Conversational Implicature in Handling Complaints for Receptionists at Si Phum Heritage Boutique Bed & Breakfast Inn

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze the language used by receptionists on how they verbally respond to guests' complaints at Si Phum Heritage Boutique Bed & Breakfast and to explain the reasons for violating the communication principle. The researchers use Grice's Conversational Implicature to analyze the responses to the complaints from five receptionists working at the property. A descriptive method was used in this research. The data were collected using a simulation technique; five common guest complaints were spoken to the five receptionists. Then, their responses were recorded, rewritten, transcribed, and analyzed on the basis of Grice's Conversational Implicature.

It was found that the receptionists gave different answers and they violated the different maxims of communication as suggested by Grice. Some of them flouted all of the maxims while others did not at all, or flouted only some of the maxims. This is because their responses were associated with Thai culture that is different from that of the west or other cultures. The receptionists flouted the maxim of quantity the most at 76 percent, then the maxim of quality and the maxim of manner equally at 44 percent. The lowermost is the maxim of relevance at 24 percent. Even though the receptionists flouted the conversational maxims, the receptionists had effort and some knowledge in their responses so as to meet guests' satisfaction.

Key words: Communication Problem, Conversational Implicature, bed & breakfast property, accommodation, receptionists

Introduction

Mackenzie & Chan(2009) explains that a hotel has been a place for people who are travelling for their meetings, vacations, seminars, shopping, etc. At present, there are many types of hotels in the hospitality industry due to the size of rooms, facilities, prices and other factors. They are, for example, city hotels, resorts, hostels, boutique hotels, and bed & breakfast properties. Nowadays, a bed & breakfast has become very popular for many people because they are inexpensive and provide new services which are different from that of general hotels. Bed & breakfast properties also provide breakfast of their signatures. The charm of bed & breakfast hotels is

that there are a small number of guests for lower prices. Like other kinds of accommodation, Baker, 2001 suggests that the first people in a bed and breakfast property who deal with guests are front office personnel. Receptionists are especially expected to be friendly, professional, responsive and able to perform multi-tasks as emphasized by Baum&Odgers(2001). There are many key responsibilities of receptionists including commencing in-house duties and providing excellent customer service. Bardi (2003)adds that they have to be able to be aware of resolving guests' complaints and keep them satisfied. They also need to cater to requests made by guests and ensure them a pleasant stay. Generally, people expect to receive good service. If guests are unhappy with the service they are receiving, they usually make complaints. People are of different types which dictates how someone will respond and behave in any given situation. It is better if receptionists have taken all steps to ensure that they have done their utmost effort to avoid complaints. However, from time to time, a receptionist has to deal with an upset customer. The challenge is to handle the situation in a way that leaves the customer with an impression because guests, who are pleased with the service, as stated by Smith& Wheeler(2002) can possibly represent as a passionate brand advocate for a hotel. Moreover, handling customers' complaints, using language effectively, is vital, especially the English language which is a medium for international communication used in the hospitality industry.

Pragmatic strategies in handling complaints either direct or indirect expression is referred to the use of language by people. He, Zhaoxiong(2002) Verschueren,(1998) summarize that pragmatics is a linguistic discipline that specializes on how people employ graceful language for communication. According to the pragmatic perspective, all linguistic phenomena, including the use of language, can be analyzed. In the following, we are going to discuss how people avoid explicitness in language from the perspective of conversational implicature. Conversational implicature, namely, "hidden meaning between the lines" and "an implied meaning" in its common sense, was put forward by Grice (1975) in 1975. Moreover, Shen Xiaolong (2003) terms the literal meaning of a sentence as "sentence meaning" and the specific context as "utterance meaning". When the two meanings are different, conversational implicature will appear. People often convey other hidden meanings more than literal meaning in a conversation with one of the purposes to try to avoid explicitness in a language. According to Grice's theory of conversational implicature, the meaning of utterances can be described in two terms as entailment, natural or conventional meanings of utterance, and implicature, non-natural or non-conventional meanings. Dinnen Rosalynn (2013) studied Handling Customer Complaints in the Hospitality by examining the engagement and expertise of hotels in handling customers' complaints. The researchers interviewed four and five star hotel managers in Scotland. The findings reveal that encouraging customers' complaints and feedback should be seen as a way in which to develop a better relationship with and re-

tain customers. The results also confirm the importance of having employee training in the area of customers' complaints.

