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Decision-Making in Salesperson–Customer Interaction: Establishing a Common Ground for Obtaining Commitment

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Abstract

Decisions are often made in a two-part sequence, consisting of a proposal by one party and an aligning response from others. While this sequence is well established, less is known about the preparatory work that may precede it. This chapter studies decision-making in the context of complex service selling. It demonstrates that and how salespeople and a prospective customer collaboratively and incrementally establish a decision over a multi-sequence course of action, in which a sequence implements a stage and the next sequence implements a next step or outcome of the prior stage. Thus, the chapter sheds light on how the groundwork for a proposal is laid. The conversation analytic study is based on 17 video-recorded business-to-business sales meetings in Finland.

Keywords: decision-making, business meetings, customer interaction, sales encounters, business-to-business marketing, conversation analysis, institutional interaction, Finnish

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1 Introduction

In business-to-business sales interactions, when a salesperson meets with a prospective customer for the first time, his/her goal is obtaining the customer's commitment to taking steps that will move the process closer to a business collaboration decision. With complex industrial service sales, the process will never be closed in one meeting. Advancement can be realised in a customer's promise to meet the salesperson again on a set date or try the service. While the ultimate goal is a sale, there are interim goals requiring the customer's incremental commitment. Yet little is known about these incremental steps and how they prepare the buyer for the final sale.

In this chapter, we study the circumstances in which the step forward is likely to occur. Drawing on video-recorded initial sales negotiations, we show that the customer's incremental commitment is best achieved when a salesperson and customer find a common ground and inter-subjective understanding on the customer's current situation, moving toward the

decision in a stepwise manner. For example, typical to our data, a salesperson first proposes an advance, the customer turns it down, the salesperson starts to work for an adjusted second proposal, and finally, next steps in business collaboration are agreed on. We infer that obtaining customer commitment is less about the salesperson's persuasive skills, as emphasised in the traditional transactional selling paradigm, and has more to do with collaborative negotiation regarding shared interest.

2 Decision-Making in Business-to-Business Selling

Early research in the business literature delineated a process approach to selling with a final step called 'closing' (Dubinsky 1981), that is, how the salesperson secures the customer's agreement to a deal. Despite huge popularity in the business literature and sales training courses, there is an almost total lack of academic research on this topic. The literature has touched on aspects of closing; for example, Hawes, Strong and Winick (1996) explore how customers perceive specific sales techniques for closing and show a detriment on the establishment of trust. Pettijohn et al. (2000) show that being more adaptive to customers increases the likelihood of closing the sale. Even literature on customer decision making falls short, focussing predominantly either on consumer goods without a salesperson or ethical decision making. Recent theory and literature on selling and

obtaining customer commitment has proposed the co-creative nature of selling and how commitment may develop (e.g. Dixon & Adamson 2011, Dixon & Tanner 2012), but such concepts have not been empirically tested in terms of obtaining the customer's commitment to advancing the sale in a stepwise fashion. With minimal research on closing, there is no empirical work at all on how closing can be achieved from the buyer or the salesperson perspective. No closing studies have considered data from a dyadic perspective.

Whilst the sales literature has not provided much insight on obtaining the customer's commitment, conversation analysis (CA) has increasingly been applied to examine the details of business-to-business (henceforth B2B) sales interaction. Such research analysis has included the use of humour and laughter (Mulkay, Clark & Pinch 1993), rapport building (Clark, Drew & Pinch 2003; Kaski, Niemi & Pullins 2018) and customer-initiated price negotiation (Niemi & Hirvonen 2019) in salesperson–customer interaction. Most central to our interest, Huma, Stokoe and Sikveland (2018) study 'cold' calls in which the salesperson's goal is booking an appointment with a prospective customer. In these time-limited calls, salespeople do not immediately ask to make an appointment; they use pre-expansions to entice customers to support the unfolding project and promote alignment with the ensuing proposal for a meeting. Furthermore, salespeople often design their appointment solicitations to address the

customers' likely contingencies (e.g. time and availability), thereby preempting potential reasons for customers rejecting the appointment.

