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The Discourse of Service Encounters in Post Communist Romania: Iconicity and Polite Routines of American Descent²

Abstract: The research reported in this study is based on the analysis of empirical data gathered in McDonald's restaurants in Constanta and Bucharest. The corpus contains 100 excerpts which are uncontrolled samples of face-to-face naturally occurring interactions in service encounters and amounts at approximately 5 hours of face-to-face naturally occurring interactions in service encounters. The data have been gathered through ethnographic observation by noting down on paper (immediately after the interaction) the natural speech event in which the researcher was a passive participant without revealing his role and identity. Two types of talk have been identified within the matrix interchange transactional talk having to do with eliciting customers' orders and payment and an 'overlay' of small talk. Both components, transactional and phatic, are realized exclusively by formulaic sequences. The preliminary analysis of the data has shown the interaction to be conducted on an impersonal level. No detail of the interaction relates to the customer in any way: the interaction is pre-patterned, predictable, simplified. The aim of the paper is to establish the patterns of reception regarding the phatic component reduced to formulaic sequences in the context of a positive-politeness oriented communicative ethos.

Key words: *speech routine; positive politeness; service encounter; phatic communion; reception*

1. Preliminary remarks

1. 1. The socio-cultural aspects of the interchange

This corpus-based study has been undertaken as part of a research project meant to analyze the speaking practices promoted by the iconized franchised American systems like McDonald's and Pizza Hut in post-communist Romania. These speaking practices add a new dimension to the discourse of service encounters, which emerges with the effect of globalization and the tendencies of standardization, automatization and efficiency of society.

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In the iconized franchised systems like McDonald's the waiter and the chef have been replaced by a number of more specialized employees who perform the tasks the waiter and the chef used to perform along with their assistants. McDonald operators perform the following routine tasks. They take customers' orders, place the items on the tray, tally the prices of the items ordered by the customers and accept payment for the goods. If necessary, they also pack the takeaway items. This specialization involves a transfer of labour costs from the personnel to the customer. It is the customer who carries the order to the table and occasionally clears the table. The transaction is conducted at the counter. This leaves less time for speech than the protracted interaction between the waiter and his customer who have time to talk over the merits of various products.

The actions performed by operators are almost entirely *rule-governed*. It turns out with great regularity that the operator begins by enquiring as to what the customer would like to order, place the items on the tray, the total is tallied by the cash register and the total is conveyed to the customer. The customer then pays, takes the tray and goes to his or her table. Should the customer wish to take the items away, the operator packs the items and the customer leaves with his or her order.

In addition to this major *action/physical routine* and its possible sub-routines, another routine is being transacted, a *speech routine*. Just like an ordinary conversation, this speech routine has a beginning, middle and end (Schegloff 1972 *passim*; Schegloff, Sacks 1973 *passim*). The opening and closing sequences have a strong tendency to be formulaic because what they need to accomplish is a matter of social ritual.

What is going on in a McDonald's restaurant is people performing *physical routines* in the way both the operator and customer perform their tasks, and *linguistic routines/rituals* in conducting talk with the customers. This context for talk shows that, with great regularity, routine actions which require routine speech tasks will have those routine speech tasks performed primarily by *using formulaic sequences*.

Not only is the food served at McDonald's restaurants pre-prepared (i.e. pre-made, pre-cut, pre-sliced), but so is the *discourse: pre-patterned, predictable, simplified*. The interactions with customers are brief, being of the order of a few minutes, while the selection of dishes is small. Consequently, the (trans)action in McDonald's restaurants is reduced to a *repetitive routine* that has been likened to *an assembly line*. The interaction seems to be conducted on an *impersonal level*. It is always the same, no detail of the interaction relates to the customer in any way.

1.2. The overall discourse structure of the service encounter in McDonald's restaurants

The research reported in this study is based on the analysis of original data gathered in McDonald's restaurants in Constanta and Bucharest. The corpus contains one hundred excerpts which are uncontrolled samples of face-to-face naturally occurring interactions in service encounters. The corpus amounts at approximately five hours of conversation. The data have been gathered through *ethnographic observation* by noting down on paper (immediately after the interaction) the natural speech event in which the researcher/informant was a passive participant without revealing his role and identity. The data gathered in Bucharest are used as a control sample to check whether the linguistic

patterns identified are restricted to a specific geographic area or can be generalized to a larger population.