Moreover, Ekiz Erdogan H. and others (2011) conducted research on how to manage guest complaints to find out the current complaint handling practices in Hong Kong hotel industry, a well-performing destination in complaint handling, and to highlight factors influence organizational responses to guest complaints. The data were collected from self-administrated questionnaires which were sent to hotel managers or front office managers who were involved with guests' complaints. The results showed that most of the reported complaints were being handled by managers or supervisors. Since employees represent the hotel at that moment, hotels should not let their employees look for their managers to offer even a small atonement which will comfort dissatisfied customers standing in front of a reception desk. The key to prevent such occurrences is empowerment. In hospitality, guests' complaints should properly be handled as Brown& Levinson (1978) suggests that in case of delays in complaint resolution, reasons and justifications should be provided to guests. A proper explanation of the situation may prevent further annoyance of the guest who is already feeling frustrated, angry or even hurt. Although having procedures are very important while dealing with complaining guests, companies should not be rigid as analyzing specific the situations. In other words, as they are reacting to guests' complaints, individual circumstances of each case need to be taken into account as suggested by Etzel and Silverman (1981) Fornell and Wernerfelt (1988). This flexibility may create a positive environment in which guests may be more willing to cooperate in the solution of their complaints. Above discussion leads to the hypothesis that handling the complaints properly will have a significant positive relationship with organization's responses to guest complaints. To better understand complaints, communication strategies are also vital. Chen (2010) studied pragmatic strategies on avoidance of explicitness in language to investigate how people avoid explicit language in daily communication. He used conversational implicature to find pragmatic strategies used for avoidance of explicitness in language and to analyze sorts of reasons for the explicitness from the perspective of pragmatics. It is found that the indirect expression of language is a common occurrence in daily life and avoidance of explicitness of language often plays a crucial role in interpersonal communication. Indirect expressions of language can not only avoid monotonousness in straightforward communication, but also can be regarded as lubricant of linguistic communication. Additionally, Vikry's (2014) research titled "An Analysis of Conversational Implicature in Iron Man 3" aimed at classifying the types of conversational implicature resulted from the non-observance maxims which have been done by the characters in Iron Man 3. The data were collected from the dialogues taken from the movie, estimated as implicature in data cards. After analyzing the dialogues, the researcher found conversational implicatures rising because the utterances of the characters flout-observance maxims. They flouted the maxim of quantity in two dia-

logues, the maxim of relation in two dialogues, the maxim of manner in 5 dialogues, opting out the maxim of manner in 1 dialogue, opting out maxim of quantity and manner 1 dialogue and violating maxim of quantity and manner in 1 dialogue. The writer also found the existence of the two types of conversational implicature. Those were generalized conversational implicature in 2 dialogues and particularized conversational implicature in 13 dialogues.

Similar to Vikry's (2014) study, this research is to analyze the Conversational Implicature, but of the responses from the receptionists working in a Bread & Breakfast property in that a small property can be benefited in their daily operation, staff training, and to explain why the receptionists violate the communication principle, which will be beneficial for training at the property and perhaps at other small bed and breakfast inns.

Objective

This qualitative study is to analyze the language used when handling complaints by receptionists at Si Phum Heritage Boutique Bed & Breakfast and to explain the reasons why they flout the communication principle using Grice's Conversational Implicature concept. It is hoped that the research will contribute to further trainings at Si Phum Heritage Boutique Bed & Breakfast.

Materials and Methods

This research used simulation as a technique to collect data. The simulation was conducted to investigate the use of spoken language and the spontaneous record of relevant data was implemented in accordance with the aims and objectives of the study. Therefore, the conversations between the researchers outing as a guest and the receptionists were used as a research tool for data collection. The data were collected from five receptionists working at Si Phum Heritage Boutique Bed & Breakfast. The researchers design different conversational situations between the receptionists and customers to gather the data in two stps. Firstly, the researcher would make complaints to receptionists and then recorded their responses. The common complaints were obtained from the property manager. Then, the selected data were firstly transcribed into written texts, and were classified into their types of maxim violation based on Grice's Conversational Implicature. Finally, the transcribed texts were analyzed using "The Cooperative Principle."

Theoretical Framework

According to Grice's theory of conversational implicature, the meaning of utterances can be described in two terms as Entailment, which is natural or conventional meanings of utterance and implicature which is non-natural or non-conventional meanings conveyed and understood implicitly through hints. The meanings are variable depending on the contexts according to Davis and Wayne(1998) Grice (1975) describes that speakers intend to be cooperative when they talk. His notion is called 'The Coop-

erative Principle' which is categorized into four principles or maxims as follows.

1. Maxims of Quality

- Do not say what you believe to be false. (i.e., "don't lie")

- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. (i.e., "don't say things which you can't back up") One of the main uses of the maxims, aside from describing how communication generally takes place, is to signal the presence of indirect speech.

2. Maxims of Quantity

- Make your contribution as informative as is required. (i.e., "Don't say too little")

- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (i.e., "Don't say too much") We usually assume that people are telling us everything we need to know. If they don't say something, then we assume they simply do not know that information.

