



On the verge of (in)directness: Managing complaints in service interactions

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ABSTRACT

In this conversation analytic study, we investigate how customers and staff members manage complaints in Swedish-speaking service interactions in Sweden and Finland. Prior research on complaining has typically distinguished between so-called *direct* and *indirect* complaints and studied one of these types. We re-examine this distinction in the context of our data and identify sequences that might better be referred to as *hybrid* complaints, which share features with both direct and indirect complaints. The hybrid complaints start off as indirect complaints but are oriented to as possibly assigning blame and responsibility for the complainable situation to the recipient. We illustrate the interactional work participants undertake to suppress the ‘directness’ of such complaints and how they transform them into indirect ones. We also document features that are either common or distinct of the different types of complaints, pertaining to the placement and emergence of complaints, interactional resources used in complaining, and responses to complaints. The findings contribute to a better understanding of different types of complaints and of the management of complaining in institutional interactions.

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1. Introduction

Research on complaining in interaction often distinguishes between *direct* and *indirect* complaints. In direct complaints, the recipient of the complaint is held accountable for the negative situation (see e.g., Dersley and Wootton, 2000; Kevoe-Feldman, 2018; Monzoni, 2009). Indirect complaints are complaints about a (typically non-present) third party/entity or situation (Drew, 1998; Drew and Holt, 1988; Ruusuvaari et al., 2019; Traverso, 2009). As discussed by some authors (e.g., Edwards, 2005), the distinction between direct and indirect complaints is not always so straightforward, however. Sacks’ (1992, Vol. II: 291) example of a negative remark about a disappointing restaurant to one’s dinner company is telling in this regard: such a remark can be heard not just as a complaint about the place itself, but also about the person who decided to go

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there. Certain types of complaints may thus involve an ambiguity about the assignment of responsibility for the negative situation that participants need to work out in the interaction. Who is to blame – the restaurant owner (in which case the complaint would be heard by the dinner company as an indirect complaint about a third party) or the person who picked the place (in which case the complaint may be heard as a direct complaint)? In this article, we similarly demonstrate that the distinction between direct and indirect complaints is not always clear at the onset, but, rather, it is negotiated *in situ* by the participants.

The study investigates customers' and staff members' management of complaints in service interactions at theater and sports event box offices, library information desks, and similar service settings in Sweden and Finland. As shown in our prior research, service encounters in these settings, despite some differences in terms of the service provided (e.g., tickets vs. information about library books), tend to be brief and unfold in a routinized, unproblematic way (Lindström et al., 2019; Norrby, 2021; Norrby et al., 2021). The participants focus heavily on the accomplishment of the service task and rarely engage in talk that is unrelated to the service (Norrby et al., 2019). In our data, customers and staff members also tend to remain cordial toward each other and interactional problems are rare. Occasionally, however, speakers express negative stance and affect in these interactions, for example, when customers are dissatisfied with the service they receive.

Using multimodal Conversation Analysis (CA), we document what kind of complaints occur in these situations, how complaints are launched, and how they are managed in the interaction. Unlike most interactional studies on complaints, we do not limit the analysis to either direct or indirect complaints. An analysis of participants' varying orientations toward responsibility and blame in complaints indicates that some complaints might better be characterized as 'hybrid' complaints. Whereas indirect complaints in our data typically concern low-stakes issues for which no one can be attributed responsibility (e.g., the weather), direct complaints concern more high-stakes problems (e.g., cash reimbursements, access to attractive event tickets) that one party in the conversation (an individual staff member, an institution) is held responsible for. Hybrid complaints include customers' complaints about matters related to the service experience (such as problems with the card reader and slippery roads outside the institution) for which immediate responsibility is less clear. The attribution of responsibility may or may not have been decided *a priori* in these situations; regardless, it is locally negotiated by the participants in the complaint sequences. This raises questions such as: Who is to blame for the problem? Who is held responsible for its solution, and how is the attribution of blame and responsibility accomplished? In what way do participants orient to their institutional roles in these situations?

The article builds on and extends existing research on complaining (see Section 2) by reexamining the distinction between direct and indirect complaints in the context of service interactions. In comparing the sequential development of complaints and the interactional resources participants use to construct these, the study documents both similarities and differences in the accomplishment of direct, indirect, and hybrid complaints. Importantly, it illustrates the interactional work participants undertake to suppress the 'directness', and thus socially discordant nature, of certain complaints, and transform them into talk that is more favorable for social solidarity. The study hence contributes to the research on complaints with new insights into important definitional criteria regarding the act of complaining, and to the literature on how participants manage complaints in institutional interactions.

The article is organized as follows. In Section 2, we review literature on complaints and other expressions of negative stance, before outlining the data and the method (Section 3). In Section 4, we present our analysis in three parts, focusing on indirect (Section 4.1), direct (Section 4.2), and hybrid (Section 4.3) complaints. In Section 5, we discuss our results and highlight their contribution to existing research.

2. Complaints and the expression of negative stance

The term *complaint* can be used to designate rather different types of interactional phenomena. Within CA research, complaints have primarily been described as distinct actions produced as a first pair part of an adjacency pair (Schegloff, 2005) or as larger activities composed of a sequence of actions (e.g., Heinemann and Traverso, 2009; Traverso, 2009). Another common distinction is the one between direct and indirect complaints mentioned above (Section 1). Regardless of the type of complaint, a shared feature of complaints is that they include expressions of negative stance about something (the 'complainable', Schegloff, 2005) that the speaker (or 'complainant', Drew, 1998) claims has affected him/her negatively in an unfair or unreasonable manner. Complaints are moral and accountable acts (Drew, 1998) and often – but not always – oriented to as delicate (cf. different observations in Günthner, 1997; Ruusuvuori et al., 2019). Pino (2022) identifies hurt and blame as central components of action-formation in complaints, but this observation is based on complaints about absent third parties. In complaints about certain inanimate matters, such as the weather, orientations to blame are for the most time naturally absent (see e.g., Iversen et al., 2022). Boxer (1993) notes that these types of complaints, which are about a situation rather than about another person or the speaker him/herself, predominate among strangers. This is not so surprising, given that situation-focused complaints tend to be less face-threatening (i.e., socially less delicate) than complaints about specific persons, and are typically also more available to people who do not share the same acquaintances.

The types of responses complaints project differ between direct and indirect complaints, and might also depend on the interactional setting. Since direct complaints are addressed to the party that is, according to the complainant, responsible for the negative situation, they typically project a reply in the form of an apology or remedy (Schegloff, 2005). In service interactions, speakers may use complaints to improve the situation in some way, such as to speed up the repair process in a repair shop (Kevoe-Feldman, 2018). As Dersley and Wootton (2000) reveal, however, recipients of direct complaints often

respond with denials, either “outright denials” insisting on non-involvement in the complained-of action or, more commonly, “not at fault-denials” that acknowledge that the problematic action has taken place but justify or excuse their involvement in it. They might shift the blame to the complainant him/herself, or refer to circumstances that are beyond their control to defend their acting. Kevoe-Feldman (2018) analyzes how participants work to suppress complaints in calls to a customer service line in an electronic repair facility. Drawing on Schegloff's (2005) notion of complainability, the author shows how customers signal issues with the service that potentially could offer grounds for a full-fledged complaint, but that customers and staff members may work to suppress the complaint. For example, Kevoe-Feldman (2018) notes that customers may design their initial description about the reason for their call in a way that lets service representatives focus on other things than the complainable issue. Service representatives, on the other hand, may show customers that they are themselves aware of a problematic situation, use more informal language, or cast blame on another service establishment to keep customers' complaints at bay. Fox and Heinemann (2021), in turn, demonstrate that service representatives respond to a trouble report solely as a request for service despite it being hearable as a complaint, disattending the complaint and focusing only on the solution to the reported trouble.