Elsewhere we have shown (Hornoiu 2010: 291-292) that, in McDonald's restaurants, operators make use of a particular **discourse structure** which is described schematically in (1):

(1)

Matrix interchange → Opening + Core action + Closing

Opening → Start + (Welcoming formula)

Core action → Elicitation formula + Total + (Receipt) + Offering formula+ Change

Closing → Back ref. + Positive face-stroke + Termination formula

All these moves are exclusively realized by *formulaic sequences*, as shown in the excerpts from (2) to (10):

OPENING (start + welcoming formula)

Opening formula

(2)

START → bună ziua/ bună seara/ bună ziua bine ați venit la McDonalds/ bună ziua bine ați venit → **STOP**

CORE ACTION (elicitation formula + Total + (Receipt) + Offering formula+ Change)

Elicitation formula

(3)

STOP → doriți să comandați/cu ce va pot servi/cu ce să vă servesc/cu ce să vă servim/pot să vă iau comanda? → **STOP**

Cash-call formula

(4)

START → X lei vă rog/vă costa X lei/X ron/în total face X/totul este X lei/face X lei/în total face X lei → **STOP**

Offering formula

(5)

START → poftiți/comanda dumneavoastră/poftiți comanda/uitați comanda dumneavoastră/aici este comanda dumneavoastră/imediat va aduc și comanda → **STOP**

Receipt of cash formula

(6)

START → mulțumesc/mulțumim → **STOP**

Change-counting formula

(7)

START → poftiți restu dumneavoastră/ și restu/poftiți restu/poftiți aici și restu dumneavoastră→ **STOP**

CLOSING (Back ref. + Positive face-stroke + Termination formula)

Back-reference formula

(8)

START→ mulțumim/vă mulțumim/vă mulțumim și noi→ **STOP**

Positive face-stroke formula

(9)

START → o zi bună/să aveți o zi bună în continuare/să aveți poftă/poftă bună/o zi bună mai poftiți pe la noi/poftă bună vă mai așteptăm pe la noi/să aveți poftă o zi bună vă dorim/vă mai așteptăm/o seară bună în continuare → **STOP**

Termination formula

(10)

START → la revedere/la revedere o zi bună/la revedere o zi bună în continuare/la revedere vă mai așteptăm/la revedere vă mai așteptam pe la noi → **STOP**

1.3. Phatic communion in service encounters

At this point it is useful to distinguish between two types of talk that occur within the matrix interchange: *transactional talk* having to do with eliciting customers' orders and payment and an 'overlay' of *small talk*³ (i.e. phatic component). We take the view that the formulaic sequences illustrated from (2) to (10) make up a *new* kind of transactional discourse characterized by the **excessive simplification** of the **phatic component**. This type of transactional discourse realized exclusively by formulaic sequences and including an excessively simplified phatic component is promoted through American franchised systems like McDonald's, KFC or Pizza Hut.

In McDonald's transactional discourse, unlike other types of service encounters, the phatic component tends to be exclusively associated with the opening and closing of the interaction. In other types of service encounters, however, such as brief buying/selling exchanges at stalls and kiosks or supermarket checkout counters or more extended service

³ Identifying small talk in service encounters is by no means a straightforward task since small talk does not clearly stand out from surrounding transactional talk as one might expect. The most appropriate approach to conceptualizing small talk in service encounters is in terms of a *continuum* rather than discrete units, with transactional talk and phatic communion interspersed with relational and transactional-plus-relational talk. Although the extremes are relatively easy to identify, many instances of talk during service encounters do not fit neatly into these core categories of transactional talk and phatic communion. Talk may shift along the continuum from transactional talk to talk that although task-oriented has a non-obligatory relational component attached to it (Hornoiu 2004: 66).

encounters the phatic component is not uniquely associated with the openings and closings of interaction, but tends to be embedded, though usually in a minimalist manner, and sometimes may even displace task-related discourse whenever relational goals become salient (Kuiper, Flindall 2000, Coupland, McEwen 2000, McCarthy 2000, *passim*). Moreover, when the phatic component is more extensive it is no longer realized by formulaic sequences, but relates to the details of the interaction and to participants on a personal level. The excerpt in (11), taken from an interaction at the grocer's, is illustrative in this respect.

