

“Right, what are we having done today?”: Examining Cultural Challenges in Service - Encounters at a British Beauty Salon in Kuwait

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Abstract: Kuwaiti society is increasingly striving to evolve into western modernity. It is for this reason that the Kuwait marketplace heavily relies on foreign franchises, be they British franchises such as Harvey Nichols and Marks and Spencer, or American franchises such as Dunkin’ Donuts and Starbucks (Welsh et al. 2001). These activities entail a large influx of western workers who are unaccustomed to the conservative, Arab and Islamic culture of the host country.

This paper investigates the interaction between hairdressers from the UK in a British beauty salon and its Kuwaiti clients, providing a useful insight into the cross-cultural challenges encountered between participants from different backgrounds in this service-oriented setting. The subject of this study is an area that has seen little research in the Gulf region, a part of the world which is not the frequent object of sociolinguistic and ethnographic research (but see a study carried out in the UAE by Palfreyman and Al Khalil 2003; and another in Kuwait by Almbayei 2010). Additionally, this study is significant because although numerous studies look at communication in the hairdressing service sector in western societies (see, for example Cohen 2010; Garzaniti et al. 2011; McCarthy 2000; Sharma and Black 2001; and Toerien and Kitzinger 2007), a few studies have concentrated on the Middle Eastern regions.

This study utilizes sociolinguistic qualitative analysis to explore various patterns of client/hairdresser interaction. All transcribed instances of interaction presented in this study have been collected in conjunction with eight weeks of ethnographic observation and interviews with both clients and hairdressers. Analysis specifically focuses on three forms of interaction: task-oriented talk, relational small talk, and silence or non-talk (Holmes 2000, Jowroski 2000, McCarthy 2000, Tracy and Coupland 1990).

Findings indicate that cross-cultural differences between foreign hairdressers and local, Kuwaiti clients are manifested in (non-language related) challenges that often affect hairdresser/client relationships. This paper, therefore, highlights the importance of training programs in helping to introduce potential foreign employees who aspire to work in the Gulf region to the importance of cultural background knowledge of the host country.

Keywords: Kuwait, hairdressing, service-related talk, small talk, silence, cross-cultural challenges.

1. INTRODUCTION

As with women in many parts of the Arab world, Kuwaiti women pay special attention to their hair. For them, their hair (whether or not covered with the Hijab) not only represents their identity as individuals, but is also part of their cultural makeup as Arab women. For many women in Kuwait, therefore, going to a beauty salon – mainly to have their hair styled, but also alongside other maintenance requirements, such as waxing, eyebrows shaping, manicures, pedicures, and so on – is a weekly ritual. And although having the latest hairstyle or a fashionable hair color is very important to most women, to many Kuwaiti women the brand name of the beauty salon in which they style their hair is of equal importance.

Kuwait is an economically and technologically advanced country. During the post-Gulf War period, evident traces of globalization and the exporting of western culture have influenced Kuwaiti people's behavior and cultural norms. Kuwaitis nowadays invest large amounts of time and money in building a physical appearance or a public image that necessarily portrays wealth, comfort and luxury. 'Image' therefore is the decisive factor in most of their lifestyle choices and daily necessities from their selection of transportation vehicle, to certain personal possessions, such as their wallets or handbags, to the restaurants they eat in, to the salons in which they style their hair (hair-care being an important grooming essential among Kuwaiti men, too.)

In the last two decades there has been a strong tendency for many Kuwaiti consumers to favor western franchises, more precisely American or British brand names, over local and regional names. This is especially true with regards to the hairdressing service sector. The hairdressing clientele referred to here are mostly upper- and middle-class, well-travelled, cosmopolitan women who are convinced that western hairdressers are more professional stylists because they are equipped with many years of up-to-date expertise in hair-care and experience in comparison to their Arab counterparts. However, the former hairdressers' expertise comes at a price tag of double, triple and even higher than more traditional hairdressing found in local beauty salons.

The fact that a beauty salon such as the one being studied in the present paper has to abide by western hairstyling, premium, hair-care standards, means that the beauty salon staff have to be all western, highly-trained employees in hairdressing. It is these characteristics that are quite alluring to wealthy clientele. And yet, ideal to some as it may be, beauty salons such as the one under study could very well foster cross-cultural differences between western hairdressers and Kuwaiti clients, as the data in this study will demonstrate.

In general, Kuwaiti women are accustomed to having their hair cut, styled, treated, or colored according to their preferences. Whether or not the hair treatment requested is suitable for them or is even recommended for their hair type, their requests are usually implemented by most Kuwaiti-run beauty salons. western (especially franchise) beauty salons, on the other hand, run their hairstyling business based on high-quality, rigorous, hairdressing standards with priority given to maintaining and treating a client's hair with utmost care while achieving the best results in hairstyling. For example, a British hairdresser would adamantly refuse to color a client's jet-black hair light blond not only because the light hair color will starkly clash with a dark complexion, but because this would mean bleaching the client's hair and therefore damaging its texture.

Based on my 23 years of experience as a client at various beauty salons, another noticeable cultural difference between western beauty salons and Kuwaiti-run ones is the varying degree in the ratio of hair-care, transactional communication and small talk that takes place during service encounters. In Kuwaiti-run beauty salons, hairdressers will often engage in small talk in the form of gossiping about the latest societal goings on, asking personal questions¹, or engaging in topic talk, or storytelling, while hair-care advice and recommendations are usually kept to a minimum, if mentioned at all. In fact, in some such salons, the clients' preferences for silence and the respect of their personal privacy are hardly acknowledged. On the other hand, western beauty salons are notably quieter and hairdressers often prefer, above all else, to offer hair-care advice in a friendly, but business-like manner. In this paper, I explore

¹ For example: 'Are you married?', 'Do you have children?', 'Where do you work?', and so on.

the different patterns of interaction between hairdressers and clients in a Kuwait-based, British beauty salon by the name of English Rose². Also, I discuss the functions or purposes of these instances of interaction and show the cultural influences and consequences of such service encounters.

2. BEAUTY SALON ENCOUNTERS

Talk that takes place in service-oriented settings can be viewed as having a 'communicative goal' either from a transactional perspective (e.g. a sales request) and/or a relational perspective (e.g. greetings, see Cheepen 2000: 288). There are certain service-oriented settings with more appropriate spatio-temporal opportunities for communicative goals to take place between participants than others (see McCarthy 2000: 104-5). Compare, for example, the interactional experience in which one engages during a hairstyling session in a beauty salon – where the time and place permit for such encounters – with that of buying groceries in a supermarket. The latter service encounter is likely to be short and at peak periods, hardly the time or place for customer and cashier to chat (but see Kuiper and Flindall 2000).