Indirect complaints project and lead to very different types of responses. Since these complaints are not addressed directly to the party who is held responsible for the complainable situation, they typically do not serve to change the situation. Instead, speakers produce such complaints to seek affiliation and/or sympathy from the recipients (Drew, 1998; Drew and Holt, 1988). If recipients do not (immediately) affiliate, the complainant tends to extend the sequence to underscore the severity of the situation and pursue stronger expressions of affiliation (Traverso, 2009). Highly affiliative responses from coparticipants may lead to joint complaining, whereby two (or more) speakers collaboratively work to construct the complaint (Rääbis et al., 2019; Skogmyr Marian, 2022). Complainants' orientations to the relevance of obtaining affiliative responses and the ensuing (often affective) stance displays demonstrate the interpersonal dimensions of complaining, whereby complaining may be a way for people to “construct emotional reciprocity” (Günthner, 1997), build social rapport (Boxer, 1993; Rodriguez, 2022; Skogmyr Marian, 2022) and enhance group cohesion (Hanna, 1981).

Studies of direct and indirect complaints have documented the rich repertoire of interactional resources speakers use to construct and respond to complaints and display negative stance generally (see Günthner, 1997; Rääbis et al., 2019; Selting, 2012; Skogmyr Marian, 2022, for overviews). As shown by Ruusuvuori et al. (2019), expressions of negative stance can be highly subtle in certain settings – as in the workplace performance appraisal interviews they analyze. In many cases, stance displays are much stronger, however, with speakers assembling verbal, paraverbal, and embodied resources to convey complaint-worthiness and show affective involvement (Günthner, 1997; Selting, 2012; Skogmyr Marian, 2021a). Research on stance and affect has highlighted the important role of prosody, non-lexical vocalizations/sound objects, and bodily-visual resources in the expression of negative stance (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1987; Hoey, 2014; Kaukomaa et al., 2014; Reber, 2012).

In sum, research on complaining in interaction has documented recurrent features of both direct and indirect complaints, but typically treated these as rather distinct phenomena. Focusing on service interactions, in this article we highlight how speakers' orientations toward responsibility and blame may change the level of ‘directness’ of complaints and result in what we refer to as *hybrid complaints*. To our knowledge, no prior study has compared the interactional resources used in direct and indirect complaints, which is why we also investigate this issue as part of our analysis.

3. Data and method

The study is based on a corpus of service encounter interactions in Swedish collected in Sweden and in Finland within the research program *Interaction and variation in pluricentric languages (IVIP)* in 2013–2015 (Norrby et al., 2021). The entire corpus consists of approximately 1100 recorded interactions (94 telephone calls, the rest face-to-face interactions) between customers and staff at theater box offices, mixed event tickets offices (e.g., sports events, concerts), university libraries, and cultural centers (museum/café venues). Service encounters can be characterized as a type of goal-oriented institutional discourse where participants – who are usually unacquainted – collaborate to solve a task or to carry out a transaction (Drew and Heritage, 1992). In the service data investigated here, customers usually request information or purchase tickets. The interactions are typically brief in nature (two-three minutes) and often follow a projectible structure (Raymond and Lerner, 2014: 238): Opening (with greetings), Presenting a reason for the visit, Transaction, Leave-taking and Closing. In our data, it is the customers who initiate complaints, and even though staff members may align or even affiliate, they never make any direct complaints toward a customer (which is not surprising considering the different roles of a professional staff member and a visiting customer, Félix-Brasdefer, 2015).

The collection that serves as basis for our analysis consists of sequences in which participants show clear negative stance and coparticipants orient to such stance displays in some way.¹ The sequences stretch over more than one base adjacency pair, meaning that complaints are accomplished as activities rather than as distinct actions in our data. Only 11 interactions include such sequences. Complaints are hence fairly rare in the data, which could suggest that this is a rather marked/dispreferred/problematic action in Swedish-speaking service encounters. Alternatively, it could be that few problems arise in these settings, or that customers who foresaw a problematic issue already before the interaction opted out of the research pre-emptively. Considering the social-relational implications of complaints and their potential delicacy (see Section 2 above),

¹ We have not included single instances of sighs or negative remarks that are not oriented to by coparticipants in the collection.

it is nonetheless important to shed light on how staff members manage complaints when they do occur. However, our observations about different types of complaints should be seen in light of the small number of cases.

We use multimodal CA (Mondada, 2014) to sequentially analyze how participants express negative stance and negotiate responsibility in complaint sequences. We pay specific attention to and compare (Sidnell, 2009) how indirect, direct, and hybrid complaints come about, with what interactional resources the complaints are constructed, and how coparticipants respond to the complaints. Transcriptions follow Jeffersonian transcription conventions (Jefferson, 2004), with some modifications.² We have indicated multimodal conduct as comments in double brackets, or used Mondada's (2019) conventions for multimodal annotation whenever the timing of bodily-visual conduct was particularly important for the analysis.

4. Analysis

Most complaints in our data are *situation-focused complaints* (Boxer, 1993) in that they concern inanimate matters and not people, but they differ in terms of how the complainable issue relates to the service establishment. They also differ in terms of participants' orientations toward responsibility and blame, and this difference only partially corresponds to the common distinction between direct and indirect complaints presented in Section 2. Some complaints start off as indirect complaints but involve negotiations of responsibility and blame that might qualify them rather as *hybrid complaints*. To illustrate this hybridity, we first present clear cases of indirect complaints (Section 4.1) and direct complaints (Section 4.2). Against this background, we then analyze hybrid cases in which participants ostensibly orient to issues of responsibility and blame, and examine how participants work to maintain social solidarity (Section 4.3). Important to note is that the categorization of complaints as direct, indirect, or hybrid complaints is not based on *a priori* labels. We did not approach the data with the purpose of fitting interactional episodes into these different complaint categories. Rather, this categorization is a post-analytical construct that emerged on the basis of emic, sequential analysis. What we refer to as hybrid complaints underlines the fact that categories such as 'direct' and 'indirect' should be taken with caution: at any point in the interaction, participants may reshape the trajectory of a complaint and transform it into something else.

4.1. Indirect complaints

The indirect complaints in our data pertain to issues that are unrelated to the service task, such as the weather. The complainables thus lie outside the realm of responsibility of any of the participants. These complaints involve clear expressions of negative stance, but no one is held responsible for the unfortunate circumstances. This has an impact on the staff members' management of the complaint.