(11)

Client: le-ați încurcat ((laughing))

Server: le-a încurcat fata asta care-i nouă # cred că le-a ↓confundat ↑CINE știe ce-a făcut ()

le-a băgat la un preț mai mic

[...]

Server: altceva?

Client: dați-mi de CINCI mii câteva arahide d-alea ((pointing)) d-alea ca să pun pă ceva

Server: ((weighing)) ↑ș-alceva

v-ajunge atâta?

Client: mi-ajunge ↓pun p-o colivă (.) un domn m-a rugat să-i fac o colivă pentru sora lui

In more extended service encounters (e.g., at the dressmaker, in a beauty salon, travel agency, etc.) the phatic component allows the opportunity to build up a good, sociable ongoing relationship that will stand the test of time and other encounters. Whether consciously or not participants seem to know that successful business is built around good personal relationships and they do not seem to miss any opportunity to consolidate the relational level (Hornoiu 2004, 2005, *passim*).

This raises the question as to whether this type of highly formulaic transactional discourse with an excessively simplified phatic component fits in with the Romanian communicative ethos. The next section briefly reviews Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (2.1) in order to contextualize the politeness orientation of Romanian society discussed in section 2.2.

2. Politeness orientation and cultural ethos

2.1 Brown and Levinson's politeness theory

According to Brown and Levinson (13), *face* consists of two kinds of desires or 'face-wants' which interactants attribute to one another within interaction: **positive face**, the desire to be appreciated and approved of, and **negative face**, the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions.

Many communicative activities entail imposition on the face of both or either of the participants: that is, they are **face-threatening acts** (FTAs). Face-threatening activities are “those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker” (Brown, Levinson 65-67). Acts that appear to impede the addressees’ independence of movement and freedom of action threaten their negative face, whereas those which appear as disapproving of their wants threaten their positive face. Participants in an interaction usually select from a set of strategies those which will enable them to either avoid or minimize such face-threatening activities.

Showing involvement and keeping distance represent the two main ways of being polite to other people and therefore of honouring their positive and negative face. These are universal, conflicting needs which all human beings share, but which, according to Brown and Levinson, are mutually exclusive. For Brown and Levinson (70), “positive politeness is approach-based; it ‘anoints’ the face of the addressee by indicating that in some respects, S wants H’s wants (e.g. by treating him as a member of an in-group, a friend, a person whose wants and personality traits are known and liked)”. By contrast, “negative politeness ... is essentially avoidance-based ... [and] is characterized by self-effacement, formality and restraint, with attention to very restricted aspects of H’s self-image, centring on his want to be unimpeded”. Positive politeness is less obvious, because when we talk or think of politeness, what immediately springs to mind is negative politeness, which is our familiar formal politeness (ibid. 62).

In *showing involvement* or *keeping distance*, i.e. satisfying the addressee’s positive or negative face wants respectively, the speaker chooses among various **politeness strategies** grouped under *positive* and *negative politeness*⁴, two sets of strategies that include the majority linguistic devices used in everyday conversational discourse⁵. *Positive politeness* strategies enable the speaker to minimize the threat to the addressee’s positive face. They are used to make the addressee feel good about himself, his interests or possessions, and are most usually employed in situations where participants know each other fairly well. In addition to hedging and attempts to avoid conflict, strategies of positive politeness include

⁴ It is worth noting here that Scollon and Scollon (1981: 175 and 1983: 167) refer to the positive politeness system as ‘solidarity politeness’, because of its emphasis on the common ground between the participants, and to the negative politeness system as ‘deference politeness’, because of its emphasis on deference and formality, arguing that we can thus avoid possible negative connotations in using the word ‘negative’.