A beauty salon is more than a place where a service is rendered. The physical surroundings and atmosphere in the salon, the 'being pampered' experience on offer, the variety of cultures present in one place, the relationship between hairdresser and client, the brand name of the service provider, and last but not least, the fact that the setting is gender segregated, are all important factors that affect the nature of interaction in the context being studied (see Maybin 1996: 12, Holmes 2000: 367 and Schegloff 1999). In most high-quality beauty salons there is usually a balance between obligatory, service-related talk (e.g. a sales request) and non-obligatory, relational talk (e.g. small talk, see McCarthy 2000: 87). Hair consultation and recommendations as well as compliments rendered to the clients on their hair by the hairdresser are necessary because they are considered part of the service provided. As for small talk, it remains an option chosen by either the hairdresser or the client for

² A pseudonym.

different reasons, such as: establishing rapport between the two participants (see McCarthy 2000: 89), and building friendships – albeit ‘commercial ones’ (see Garzaniti et al. 2001; Price and Arnould 1999). Indeed, numerous studies linked to service encounters in the beauty industry have demonstrated the importance of the relationship between client and stylist and the significant role of the hairdresser (as an ‘emotional worker’³) in creating a welcoming and friendly environment by focusing on the relational aspect while performing the grooming tasks (Toerien and Kitzinger 2007; Sharma and Black 2001).

Small talk plays an important role in service encounters and it is mostly up to the beauty salon worker to ‘preform friendliness’ in order to establish client loyalty (see Lee et al. 2001: p. 16), engage in ‘topic talk’ with the client (see Toerien and Kitzinger 2007: p. 654) and even go as far as being the client’s ‘counselor-like therapist’ (see Sharma and Black 2001: p. 926; also see Cohen 2010). However, there is hardly any research that looks at non-transactional small talk, and especially non-transactional interaction and service-oriented talk that are viewed in light of cross-cultural differences (but see Bianchi 2001; Bailey 2001). Furthermore, hardly any research to my knowledge looks at ‘silence’ as part of the service encounter. Also, most research in the integrative area of service encounters, and culture and communication is largely based on western, mixed gender societies. Therefore, the examination of service encounters in Arab, Middle Eastern, gender-segregated settings is needed. In fact, access to such settings for study purposes is very challenging indeed, hence the importance of the present study, which will undoubtedly contribute sociolinguistic and ethnographic insights into an understudied area.

3. METHOD OF STUDY

The data I examine in this paper consist largely of short-hand notes of dialogues between hairdressers and clients. Given the all-female, private nature

³ The idea of the beauty salon worker being expected to engage in personalizing a service encounter with the client in order to establish customer satisfaction not merely from skill alone, originates from Hochschild’s (1983) concept of ‘emotional labor’, which emphasizes the idea that service employees are paid in order to appear presentable and deal with customers politely and friendly.

of the setting under study and the fact that the Kuwaiti culture is very reserved and traditional with regards to women's privacy, I was unable to use a digital recorder to record client/hairdresser interaction. Fortunately though, I was granted permission to use semi-structured oral questions to interview both clients and hairdressers. I was also given permission to take down in writing (using short-hand) the conversations between clients and hairdressers. Considering the cultural reservations that prevail in Kuwait, this method of written-form data collection enabled me to obtain information about beauty salon talk patterns from both hairdressers and clients.

The two sources of data: the conversations between clients and hairdressers, and interviews with participants were conducted in light of insights gained from an observational period of 8 weeks, for approximately 2 hours per day (excluding weekends due to the salon being too busy). This amounted to a total of 60 hours. The first 2 weeks of this period were dedicated to pilot observation, which allowed me to form interaction-related insights to help formulate my interview questions and direct my research focus. The conversations between the hairdressers and their clients were chosen at random depending upon the time that I was present at the beauty salon. The dialogue between participants typically took place during the hairdressing task that was being performed, each task lasting an average of 40 minutes. My role as an interviewer would therefore come immediately following the termination of the hairdressing task, because I would be unlikely to hinder the process of hair styling, coloring or cutting. The interviews with clients lasted for about 5-7 minutes. My interviews with all hairdressers lasted longer, between 10 and 15 minutes. Throughout the process of data collection, participants were informed that they were free to edit or delete data as they wished. Also, while at the beauty salon I dressed in black in order to blend in with the hairdressers who were always dressed in a black uniform. One final point to mention is the distinction between the stylist (the person who is responsible for hair cutting and styling) and the technician (the person who responsible for hair coloring). I maintain this distinction throughout the present paper.

The interviews were ethnographic in nature in that they were designed in accordance with my observation of the specific setting as well as the documented client/hairdresser interactions of various types. This multi-faceted method of data collection enabled me to achieve substantial insight into the nature of the setting under study and an accurate understanding of small talk, service-oriented talk and silence between participants from different socio-cultural backgrounds.

4. SERVICE-ORIENTED TALK:

‘Right, what are we having done today?’

A “service encounter” is a face-to-face, interactional situation between the customer and the service provider (Merritt 1976: p. 321). Service-oriented talk in a beauty salon setting is talk that is related to hairdressing tasks (see McCarthy 2000). In services that take place for longer periods of time and require close provider-consumer contact, cultural differences can affect customer satisfaction within the service encounter (Bianchi 2001). The presence of a variety of cultures in one place, with participants that have different backgrounds, makes the successful customer/provider interaction during service encounters quite a challenge. Service providers make great efforts to adjust to local cultural preferences (Riddle, 1992; also demonstrated in the present study). In the specific setting being examined at the beauty salon, the English Rose, I consider service-oriented talk to include, hair-care consultations, explaining the hairstyling task, compliments about to a client’s hair, marketing hair products, introducing new hair treatments, and client/hairdresser negotiations over haircuts, styling and color (which I discuss in Section 4.1).

This service-oriented type of client/hairdresser interaction is not only essential in terms of establishing customer/service provider boundaries but also, more importantly, it emphasizes the high standards of hairdressing expertise, which is lucrative to the hairdressing business. Many beauty salon clients in the present study explained that they often choose to have their hair styled in this up-market, fashionable hair salon – English Rose – because of its high-end,

international popularity, and western, well-trained staff as well as its high-quality hair-care products. Clients therefore expect to receive expert recommendations and advice, which should be suited to their specific hair-type as well as special time and attention given to their hair. In other words, they expect to be ‘pampered’ (see Sharma and Black 2001: pp. 918-9). Equally, all the hairdressers at the salon English Rose salon are aware that a large part of their communication with their clients has to focus on the client’s hair. I was able to confirm this during my observation of client/hairdresser encounters in the present beauty salon setting.