Excerpt 1 exemplifies such dynamics. The interaction comes from a service center in the Swedish-speaking part of Finland where customers can buy tickets to various events. The customer (CU1) is carrying an umbrella with her as she enters the service establishment, and she makes loud in-breath sounds through her dripping nose, thereby orienting audio-visually to bad weather conditions already at the start of the interaction. After having received two tickets to one event, the customer produces a pre-request about the availability of tickets to a second event, a concert by the group *Trio Saludo* (lines 1–2). As the staff member (ST1) starts working on her computer (line 5) to pre-emptively comply with the customer's *de facto* request delivered in line 7, the customer continues making wet-nose sounds (lines 9, 13) and initiates a complaint about the weather (line 13):

Ex. 1. Nasty weather (Turku)

- 01 CU1: sen har du redan ti den där som- konserten som va i
 then do you have already to that that- the concert that was
- 02 tidningen idag de där trio saludo.
 in the newspaper today that ((artist name))
- 03 CU1: [.nffh]
- 04 ST1: [jå] de ha kommi redan,
 yes they have already arrived
- 05 [\$de e-]
 they are-
 st1 Sstarts working on computer-->1.13
- 06 CU1: [jaha,]
 oh okay

² Special signs include: # = creaky voice; + = legato/sliding pronunciation of vowel sounds; & = turn continuation.

07 då sku ja ta två dit också.
 then I would take two to that as well

08 ST1: jä.=
 yes

09 CU1: =.nffh
 (1.6)

11 ST1: °vi ska se:°.
 let's see

12 *(2.2)
 cul *opens hand bag-->

13 CU1: .nfHHH (.) * alltså de e så äckligt väder\$ så de e någo
 PRT *it's such nasty weather so it's just*
 cul -->*
 stl -->\$reaches-sheet-->

14 riktigt [*rysligt .nffh*]
 really awful
 cul *puts ticket in bag*

15 ST1: [jå: de va riktigt]\$ (1.3) \$(0.5) riktigt
 yes it was really really
 stl -->\$turns-comp\$clicks-comp-->>

16 så där ruggigt.
 like (approx. horrid)

17 CU1: man kan ju int ha paraply: heller de blåser iväg.=.nFFfh
 one can PRT not have umbrella either it blows away

18 (0.8)

19 ST1: dom va <tjugo euro styck> [dom där.]
 they were twenty euro a piece those

20 CU1: [jå:+å,]
 yes

21 (1.2)

22 ST1: °°ja ska kolla in (här ännu trio°° °salu:do°),
 I will check in (here further) ((artist name))

Opening her turn with another audible in-breath through her nose, the customer then assesses the weather as *så äckligt* (approx. 'so nasty/disgusting', line 13). She immediately extends her turn with what may be considered an account for the first assessment, but which includes another negative assessment: *så de e någo riktigt rysligt* ('so it's just really awful', line 14) before closing with another nasal in-breath. Both assessments take the form of hyperbolic formulations and convey the customer's strong negative stance toward the weather conditions. The weather is not just bad, it is unreasonably bad, and therefore complaint-worthy (Drew, 1998). The assessments are produced at a time in the interaction where the service talk has come to a halt, as the staff member is attending to her computer to comply with the client's request and when longer silences (lines 10, 12) are only interrupted by the staff member's formulaic expression *vi ska se* ('let's see', line 11) accounting for her temporary interactional exit (Levinson, 1983).

In overlap with the end of the second part of the customer's complaint turn, the staff member offers a prosodically stressed agreement token (*jå*; 'yes', line 15) and initiates an aligning and affiliative second assessment (Pomerantz, 1984) – with some turn-medial delay that is explained by the fact that she is working on the service task, reorienting her attention to the computer after having reached out for a paper sheet on her right side: *de va riktig (1.8) riktig så där ruggigt*. ('it was really (1.8) really like horrid', lines 15–16). This second assessment is hence initiated without delay and upgraded through the repetition of the adverbial intensifier *riktig* ('really'), which the staff member recycles from the customer's first assessment to reinforce the already high-grade negative assessment term (see Goodwin and Goodwin, 1987, on the timing of affiliative second assessments).

Following the staff member's display of affiliation, the customer expands the sequence with another reproach, that it is impossible to use an umbrella because of the strong wind (line 17). This turn also works as an account for the complaint, again underlining the unreasonable nature of the situation and therefore its complaint-worthiness. The linguistic formatting of the assertion, formulated with the generic pronoun *man* ('one') and the modal particle *ju*, enhances the response-relevancy of the turn as it invokes shared knowledge (Heinemann et al., 2011). The assertion is not picked up by the staff member, however, who instead pursues the institutional task at hand (lines 19, 22) and the participants do not further attend to the complaint.

In sum, this excerpt has shown a brief complaint about an everyday, inanimate matter – the weather – initiated during a break in transactional talk in the service interaction.

The complaint is performed through hyperbolic, high-grade assessments and non-lexical vocalizations expressing negative stance (Skogmyr Marian, 2021a), but the exchange is rapidly abandoned as the staff in an unproblematic way re-orient her full attention to the service task. The complaint works as pro-social small talk (Iversen et al., 2022; Maynard and Hudak, 2008) on a 'safe topic' between two unacquainted parties (see also Boxer, 1993) that allows them to exchange small tokens of affiliation in a momentary side-step from the main business.³ The participants orient to the situation as strongly negative, as seen in the high-grade negative stance expressions, but no one is held responsible for the problem – which is not surprising given the nature of the complainable.

The excerpt shares several interactional features with other indirect complaints in our data:

- (1) Interactional placement and emergence: The indirect complaints are launched in a rather straight-forward way (e.g., through a hyperbolic negative assessment) after a longer silence in the interaction and/or at the boundary of an encounter, and seem to be a way for participants to minimize silences and accomplish pro-social small talk at a moment when such talk does not interfere with the service transaction.
- (2) Interactional resources for complaining: Speakers use (often high-grade) negative assessments, prosody, sighs, and other non-lexical resources to display a negative stance and characterize the situation as complaint-worthy.
- (3) Responses to complaints: Staff members affiliate with customers by offering aligning and affiliative expressions of negative stance, in the form of second assessments.

We now turn to complaints in which participants ostensibly orient to responsibility and blame, starting with direct complaints before analyzing what we call 'hybrid' cases.

4.2. Direct complaints

In our cases of direct complaints, the customer explicitly blames the staff member, and/or the service establishment s/he represents, for having caused a problem or negative situation. Excerpt 2 illustrates such cases. The interaction comes from a phone call to a theater box office in western Sweden and concerns the purchase of tickets through a special promotion that the theater had in collaboration with a local newspaper. The promotion campaign offered a limited number of tickets to the final dress rehearsal of a show for a highly attractive price, which could be bought either online at four pm on the day of the sales or in person at the theater on the same day and time. In the call, the customer complains about his inability to buy such tickets despite visiting the website at the right time, and after a long sequence of negotiation with the staff member, the customer ends up threatening to expose the theater on Facebook for doing a bad job. To illustrate the stepwise emergence and sequential unfolding of the complaint, we have included the whole call here, but it has been divided into several parts to facilitate reading:

Ex. 2(1). Publish on Facebook (Gothenburg)

01 ST1: biljettkassan ((förnamn))?
 ticket office ((first name))

02 (0.4)

03 CU1: ja: god middag.
 yes good day

³ Maynard and Hudak (2008: 663), who analyze small talk in doctor–patient interactions, define small talk as “concrete conversational sequences not necessary to the instrumental task itself – whether primarily embodied or done through talk – that form distinctly affirmative or what we call “prosocial” actions recognizable as such to the participants”.