⁵ The positive/negative politeness distinction closely parallels two of the main forms inherent in Goffman’s (481) concept of *deference*, i.e. *avoidance rituals* and *presentational rituals*. Avoidance rituals are “forms of deference which lead the actor to keep at a distance from the recipient”. Presentational rituals encompass “acts through which the individual makes specific attestations to recipients concerning how he regards them and how he will treat them in the on-coming interaction” (Goffman 485).

statements of friendship, solidarity, compliments. *Negative politeness* strategies⁶ are oriented towards the addressee's negative face and emphasize avoidance of imposition on the hearer. By employing these strategies the speaker presumes that the speaker will be imposing on the addressee. Negative politeness strategies are used when the potential for awkwardness or embarrassment is perceived to be higher than in bald on record strategies and positive politeness strategies. Negative face is the desire to remain autonomous so the speaker is more apt to include an out for the listener, through distancing styles like apologies. *Off-record strategies* use indirect language and remove the speaker from the potential to be imposing. This means that the utterance used is ambiguous (formulated as a hint, for instance), and its interpretation is left to the addressee, because the risk of loss of face is great.

In their schema, positive politeness strategies are less face-redressive than negative politeness strategies, which, in their turn, are less redressive than off record strategies. It should be emphasized that in actual usage these positive and negative politeness strategies can be *mixed*. Thus, **positive politeness markers** can co-occur with **negative politeness strategies** such as *indirect requests*. Similarly, such aspects of **positive politeness** as *intimate forms of address* may occur in **off-record usage** (Brown, Levinson 18)⁷.

While negative politeness may be viewed as being similar to what people in everyday life may mean by 'being polite' and is related to the need to remain distant, positive politeness is "a communicative way of building solidarity, showing the other is liked and seen as desirable" (Tracy 211-212). Positive politeness can be viewed as a set of requirements that affirm one's sense of belonging to a certain society or community. In other words, the desire to be approved of, liked, admired and understood derives from the inner want of social acceptance.

Despite claims to universality, Brown and Levinson do allow for a certain degree of *cross-cultural variation*, which they call **ethos** and define as 'the affective quality of interaction characteristic of members of a society' (243). Their distinction between *positive* and *negative politeness strategies*, whether mixed and multifunctional or not, and the subsequent differentiation between *positive* and *negative politeness societies* can shed considerable light on differences between cultures, on the one hand, and various social groups within a given culture, on the other, and provide a secure basis for a comparative investigation.

⁶ Scollon and Scollon argue that it is preferable to refer to positive politeness and negative politeness strategies as '**involvement**' or '**distancing**' strategies respectively as this terminology avoids the implicit evaluation contained in Brown and Levinson's terms. They also suggest that 'the concept of face has built into it both aspects: involvement and independence must be projected simultaneously in any communication', but they go on to argue that 'the reason involvement and independence are in conflict is that emphasizing one of them risks a threat to the other' (Scollon and Scollon, 1995: 38). A similar view is held by Tannen (15), who prefers to use the more neutral and more descriptive terms '**community**' and '**independence**' instead of 'positive' and 'negative' so as to avoid value judgements.

⁷ Brown and Levinson argue that their ranking of positive and negative politeness follows naturally from the Durkheimian perspective according to which rituals of approach are devoted to lesser deities while those of avoidance are for the ultimate deity (18).

2.2 Politeness orientation in Romanian society

Complex stratified societies exhibit both kinds of politeness. However, various social groups within such societies may show *differing preferences* for one ethos or another. Upper classes, for instance, may have a negative politeness ethos and lower classes a positive politeness ethos (Brown, Levinson 20). Similarly, it is widely reported that *women* tend to value *positive politeness strategies* and *informality* more than men (Brown, Levinson 246).

Although we can distinguish societies according to the ethos predominant in daily conversational discourse, we are *not* implying here either that societies as a whole or that various social groups within a complex stratified society can *clearly* and *exclusively* be categorized as being either positively or negatively polite. Rather they can be categorized as *relatively more positive politeness oriented* or *relatively more negative politeness oriented*, according to the politeness orientation that is more prevalent.