The service encounters that take place in the English Rose are mostly ritualized, typically starting with a phatic greeting and usually a handshake or a hug of recognition between the hairdresser and a regular client (Malinowski 1923; Schegloff and Sacks 1999). The client is then robed with a loose gown and asked to wait in the waiting area until the designated hairdresser attends to her hair (usually, for no longer than 5 minutes). Also, among the routine client/hairdresser exchanges are hair-care consultations that have a common pattern beginning with the hairdresser asking the client what type of hair-care treatment she uses for her hair and moving on to the hairdresser recommending one of the many hair products they have that is suitable for the client’s hair as well as giving advice on hair care and styling more generally. Below is an example of this type of ritualized exchange which also includes specialized advice offered by one of the stylists to a client who had just finished coloring her hair.

Extract 1:

1 **Stylist:** [touches the client’s hair and nods and smiles in approval.]

2 It’s very nice...it’s gorgeous.

3 **Client:** [smiles] Thank you.

4 **Stylist:** [Pauses for a few minutes.] Do you put any products on
5 your hair?

6 **Client:** No.

7 **Stylist:** That’s what I want you to start doing.

8 **Client:** [Nods in approval.]

9 **Stylist:** There are some nice products which help protect the hair from
10 being ruined by the environment we live in and from the heat of the
11 hairdryer. Also, they add shine to your hair and give definition to your
12 hairstyle.

In the above exchange, the hair stylist typically starts by complimenting the client's hair. Compliments are quite frequent expressions of 'positive politeness' (Brown and Levinson 1987: p. 102) that are expressed by hairdressers essentially as part of the service provided to the client by beauty salon workers. Indeed, the beauty salon is the place where women come to be groomed, pampered and made to feel special both verbally and through the hairdressing task (see Sharma and Black 2001: p. 918). According to Holmes (1995) 'complements are prime examples of speech acts which notice and attend to the hearers' "interests, wants, needs, goods" (Holmes 1995: p. 119).

Additionally, the hairdressers I interviewed believe that hair-care does not have to end when the client leaves the beauty salon. Clients can beautify themselves at home too, especially if they buy high-quality products that are well-suited for their hair. In the words of one of the hairdressers, 'We always advice our clients to buy our high-quality, hair-care products because they will see better, long-term results' (see instances of this sales strategy in Extract 1, lines 8-12).

4.1 NEGOTIATING HAIR-LENGTH AND COLOR IN HAIRDRESSING:

'I want to look like the lady in the picture'

The hairdressers I interviewed find that it is their duty as hair-care experts to teach clients how to care for their hair and most clients realize that this is a privilege they will only find in a beauty salon of high standards, such as English Rose. However, sometimes imparting expert advice by professionals can be seen as an imposition from the client's point of view; at least, according to the clients taking part in this study. What starts of as a typical hairdresser/client encounter related to the hairdressing task that is requested is soon transformed

into a lengthy negotiation over the length or style of a haircut or the shade of a hair color. Below (Extracts 2 and 3) are two examples of such negotiations between hairdresser and client. The first extract, which is about negotiating the length of a haircut, is less intense than Extract 3.

Extract 2:

1 **Stylist:** [After having cut the client's **waist-length** hair into a very
2 short crop, she looks at the picture of the hairstyle that the client has
3 requested her to copy and then at the client's hair.] I think this
4 is a good length.

5 **Client:** [Looks at the picture in the stylist's hand and then at her new, short
6 haircut.] But I want my hair to look like hers [Pointing at the picture in the
7 hairdresser's hand and then looking back at her hair through the
8 mirror.] I think I'd prefer to go shorter on the sides.

9 **Stylist:** [Surprised] Really?! [pauses] Why don't you go home and
10 play with it (meaning style it) and then decide if you really want to go
11 shorter.

12 **Client:** Just a little bit shorter though. [Giggles and signals with her
13 thumb and index fingers the sign for 'a little bit']

14 **Stylist:** [After cutting some more of the client's hair and then looks
15 at the client through the mirror in search of her approval to stop
16 cutting.] There.

17 **Client:** Ok, I'll go home and see what it'll be like and maybe come
18 back if I want it shorter.

19 **Stylist:** I mean, if you want it shorter, we could go shorter here,
20 [Touches the client's now very short hair on the sides of her
21 head], but your scalp will show, are you ok with that?

22 **Client:** Yeah ok, let's go shorter, then.

23 **Stylist:** [After cutting some more of the client's hair.] There, how's
24 that? Much better?

25 **Client:** [Nods with approval.] Yeah, much better.

Negotiations with regards to the length of a haircut or the shade of a hair tint are very common in English Rose. In the case of Extract 2, the client makes four attempts to let the hairdresser know that she would prefer her hair to be cut shorter (see lines 6, 8, 12, 17 and 22). Even in line 17, when the client is finally happy with the new length of her hair (which used to be waist-length, see line 1), she tells the hairdresser that she may come back later perhaps to have her hair cut even shorter. It may be a lengthy negotiation over hair length, but clearly it is a friendly negotiation. This is obvious from the client's giggling and hand signal indicating 'just a little bit shorter' (lines 12-3) and the hairdressers justification of why she thinks she should not cut the client's hair shorter 'but your scalp will show, are you ok with that?' (line 21).

It is not uncommon for conflict to occur between the client's expectations, and what is suitable for her hair type and what the hairdresser (based on experience and expertise) believes is an unreasonable or impossible hair styling request. But it is the manner in which both hairdresser and client verbally deal with this hair-related dilemma that is worth a closer look. Unlike the calm – albeit persistent – negotiation exemplified in Extract 2, a client/hairdresser exchange can soon become a struggle of wills between the client, who seems to believe that she is the individual with the power since she is paying for the service, and the hairdresser, who is, in fact, the powerful party in this encounter, given that she is the source of knowledge, experience and a representative of the institutional rules of the salon (see Holmes 2000: p. 51). Extract 3 below, demonstrates clearly how the hairdressers in the present setting often struggle with clients that feel they have to see their requirements met against all odds simply because they have paid for this service to be fulfilled, which – in a way – echoes the idea of 'emotional labor' mentioned above (see Section 2). In the following extract a client who is invited to a wedding later that evening, hopes to have a major hair color transformation to her hair:

Extract 3:

1 **Technician:** [Touches client's hair and looks at client through the mirror]

2 Right, what are we doing today?

3 **Client:** I want my roots done as well as highlights and lowlights, like this
4 lady's hair [shows the hairdresser a picture of a blond, Hollywood movie
5 actress].

6 **Technician:** [Looks at the picture and then at the client through the mirror
7 with frustration.] Well [pause], I can do your roots but it's getting late. So
8 I can't do highlights and lowlights.

9 **Client:** [Is clearly upset because her request can only be partially achieved,
10 so she looks at her friend, who is sitting next to her having her hair
11 styled by another hairdresser, and starts to badmouth the technician in
12 Arabic⁴ and then answers the technician.] O.K., fine but I want to go two
13 shades lighter.