- 04 ST1: he[j.]
hello
- 05 CU1: [j]a ringer om: e:::y en visning a:v familjen addams
I am calling about a showing of The Addams Family
- 06 fredagen genrepet.
the Friday the dress rehearsal
- 07 (0.4)
- 08 CU1: mt och ja: e:h hängde på låset klockan sexton: (.)
and I ('was there right on time') at four o'clock
- 09 men fick eh .h ja ja de gick inte å komma åt
but got yes yes it was not possible to get a hold of
- 10 nå biljetter ifrån hemsidan.
any tickets from the website
- 11 CU1: va kan vi göra?
what can we do
- 12 (0.3)
- 13 ST1: j:a förmodligen e de så då att eh me en gång klockan
yes probably it is like that then that straight away at
- 14 sexton så blir de liksom l- stopp för att alla-
four o'clock there is like l- stop because everyone
- 15 de e så (.) många personer inne samtidigt å nu
there are so many people online at the same time and now
- 16 verkar de som dom e slut redan.
it seems like they are out already
- 17 (0.9)
- 18 CU1: ja [de e ja hängde-]
yes it is I was there
- 19 ST1: [.de e ju hu]ndra: <personer> bara hundra
it's PRT hundred people only hundred
- 20 biljetter bara.
tickets only

The customer's greeting in line 3 is marked compared to other greetings in the corpus (Nilsson et al., 2020, 2022), and seems to be premonitory of the problematic nature of the upcoming call (see discussion below). After presenting the reason for the call, asserting his inability to purchase tickets on the website (lines 5–6, 8–10), the customer asks the staff member what can be done about the situation (line 11). Instead of offering a solution, the staff member speculates about the reason for the problem, suggesting that they probably have run out of tickets considering the high demand (lines 13–16) and the limited number of tickets (lines 19–20) – thereby also implying that no solution is to be found.

In what follows (Ex. 2(2)), the customer rejects the possibility that the tickets already have sold out (line 22), insisting on his timely presence on the website and claiming that he started pressing (presumably the purchase button) two minutes before the start of the sales (lines 23):

Ex. 2(2). Publish on Facebook (Gothenburg)

- 21 (0.3)
- 22 CU1: .h de kan inte va möjligt för ja
it cannot be possible because I
- 23 börja[de klock]an två minuter i (.)
started two minutes to
- 24 ST1: [a:.]
yeah

- 25 CU1: å >tryckte å tryckte å tryckte å< [tryckte.]
and pressed and pressed and pressed and pressed
- 26 ST1: [a:.]
yeah
- 27 (0.2)
- 28 CU1: [å tryckt-]
and press
- 29 ST1: [a men] de e du vet de e så många som e
yeah but there are y'know there are so many who are
- 30 inne samtidigt å [(xxx)]
online at the same time and (xxx)
- 31 CU1: [men hur kan de] va så många när
but how can it be so many when
- 32 ja e inne .h [så flä(h)ng(h)-]
I am online so far
- 33 ST1: [°.ja°.]
yes
- 34 CU1: .h de kan inte d- man kan inte lägga sig i kö: .h
it cannot you cannot stand in line
- 35 de finns ju ingen (möjlig de e-)
there is PRT no (possible it is)
- 36 ST1: a: näe (0.3) utan att de e liksom e::h (.) förmodligen
yeah no so that it is like probably
- 37 e de så att dom e slut här nu redan då
it is that they have run out here now already then

By prosodically stressing the preposition *i* ('to', as in *two minutes to four*) and repeating the verb *tryckte* ('pressed') several times in high pace (lines 23, 25, 28), the customer vividly emphasizes the well-timed and extensive nature of his efforts to buy tickets. The staff member responds by insisting on the large number of customers online at the same time (lines 29–30), an argument to which the customer again objects (lines 31–32) before asserting the lack of possibility to get in line for tickets (lines 34–35); thereby showing his familiarity with the online booking system and his customer competence (Lindström et al., 2019). This leads the staff member to reiterate her assumption that they have run out of the tickets (lines 36–37), after which the customer again objects and retells the event of him going online in advance of the start of the sales (line 38, see below). This time, however, he upgrades his efforts further, claiming that he was there five minutes in advance (and not right at four pm, as initially claimed, line 8, or two minutes to four, line 23), hence underlining his own, rightful conduct and accounting for his frustration with the situation:

Ex. 2(3). Publish on Facebook (Gothenburg)

- 38 CU1: ja men asså när ja började så e ja fem i: å [(x)]
yes but like when I started I am five to and (x)
- 39 ST1: [ja men] då
yes but then
- 40 händer de ingenting vetdu då kommer du inte fram
nothing happens y'know you don't get through then
- 41 in[te förrän-]
not until
- 42 CU1: [de vet] ja men sen [fortsatt] varje minut
I know that but then continued every minute
- 43 ST1: [a:,]
yeah

- 44 CU1: å fortsatte .h å [när de va ö]ppnade direkt så va ja ju-
and continued and when it was opened directly I was PRT
- 45 ST1: [ja:.]
yes
- 46 CU1: .h [så var] ja nog (mig säkerligen) först på plan å ändå
I was probably (surely) first out and still
- 47 ST1: [.ja]
yes
- 48 CU1: gick de inte.=
it didn't work
- 49 ST1: =[a:.]
yeah
- 50 CU1: =[.h så ja] tycker att göteborgsposten å ni gör ett
so I think that ((newspaper)) and you do a
- 51 jädra dåligt ↑jobb å detta kommer jag å lägga ut på facebook.
darn poor job and I will publish this on Facebook

Before the customer has finished his turn in line 38, the staff member dismisses his claim as a legitimate account, since there is no point of attempting to buy tickets before the opening of the sales itself (lines 39–41). In response, the customer objects to the staff member's dismissal by claiming knowledge of the sales terms (*de vet ja*, 'I know that', line 42) and by retelling his experience through a detailed listing of his continuous but unsuccessful efforts (lines 42, 44, 46, 48; see Skogmyr Marian, 2022, on the use of lists to portray a long and arduous process in complaint stories). As the staff member only offers small alignment tokens in response (lines 43, 45, 47, 49), the customer upshots his experience and formulates a threat: *så jag tycker att göteborgsposten å ni gör ett jädra dåligt jobb å detta kommer jag å lägga ut på facebook*. ('so I think that Göteborgsposten [the newspaper selling the tickets] and you do a darn poor job and I will publish this on Facebook', lines 50–51). The upshot contains a high-grade negative assessment of both the theater's and the newspaper's management of the situation, which is further reinforced through prosodic stress and raised pitch. It characterizes the customer's experience as strongly negative and specifically assigns a shared responsibility for the negative situation between the newspaper and the theater. The threat to share this negative experience on social media (line 51) further underlines the perceived severity of the situation, as something worth public shaming, and works to escalate the complaint, as shown in the continued interaction:

Ex. 2(4). Publish on Facebook (Gothenburg)