3. Maxims of Manner

- Avoid obscurity of expression.

- Avoid ambiguity.

- Be brief.

- Be orderly.

4. Maxim of Relevance

- Be relevant.

This maxim is considered the most important since it is responsible for preventing random, incoherent conversations lacking any continuity.

Common complaints made by the property's guests as used in this study

Complaint 1: "There's no free Wi-Fi in my room?"

Complaint 2: "I cancelled my hotel room booking just before I was supposed to check in. Why can't I get my money back?"

Complaint 3: "That's not what it says (or looks like) on your website."

Complaint 4: "I'm supposed to pay extra for this? How was I supposed to know?"

Complaint 5: "Are you having different foods? I want something more special than this."

After receiving the responses from the receptionists at Si Phum Heritage Boutique Bed & Breakfast in written texts, they were analyzed in details using Grice's Conversational Implicature as a principle to show the violation of communication maxims.

Research Findings and Discussion

By using the simulation technique accompanied by five common complaints, all data were recorded from the receptionists working at Si Phum Heritage Boutique Bed & Breakfast. The result of communication maxims is then shown in the following table (Table1).

According to the findings, the researchers found a number of implicatures in the dialogues showing that the receptionists violated all of Grice's maxims which could interrupt efficiency of their conversations with guests. Overall, it is obvious that a majority of the receptionists (76%) flouted the maxim of quantity while only two-fifths of them flouted the

Table1 : Frequency and Percentage of Flouting the Maxims				
Complaint	**Maxims of Quality**	**Maxims of Quantity**	**Maxims of Manner**	**Maxim of Relevance**
Compliant 1	2 out of 5 (40%)	2 out of 5 (40%)	0 out of 5 (0%)	0 out of 5 (0%)
Complaint 2	3 out of 5 (60%)	4 out of 5 (80%)	3 out of 5 (60%)	3 out of 5 (60%)
Complaint 3	2 out of 5 (40%)	3 out of 5 (60%)	3 out of 5 (60%)	2 out of 5 (40%)
Compliant 4	1 out of 5 (20%)	5 out of 5 (100%)	2 out of 5 (40%)	0 out of 5 (0%)
Complaint 5	3 out of 5 (60%)	5 out of 5 (100%)	3 out of 5 (60%)	2 out of 5 (40%)
Total	11 out of 25 (44%)	19 out of 25 (76%)	11 out of 25 (44%)	7 out of 5 (28%)

maxim of quality and the maxim of manner at 44% each. This implies that the receptionists may possess limited knowledge of the property and English language. The lowermost flouted the maxim of relevance (28%). This can be implied that they want to save face of the guests.

The first simulated complaint was about Wi-Fi connection. The guests asked for Wi-Fi because they wanted to connect the internet signal on their devices but they could not do so.

The simulation shows that 40% of the receptionists flouted the maxim of quality and another 40% flouted the maxim of quantity. None of them flouted the maxim of manner and the maxim of relevance. This points out that, all receptionists responded to the complaints with relevancy and order but some receptionists said for which they lacked adequate evidence and did not make the required information to guests. Thus, they flouted the maxim of quality and quantity as one of the receptionist said *"At Si Phum Heritage all room are free Wi-Fi and when, but but you have a problem might be a connect to system Uhmm because I, I think every guest is used situation same time".* This complaint should have not occurred if the on duty receptionists had provided this information at check-in.

In the second complaint, three receptionists flouted the maxim of quality, the maxim of manner and the maxim of relevance equally while most people flouted the maxim of quantity at 80%. It is noted that all of the receptionists flouted one or more maxims, which means that they did not understand the complaint clearly because they could not respond to the answer that guests would like to know as one of the receptionists said *"The policy my hotel. If you book, if you book my hotel is cannot refund, before you reservations. You can cancel before 7 days".*

Here, the guests wished to get a refund since they canceled their reservations just before their checking in. However, the receptionists could not give a refund because the cancelling policy is always and clearly written on the website. This can occur because the website may not arrange infor-

mation in good layouts. The guests might oversee the canceling policy since it may be hard to find on the website. Thus, the property should move "Cancel Booking" icon to a better seen position on its website and regard this problem as part not to be repeated for future case in the manual policy. It is always a good idea to have written policies to deal with different levels of complaints for consistency and future trainings.

The receptionists flouted all of the maxims in Complaint Three as in Complaint Two though less than the previous complaint. The receptionists flouted the maxim of quantity and the maxim of manner at 60% equally. While 40% of them flouted the maxim of quality and one-fifths flouted the maxim of relevance. This shows that the receptionists were not sure when giving responses to guests because they answered the guests using their own feeling and did not have information to support their responses as in *"May be this picture have just to decorate"*. Some receptionists do not speak clearly; for example, *"The photo Ahhh the photo my room in the hotel is not same in the website because Ahhh have problem…. Have problem in Ahhh Err in my website I think I is recheck photo in your website again"*.