Beyond the research on B2B interaction, CA studies from different workplace contexts offer insights into negotiation and decision making, centring on the sequential analysis of decision making and formulations as a tool in decision making. Maynard (1984) studies pretrial negotiations between the defence and prosecution in misdemeanour criminal justice. For each case, the defence and prosecutors decide on an outcome. The participants generally employ a bargaining sequence consisting of two turns. In the first, a party makes a position visible by reporting on a preference or offering a proposal; in the second turn, the other party exhibits alignment or non-alignment with that position (Maynard 1984: 171). A decision is achieved when the parties align with the same position.

Continuing the sequential analysis on decision making, Huisman (2001) illustrates that we cannot attribute decisions to a specific utterance in meeting talk, but we can locate the emergence of decisions in the sequential organisation of turn-by-turn interaction. In brief, a decision-making process involves the relevant participants formulating and assessing a state of affairs. Thus, a decision is a positively assessed formulation of a future situation, event or action (see Wasson 2000; Stevanovic 2012).

Another line of CA research on decision making focuses on the use of formulations (Heritage & Watson 1979) as a tool for establishing decisions. Barnes (2007) analyses how chairpersons' formulations that gloss the

preceding talk provide an entry into a decision and topic transition. The chair's pre-closing formulations helps establish and preserve a shared understanding in meetings talk. In Clifton's (2009) study, the subordinates in organizational management meetings orient to the chair's formulations as a decision. Furthermore, the subordinates can influence the decision-making process by seeking the chair's alignment with their own proposed solution.

In summary, CA research has established the basic decision-making sequence and demonstrated how formulations can be used as a tool in establishing decisions. However, less attention has been paid to how the groundwork for a proposal is laid (cf. Huma, Stokoe & Sikveland 2018). Maynard (1984) notes that bargaining sequences are locally occasioned in turn-by-turn talk. That is, an initial bargaining sequence must be preceded by 'relevant discussion', or a solicitation (e.g. *Is there an offer in that case?*) or announcement (*I'll propose a deal to you*) must allow such discussion to happen (Maynard 1984: 85–88). Besides that, we are not aware of research on building the ground for a proposal. In B2B sales interactions, the local occasioning and preparation of a business proposal is an important task for the salesperson. As we demonstrate, customers reject business proposals which occur too early, before the appropriate series of incremental commitments has been achieved. A salesperson needs to achieve the customer's alignment with actions that prepare for an eventual business proposal.

3 Data

The data for this study are drawn from a corpus of 17 video-recorded, face-to-face business meetings occurring between representatives of different organisations in Finland. These organisations represent multiple industries and services, with sizes varying from small to global companies. All the meetings include new potential customers. Thus, the organisations do not have business collaboration and are not currently collaborating in the business area they are now discussing.

To illustrate our results, we draw on a single meeting from our corpus. This enables us to better demonstrate how obtaining the customer's commitment is a stepwise process via a qualitative analysis. Our data show that, to achieve an intersubjective understanding, the salesperson and customer should first build a mutual understanding of the customer's needs, then establish a detailed understanding of the fit between the salesperson's service and customer needs. Next, they need to determine a clear, but not too risky, way of advancing the collaboration. This helps ensure that, when the salesperson eventually makes a business proposal, the customer has little room for turning it down; the proposal is a result of collaborative discussion and aligned with customer need.

4 The Stepwise Construction of Customer's Commitment

In this section, we focus on a business meeting between a company that offers human resources and staffing services (STAFF) and a company that is a major player in the Finnish trade business (TRADE). In the meeting, there are two representatives of STAFF and one representative of TRADE (Picture 1).



Picture 1: Salespeople (SP1 and SP2) on the left, and customer on the other side of the table.

Over the years, STAFF and TRADE have often discussed different types of collaboration. In fact, the two companies already collaborate in the TRADE storage and logistics services, and now they are discussing potential collaboration in TRADE outlets. However, TRADE has a staffing contract for its outlets with a competitor of STAFF. The STAFF representatives have explained that there are differences between the competitor and STAFF, in that the competitor is more experienced in restaurant staff services, whereas

STAFF is an expert in, for example, logistics and construction. This is important, since the customer is mainly looking for help with temporary staff involved in physical work with goods.