The findings emerging from previous empirical research have shown that when engaging in verbal interaction Romanian speakers put more emphasis on serving the need for *positive face* i.e. honouring their interlocutors' need for involvement. More specifically many of the interactional strategies for which Romanian speakers show a preference are associated with *positive politeness*, being thus ways of expressing similarity between the self and others by indicating the speaker's appreciation of the addressee's wants i.e., the addressee's actions, opinions, acquisitions, etc. are thought of as desirable. Rather than make recourse to negative politeness strategies that would ensure that the addressee is unimpeded in his actions or wishes, Romanian speakers seem to prefer a more or less consistent use of positive politeness strategies that would render a potentially face-threatening extended spate of talk extremely interesting and worth listening to (Hornoiu 2006, 2008, *passim*)⁸.

In a cross-cultural comparison between Romanian and English, elsewhere we have argued that the two societies differ in relation to their *politeness orientation*. It seems that a fundamental difference between the two politeness systems arises from the differences in the significance attached to the two components of **face**: *aspects of approval*, on the one hand, and *aspects of non-imposition*, on the other. English-speaking cultures seem to place a higher value on *privacy* and *individuality*, i.e. the negative aspect of face, whereas Romanians seem to emphasize *involvement* and *in-group relations*, i.e. the positive aspect (Hornoiu 2006, 2008, *passim*). We argued that Romanian women possess a *wider* and *more elaborate* repertoire of *positive politeness strategies* than English-speaking women. By the same token, we hypothesized more similarities between the two gender groups in Romanian than in English, expecting thus Romanian men to be *more positive-politeness* oriented than their English counterparts. Empirical research has also shown that Romanian speakers make use of a rich and elaborate repertoire of positive politeness strategies in service encounters (Hornoiu 2004, 2005, *passim*). All these empirical research findings substantiate the view that the communicative ethos of Romanian society is *positive-politeness oriented*.

⁸ Given the fact that this *solidarity-oriented conversational style* is acquired within the process of *socialization* and that many positive politeness manifestations are multifunctional in nature, various segments of the larger population *differ* in relation to their preference for certain linguistic devices (Hornoiu 2009: 189-218).

3. The reception of clichéd transactional discourse in positive politeness-oriented Romanian ethos

3.1 Hypothesis

The empirical data illustrated in **Section 1.2** allow us to hypothesize that, given the *positive-politeness oriented communicative ethos* of Romanian society this highly formulaic kind of transactional discourse promoted through McDonald's restaurants should be perceived as **artificial**, precisely because its *phatic component* is reduced to the minimum. This type of clichéd robotic speaking style is anything but polite.

3.2. Testing the hypothesis

This hypothesis was evaluated through a survey of customers' (language) attitudes based on questionnaires. The survey was conducted among Romanian undergraduates studying at *Ovidius* University, as part of a larger pilot project meant to establish the reception of what I call "*speech routines of American descent*" in transactional discourse, i.e. the type of pre-patterned, predictable repetitive discourse illustrated in **Section 1.2**. The sample included 84 Romanian students belonging to one age-group (20 – 25).

The aim of the questionnaire was two-fold. First, the respondents were asked whether they perceived any differences at the interactional level between McDonald's restaurants and classical restaurants and to account for their answers. Second, they were asked to state the reason why they choose to go to a McDonald's restaurant rather than a classical restaurant. In what follows the former research question will be discussed.

3.3 Findings

Surprisingly, the results of the survey refuted the hypothesis proposed in **3.1** in the case of the age-group under scrutiny. The following reception patterns have emerged:

- 50 %** perceived the interaction as informal, friendly, polite, brief and efficient
- 27.38 %** perceived no differences at the interactional level in terms of politeness
- 10.71 %** perceived the interaction as less polite than that of a classical restaurant
- 6 %** perceived the interaction as impolite because of its robotic, artificial, clichéd nature
- 4,76 %** did not answer

3.4 Discussion of findings

Relevant to the discussion of the way this kind of formulaic discourse is perceived are two types of **linguistic iconicity**. In Croft's (102) words, "the intuition behind iconicity is that the structure of language reflects in some way the structure of experience".