In Complaint Three, the guests were dissatisfied with the condition of the property as they did not look the same as the pictures on the website. In this case the property should update the picture regularly to its current condition. The receptionists have to be sincere when communicating with the guests as Fornell and Wernerfelt [10] stated that *"a proper explanation of the situation may prevent further annoyance of the guest who is already feeling frustrated, angry or even hurt…"*

In the fourth compliant, the receptionists flouted the maxim of manner at 40% and the maxims of quality at 20%. This is because they did not speak orderly and omitted some words. It is noted that all of them flouted the maxims of quantity, while none of them flouted the maxim of relevance. This number indicates that the receptionists understand the question but some of them did not give the required information to guests; for example, "*everything is free, not to pay more,*" and some receptionists make the contribution more informative than is required as in "*When you book for Err when you book when you pay when you pay is for room is my hotel is include everything Ahhh we have it and water and coffee and tea include in you room already."*

When considering Complaint Four, the guests did not know they would have to pay extra apart from the room rate. In this case, the property should provide extra information on their website on things a guest can eat or use and explain this once guests check in. This will ensure that the guests are not confused

In the last complaint, all receptionists flouted all maxims in this complaint. They flouted the maxim of quality and maxim of manner equally at 60%. All of them flouted the maxim of quantity and 40% flouted the maxim of relevance. The reasons are similar to Complaint Four, because they did not give the required information to guests and some receptionists make the contribution less informative than is required; for instance, "*No we have just this.*" Some re-

ceptionists say what is not relevance to the discourse as *"Sorry for your convenience this is some step food from our hotel,"* and some said that they were not sure of the answer; for example, *"At Err at heritage I have breakfast just Ahhh mini breakfast for… the customer because I have mini mini bar mini bar! For cooking."*

The results revealed that the guests were not satisfied with the food provided at the property and wished to have different food, especially breakfast. Once the property can alter its breakfast not to be similar to that served at regular hotels, guests can be more excited and look forward to the next morning. This can become the signature of the property.

Even though the receptionists flouted the conversation maxims due to their lacks of full knowledge of the property and their limited knowledge of the English language, it is shown that the receptionists have effort and some language knowledge to sort things out.

The cooperative principle for a good conversation is a social rule. Grice's maxims indicate that men's natural language isn't normally ideal in good communication, so is the language spoken by the receptionists which may cause problems for the service. Moreover, the property has not conducted training sessions on required information. This is the cause of ineffective language skills when responding to guests' complaints.

It was found that the receptionists flouted all of the maxims in some complaints whereas they flouted some maxims, or did not flouted any maxims in others. It is therefore suggested that the property focus on the educational background and their language competency since they are important for a front office position. Written policies must be set to handle levels of complaints in order to build up consistency for each occurrences and training sessions.

Suggestions and Application

Since training is crucial, the property should train its receptionists before their first day of work and periodically; for example, every six months during the low season period, to make sure that they understand how to appropriately respond to questions and complaints. Designed English courses should include communication principles. Moreover, they need to be tested to follow the development of their training sessions. Incentives, rewards, and promotions should be granted to the receptionists who score well.

In the recruitment process, human resources personnel should have language assessments and interviews to test the candidates' language ability. The trusted and internationally recognized language proficiency test such as TOEIC can be employed in this stage with the minimum usually suggested for the hospitality industry since the test is widely accepted and used in nearly all sectors of the industry. Other equivalent English proficiency tests may also be used in this process.

Furthermore, the property must have a system in handling complaints set as standards for their front desk staff to follow. This should include complaints that guests write on websites or applications. As guests' orientation, in accordance with the stand-

ards and principles set by the hospitality organization, is vital as suggested by Kelly(1995) that the property should employ a professional evaluator to check whether the receptionists have improved their communication skills after the training sessions from time to time. It is necessary to test their progress to ensure better service quality.

Susskind and others (2000) point that organizational support, which is another important factor to improve the staff's working skills, involves two independent dimensions; coworker support and supervisory support. Thus, an owner of a property has to be concerned with this as well as part of a communication improvement.

It is observed that the receptionists violated some of the maxims such as the maxim of quantity. Normally, Thai people would not like to say much to people whom they are not familiar with. They are sometimes too considerate and may think that they would disturb the guests. However, guests, especially those from the western world would like to get full information. This is the issue of cultural awareness.

Thus, further research should be conducted regarding cultural differences in communication which can be beneficial to front desk staff. Skills in English language are not enough without the understanding of cultural differences, especially in ASEAN countries which are involved with cultural diversities.

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