

## Abstract

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of a conversational exchange initiated by a customer's price question in real-life business-to-business (B2B) sales encounters. The analysis focusses on when the customer requests a price, what that implies as well as how the price discussion is conducted. Marketing literature usually considers product/service price to be an obstacle that the salesperson needs to overcome; we demonstrate that the price question is a positive signal for the salesperson. By requesting the price, the customer claims sufficient understanding of the offer, recognition of the service value and a readiness to move to the next phase in the meeting. The salesperson initiates an insert expansion to tailor the price to her/his customer and then informs the price in an expanded clausal response to build customer value. The conversation analytic study was based on a dataset of 13 video-recorded B2B sales meetings in Finland.

*Keywords:* business meetings, conversation analysis, customer interaction, industrial marketing, institutional interaction, questions, sales encounters, service price, software-as-a-service

## Money talks. Customer-initiated price negotiation in business-to-business sales interaction

Buying and selling involve an exchange of money for a product or service. The salesperson attempts to sell her/his product or service for a price that not only covers the work invested and the materials used, but also make a profit. The customer, on the other hand, seeks at least value for money: a balanced relationship between the money that s/he uses and the perceived value of the product/service that s/he receives. This means that during business transactions, the buyer and seller have (potentially) conflicting aims, and money is an important underlying factor in their relationship. Consider the following example from an influential sales book:

**Example 1.** (From Rackham 1988: 74)

BUYER: What does your system cost?

SELLER: The basic system is about \$120,000 and...

BUYER: (*amazed*) \$120,000!!! Just to make a machine easier to use! You must be kidding.

Rackham (1988) explains that the problem in Example 1 is that the buyer does not recognise that his problem justifies such a pricy solution, and the money spent would outweigh the value received. In other words, the customer implicitly claims that the salesperson would benefit unfairly at his expense, and that their relationship would not be balanced.

This paper presents an analysis of customer-initiated price negotiations during real-life business-to-business (B2B) sales encounters. These B2B sales interactions occur between representatives of two different organisations, and they are characterised by long-term relationships, high-value trades and multiparty decision-making processes within the organisations. During B2B interactions, sales are rarely decided on the first encounter, and multiple meetings are usually needed. We focus on the initial sales encounters between two organizations and consider the implications of a customer posing (or not posing) a price question within the first encounter. Furthermore, we analyse the

features of the conversational exchange – the money talk – that is initiated by the customer's price question.

Although buying and selling as an interactional achievement is an everyday phenomenon, few studies have been conducted on the price inquiries. Marketing literature has usually discussed product/service prices in B2B sales encounters as an obstacle that the salesperson needs to overcome. Price is considered to be a basis for the customer to object (see Example 1), and literature available to advise salespersons as to how they should deal with this situation (e.g. Schurr et al. 1985). The advice offered is predominately related to a suggestion to clarify what customers receive in return for their money, or in other words, to build value (for the concept of value, see Grönroos 2011). Furthermore, it is believed that if the salesperson manages to build value at the beginning of a sales meeting, price is then less of an issue at the end of the meeting (Manning et al. 2012: 278). Our study is informed by the marketing literature, but it differs from it by using video-recordings of real-life sales encounters as data and by the data-driven approach we adopt. As a result, our study suggests several gaps in earlier research as well as new directions for research.

Conversation analytic (CA) studies on business transactions have been conducted in different types of settings, such as at theatre ticket counters (Lindström et al. 2017; see also Llewellyn 2015), a shoe repair shop (Fox and Heinemann 2015), convenience stores (Mondada and Sorjonen 2016, Koivisto and Halonen 2009), marketplaces (Settineri 1999, Vázquez Carranza 2017), auctions (Heath and Luff 2007) and telemarketing and telephone sales calls (Clark et al. 1994, 2003; Mazeland 2004). The customer's price question in B2B sales interaction seem to differ from price questions such as those that are asked, for example, in a kiosk. In a kiosk and probably in other low-value B2C interactions as well, the customer most often requests a price after s/he has decided to buy a product (Koivisto and Halonen 2009), but in B2B context, such a decision is yet to be made.

Within CA studies, price as a topic surfaces most often in price announcements by salespersons, such as *Serían este veinticuatro de la papaya por favor*, 'That would be twenty-four for the papaya,

please' (Vázquez Carranza 2017; see also Pinch and Clark 1986, Mondada and Sorjonen 2016). For example, Clark et al. (1994) focussed on a set of interactional strategies that the buyer and seller could use to negotiate their way in real-life telephone sales calls, mostly paying attention on the objections of prospective customers and how the salespeople should deal with them. However, it is noteworthy that in their data, the price is announced by the salesperson as a first pair part, as a proposal, to which the customer is to produce a second pair part, an acceptance or a non-acceptance.