(i) Iconicity of politeness

Haiman (1983: 783) hypothesized that “the social distance between interlocutors corresponds to the length of the message, referential content being equal”. Thus the mere length of an utterance may connote *tentativeness* or *familiarity/friendliness*:

Long message → great social distance → tentativeness → negative politeness strategies

Short message → short social distance → familiarity/friendliness → positive politeness strategies

It appears that the way the great majority of my informants perceive the formulaic sequences employed in McDonalds restaurants confirms Haiman’s hypothesis. Given a certain referential content, longer and more tentative messages correspond to greater social distance and are likely to include negative politeness strategies. Whereas messages appropriate among intimates are likely to be shorter and to include positive politeness strategies.

The formulaic sequences used in McDonald’s restaurants are brief, concise and to the point, with no unnecessary words, but, at the same time, they are marked by various *markers of politeness* (verbal inflections, pragmatic particles). Apparently these two ingredients, *politeness marker* and *briefness*, are sufficient to make the conversational exchange *friendly* and *positive-politeness oriented*, at least for some customers.

(ii) Iconicity of quantity

Iconicity of quantity⁹ has been defined as follows:

Greater quantities in meaning are expressed by greater quantities of form (Haspelmath 1).

Iconicity of quantity has also been correlated with *frequency*. Haiman (1985: 194 -195, 2000) argues that “the motivation for the reduction is also partly economic: one gives less expression to that which is familiar or predictable”. In other words something which is familiar or predictable is shorter.

Thus, if we adopt a **frequency-based explanation** we can argue, following Haspelmath (3-4) that any efficient sign system in which costs correlate with length will follow the following economy principle:

The more predictable a sign, the shorter it is

Since frequency implies predictability, we also get the following prediction for efficient sign systems:

⁹ The first linguist who mentioned this motivating principle was Jakobson. For instance, in many languages, “the positive, comparative and superlative degrees of adjectives show a gradual increase in the number of phonemes, e.g. high – higher – highest (Jakobson 352).” The higher the degree, the longer the adjective.

The more frequent a sign is, the shorter it is

Thus a sign/message which is short is *frequent, predictable, and efficient*.

The formulaic sequences employed by McDonald's operators are not only brief, concise, simple, but also *highly predictable*. In fact, **predictability** is one of the distinguishing features of the McDonalds franchise system and it goes hand in hand with efficiency.

Predictability is achieved by "the replication of settings", "the routinization of employee behaviour" (Ritzer 99), the uniformity of the products served. Predictability is important because it induces a feeling of **security** and **familiarity** and it makes things easier to both employees and customers. However, predictability is achieved not only at the level of the actions performed, but also at the interactional level through the use of speech routines employed. These speech routines may thus convey a sense of familiarity and friendliness.

3.5 Revised hypothesis

Given the two types of linguistic iconicity discussed above and the politeness orientation of Romanian society discussed in **Section 2.2.**, the repetitive and predictable short formulaic sequences employed in McDonald's restaurants are subject to the following interpretations: **(i)** *artificial/robotic* and therefore impersonal and impolite; **(ii)** *polite, friendly/familiar*; **(iii)** *efficient*

4. Conclusions and suggestions for further research

The research reported in this study is based on the analysis of empirical data gathered in McDonald's restaurants in Constanta and Bucharest and amounting at approximately 5 hours of face-to-face naturally occurring interactions in service encounters. The Bucharest data are used as a control sample to check whether the linguistic patterns identified are restricted to a specific geographic area or can be generalized to a larger population.

The preliminary analysis of the corpus revealed that in terms of the overall structure of the interaction *the matrix interchange* obligatorily includes an opening, an exchange section and a close. Two types of talk have been identified within the matrix interchange *transactional talk* having to do with eliciting customers' orders and payment and an 'overlay' of *small talk*. Both components, transactional and phatic, are realized exclusively by formulaic sequences. The (trans)action conducted through American franchised systems like McDonald's, KFC is reduced to a **repetitive routine** that has been likened to *an assembly line*. The interaction seems to be conducted on an *impersonal level*. It is always the same, no detail of the interaction relates to the customer in any way. Not only is the food served in these restaurants pre-prepared (i.e. pre-made, pre-cut, pre-sliced), but so is the *discourse: pre-patterned, predictable, simplified*.