In the meeting we concentrate on, we find the following seven steps in the establishment of customer commitment: 1) the customer need is determined, 2) the salesperson's service is discussed as a potential solution, 3) the salesperson proposes a business collaboration, 4) the customer expresses a personal interest but brings forward the company restrictions, 5) a plan for the customer organisation's internal discussions is collaboratively laid out, 6) an advance in business collaboration is explicated, and 7) a date for a new meeting is set. Next, we discuss these steps in more detail by analysing excerpts (Examples 1–6) from the meeting between STAFF and TRADE.

4.1 Determining the Customer Need and a Potential Solution

At the beginning of an initial meeting, a salesperson (or two) represents the organisation to the customer, and customer need is determined. Next, the salespeople work to establish the customer's interest in the service. In our data, one resource that salespeople recurrently use in this task is invoking shared knowledge. Prior to the excerpt below (Example 1), representatives of STAFF (SP1 and SP2 in the transcript) have informed the customer (CUS in the transcript) about the details of collaboration between STAFF and a

subsidiary company of TRADE (storing and logistics), and the customer then introduced his current concerns. The customer explained that, despite their contract with another human resources company, they are constantly in need of physical staff that can work effectively with goods. Currently, the same people who do customer service in the outlets also work with goods, and they have complained of this burden. Furthermore, the customer has stated that the inevitable seasonal changes in the amount of goods coming in do not affect the number of staff in the outlets. The excerpt below begins when the customer summarises an extended stretch of need description by stating that the lack of flexibility in staff is ineffective. In the excerpt, target lines are highlighted in grey colour.

Example 1: STAFF_TRADE (44:26–44:46 of total 1:28:07).

01 CUS: **et kyl meil[lä niinku, .hhh**
so we surely have

02 SP2: **[kyllä,**
yes

03 CUS: **niinku tehokkuuspotentiaalii (.) on paljon.**
*a lot of potential for ((improvement in))
effectivity*

04 SP2: **mm,**

05 CUS: **paljo siinä et et ku löydetää vaa semmoset keinot.**
a lot there so if we only find means for it

06 (1.2)

07 SP2: **.mt tää on se missä niinku me (.) voitaa i[ha**
this is where we could absolutely

08 CUS: **[mh.**

09 SP2: **ehdotto[masti auttaa meinaan nythän tällä hetkel ku**

help you

I mean as we are at the moment

- 10 CUS: [mh.]
- 11 SP2: **me=ollaa siellä varastopuolella.**
there in storing
- 12 SP2: **siis ne varaston sesongit[han menee**
I mean the seasons for storage go
- 13 CUS: [mh.]
- 14 SP2: **ai[van yks yh[teen [niinku [teiän[seson[kien**
one-to-one with your seasons
- 15 CUS: [mm. [joo. [joo. [joo. [joo. [joo.
yes yes yes yes yes
- 16 SP2: **kanssa. .hh[h ni me] niinku, (.) autetaa jo siinä**
so we already help you in the
- 17 SP1: [°mm::°.]
- 18 SP2: **jous[tossa.**
flexibility
- 20 CUS: [mm.]

When summarising the ineffective current practice (lines 01 and 03), CUS implies the potential need for the kind of service that STAFF offers. He then describes a contingency – the need to find suitable means (line 05). After a gap of 1.2 seconds, during which CUS gazes at SP2, SP2 responds by stating that STAFF (*me*, ‘we’, at line 07) could help. As an account for her claim, SP2 refers to shared knowledge (see the enclitic particle *-han* in *nythän* ‘now’ and *sesongithan* ‘seasons’, lines 09 and 12; VISK §830), the collaboration that STAFF and TRADE already have. That is, SP2 invokes shared knowledge for establishing mutual understanding of how STAFF could help TRADE. The customer’s repeated acknowledgements (line 15) display his understanding and familiarity with the topic.