14 **Technician:** [Pauses again, and has a concerned look on her face]
15 I can only lift your hair up one shade lighter otherwise the warmth of your
16 original color will show at the roots.

17 **Client:** [Insists] But I want my hair to be much lighter!

18 **Technician:** Well, I'd do a stripe test and show you what I mean, but
19 you'd have to wait 50 minutes for that alone and there's no time this
20 evening. [pauses] As I said, I could do your roots but I can only
21 lift your hair one shade up.

22 **Client:** [Who by now is clearly very upset because none of her requests
23 have been met. Once more, she expresses her anger to her friend in
24 Arabic and avoids making eye contact with the technician.]

25 **Technician:** [Stands by the client for a while waiting for further instructions
26 related to the hair-coloring task requested. Eventually, she starts to feel
27 awkward and therefore politely addresses the client with a question before
28 she retreats.] Do you need me to hang around any longer?

29 **Client:** [Answers with disdain, while still avoiding eye contact with
30 the hairdresser.] No!!

Upon asking the client afterwards about this heated negotiation (see Extract 3, above) she informed me that she dislikes coming into an expensive

⁴ Knowing well that the hairdresser does not understand Arabic.

salon with a picture of how she wants her hair to look only to be told by an expert that it is not possible. According to her:

‘If I want to look like the actress in the picture then the hairdresser, who claims to be the expert, should try her very best to fulfill what I want. That’s what she’s paid to do!’

She also added that

‘**These foreigners come to our country** and think they can tell us what to do and how to style our hair as if we haven’t travelled abroad and been to fashionable hairdressers before!’

Note how in the above comment the British hairdresser is referred to with a specific category term in bold font ‘these foreigners’ (see Sacks 1972: p. 32 and Mendoza-Denton 2008: pp. 29-52 for a discussion over this issue). It is worth emphasizing here how the client not only portrays the hairdresser as belonging to a group that is seemingly of lower social status than herself but also, questions how ‘these foreigners’ appear to infringe upon ‘our country’, i.e. our ‘turf’ (Mendoza-Denton 2008).

On the other hand, the hairdressers participating in the present study consider any type of hairstyle or hair color that has been administered by them is their salon’s responsibility. It is their brand name that is held accountable for the end-result of a hairstyle or hair color. As one hairdresser put it: ‘I don’t want to be blamed for a botched up hair job. And I don’t want our salon to be blamed, either’. Additionally, the hairdressers emphasized their frustration over some of the clients’ unrealistic expectations when they demand a hair color that is far lighter than the Kuwaiti women’s generally dark hair color and complexion. According to the hairdresser represented in Extract 3: ‘Some of the ladies come in with these pictures of Hollywood stars and expect me to magically transform them into the person in the picture’ (see Extract 3, lines 4 and 5). As such, negotiations over what is a possible haircut, color or style is a constant source of frustration to both parties in the present beauty salon setting.

It is very likely that culture plays an important role in these frustrating negotiations over hair length or color in that Kuwaiti women are mostly unaccustomed to confronting refusal or conflict with hairdressers when it comes to their hair (see Extract 3, lines 9-12 and 22-30). Kuwaiti-managed beauty salons, any hair-related dilemmas are promptly resolved as requested by the clients regardless of whether it is suitable or not. Another cultural aspect that does not help mitigate the conflict in this area is that the British hairdressers in English Rose are used to more compliant clients who understand that the hairdresser is the expert and the one who knows better (see Sharma and Black 2001: p. 925). And therefore some of the hairdressers in this case are not accustomed to dealing with such situations of conflict. This in turn increases the friction between client and hairdresser due to cross-cultural differences (see Bianchi 2001).

4.2 NEGOTIATING PRICES AND APPOINTMENTS:

‘How much for a haircut?’

Another source of conflict between client and hairdresser, which can be explained by differences in cultural background, are negotiations about hairstyling prices and the beauty salon’s client appointments. According to interviews with hairdressers, negotiating appointments occurs when a client has booked a late appointment and requires a major hairstyling task after having informed the receptionist of a minor hair task. This discrepancy usually creates tension not only between client and hairdresser but also, between the hairdresser and the receptionist who has recorded the booking details. Kuwaiti clients who go to Kuwaiti-managed beauty salons usually request additional hairstyling tasks at a whim; i.e. without having booked them beforehand. These tasks are mostly never denied or delayed by such salons because of the large number of low-paid hairdressers that are employed there (see Hochschild 1983; Toerien and Kitzinger (2007).

Additionally, clients from the beauty salon being examined for this study usually arrive half an hour late for their appointments, in which case

hairdressers are obliged to attend to other clients. And although the late client will have caused a disruption of the salon appointments, she is very likely to complain about being made to wait until it is her turn. In this sense, people from the Kuwaiti culture are much more laid back about being punctual for appointments, while in Britain more attention is paid to punctuality. Certainly, such cultural differences can create sensitive situations between (Kuwaiti) clients and (British) hairdressers (Bianchi 2001: p. 3).

In the case of negotiating prices, the interaction between client and hairdresser can become intense. This is mainly due to Kuwaiti women being accustomed to relatively cheaper hairdressing at Kuwaiti-run beauty salons. One of the technicians I interviewed related a story about a lady who had come in for hair-root tinting and after suddenly realizing she wanted to color her entire head of hair and was shocked to hear that a whole-hair color costs twice the price of hair-root tinting. She then decided to do the job herself by asking for plastic hand gloves and proceeded to redistribute the hair color applied by the technician onto her roots to the rest of her hair. As a result, the client ruined her own hair, in that the hair color was unevenly distributed, and she finally blamed the salon's technician for ruining her hair. The technician informed me that this situation was highly unacceptable, as well as stressful and embarrassing in front of the other clients:

‘Apart from creating a scene in the salon in front of everyone and ranting about the price – which in a fashionable beauty salon such as ours, is not a done thing – this lady wanted to do the hair coloring job herself. The problem is, she was coloring her hair the wrong way and she therefore ruined her own hair. Ultimately, it is our salon that would be held responsible for whatever happens to her hair.’

Another price-related dilemma is haggling which is quite common in the Kuwaiti culture. People usually know where it is appropriate to haggle. An upscale beauty salon such as English Rose clearly a place where haggling is

unacceptable because most clients are familiar with the price ranges beforehand. However, some clients still complain about high prices (see hairdresser's comments above).

I have so far looked at service-oriented communication between hairdresser and client, but where does 'small talk' fit in among all these episodes of business-like negotiations and hair-care talk? Does small talk occur as often as service-oriented talk? Who initiates small talk: the hairdressers or the clients? What role does it play in a beauty salon environment, and more specifically, within client/hairdresser relationship? I will answer these are questions in the next section about small talk in the present beauty salon setting.

