter for research purposes. She discusses the papers with the official and the researcher. When the papers and permission for recording and research are ready, the client begins by saying:

01 A: well, uh, my course (.) [is /finished/, GIVES A PAPER TO THE OFFICIAL  
02 V: [yes?  
03 A: (he)re is /the certificate/, GIVES ANOTHER PAPER TO THE OFFICIAL  
04 V: thank you? STARTS TYPING WITH THE COMPUTER  
(120.0)  
05 V: here you are, do you have a client (.) card like this. GIVES PAPERS BACK TO CLIENT  
06 A: yes. GIVES HER CLIENT CARD TO THE OFFICIAL  
07 V: you have (.) applied for the courses this autumn, however (.) there is no information about  
08 who will be selected and will not so lets' put [there,  
09 A: [I want to (.) Finnish Two? \*I=don't know\*,  
10 V: the selections (.) have not been made yet (.) for the Finnish Two courses (.) the information  
11 will be sent home. STARTS TYPING INFORMATION USING THE COMPUTER AND ON THE CLIENT  
12 CARD  
(26.0)  
13 V: so at the end of the July, a letter will arrive home on whether or not you have been selected for  
14 the course or (.) Finnish Two [course. GIVES THE CLIENT CARD BACK TO THE CLIENT  
15 A: [yes? thank you. bye. PACKS PAPERS IN HER BAG, STANDS UP AND  
16 LEAVES  
17 V: bye=bye. CONTINUES TYPING WITH THE COMPUTER

## Example 2

The client is a 21-year old man, mother tongue Russian, has lived 3 years 6 months in Finland

V3

2 min 30 s

01/11/2005

The client has returned to submit a contract for practical training which he had forgotten on the previous occasion.

- 01 A: APPROACHES THE OFFICIAL'S DESK, [HANDS OVER THE PAPER AND SITS DOWN  
02 V: [well /now/ you have a new paper (.) thank yo:u? (4.0) so  
03 now you are there in November and Decem[ber.  
04 A: [mm, \*So a couple of months \*.  
05 V: yes? from this day on.(.) those insurances are=valid (.) only=after when this (.) contract  
06 is officially made here, so that is why we must hurry to get your (.) papers ready STARTS TO  
07 HANDLE THE CLIENT'S PAPERS AND EXPLAINS SIMULTANEOUSLY  
08 A: which certificate I had to bring now.  
09 V: well it is that (.) when the practical training ends (.) then you have to ask for a certificate from  
10 Pentti (.) certificate? (.) where Pentti explains when you participated in the training (.) and what  
11 you have done there.  
12 A: yes.  
13 V: and there is no form for it so Pentti can (.) if he can find clean >empty< paper in the firm, which he  
14 can write on [it.  
15 A: [CLIENT LAUGHS (- -) can write by hand.  
16 V: but it is enough if you bring (.) one certificate for both of these periods then (.) in  
17 [January. STAMPS PAPERS  
18 A: [yes.  
19 V: do you have our card? (.) the employment office card.  
20 A: no.  
(2.0)  
21 V: well where [is it.  
22 A: [well I don't >remember where it is.<  
23 V: TAKES NEW CLIENT CARD AND STARTS WRITING IT FOR THE CLIENT (- -) well I'll give you (.)  
24 you'll put it in your wallet? then=safe and (.) then you'll always (.) every evening you'll look  
25 at it so that (.) what day it was when I had to come to the employment offi[ce.  
26 A: [£yes£.NODDING  
27 V: isn't it [so.  
28 A: [mm.  
29 V: here's your new address SAYS IT ALOUD WHEN WRITING IT ON THE CARD (9.0) and that is your  
30 social security number? (.) and on the first of January the office is closed so I'll write the  
31 here second of January, zero six? and (.) write certificate here? (.) and then I'll write the  
32 telephone number here? (4.0) if you need to call? (.) and now every night you will look at (.)  
33 this ca[rd,  
34 A: [LAUGHS £yes£.  
35 V: and you'll remember that [the second of,  
36 A: [£I'll remember £.[LAUGHS  
37 V: [you'll remember to come to the employment  
38 office [with the papers.  
39 A: [£yes£.  
40 V: okay? (.) I'll give you (.) your own (.) copy (.) GIVES THE CLIENT HIS COPY OF THE CONTRACT  
41 FOR PRACTICAL TRAINING here you are? and I'll enter it into the computer and send it to Pentti  
42 through the post.  
43 A: yes (.) thank you. STANDS UP AND WALKS TOWARDS THE DOOR  
44 V: ok thank you /bye=bye/.

## APPENDIX 2: Symbols used in the transcription of data

### Intonation and vocal pitch

|   |  |
|---|--|
| . | Falling intonation   |
| , | Level intonation   |
| ? | Rising intonation  |
| / | Sequence began or spoken at a higher pitch than surrounding talk |
| \ | Sequence began or spoken at a lower pitch than surrounding talk  |

### Stress and pace of speech:

|    |  |
|----|--|
| —  | Underlining indicates stress or emphasis on the underlined word or part of the word (e.g. <u>joulukuussa</u> ) |
| *  | Sequence spoken more quietly relative to the surrounding talk  |
| >< | Sequence spoken more quickly relative to the surrounding talk  |
| <> | Sequence spoken more slowly relative to the surrounding talk   |

### Word duration:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| - | cut-off word (e.g. <i>tou- eiku tammikuussa</i> )                               |
| : | prolonged sound (e.g. <i>kiito:s</i> )  |
| — | fusion of two consecutive words; legato pronunciation (e.g. <i>no sitä_et</i> ) |

### Pauses and overlap:

|       |                                   |
|-------|-----------------------------------|
| (0.9) | Pause duration in seconds         |
| (.)   | Micropause                        |
| =     | Utterances linked without a pause |
| [     | beginning of overlap              |

### Other symbols:

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| £      | Speaker is smiling or laughing while speaking                                       |
| ( )    | Brackets indicate an unclear sequence   |
| (-)    | Brackets with one dash: unclear word  |
| (- -)  | A longer unclear sequence   |
| NAURAA | Non-linguistic action is described using small block letters (e.g. OJENTAA PAPERIN) |