Although SP2 does not design her claim of STAFF's ability to help TRADE as a business proposal – it does not explicitly express a desire to initiate collaboration (e.g. *we could start by* in one of the business proposals in our data) – it can be understood as such. Indeed, a little later, CUS responds as if it were a business proposal and explains that the existing contract with another human resources company makes it harder to start collaborating (data not shown). Then, CUS repeats that he sees the potential for collaboration but explains that they should build a better understanding about the need in TRADE. Furthermore, CUS acknowledges that TRADE must establish more staff flexibility to address the staff changes due to seasonality.

SP1 interprets the display of customer interest/need as a chance to propose a business collaboration. He first displays an understanding of the need to adjust the staff number seasonally, then moves to his proposal. However, as the next excerpt demonstrates, SP2 comes in right after SP1's proposal and asks about a different matter. By doing this, SP2 makes an answer, instead of an alignment or non-alignment with SP1's proposal, a conditionally relevant next action from the customer. This can be seen as evidence that SP2 regards this as too early to propose collaboration.

Example 2: STAFF_TRADE (48:22–48:53 of total 1:28:07).

01 SP1: et jos vaan, (0.2) jos vaan jostain
so if only if only we

22 CUS: oon montaki kertaa [että et ni-.
I have many times so that

23 SP2: [nähny meiän porukoita siel[lä
you have seen our staff there

24 CUS: [joo.
yes

25 SP2: ja.=
and

SP1 proposes a pilot (lines 06 and 08), but CUS does not respond immediately. There follows a gap of 0.6 seconds (line 10), after which, CUS acknowledges SP1's proposal with a minimal response *mm* (line 11) but does not evaluate it, implying that there are problems related to the proposal (cf. *nii* as a response to a directive; Sorjonen 2001). Furthermore, while SP1 is producing his proposal, CUS acts as a temporary host and offers to fill up the water glasses. We argue that this embodied action serves as an index of CUS's understanding that this meeting is not in its concluding phase, but rather, around midway through. Therefore, SP1's proposal of a concrete advancement in the business collaboration is too early.

After CUS's acknowledgement, SP1 elaborates on his proposal (lines 10–13), thereby offering another slot for CUS's evaluative response. However, aligning with the customer, SP2 suggests that the time is not right for decision making, as she now comes in with a rather intrusive question, accompanied with a misplacement marker *muuten*, 'by the way' (line 15; Schegloff & Sacks 1973).

This question blocks SP1's ill-timed business proposal and changes the customer's response relevancy. That is, SP2's question at least momentarily overtakes the response relevancy from SP1's business proposal, and the customer indeed responds to SP2's question instead of SP1's proposal (see lines 17, 20 and 22).¹ While it is possible that the business proposal would not be returned to by CUS, he nevertheless does return to it, as the next excerpt demonstrates. In it, the customer brings forward contingencies related to accepting SP1's proposal.

Example 3: STAFF_TRADE ((49:24–49:54 of total 1:28:07)).

- 01 CUS: °kyllä°, .hhh kyl siellä kun, (0.4) paljo on tullu
yes I have been there
- 02 pyörittä² mutta, .h[hhh mut tota ihan siis nään,
a lot but but um I mean I see
- 03 SP2: [joo,
yes
- 04 CUS: (.) nään itse kans niinkun ihan, mhhhh ihan, (1.0)
I personally see as well like
- 05 todella< todella semmone yhteistyö niinku, (0.8)
really really that kind of collaboration
- 06 tässä olis niinku (0.4) paljonki mahdollisuuksia
we would have lots of possibilities here
- 07 ja, (.) me oltas niinku (0.2) pitä³s vaan
and we would be one should only
- 08 tavallaa puhua niinku meilläkin sitä että et
discuss it within our organisation as well
- 09 [tietysti ite ei ni- voi, .hhh ei voi päättää

¹ CUS produces his response with a smiling voice (lines 17 and 20). While it may be that CUS finds SP2's question 'funny', we argue that it is more likely that this voice quality indicates CUS's understanding that SP2 interfered with SP1's question and aimed to block an ill-timed business proposal.