5. SMALL TALK BETWEEN HAIRDRESSER AND CLIENT

In general, small talk may be defined as 'an utterance doing important interpersonal relational work' (Candlin 2000: p. xvii). In the specific setting of a hair salon, an important feature of small talk is to prioritize the moral boosting or "the feel good factor" (Sharma and Black 2001: p. 514) which good beauty salons world-wide aim to provide as part of their service. This umbrella term includes various features of small talk, such as building client trust through establishing a strong client/hairdresser bond (see Extract 4), entertaining the client to pass time, getting to know the client's character in order to help shape the hairstyle that suits her, creating a friendly atmosphere in the salon, familiarizing both client and hairdresser with each other's different cultural norms (see Extract 5), and so on.

A significant part of small talk is seen as 'phatic communion' (Malinowski 1923: p. 146; also see Laver 1975). When neighbors meet very briefly in the lift of a building they would usually greet one another and they may casually mention the weather either positively: 'lovely weather today' or negatively: 'rather warm and stuffy this morning'. This type of utterance is primarily initiated with a sociable function in mind rather than to provide information about the weather (see Coupland and Ylanne-McEwen 2000: p. 163). Holmes (2000) argues that phatic talk or small talk cannot be 'dismissed as a peripheral, marginal or minor

discourse mode' (2000: p. 33). These verbal considerations are an integral part of the 'face work' (Goffman 1967) that is needed to 'modify and maintain' interpersonal relationships between speaker and hearer (Holmes 2000: pp. 50-1; also see Laver 1975).

McCarthy (2000) points out a variety of conversational topics that are initiated by either the hairdresser or the client. These subjects could be about the weather, holidays, interesting anecdotes, family occasions, and so on (2000: pp. 95-6). Although 'topic talk' is quite common in a setting such as a beauty salon (see Tannen 1993: p. 178; Toerien and Kitzinger 2007: p. 654), at times, conversational topics can go beyond the sanctioned or acceptable limits of a beauty salon context. Bernardo Carducci 2013, director of the Shyness Research Institute at Indiana University Southwest, argues that not only is small talk the "cornerstone of civility" – but it also 'paves the way for bigger conversations' (2013: p. 69, emphasis in original). However, taking small talk too far may defy the purpose of engaging in small talk (as will be demonstrated in Extract 5 below). Carducci warns:

'Don't make the mistake of staying on one subject for too long. It's called "small talk" for a reason. Think conversation hors d'oeuvres, with each topic sampled and savored' (2013: p. 69).

5.1 AN INSTANCE OF SMALL TALK:

'So, did you go on vacation somewhere?'

As part of the face work that helps maintain interpersonal relationships between client and salon employees, a hairdresser may start up a conversation with a question related to the summer vacation or seasonal events or religious holidays. In the extract below a hairstylist and a client both share their recent travel experiences after having visited the same country, namely: Jordan.

Extract 4:

- 1 **Stylist:** [Smiling at the client] So, did you travel or did you stay?
- 2 **Client:** [Smiling back] Last time I told you I wanted to go for a beach vacation.
- 3 **Stylist:** So how was it?
- 4 **Client:** It was excellent. Really excellent. We went to Petra, Aqaba
- 5 and of course, the Dead Sea. What about you?
- 6 **Stylist:** I went there too. I went with my mom in January.
- 7 **Client:** January?! It's very cold.
- 8 **Stylist:** It was fine, really. We even went to the Dead Sea. How long
- 9 did you stay in the Dead Sea for?
- 10 **Client:** I stayed there 10 days.
- 11 **Stylist:** [Surprised] Really! I don't know if I can stay that long, I'd get
- 12 bored. What did you do?
- 13 **Client:** I went to the spa.
- 14 **Stylist:** Did you go to the spa every day?
- 15 **Client:** Yes, every day.
- 16 **Stylist:** [Surprised] Wow!
- 17 **Client:** I did massage every day.
- 18 **Stylist:** Wow! You did massage every day?
- 19 **Client:** yes, yes.
- 20 **Stylist:** How did you feel at the end of the day?
- 21 **Client:** [Furrowing her brows as she tries to make out the meaning
- 22 of the question] Ehhh, sorry?
- 23 **Stylist:** [Tries to rephrase the question to get her message across]
- 24 Did you feel slimmer afterwards?
- 25 **Client:** Yeah.
- 26 **Stylist:** [Nodding in agreement about the slimming effects of some massages]
- 27 Yeah! That's lovely. I love when that happens.
- 28 **Client:** Yes, it feels really, really good.

This type of non-obligatory, sociable chat, in which both participants exchange information about their respective travels, facilitates the maintenance of an ongoing relationship that pivots around shared knowledge and a common experience (McCarthy 2000: p. 103). The hairdresser shows interest and boosts

the client's sense of importance by initiating a chain of questions about her trip to Jordan (see lines 1, 3, 9, 12, 14, 18, 20 and 24). The client in turn shares information about her activities during her trip, which then allows the hairdresser to evaluate these activities (see lines 11, 18 and 27).

Interviews with both the client and the hairdresser who had participated in Extract 4 showed that each of the participants had achieved different outcomes. The client informed me that recalling the wonderful memories she had during this trip made her happy and sharing them with someone who has also recently visited the same place is very satisfying. According to the hairdresser, 'showing the client that she is important by being interested in her daily activities and travel ventures is part of "the feel good" service our salon offers' (see Section 5). The hairdresser added that asking a number of linked questions rather than only one general question about whether the client had recently traveled or not, shows genuine interest in the client and good listening skills (see Sharma and Black 2001: p. 920; also see Garzaniti et al. 2011). But she also pointed out that part of the effort of engaging in small talk with clients is to take care to evaluate and react to the client's comments:

It's nice of the client to acknowledge my interest in her travels and to share the information, as opposed to simply saying that her trip was nice and stop there. But I have to say; I was rather baffled at the prospect of her going to the spa and having a massage every day. I personally couldn't do that, and I had to therefore mask my reaction of surprise a bit by asking her how she felt at the end of the day" (see line 21 and 24)'.

Most of the hairdressers who work at English Rose told me that it is necessary for them to engage with their clients in small talk because it helps make their work more interesting. But, more importantly, getting to know the client's character and sense of style is a focal point for the hairstylists in this beauty salon. They also feel that a given haircut has to suit the client's overall style, or as one of the hairstylists put it: 'I can't create an "Avant-garde" kind of

haircut or hairstyle on a client who appears shy and traditional. Therefore, getting to know the client certainly helps with hairdressing.’

5.2 DIFFERENT CULTURES, DIFFERENT VIEWS

According to McCarthy (2000: p. 104) ‘The hairdresser’s salon offers the maximum time and space for relational talk, and that, put simply, is why it occurs’. The beauty salon is also the type of setting, which provides an ideal opportunity for friendly small talk to develop into ‘bigger conversations’ (Carducci 2013, mentioned earlier in Section 5), especially since the participants in this particular setting come from different cultures.