- 52 ST1: .ja=
yes
- 53 CU1: =ja tycker de e sorgligt att ni .h annonserar om saker
I think that it is sad that you advertise things
- 54 som inte fungerar.
that don't work
- 55 ST1: a: .h men för att den e: (0.8) du få:r e:h i så fall
yeah but because it is you have to in that case
- 56 höra av dig ti G P där för de e ju deras
get in touch with ((newspaper)) because it's PRT their
- 57 adress man går in på
address you go to
- 58 (0.3)
- 59 CU1: ja[ha,]
oh yeah
- 60 ST1: [å]: eh för att eh ja kan inte göra nånting annat än
and because I cannot do anything else than
- 61 å säga de att vi tror att dom e slut på nätet.=
to say that that we think that they have run out online

- 62 CU1: =okej å du säljer inte dom hos dig?
okay and you don't sell them yourself
- 63 (0.7)
- 64 ST1: nej ja vi säljer dom inte hos oss nej annat än dom här
no yes we don't sell them here no other than these here
- 65 man får s- vara här på plats å k^öa här nu då
you have to s- be here on site to line up here now then
- 66 dom säljs ju just nu klockan sexton också:
they are for sale right now at four o'clock too
- 67 (0.4)
- 68 CU1: jaså o[kej.]
oh okay
- 69 ST1: [ja:]
yes
- 70 (0.4)
- 71 CU1: hur många- hur långa har ni i kö där?
how many how long have you in line there
- 72 ST1: ja vi sitter ju inte på samma v^åning vi å dom som
yeah we don't sit PRT on the same floor we and those who
- 73 säljer dom biljetterna nu men de var ju lång kö utanfö:r.
sell those tickets now but there were PRT long line outside
- 74 (0.3)
- 75 CU1: mt a okej.=
yeah okay
- 76 ST1: =.ja=
yes
- 77 CU1: =hälsa gärna G P ja tycker de e eh bedrö:vligt
please tell ((newspaper)) I think it's deplorable
- 78 å bli lurad så här [>tack ska du ha<.]
to be deceived like this
- 79 ST1: [.ja] hej.
yes bye

Despite the customer's direct accusations, the staff member only minimally receipts the complaint (line 52). In response to this minimal uptake, the customer offers another negative assessment, that it is sad that 'you' (supposedly the theater and the newspaper) advertise things that do not work (lines 53–54). Only after this does the staff member respond more elaborately, by suggesting that the customer contacts the newspaper instead, since the ticket sales go through their webpage (lines 55–57). Through this suggestion, the staff member does not only attempt to offer a solution to the problem, she also shifts the blame to another organization (Kevoe-Feldman, 2018). She then explains that the situation is out of her hands and that there is nothing she can do other than saying that they (vi, 'we', line 61, as in she and the other staff members) think that the tickets have run out online (lines 60–61). Doing so, she again denies her own involvement in the negative situation (Dersley and Wootton, 2000). The customer receipts this by inquiring about the possibility of buying tickets directly from the staff member (line 62), to which she explains that one must come and line up in person (lines 64–66). The customer then asks about the length of the line (line 71), whereby the staff member asserts her inability to accurately answer but claims that there was a long line outside (lines 72–73). The customer seems to accept this as the end to his attempt at obtaining the tickets (line 75). Before hanging up, he asks the staff member to pass on his outrage to the newspaper (lines 77–78). Through this final move, he thus to some extent aligns with the staff member's shift of blame to the other organization while holding the staff member accountable for the theater's collaboration with such a "deceptive" entity.

To summarize, Excerpt 2 has shown a direct complaint in which the complainant blatantly assigns responsibility to and accuses the receiving party of having caused a negative situation. In contrast with Excerpt 1, where the complaint was ancillary to the service interaction, in this excerpt the complaint emerges as the consequence of a problem with the service itself. Although the complaint was not the reason for the call – the customer called to attempt to resolve the problematic situation – there were signs of the non-straightforward nature of the call and the customer's negative stance long before the initiation of the complaint (cf. Jefferson, 1980, on 'trouble-premonitory' responses to inquiries, and Schegloff's, 2005 discussion about the early projection of complainability). As mentioned above, the customer's choice of greeting term is marked compared to most greetings in similar service interactions. As shown by Nilsson et al. (2020; see also Nilsson et al., 2022), hej

(‘hello/hi’) is deployed in a clear majority of all service openings in our corpus. It constitutes the unmarked, neutral greeting used by all types of participants at all the types of venues (see also [Clyne et al., 2009](#), on *hej* as the default greeting in Swedish). *God middag* (‘good day’), which is what the customer uses in Excerpt 2 (line 3), is a much more formal greeting ([Nilsson et al., 2017](#)) and appears to be the only instance of its kind in the Sweden–Swedish interactions. The greeting term hence carries a special meaning: it indexes the marked nature of the upcoming call. The customer has already experienced a problem and is calling to express his frustration about the situation and attempt to find a solution, perhaps adopting a more formal tone to signal the serious nature of his call.⁴

Also contrary to in Excerpt 1, in Excerpt 2 the staff does not affiliate with the complainant, but nevertheless does fine-grained interactional work to manage the situation in a professional way. Specifically, the staff member aligned as a recipient of the complaint by letting the customer develop his story and express his frustration (this also explains the lengthy sequence), and she responded to the accusations by defending the service provider without showing any affective engagement herself.

The following features characterize the direct complaints in our data:

- (1) Interactional placement and emergence: The complaints emerge incrementally in the service encounter. After early indications about the marked, non-straightforward nature of the upcoming interaction, the client offers a detailed telling about a problematic situation that escalates into high-grade displays of affective negative stance. The complaint thus unfolds in a stepwise way ([Ruusuvuori et al., 2019](#); [Skogmyr Marian, 2021b](#)) and develops into a larger interactional activity than the indirect complaints.
- (2) Interactional resources for complaining: Similar to our cases of indirect complaints, speakers use (high-grade) negative assessments, prosody, sighs, and other non-lexical resources to express a negative stance and characterize the situation as complaint-worthy. Descriptions that specify and account for the negative situation and why it constitutes a nuisance seem to be more central to, and more elaborate in, these direct complaints than in the indirect ones.
- (3) Responses to complaints: Staff members do not affiliate with the customer. They leave customers interactional room to express their concerns and frustration, but they refute responsibility for the negative situation by referencing circumstances beyond their control or deflect it to a non-present third party.

Contrary to our indirect complaints in which participants primarily orient to “doing small-talk”, in our direct complaints participants to a higher degree orient to doing criticizing, accusing, blaming, and other complaint-related actions. Next, we address sequences that incorporate features of both indirect and direct complaints, which we refer to as *hybrid complaints*.

4.3. Hybrid complaints

As mentioned above, we did not approach our data with the idea of identifying hybrid complaints. When analyzing complaint sequences, we nevertheless noticed that some sequences unfold in a way that is different from what prior literature has shown about direct and indirect complaints, and therefore are perhaps best referred to as hybrid complaints. In these cases, customers express a negative stance about issues that are not directly linked to the service, but for which there is a certain ambiguity as to who is responsible for the negative situation (cf. the restaurant example from Sacks, 1992 presented in Section 1). The complainant does not outrightly accuse the recipient, as in direct complaints, but the sequence involves orientations toward the potential ascription of blame and responsibility. Hybrid complaints illustrate the kind of interactional work participants do in order not to end up in direct complaints, or to transform potentially direct ones into indirect ones (cf. [Kevoe-Feldman, 2018](#), on the suppression of direct complaints).