	<i>because I can't</i>	<i>I can't decide</i>
10 SP2:	[mm,	
11 CUS:	suoraa et meil on ↑sopimukset niinku näis[tä <i>directly because we have contracts on it</i>	
12 SP1:		[mm,
13 CUS:	ja to[ta nyt hh pitää vaa niinku mieltä nyt et <i>and now we need to like think about it</i>	
14 SP2:	[mm,	
15 CUS:	millä tavalla tätä asiaa niinku lähtee sit niinku <i>how one should begin</i>	
16	kauppaamaan sitte niinku. <i>to sell this then</i>	
17	(0.4)	
18 SP2:	nii. <i>yes</i>	
19	(0.4)	
20 SP2:	[teillä eteenpäi.] <i>forward in your organisation</i>	
21 CUS:	[.khhhh °s'ten°] meillä eteenpäin <i>forward in our organisation</i>	

First, CUS explicates his personal interest in collaborating with STAFF, marking his opinion as aligned with that of the salespeople (*nään itse kans*, ‘I personally see as well’, line 04). As CUS goes on to express his contingencies (lines 07–16), SP2 completes the utterance that CUS is producing (line 20), and thereby displays that she understands CUS’s situation (for collaboratively constructed utterances in interaction, see Lerner 1996, 2004, and Helasvuo 2004). CUS then accepts SP2’s completion (line 21).

In this section, we have demonstrated that, after the customer's need is determined, salespeople may invoke shared knowledge as a resource in building a mutual understanding of how the participants could do business together (Example 1). However, our data also reveal that the initial building blocks of mutual understanding are not sufficient, and how a relatively early business proposal may be treated as premature by both a customer and colleague salesperson (Example 2), requiring further discussion on how to make progress (Example 3). This implies the need for stepwise and collaborative establishment of a more detailed mutual understanding, as analysed in the next section.

4.2 Collaborative Achievement of an Advancement in the Business Relationship

This section demonstrates how the customer's commitment to an advancement (agreement to meet again after inter-organisational discussions) is collaboratively achieved in a multi-sequence course of action. In this action trajectory, successive sequences are linked so that a sequence establishes an agreement on a minor issue and the preconditions for a bigger scale agreement (or ultimately, a joint decision) in the next sequence.

Importantly, in Example 3, CUS clearly expresses his personal interest in collaboration with STAFF. This provides a new resource for the

salespeople, as displayed in the next example. Here, SP2 has just explained that she now wants to think about ways in which ‘we could make progress’; the first-person plural pronoun ‘we’ creates a collective that includes the customer in the same team with the salespeople (on ‘we’ as a resource in institutional interaction, see Drew & Heritage 1992). Below, SP2 continues from this point. Our attention should be on three actions that pave the way for customer commitment: First, SP2 asks about CUS’s personal feeling on the chance of collaboration (lines 1–14); second, she asks if she and SP1 could help CUS with approaching his company internally (lines 45–49); and third, she offers to provide C with relevant information (lines 61–64). In line 50, the pseudonym EXOT refers to the collaboration that STAFF and TRADE already have in storage and logistics.

Example 4: STAFF_TRADE (1:01:57–1:03:36 of total 1:28:07)

- 01 SP2: **mut mimmonen, (.) tuntuma sulla niinku on: on että**
but what kind of feeling do you have
- 02 **me ollaan aika< aika monesti nyt törmätty; (0.2)**
we have quite often collided
- 03 **.hh törmätty niinku siihe että me ei päästä**
collided with the fact that we don't get to
- 04 **ideoimaan.**
discuss ideas
- 05 CUS: **mm.**
- 06 SP2: **niinku teiän kanssa asioita ja, (.) ja tullu niinku**
with you and and basically
- 07 **oikestaa just sopimuksen takia ni on tullu seinää**
because of your contract we have hit a wall