The exchange below took place between a stylist and one of the regular clients of the beauty salon under examination. Initially, the stylist was working on the client’s hair in silence. This silence was then broken when the client began the conversation by seeking the opinion of the hairdresser (as an expert) about the use of oil as a hair-treatment. The conversation between them then moved from the topic of hair-care treatment to a heated discussion on bad hairdressing and later to a tense discussion on the younger, “millennial” generation in Kuwait.

Extract 5

1 **Client:** So... is oil bad for the hair?

2 **Stylist:** Well, it really depends on your hair type and what it requires.

3 **Client:** Because a Lebanese hairdresser told me that it’s bad for the hair.

4 **Stylist:** [Annoyed] I think this thing about oil being bad for the hair is one of
5 these typical old housewife stories. These hairdressers drive me insane! It’s
6 difficult to argue with people whose minds are set by influences from their
7 grandmas.

8 **Client:** Hmmm, yeah.

9 **Stylist:** [Annoyed] They really need to think outside the box. It’s
10 common sense, how can oil be bad for the hair?! It’s incompetent
11 hairdressers like that, that give you wrong information. These Lebanese,

12 Egyptian and Moroccan hairdressers give hair-care advice based on folk
13 stories rather than on proper hair-care expertise and advanced, scientific
14 studies done by top hair brands.

15 **Client:** Yeah, but perhaps your expertise is limited to familiarity with
16 European hair, which is different than Arab women's hair.

17 **Stylist:** The thing is though; we deal with different hair types every day.
18 So, we know. [...] I'm a professional hairdresser. I give out advice based
19 on knowledge and numerous years of experience in London and Kuwait.
20 I've even learned some hair-related Arabic terms to try to accommodate
21 the Arab client.

22 **Client:** Hmmmm. [After a long pause comes a shift in topics. The client
23 checks her watch] My daughter said she wanted to come to the salon to
24 have her hair done, but I don't know if she's actually coming. She's
25 canceled two appointments already. [pause] Sometimes I can't understand
26 what she wants.

27 **Stylist:** [Short pause] What I don't understand is; how most of the young
28 people in this culture (meaning the Kuwaiti culture) don't really know
29 what they want. The problem is they are so dependent on 'the helper'⁵ that
30 teenagers don't even know how to boil or fry an egg.

31 **Client:** Yeah, it's true, they don't. But how could they?!
32 Everything's always been done for them since they were young and they
33 grew up having gotten used to this lifestyle. [After this conversation, both
34 client and hairdresser became silent till the hair task at hand was completed.]

As mentioned earlier, spatio-temporal factors influence the interaction, since clients are confined to the hairdresser's chair (see McCarthy 2003: pp. 104-5) so that not only lighthearted small talk may occur but also, more heated discussions. This offers opportunities for cross-cultural norms to be exchanged between participants in an exchange. Extract 5 demonstrates personal opinions and judgments most of which are articulated by the hairdresser who seems to be

⁵It is customary for most Kuwaiti families to have maids, cooks and drivers working within their households.

struggling to accept the foreign and starkly different culture in which she finds herself (see Constanza 2001). The hairdresser reacts with intensity toward 'non-western' hair-care beliefs held by other Arab hairdressers (see lines 5-7 and 10-14) and then expresses opposition toward young Kuwaitis who are mostly reliant on their maids or helpers rather than themselves despite their mature age (see lines 27-30).

Both these topics seemed to have caused the client (who, as mentioned above, is a regular at this beauty salon) to feel uneasy. According to her:

'It seemed that this conversation was unavoidable and I didn't want any confrontation with the hairdresser. After all, I came here to relax. But I was really about to tell her, "why are you here, in our country⁶ if you don't like it?" Clearly she has a grudge against our culture. So what if we have "helpers". I'm sure that in Britain wealthy people have helpers too. I don't understand why she has to criticize our younger generation?!

While the client saw this topic development as an unsanctioned and indirect attack to her culture: the host culture to the staff members of this western beauty salon, the hairstylist considered it a casual comment about common topics, such as 'bad hairdressing' and 'today's younger generation'. The hairdresser pointed out to me that she 'was simply stating facts while trying to engage in small talk with the client'.

While on the subject of cross-cultural differences between service provider and client, I had noted other instances of cultural struggle during my observation period in the English Rose. These instances suggested that some of the hairdressers were indeed facing challenges accepting the host culture, mainly because they felt that unlike the more open and dynamic culture of London and the UK as a whole, Kuwait seemed too religiously and culturally

⁶ Recall the similar expression: 'These Foreigners... in our country' mentioned earlier in section 4.1.

strict. This may have been one of the aspects that could sometimes trigger friction between hairdressers and clients.

In another incident, a British hair technician was excitedly showing her best friend a hairstylist the latest iPhone 5 (at that point in time, an expensive device in European markets and therefore not yet widely available). The hair technician told her friend how happy she was at having purchased this high-tech device (and at a very reasonable price, due to Kuwait's tax-free market). I asked the hair technician why she seemed so overly excited and her answer was: 'well, what else is there in Kuwait!' I also found out through numerous interviews that over the weekend break the hairdressers often travelled to neighboring countries and cities especially, Dubai and Oman, and sometimes reaching as far as Greece and Cyprus in search of 'a bit of fun', as they put it. In the next section, I discuss other patterns of interaction (or lack of it) between hairdressers and clients.

6. THE ROLE OF SILENCE AT THE BEAUTY SALON

The term "silence" refers to absence of talk and could alternatively be referred to as "non-talk", but it may also refer to the 'absence of something that we expect to hear on a given occasion', especially when it is assumed to be present 'but remains unsaid' (Jaworski 2000: p. 111). Most of the instances of silence examined in the present study are of the former type, where silence is tacitly an 'accepted' and a 'non-threatening' choice in an encounter (2000: p. 129). In the specific beauty salon setting being examined, silence is considered the client's prerogative, although hairdressers tend to be silent too at times.

Feedback from interviewees suggests that silence has numerous functions and is characteristically signaled through body language. All the hairdressers agreed that although they are required to impart hair-care advice and are encouraged by the administration of the beauty salon to engage in friendly banter whenever possible, silence is sometimes opted for especially if signaled by the client. Accordingly, two questions come to mind: 1. How is the need for silence signaled by the client? And, 2. Do hairdressers usually opt for silence?