This type of transactional discourse realized exclusively by formulaic sequences and including an excessively simplified phatic component was further addressed within the communicative ethos of Romanian society. Previous empirical research findings substantiate the view that the communicative ethos of Romanian society is *positive-politeness oriented* (Hornoiu 2004, 2005 *passim*). In view of this empirical evidence, we proposed the *hypothesis* that the type of highly formulaic transactional discourse promoted through American franchised systems like McDonald's, KFC or Pizza Hut is likely to be perceived as **artificial**, precisely because its *phatic component* is reduced to the minimum.

The hypothesis was evaluated through a survey of customers' (language) attitudes based on questionnaires. The survey was conducted among Romanian undergraduates studying at Ovidius University, as part of a larger pilot project meant to establish the reception of what can be called "speech routines of American descent" in transactional discourse, i.e. the type of pre-patterned, predictable repetitive discourse illustrated above. The sample included 84 Romanian students belonging to one age-group (20 – 25). The informants were asked whether they perceived any differences at the interactional level between McDonalds restaurants and classical restaurants and to account for their answers. Surprisingly, the results of the survey refuted the hypothesis in the case of the age-group under scrutiny. The following four patterns of reception have been identified for this age-group: **50 %** perceived the interaction as *informal, friendly, polite, brief and efficient*; **27.38 %** perceived no differences at the interactional level in terms of politeness; **10.71 %** perceived the interaction as *less polite* than that of a classical restaurant; **6 %** perceived the interaction as impolite because of its *robotic, artificial, clichéd* nature; **4,76 %** did not answer.

Relevant to the discussion of the way this kind of formulaic discourse is perceived are two types of linguistic iconicity: *iconicity of politeness* and *iconicity of quantity*. The way the great majority of my informants perceive the formulaic sequences employed in McDonalds restaurants confirms Haiman's hypothesis (1983, 783). The formulaic sequences used in McDonald's restaurants are brief, concise and to the point, with no unnecessary words, but, at the same time, they are marked by various *markers of politeness* (verbal inflections, pragmatic particles). Apparently these two ingredients, *politeness marker* and *briefness*, are sufficient to make the conversational exchange *friendly and positive-politeness oriented*, at least for some informants.

In addition to, or perhaps due to, their briefness and simple structural complexity, the formulaic sequences employed by McDonald's operators are also *highly predictable*. Predictability is important because it induces a feeling of *security* and *familiarity* and it makes things easier to both employees and customers. In McDonald's restaurants, predictability is achieved not only at the level of the actions performed, but also at the interactional level through the use of speech routines employed. These speech routine may thus convey a sense of familiarity and friendliness.

The patterns of reception that emerged from the survey enabled us to propose a revised hypothesis. The repetitive and predictable short formulaic sequences employed in McDonald's restaurant are subject to the following interpretations: **(i)** *artificial/robotic* and therefore impersonal and impolite; **(ii)** *polite, friendly/familiar*; **(iii)** efficient.

Further research is needed on how this type of transactional discourse is perceived by various sections of the larger population. The survey will be replicated and extended to cover other age groups. Differences in terms of reception are expected to arise among various sections of the population and these differences are likely to be related to a

particular social variable, i.e. the age of the customer/informant, rather than gender, level of education, socio-economic status, etc.

There might be, however, another factor that might influence the way these speech routines are perceived: the customer's familiarity with the English language. The more familiar addressees are with English syntactic structures, the greater the possibility that they perceive speech routines such as *s-aveți o zi bună* ('have a good day') / *s-aveți poftă* ('have a good appetite') / *aici este comanda dumneavoastră* ('here is your order') / *poftiți aici și restu* ('here is your change') as polite and friendly. Conversely, the less familiar addressees are with English syntactic structures, the greater the possibility that they perceive such speech routines as artificial, unnatural, or even impolite because they are word for word translations of English phrases or sentences.

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