49	SP2:	siinä [työssä. <i>in that work</i>
50	CUS:	[no ↑tietysti toi, mHHh EXOTin; (.) EXOTin <i>well of course the EXOT EXOT</i>
51		kautta niinku kuvio niinku sillä tavalla niinku <i>collaboration is like interesting</i>
52		kiinnostaa vielä niinku avata aika paljo että, <i>to open up</i>
53		krhnh et minkälaista niinku .hhh KRHh Krhnh <i>that what kind of</i>
54		henkilö- henkilöprofiilia vielä niinku vaikka tässä <i>personnel profile even though</i>
55		ollaan keskusteltu siitä että. <i>we have discussed about it here</i>
56	SP2:	mhm;
57		(0.4)
58	CUS:	.mts et siellä o oltu ja, .hhh tavallaa et et mitäh; <i>so that they have been there and like what</i>
59		(0.4) mitä he ovat <tehneet> siellä niinku. <i>what have they done there</i>
60	SP1:	.nff[f
61	SP2:	[me voitaa [se: siitä tehdä sem[monen tota ni <i>we could draft a summary about it</i>
62	SP1:	[jos-
63	CUS:	[(--) [nii. <i>yes</i>
64	SP2:	yhteen veto sul[le. <i>to you</i>
65	CUS:	[↑mä voisi ottaa iha mielelläni. <i>I would gladly have it</i>

In line 10, SP2 uses the first-person plural pronoun 'we' to express the idea of a collective that includes both the salespeople and customer. She implies that this collective has a shared interest and common understanding of the

benefits of collaboration, but this interest may be in contrast with the current solution in TRADE's staffing services. The question *tyssääkö meillä*, 'will we get stuck' (line 13) invokes shared knowledge of earlier, failed attempts at collaboration between STAFF and TRADE and implies that the participants have already reached a new step in collaboration (see also *näin pitkälle ei olla päästy keskusteluissa aikasemmin* 'we have not been this far before in our discussions', lines 8–9 and 11), but this progress is in danger of being lost. The candidate proposition (Heritage & Raymond 2012) in this question is designed as a dispreferred option by lexical choice (*tyssääkö* 'get stuck', the bureaucratic description *näihin sopimusteknisiin asioihin* 'these contract technical things' line 13), and the turn-final disjunctive conjunction *vai* 'or' (line 14), projecting a preferred second option (cf. Drake 2015; Llewellyn 2015; Huma, Stokoe & Sikveland 2018).

CUS initiates his response while SP2 has yet to formulate the second part of her alternative question. The turn-initial particle *no* 'well' (line 15) implies a non-straightforward response to come (Sorjonen & Vepsäläinen 2016). Then, overlapping with SP2's completion of the alternative question (*löytyiskö sieltä joku* 'could we find some [solution]', line 17), CUS initiates a positive evaluation (line 18), and sketches a way of progressing. In this plan, CUS repeats the pronoun 'we' (line 19), aligning with the idea that there is indeed a shared understanding of the benefits of collaboration and a collective. After some further discussion of the plan (data not shown), SP2 comes in with a polar (yes/no) question that is tilted to an affirmative

answer by the use of *jotain* ‘some’ (*onko jotain semmost tietoo mitä me niinku voitaa toimittaa sulle* ‘is there some information that we could provide to you’, lines 45–46; Heritage et al. 2007). Indeed, CUS provides an affirmative answer (lines 50–55 and 58–59), and SP2 offers to provide a summary (lines 61–64), explicitly marking CUS as the beneficiary (*sulle*, ‘to you’, line 64; cf. Niemi & Hirvonen 2019). Altogether, the participants collaboratively proceed from a problem recognition to a possible problem resolution, and SP2’s initiative actions (lines 13–14, 45–47, and 61–64) pave the way for it.

The participants have now reached a possible way of moving forward, but this is insufficient for the salespeople, who must still establish a concrete advancement towards a deal. Next, we demonstrate how this is achieved in sequences that continue the course of action initiated previously (Example 4). Shortly after the prior example, SP1 says that he believes STAFF can bring true additional value to TRADE, especially as service personnel and personnel working with goods in TRADE outlets become more specialised. CUS then explains that there is still some way to go to reach that point, but it is the direction in which they are heading. Below, he continues in this vein.