Interviews with hairdressers enabled me to establish that at times silence is a viable option. Choosing to be silent or avoiding small talk and simply giving

hair-care advice is preferred when dealing with clients who are non-fluent in English. Hairdressers often attempt to read the client's body language in order to conclude whether or not a client wishes to be chatty or remain silent. There are therefore some subtle signals that hairdressers interpret as, 'wanting to be left alone'. If a given client is engaged in social media chatting with friends on her mobile phone, or avidly reading a magazine or book then the hairdresser understands that the client prefers her to work in silence. I collected the views of the hairdressers I interviewed; they all unanimously agreed that 'silence' is an acceptable part of the beauty salon service encounter, especially if this is what the client wants:

'Some clients come here to relax and therefore choose not to chitchat', 'some want to catch up with friends and family on the phone and as such allow no opportunity for small talk', 'a few clients feel self-conscious about speaking English', 'other clients are simply the silent type, so that needs to be respected', and so on.

One hairstylist informed me that she could usually tell whether or not a client wants to make conversation through what she calls 'a client's energy' which may be considered as body language signals, or may not⁷. Another hair technician pointed out that if her client is 'energetic and lively' then she mimics the client's mood and if her client is 'melancholic, somber or pensive' then, as the technician put it, 'I leave her to it, because we are the client's mirror. We mirror the mood a client has when she's here'. However, even if the client seemed to be chatty and sociable, some hairdressers informed me that they are under no obligation to engage in small talk if they do not feel up to it and that they can limit non-transactional interaction to engaging in phatic communion, for example greetings, offering beverages and closings.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the clients I interviewed, silence is often considered a "power tool", since it is the client who is paying for the service and it is therefore she who should decide whether to allow the

⁷ It is hard to define what 'one's energy' is, really.

hairdresser to engage with her in small talk or require her to remain silent (see Holmes 2000: p. 51, Tannen 1993: p. 176). Some clients informed me that they prefer not to socialize with the hairdresser because they believe that there should be a “social wall” between them and people in service-oriented jobs. Other clients relish the beauty salon’s ‘feel good factor’ (see Sharma and Black 2001) and therefore choose the relaxing prospect of not chatting with hairdressers; in the words of a client:

‘I don’t want anyone to intrude on my “me time”, this is why I have chosen this beauty salon over annoyingly noisy, chatty, gossipy Kuwaiti-run ones, even if it means paying a lot more! People here respect what the client wants. That’s why I always come back to this beauty salon.’

Other clients I interviewed also agreed that the whole purpose of choosing an up-market, fashionable beauty salon and paying for the extravagance is so that they can relax and enjoy the experience of professional people tending to their hair quietly. A few of the clients also informed me that they enjoy looking at the latest fashion trends in the salon’s English and American magazines⁸. Additionally, some clients considered being at the salon a chance to use social media to catch up with friends on WhatsApp and Twitter.

A further perspective is that of the many young clients (ages ranging 17-22 years) whom I interviewed. They explained to me that they kept silent most of the time because they felt that the hairdressers did not show any interest in chatting with them. One 20 year-old client informed me that: ‘it’s as though I was invisible to the hairdressers in this salon’. Another client in her late teens told me that she usually comes to English Rose with her mother and she is always conscious of the fact that the hairdresser chats with her mother but not with her. Generally, however, all the clients (without exception) emphasized the importance and ‘privilege’ of hair-care consultations and recommendations given by western, well-trained hairdressers over small talk and silence, and this is

⁸These magazines are bought by the hairdressers when travelling on vacation to their hometowns and are therefore exempted from Kuwait’s ‘bare-flesh’ censorship policy applied on foreign magazines.

what English Rose ‘does’ deliver. Finally, I should mention that from the client’s point of view, silence is often portrayed as a right not a privilege.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have demonstrated how cross-cultural differences have a profound effect on client/hairdresser communication in a service encounter. Although transactional communication, and particularly hair-care consultation and recommendations, constitute the most important interactional practices and a large part of the service encounters in English Rose, it is often balanced casually but strategically with sequences of small talk, or otherwise silence (see Fig. 1.1, below for an overview of the service encounters that took place in English Rose).

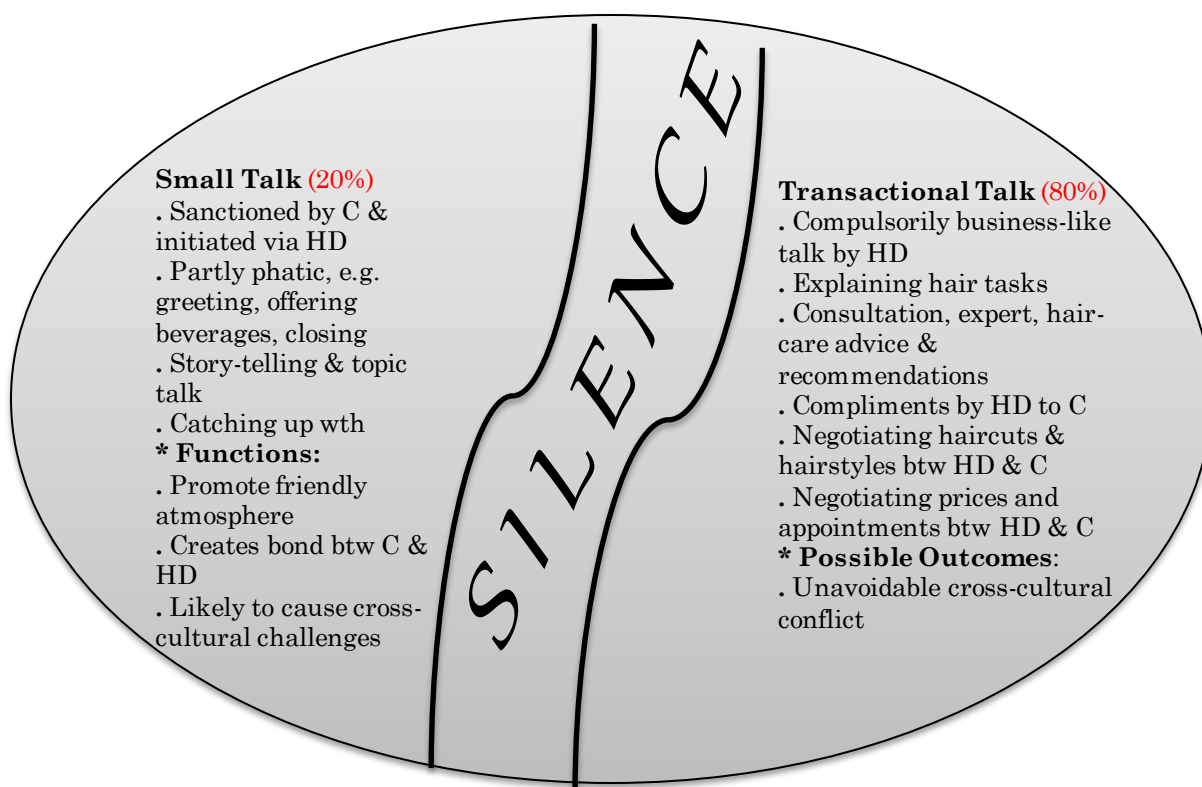


Fig. 1.1: An overview of service encounters in the English Rose.