Excerpt 3 takes place in a museum shop/café in northern Sweden in winter time. The customer has just paid for her purchase in cash, and the staff member is preparing and handing over the change (lines 1–2). After a mutual exchange of thanks (lines 3–4), a 2.9 s silence ensues while the customer is putting the change in her wallet (line 5). She then gazes up at the staff member and offers a negative assessment of the access to the museum (line 6), which appears to be hindered by icy roads (note that northern Sweden is a cold region with long, typically snowy winters):

Ex. 3. Tiptoe (Lulea)

```
01          (6.1) ((ST1 prepares change for CU1))
02  ST1: +så där.+
        there you go
        st1 +hands over a bill to CU1+
```

⁴ In another call in our corpus that also involves a direct complaint (not shown here), it is not the lexical choice of the greeting that is marked, but the prosodic delivery of the greeting, which deviates from the most common, neutrally delivered greetings and seems to index forthcoming trouble (see [Pillet-Shore, 2012](#): 392, on greetings prosodically designed to display a negative stance and “index an orientation to some intra/inter-personal trouble”).

- 03 CU1: tack [°så mycket°.]
 thanks a lot
- 04 ST1: [°tack°.]
 thanks
- 05 (2.9) ((CU1 puts bill in her wallet, gazes down))
- 06 CU1: *de e svårt å ta sig hit.
 it's difficult to get here
cul *gazes up at ST1-->
- 07 ST1: ja:.*
 yes
cul -->*
- 08 CU1: mås[te nästan-]
 must almost
- 09 ST1: [de e ju] kommu:nen som har ansvaret för å-
 it's PRT the municipality that has the responsibility to
- 10 [hä-] ytan här ute å=
 he- the area out here and
- 11 CU1: [ja.]
 yes
- 12 CU1: =ja de e hemskt [(de e dom som)]
 yes it's terrible (it's them who)
- 13 ST1: [men dom ha ju] många ställen å °fhhhhf°
 but they have PRT many places and
- 14 CU1: fhhhf va sa du
 what did you say?
- 15 ST1: de e många ställen å sanda på en [sån här] dag [jå.]
 there are a lot of places to sand in a day like this
- 16 CU1: [jå.] [jå:.]
 yes yes
- 17 ST1: *°.ja° [nä man få-] man får trippa på tå.
 yes no but one has to has to tiptoe
*CU1 walks away from counter-->>
- 18 CU1: [jo visst.]
 yes indeed

The customer's negative assessment *de e svårt å ta sig hit* ('it's difficult to get here', line 6) is formulated as a general assertion not targeting any particular individual or entity, and the staff member minimally aligns with this through the agreement token *ja*: ('yes', line 7). In overlap with the customer's initiation of an expansion (line 8), the staff member asserts that it is the municipality that is responsible for taking care of the area outside (lines 9–10). This orientation by the staff member can be related to Schegloff's observation that complainability is "recognizable (by other than the potential complainer) in advance of a complaint" (2005: 452). The staff member's turn in lines 9–10 indicates that she hears the customer's assertion that it is difficult to get to the museum as potentially indexing complainability. That is, the assessment is heard as possibly being a preliminary move to a direct complaint about the service establishment. By asserting the municipality's responsibility for taking care of slippery roads, the staff member shifts any potential blame for the negative situation from the museum and their employees to a third party. But when the customer expands the sequence through another high-

grade negative assessment that underlines how terrible the situation is (line 12), the staff member resists the complaint. Specifically, she interrupts the customer's turn and defends the municipality by invoking the many places that need to be sanded on a day when weather conditions make roads especially icy or slippery (lines 13, 15), and the customer aligns with small acknowledgment tokens (line 16). The staff member then offers a summary statement of the consequence of the situation, that one has to tiptoe (using the generic pronoun *man*, 'one'). This summary statement could be interpretable as a generalized recommendation, or advice, to walk carefully (line 17), but also as a way for the staff member to underline her commonality with the customer, that they are part of the same member category having to adjust to the unfortunate circumstances. The customer is nonetheless already walking away from the counter, orienting to the conversation as closed.

This excerpt showcases the contingent nature of complaint trajectories, and the fine-grained interactional work participants may engage in to negotiate responsibility and affiliation when a negative remark can be heard as a potential complaint about the recipient. Although the sequence started off in a similar way as the indirect complaint shown in Excerpt 1, through a negative assessment about what may appear as a neutral and non-delicate topic related to weather conditions, in this case the staff member does not affiliate strongly (as in Excerpt 1). Instead, she orients to the assessment as conveying complainability (thus foreseeing a potential complaint about the service provider, and perhaps of herself as its representative) by invoking a responsible third party (see [Kevoe-Feldman, 2018](#)) and offering an excuse on their behalf. These responses demonstrate the staff member's orientation toward her institutional role, whereby service employees may be held accountable for the organization's misdoings (even if no outright accusation or ascription of blame has been pronounced). The generalized recommendation on how to act given the circumstances further indexes an orientation toward institutional responsibility, namely a responsibility for customers' safety. At the same time, this recommendation places the customer and the staff member "on the same side", as victims of the same negative situation, and could therefore be seen as an attempt to suppress the 'directness' of the complaint and transform it into an indirect one, which is more favorable for the maintenance of social solidarity.

Excerpt 4 shows another case in which participants visibly orient to ambiguity in responsibility, and undertake actions to transform a (potential) direct complaint about the service establishment into an indirect one. The excerpt comes from a theater box office in western Sweden. It was recorded on a day when an unusual problem occurred: Because of an attempted robbery at a local bank, the card payment system was suspended and the theater staff put up signs informing customers that they only accepted cash payments. One customer, Customer 1 (CU1), had attempted to buy tickets but was forced to interrupt her purchase to go and withdraw money from an ATM; she therefore got to skip the regular line upon her return so that she could finalize the payment at the same ticket counter. As the payment is being processed, a second customer's queue number is advanced through the automatic system, and since the staff assesses the payment process to be almost completed, she calls Customer 2 (CU2) to the same counter (line 3). The excerpt has been divided into two parts to facilitate reading:

Ex. 4(1). Only cash (Gothenburg)

```

01  ST1: °då e de tjugo kronor tillbaka°.
      then it's twenty crowns back

02      (2.1) ((talk in background between CU2 and someone else))

03  ST1: tdu KAN KOMMA TILL MIG JAG E FÄRDI HÄR.±
      you can come to me I am done here
      st1 tturns toward CU2-----±

04  CU1: ja[: , ]
      yes

05  ST1: [ski]cka [kunden.]
      send the customer

06  CU1: [mm: ] ja jag ska bara ha en tjuga
      yes I should just have a twenty

07      [tillbaka] så.
      back so

08  ST1: [ja: , ]
      yes

09      $(0.4)$
      cu2 $approaches counter$

10  CU1: mt ja [fick gå å hämta pengar vetdu.]
      yes (I) got to go and get money y'know

11  CU2: [h så s:-s:- ]
      so s- s-