Example 5: STAFF_TRADE (1:07:47–1:08:37 of total 1:28:07)

01 CUS: *mut tota: (0.6) on: oon itse niinku (.) kyllä sillä*
but um I am personally like

22	SP2:	haluu hoput[taa enkä mitää mutta et vähän niinku <i>rush you in any way but just to like</i>	
23	CUS:	[joo. <i>yes</i>	
24	SP2:	#ym:[:# tiedän että missä vaiheessa me, (.) kenties <i>know that in what stage we potentially</i>	
25	CUS:	[.thhhhhh HHHh	
26	SP2:	voi[tais istuu sit]te taas uudellee [alas <i>could sit down again</i>	
27	CUS:	[j::oo. ehhh]	[°joo°, (0.2) <i>yes yes</i>
28		↑tietysti <joku tota>, (.) nyt eletään; (1.0) <i>of course some um we are now</i>	
29		eletää helmikuun loppuu joku maaliskuu <i>at the end of February so March</i>	
30		tietysti ois ihan, <i>would of course be</i>	
31		(0.4)	
32	SP2:	nii. <i>yes</i>	
33	CUS:	ihan maaliskuun niinku joku; (0.2) puolivär- <i>like in mid-March</i>	
34		varmaan niinku viimestää <i>probably at latest</i>	

CUS again expresses his interest in business collaboration (lines 1–2), but a customer’s personal interest is not yet a promise of organisational collaboration. Thus, SP2 begins with an acknowledgement token *nii*, ‘yes’ (line 3), pronounced in a separate prosodic unit with level pitch, and continues with a contrastive conjunction *mut*, ‘but’ (line 5). Such turn prefaces are used in the middle of an on-going negotiation, and the speaker of *nii mut* utterance claims recognition of the prior speaker’s line of action

while also implying that it does not completely satisfy him or her (Niemi 2014). After CUS has offered his positive overall evaluation (line 6), SP2 continues the multi-sequence course of action aimed at establishing a joint decision towards proceeding.

First, she makes a proposal (cf. bargaining sequence; Maynard 1984), linked to the second part of her prior alternative question (*vai löytyiskö sieltä joku*, ‘or could we find some [solution]’) and CUS’s affirmative answer (see Example 4). The proposal consists of the first-person plural modal verb *voidaanko*, ‘can we’, complemented by the pronoun *me* ‘we’, the infinitival verb *edetä*, ‘proceed’ and an utterance initiated by *nii että* ‘so that’ (line 8). The choice of the infinitival verb is notable, as *edetä* ‘proceed’ suggests an advance in the business relationship, albeit as modest as a permission to send CUS a summary. Furthermore, by framing the decision as contingent on the customer’s agreement, SP2 presents this modest step forward as important. The second part of this adjacency pair is the customer’s response, which is a simple agreement (*joo*, ‘yes’, line 12). We argue that CUS’s unproblematic agreement arises from the collaborative construction of the foundations for the proposal and its not-too-ambitious character, requiring CUS to agree only to what he has already demonstrated interest in.

Second, SP2 initiates a new first pair part, a request for information on when the participants could meet again (lines 18–26). As observed by Heritage and Sorjonen (1994), prefacing an initiation of a new sequence

with *ja* ‘and’ marks a continuation to a course of action (establishing a decision) that continues over sequence boundaries. Importantly, SP2 presents the request for information (*missä vaiheessa me kenties voitais istuu sitte taas uudellee alas*, ‘in what stage we could potentially sit down again’, lines 24–26) as the focal action, thereby presupposing CUS’s agreement for the new meeting (see also Huma, Stivers & Sikveland 2018). She marks the proposed meeting as tentative only by the use of the modal particle *kenties* ‘potentially’ (line 24). As CUS already aligned with SP2’s prior proposal, not aligning with the continuing course of action would require extra interactional work from CUS. Indeed, CUS provides his answer (lines 27–30 and 33–34), agreeing to meet again.