C= client – HD= hairdresser.

Although, both clients and hairdressers generally acknowledge the importance of small talk in a beauty salon, the instances of small talk in this

specific context are not only used to create a friendly atmosphere and hence ultimately achieve clientele loyalty and trust, but they are also used as a way of unearthing 'bigger issues'. Many of the clients seem to view the British hairdressers as 'foreigners' who need to go through a process of acculturation in order to learn more about the Kuwaiti people and thus be able to interact with them more affectively. For example, it is not uncommon for Kuwaiti clients to request the haircut of a famous Hollywood star in a picture that is shown to the hairdresser. And as part of the beauty salon's 'feel good' principle discussed in this article, the hairdressers could try to understand this concept of identity formation or recreation by Kuwaiti clients.

Additionally, hairdressers could try to become more aware of important cultural differences, for example unlike many British women, Kuwaiti women consider the activity of going to the beauty salon more a reason to be pampered and taken care of by a professional rather than a practical necessity. This cultural difference is well illustrated in Extract 4 in which the hairstylist views having a massage everyday at the spa quite extravagant, while the Kuwaiti client, who can afford such an extravagance, considers it normal. This is not to say that the hairdressers at English Rose do not work diligently to try to accommodate the Kuwaiti clients' needs and special requests. Indeed, many of the hairdressers make the effort of 'mirroring the client's mood' (discussed in Section 6) as an example of this cultural accommodation on the part of the hairdressers.

My investigation of instances of small talk in this article has shown how participants in the present context exploit this form of talk as a multifunctional linguistic strategy; initially starting with the relational function of small talk which helps establish hairdresser/client rapport and gradually shifting into cross-cultural recognition which can lead to cultural intolerance and conflict. Hence the importance of cultural training programs for hairdressers which will certainly enhance their awareness of the cultural differences of the host country and as such result in successful client/hairdresser relationships (see for example [culturalsavvy.com/Global cross-cultural training/2013](http://culturalsavvy.com/Global%20cross-cultural%20training/2013)). And yet, episodes of conflict arise at times because of different cultural outlooks towards significant

issues, such as: respecting punctuality, accepting set hairdressing prices, and more generally, recognizing the emotional pressure that employees in the beauty service sector are put under.

My observations and findings have also offered insights onto the more common and conversational aspect of small talk, typically involving exchanging vacation news, for example.

Furthermore this article demonstrates the sanctioned form of non-talk or silence. I have shed light over silence as part of the service encounters in English Rose because I believe that even though it does not involve talk, it is in itself a form of interaction. For one thing, requesting silence is often signaled through body language cues, for another there is always a purpose behind wanting silence. It is therefore suggested here that silence is just as significant as small talk or service-oriented talk. Despite not being used as a strategy in itself, akin 'small talk', silence has multifunctional dimensions. Hairdressers and, more evidently, clients consider the many purposes of opting to be silent acceptable, well tolerated and even respected in the beauty salon under study. Moreover, the relevance of the various forms of interaction examined in this study (service-oriented talk, relational small talk and silence) all strongly invoke the significant role of context or setting (see Schegloff 1991: p. 92), as does the influence of different cultural norms and beliefs of the participants in the service encounters that are presented in this article.

An interesting question curiously arises to the surface in this article, whether or not similar aspects of cultural differences manifest themselves in service encounters in 'all-male' hair salons in Kuwait? This may conveniently be a potential sociolinguistic dimension to explore in a future comparative study.

Acknowledgments

My special thanks goes to the administration of the beauty salon English Rose for allowing me to have access to the data that have been collected for the purpose of the present study. Also, I'm very grateful to all the hairdressers of English Rose for participating in the present study; I'm especially thankful for

their patience and cooperation. Last but not least, I would like to thank all the clients from English Rose who participated in this study and helped me gather some very interesting and insightful data.

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Appendix 1:**Transcription conventions**

[laughs] Square brackets indicate paralinguistic features in square brackets.

[...] Dots indicate some words omitted because they were missed while writing down interaction between participants.

() Curved brackets indicate additional information added by the transcriber to clarify meaning where needed.

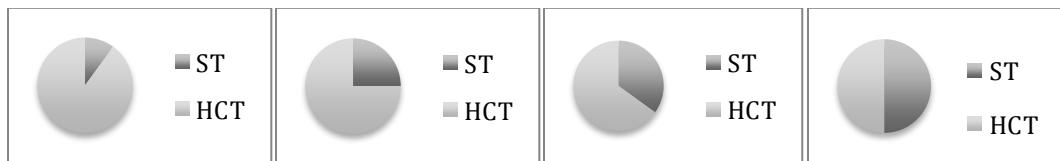
Waist-length Bold font indicates emphasis.

Appendix 2.**Questionnaire – Hairdresser**

1. Do you feel you have to chitchat with the client about topics other than hair-care recommendations? (Yes / No)

2. When (or with which type of client) is it appropriate to chitchat?

3. Which combination of small talk versus hair-care consultation talk do you think best represents hairdresser/client communication in this salon:



Scale **ST**: Small Talk

HCT: Hair-care Consultation Talk

4. Which of the following topics are you more likely to chitchat about with the client:

- Weekend activities
- Summer vacation
- Life in Kuwait
- UK vs. Kuwait cultural differences
- The weather
- Enquiring about family
- Client's day at work

5. Any other comments.

Thank you for your time 😊

Appendix 3. Questionnaire / Interview – Client

Name: _____

Nationality: (Ku/Arab/expat.)

Profession: (employed / unemployed) Type of client: (regular / 1st time)

1. How do you rate the friendliness of this salon:
 - a. Very friendly
 - b. Friendly
 - c. Normal
 - d. Unfriendly
 - e. Very unfriendly

2. Based on what did you decide that it is friendly or unfriendly?
E.G: greetings, stylist's smile, small talk by stylist, aesthetics of the salon, offering hot drinks to clients, etc.

3. Do you like to **chitchat** with your hairdresser or do you prefer **silence**?
And why?

4. Which of the following questions/comments would you consider as socially acceptable chitchat topics as opposed to inappropriate ones:
 - a. Did you travel this summer?
 - b. Do you work?
 - c. Where are you from?
 - d. Is it very hot outside?
 - e. Are you married?
 - f. Do you have kids?
 - g. How old are you?
 - h. Do you like your job?
 - i. Where does your husband work?
 - j. Compliments on hair color, thickness, shine, etc.
 - k. Compliments about personal belongings, e.g. bag, top, shoes, etc.

5. Any other comments offered by client.

Thank you for your time 😊