```

- 12 CU2: >jaja< ja \$ser de [att\$ de bara e kontant.]
 yesyes I see that that it's only cash
 cu2 \$points-card machine\$
- 13 CU1: [mt #a: visst de e jättejobbigt#.]
 yeah right it's very tough/a real nuisance
- 14 (0.5)
- 15 CU1: mt >eller ja jobbigt< dom sköter de så jättebra
 or well tough they manage it so very well
- 16 dom [här .HH damerna] som&
 these ladies who
- 17 CU2: [jaja visst men&]
 yesyes sure but
- 18 CU2: &när [man inte vet de innan.]
 when you don't know it before
- 19 CU1: [&mt .h har de jobbigt].
 have it tough
- 20 (2.4) ((CU1 & CU2 nod toward each other, then gaze at ST1))
- 21 CU2: dom e vana: [°°(som s-)°°]
 they are used to it (as s-)
- 22 CU1: [°#jadå:#°] £huhhah .hh[ehhh£]
 oh yes
- 23 CU2: [du har su]ttit här
 you have been sitting here
- 24 många år nu.
 many years now ((to ST1))

When Customer 2 approaches the counter (line 9), Customer 1 informs her that she had to go and withdraw money (line 10). This informing accounts for her skipping the line ahead of Customer 2 – but can possibly also be heard as implying a nuisance associated with having to leave the theater and come back again (the verb choice *fick*, 'got to' or 'had to', signals that this was an involuntary act). Customer 2 confirms her understanding of the situation, pointing to the card machine where the note about cash payments is displayed (line 12). Customer 1, in overlap, then launches a strongly negative assessment that underlines the imposition on her: *de e jättejobbigt* (approximately 'it's very tough/it's a real nuisance'), produced in creaky voice (line 13).

A brief silence ensues, after which Customer 1 repairs her negative assessment: *>eller ja jobbigt< dom sköter de så jättebra dom här.HH damerna som mt .h har de jobbigt*. ('or well tough they manage it so very well these ladies who have it tough', lines 15–16, 19). Through this statement, she withdraws her previous high-grade negative assessment of the situation (characterized as 'very tough' or 'a real nuisance'), possibly in response to the brief silence in line 14, to underline how well the staff ('the ladies'), who are the ones suffering the most, manage the tough situation. She hence orients to her previous criticism as something that could be heard as a direct complaint of an innocent party and initiates repair on the whole action to frame the staff, instead of herself, as a victim (cf. Schegloff, 2005, on how other-initiated repair may relate to complainability). In overlap, Customer 2 nevertheless aligns with Customer 1's criticism, agreeing with the nuisance associated with not knowing in advance about the cash payment (lines 17–18). During a moment of silence (line 20), the two customers nod toward each other before looking at the staff, who is working with the service task. Customer 2 then offers an assessment of the staff members' professional experience, claiming that "they are used to it" (probably to similar situations, line 21), to which Customer 1 affectively agrees through an agreement token and laughter (line 22). Customer 2 then addresses the staff person directly with *du* ('you' sg.), claiming that she has been 'sitting here' (as in 'working here') for many years (line 24). This exchange hence positively assesses the staff member's professional experience, and might work as a way for the customers to mitigate the prior negative and socially delicate exchange.

Until now, the staff member has been more of an overhearer than an active participant in the exchange, but in the continuation of the excerpt (Ex. 4(2)), she gets involved more actively. In the 11 omitted lines that follow, Customer 1 reinvokes the problematic situation with the card payments, to which the staff member responds that some cards actually work now, and Customer 1 concedes that she was at least able to withdraw money from the ATM. A silence of 6.4 s follows,

during which the staff member works with the service task on her computer (line 36). Almost exactly at the same time, the customers break the silence with minimal turns (lines 37–38) and Customer 1 reiterates the difficulty involved in picking up tickets (lines 39–40):

Ex. 4(2). Only cash (Gothenburg)

((11 lines omitted))

36 (6.4) ((ST1 is working on the computer))

37 CU1: mt [ja+a,]
yes

38 CU2: [°mm-hm°,]

39 CU1: inte visste man att de skulle bli så besvärligt å hämta
one did not know that it would be so difficult to pick up

40 fbiljetterf.
tickets

41 CU1: £.hhh hh°eh°£

42 *(0.3)
cu1 *turns to CU2-->

43 ST1: \$e::h\$* de e problem på banken
there are problems at the bank
cu2 \$nods\$
cu1 -->*

44 ST1: [dom e hotade eller va de] e.=
they are threatened or something like that

45 CU1: [mt ja jag hörde detta.]
yes I heard this

46 CU1: =dom e *[hota]de där nere i nordstan.
they are threatened down there in ((neighborhood))
cu1 *turns to CU2-->

47 ST1: [a+a.]
yeah

48 CU2: e dom de?
are they

49 CU1: ja+a.*
yes
cu1 -->*

50 (0.2)

51 CU1: °nåt pulver *vetdu som° [.h dom där* gangsterna,]
some powder y'know that those gangsters
cu1 *gazes at CU2-----*

52 CU2: [\$°#amen (jag tror att)#°\$]
oh well (I think that)
cu2 \$shakes head slightly---\$

53 CU1: dom e ju helgalna.=
they're PRT completely crazy

54 CU2: =hur lyckas man få ti- eh att inte bli sedd.
how do you manage (to succeed-) uh not to be seen

55 CU1: ja+a,
yes

Customer 1's negative assessment (lines 39–40) re-launches the complaint. It also works as an account for her continued presence at the counter, despite her earlier assurance that she had brought almost exact change and only needs one bill in return (line 6–7). As she does not immediately receive any response, Customer 1 produces a small laughter and turns toward Customer 2 to seek affiliation (lines 41–42). Customer 2 nods in response (line 43), thereby displaying some alignment but no strong signs of affiliation, which might be an indication of her orienting to Customer 1's criticism as socially problematic. At this point, the staff member intervenes by invoking the problems at the bank: *e::h de e problem på banken, dom e hotade eller va de e* ('there are problems at the bank, they are threatened or something like that', lines 43–44). Doing so, the staff member shifts the responsibility of the complainable situation to an external party (the bank) and circumstances that lie beyond her, the organization's, and also the third party's control. This account also shifts the focus away from the problems at the theater, and facilitates the participants' continued construction of the complaint as an indirect rather than a (potentially) direct complaint.

Customer 1 confirms her awareness of the situation (lines 45–46) and, after Customer 2's repair initiation (line 48), she specifies that there was some 'powder' involved (line 51). Her gaze to Customer 2 and the particle *vetdu* ('y'know', line 51) invite Customer 2 to respond (Lindström and Wide, 2005). In contrast to before, when Customer 1's criticism was possibly hearable as a complaint about the service establishment, Customer 2 now offers an affiliative expression of astonishment and negative stance (lines 52, 54; see also headshakes), whereas Customer 1 assesses the accused third party, the 'gangsters' (line 51), as *helgalna* ('completely crazy', line 53). The sequence has now transitioned into an indirect complaint about a third party, rather than a (possible) criticism of the service provider, which is finally abandoned as the staff member offers the printed tickets to Customer 1 (lines 57–58).

Like in Excerpt 3, this excerpt shows how orientations toward responsibility and blame rise to the surface of the interaction (Pino, 2022) in the context of a complaint related to customers' experience at the service institution. The excerpt also illustrates the interactional work participants do to stay away from direct complaints and favor the maintenance of social solidarity. In Excerpt 3, the staff member deflected responsibility for the complaint-worthy issue by referring to a third party. In Excerpt 4, the complaint-initiator herself reframes her criticism so as not to make it hearable as a complaint about the staff, who initially is more an overhearer than an active participant in conversation. When the customer re-launches the complaint, the staff member nevertheless responds by offering an account for the complainable situation, orienting to herself as a legitimate party of the interaction and to her institutional responsibility to explain the problematic circumstances. The invocation of parties and circumstances beyond the control of the service establishment facilitates a transformation of the complaint into an indirect complaint about a third party, whereby the participants can focus on a 'joint enemy' rather than blaming the service provider and its staff. The participants' management of responsibility and blame reflect the institutional nature of the interactions and the participants' orientations to institutional roles.