Shortly thereafter, SP2 makes a new proposal, thereby implementing the phase in which the customer’s commitment to a new meeting is established (cf. Stevanovic 2012).

Example 6: STAFF_TRADE (1:09:08–1:09:15 of total 1:28:07)

- 01 SP2: *ni tota ni, (0.2) voidaanko me ottaa tohon*
so um can we already book
- 02 *maaliskuun puolivälin kieppeille jo joku #m:#*
a time for meeting for around
- 03 *pa^laveriaikah?*
mid-March
- 04 (0.2)
- 05 CUS: *.thhh (0.4) ↑otet^a vaan*
let's book ((a time there))

SP2's proposal of settling on a specific date for a new meeting implements a next step in the course of decision making, for which the agreement to meet again (Example 5) implements a prior stage. Therefore, the proposal has an incremental character, requiring CUS to agree only to what he has stated to be possible. CUS agrees to the proposal by repeating the verb, *ottaa* 'to book', in the first-person plural form *otetaa* (line 5; Sorjonen 2001: 37–44), and the turn-final particle *vaan* (lit. 'only') signals a go-ahead permission. The participants then take up their notebooks and begin to look for a date for the new meeting.

The participants have now agreed on how to make progress (Example 5) and settled a date for a new meeting (Example 6). These decisions have occurred in separate sequences but in the same course of action. That is, the customer commitment to an advancement in the business collaboration and a new meeting has been collaboratively achieved.

5 Summary and Conclusions

In this study, we discussed how salespeople work to obtain their customer's commitment to an advancement in B2B sales interactions. We showed that there are many steps in the path to customer commitment, and the customer

is likely to reject a salesperson's proposal of business collaboration if it occurs too early. It is our understanding that the stepwise construction of customer commitment reflects the institutional characteristics of interactions that are specific to B2B sales: Both the salespeople and their customers represent an organisation and are thus constrained in their rights to make decisions. The customer especially will usually need to consult his/her organisation and 'sell' the service to the executives. Therefore, the negotiation of a customer need and potential solution to it in the first meeting between a salesperson and prospective customer is only a starting point for a further discussion about how to progress. The customer cannot promise too much, and he/she must design all commitments to a business collaboration with a specific type of professional caution (cf. Drew & Heritage 1992: 45–47; Heritage & Clayman 2010: 74–78).

Studies in social sciences and linguistics have discussed intersubjectivity, or participants' mutual understandings of the on-going action, as based on sufficiently shared cognition (Schutz 1962; Linell & Lindström 2016). Whilst this most likely holds for many institutional, work-related interactions as well, our study proposes that what counts as an intersubjective understanding is a target of elaborate negotiation in B2B sales interactions. That is, the participants pursue stepwise building of a shared understanding and extensively address the question of whether something is agreeable. The salesperson's proposal of an advance in the business relationship is built during a multi-sequence course of decision

making where small-scale agreements lead to bigger ones, and eventually, to commitment.

This study makes several important contributions. First, it contributes to the existing sales and marketing literature, being the first to specifically and empirically study how closing occurs in the complex B2B context. It provides a foundation for theoretical development of the closing process as one which relies on a series of intersubjective agreement to proceed proposal acceptance. Further it demonstrates that a patient process is required in selling, as solutions proposals that occur outside of this process are more likely to be rejected. It also contributes to the customer decision-making process, which has not yet empirically demonstrated a step-wise process leading up to purchase decisions in a complex B2B context. Finally, it makes an important contribution to the CA literature by extending the understanding of decision-making to the preparatory work that precedes decisions in institutional negotiation. First, we demonstrated that and how participants in negotiation may invoke shared knowledge as an initial step towards decision-making. In addition, both the notion of incremental commitment in multi-sequence action trajectories, in which prior minor agreements are used as a resource for later bigger scale agreements, and of proposal timing (rejected if too early) add to our current understanding. Therefore, in summary, our study contributes to the establishment of joint decisions by focussing on the required groundwork before a bargaining

sequence (Maynard 1984), and intersubjectivity in the final purchasing commitment, can be successfully initiated.

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