The following features are characteristic of the hybrid complaints in our data:

- (1) Interactional placement and emergence: Similar to the indirect complaints, the hybrid ones are initiated through the expression of negative stance at the boundaries of a service encounter or after a longer silence, such as when the staff member is working silently with the service task.
- (2) Interactional resources for complaining: These complaints are similar to both the indirect and direct ones (negative assessments, prosody, non-lexical resources). Longer descriptions and accounts do not seem to be as central to the hybrid complaints as to our cases of direct complaints.
- (3) Responses to complaints: Like in the direct complaints, staff members do not (immediately) affiliate with the customer. Instead, they use practices for denying or downgrading their own and the service establishment's responsibility and for shifting the focus to circumstances beyond their control. Such ascription of blame might change the trajectory of the sequence toward an indirect complaint rather than a direct one.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have explored similarities and differences between different kind of complaints produced in service interactions in Sweden and Finland. Our findings suggest that some complaints are similar to so-called *direct* and *indirect* complaints as described in previous literature, while some examples may rather be characterized as *hybrid* ones. Hybrid complaints are cases that start off as indirect complaints, but which in some way are oriented to as possible direct complaints about the service establishment. Our analysis has shown the interactional work participants undertake to 'get out' of such situations, which may be social-relationally unfavorable and counter-productive to the smooth accomplishment of the service encounter. In this section, we discuss our findings and their implications from a wider perspective. Given the small number of cases in our collection (N = 11), the conclusions about complaint features in different types of complaints are tentative and deserve more attention in future research.

The way participants construct and respond to complaints in our data is reflexively related to the institutional nature of the interactions. As shown throughout the analyses, staff members respond to complaints not as their private selves, but in their institutional roles as representatives of the service establishment (Félix-Brasdefer, 2015). This is unproblematic when customers initiate complaints about the weather and similar inanimate matters for whom no one can be blamed; in such cases, the staff member can straightforwardly participate in the complaint and affiliate with the customer. These complaints hence

work as pro-social small talk (Iversen et al., 2022; Maynard and Hudak, 2008) that contributes to the establishment of social solidarity between the parties (Boxer, 1993; Hanna, 1981; Rodriguez, 2022; Skogmyr Marian, 2022). In complaints about service-related matters, the staff members' responses are more delicate, since they have to deal directly with the customers' problem and try their best to reach a positive outcome. At the same time, it is part of the staff members' job to deal with problems that arise in connection to the service they provide, and they might even receive some training or advice from the service institution about the management of problems or particularly difficult customers. The staff members' rather passive participation in much of the call in Excerpt 2, by which she during a long time only responded with neutral receipt-tokens and let the customer develop his complaint, exemplified such a professional stance. Hybrid complaints, in turn, are slightly more complex, as they have the potential to become both more 'dangerous' (as direct complaints) and less so (as indirect ones) in terms of their social-relational impact. The hybridity occurs when the negative stance expressed by the customer can be heard as either an indirect criticism about an outside matter or a potential criticism of the service provider. In such cases, staff members have to deal with their dual institutional responsibility of both promoting social solidarity to ensure that the customer leaves the service encounter with a positive experience and defending the organization in face of unwarranted criticism. These complaints might thus require a more subtle professional acting and fine-tuned interactional competence on behalf of the staff (Nguyen, 2012). Denying blame (Dersley and Wootton, 2000) or shifting it to a third party (Kevoe-Feldman, 2018) could be seen as types of defensive practices (see e.g., Maynard, 2013; Pilnick and Coleman, 2006) that the staff members use to facilitate the move away from directness and into socially less delicate territories.

The customers' competence also plays a role in the management of complaints. Many customers are experienced in being customers at the service establishment in question, and they display this experience by doing 'being a competent customer' (Lindström et al., 2019). They often display knowledge about the booking procedures and may foresee the next course of action from the staff member, which leads to a striking number of interactions that unfold in a routine-like, unmarked, fashion. Doing being a competent customer is especially relevant when putting forward a high-stakes direct complaint. In such a case, the performance of 'competent customer' presupposes to some extent the 'blame of other'. In Excerpt 2, the customer lets the staff member know that he is used to the routines surrounding online purchases (e.g., being ready well in advance and pushing the purchase button repeatedly at a certain time). This could be interpreted as a way to underscore who is to blame for his failure to purchase tickets: his competence as a customer in itself must mean that the service establishment, or at least some other party than himself, is to blame. In Excerpt 4, the customers' competency as customers was made relevant in a different way, as the customers invoked their long-term experience with the service provider and familiarity with the particular staff member's professional history to retract what was possibly hearable as a criticism of the staff's management of an unusual situation.

To conclude, we have documented the following features of complaints in service interactions, pertaining to (1) the type of complainables that occur in our data, (2) the interactional placement of complaints, (3) the interactional resources involved in complaining, and (4) how staff members respond to complaints. These features are closely related to the participants' orientations to the talk as doing primarily complaining and related negatively valenced actions (in direct complaints), or primarily something else, such as small-talk addressing a longer silence.

- (1) With some exceptions, the complaints in our data are complaints about inanimate matters. The indirect and hybrid complaints tend to concern something in the immediate environment that is noteworthy, such as particularly bad rainy weather or slippery roads. In contrast, the direct complaints concern issues related to the service provider like problems related to the purchase of tickets or booking fees.
- (2) While direct complaints may be foreshadowed directly in the opening sequence through particular prosodic features or formal greeting phrases, indirect and hybrid ones surface when there is a gap in the service interaction, or at the boundary of the encounter. That is, indirect and hybrid complaints occur in the same position as small talk often occurs, such as when the staff is working in silence with the service task.
- (3) Most complaints are constructed through similar types of interactional resources, such as negative statements, hyperbolic formulations, non-lexical vocalizations, and prosody. Although descriptive accounts occur in both the direct, indirect, and hybrid complaints, they are most extensive in the direct complaints.
- (4) In our indirect complaints, staff members affiliate with the customer by agreeing and contributing to the complaint. In direct and hybrid complaints, staff members show service-mindedness by addressing the customer's concern but they do not affiliate with the customer.

The analyses thus demonstrate ways in which participants orient to and negotiate some of the key concerns for complaint participants (see Heinemann and Traverso, 2009), such as who complains to whom about what/whom, how this impacts recipient responses, and how issues of responsibility are managed. Specifically hybrid complaints deserve attention in future research. It would be fruitful to examine additional hybrid cases in which indirect complaints are treated as (potentially) direct complaints, to see whether the practices for dealing with such complaints observed in our data recur in other settings and with other (types of) participants. A focus on opposite complaint trajectories would be equally interesting. Future studies may shed more light on how participants accomplish re-orientations of complaints, and how blame is negotiated in such cases.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

The majority of the data can be accessed for research purposes through a password-protected online corpus upon request.

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