Few conversation analytic studies have focussed on B2B sales, but those that have highlighted the importance of the social relationship between a salesperson and a prospective customer. As an example, Mulkay et al. (1993) suggest that in buying and selling, the successful business transaction is not only carried out by establishing the value: they demonstrate how engaging in social interplay by humour and laughter can also function as a coping tool with difficulties in the sales negotiation (see also Clark et al. 1994; Kaski et al. 2017; for CA research on B2B sales interaction, see also Huma et al. 2017, Niemi 2017).

Using data from real-life B2B sales meetings, we explore three main aspects of selling and buying: when and how the customer requests a price and how that price discussion sequence is conducted. We demonstrate that the price inquiry sequence constitutes a turning point within the sales encounter, and the buyer and seller jointly move on from the presentation phase to a phase involving the anticipated business transactions and measures in the negotiation.

## Data and method

This study was based on a dataset of 13 video-recorded B2B sales meetings (11 h 25 min) in Finland. These meetings were initial business encounters. The data were transcribed according to the conventions developed by Gail Jefferson (Atkinson and Heritage 1984), and analysed with

conversation analysis (CA). The methods of CA are micro-level, connecting actions and their design to the way sequences run off (e.g. Heritage 1984, Sidnell 2013).

Three sales organisations participated in the study. Two of them, which we call CONSULT and TRACK, had five meetings recorded, whereas the third one, VIDEO, had three. All three companies used a Software as a Service business model, that is, they offered their customers a computer software and services related to it. CONSULT offered a management and strategy consultancy service, VIDEO a video-messaging software, and TRACK a project management and work-time tracking solution. Their prospective customers were from fields such as education, construction, and communication. Most of the meetings consisted of two participants, a salesperson and a prospective customer, but two of the meetings had two representatives of a customer.

CONSULT and VIDEO organised face-to-face meetings with their customers. In these cases, the researcher set up a camera in the meeting room and left. On the other hand, TRACK had technology-mediated business meetings. A salesperson of TRACK had arranged a meeting time with a customer and then phoned her/him. He then requested that the customer click on a link that was sent in an e-mail, and the customer could open a shared computer screen view with the salesperson. The salesperson then used his computer screen to give his presentation, but the participants did not have visual access to each other. During these technology-mediated meetings, the researcher set up a camera in the salesperson's end, and thus we were able to capture the salesperson and the screen that he was sharing with the customer.

Permission for the recordings was granted by the sales company management, and the salespeople of these companies proposed the video-recording of a sales meeting for their prospective customers. All the participants gave their consent for video-recording of their meeting. The study design conformed to established ethics guidelines from the University of Helsinki. Complete confidentiality and anonymity was guaranteed for the individual participants.

In the following, we begin with an analysis of the position of the customer's price question. We pinpoint a specific place within a business meeting for the price question, and consider the features of those meetings that do not have the customer requesting the price. We then analyse the price negotiation as a three-part sequence, consisting of a customer's price question, a salesperson's price announcement and that customer's price receipt. We demonstrate that despite the customer's price question, the salesperson does not reveal the price immediately. Rather, the salesperson orients to securing that the customer understands what s/he would receive in return for her/his money by utilising an insert expansion before the price informing. We discuss both the positive implication of the customer's price question as well as its employment as an 'exit device'.

### When does the customer ask about the price?

The customer-initiated price discussions in our data occur in a specific slot within at the end of the meeting, after the salesperson has presented the service and demonstrated how it may be used in a context that resembles the customer's business context. We will argue that by requesting the price, the customer 1) demonstrates her or his understanding that the presentation phase of the meeting has been completed, and 2) implies that s/he sees the potential value that the service could bring to her/his company. The following example originates from the initial meeting between TRACK and a customer organisation that operates within a construction business. During his turn, the customer appreciates the presentation given by the salesperson and marks it therefore as potentially completed. The customer subsequently asks about the price of the service (the price question is indicated by q in the transcript).

#### **Example 2.** TRACK – CONSTRUCTION ((1:01:55–1:02:16 of total 1:17:43))

01 CUS     #mmh# ↑mun täytyy (0.2) sanoo, (0.4) #ehm ehm#  
          #mmh# I must           (0.2) say,    (0.4.) #ehm ehm#

02           presentaatio on ollu iha hyvä.=mä e (.) mä e nyt niinku  
          *the presentation has been rather good.=I don't I don't just now*

03 iha äkkii mä en osaa niinku sanoo mitää, (0.2) sellast,  
*immediately I can't say anything like, (0.2.) such,*

04 q) (0.8) ihme- (.) no ↑tietyst se mikä, (0.2) mä tiedän  
*(0.8) specific- (.) well ↑of course one thing what (0.2) I know*

05 q) että mä meen meitä ↑omistajalle tätä asiaa esittelee ni  
*that when I go to present this to our owner is*

06 q) [hinta.  
*the price.*

07 SAL [hinta.  
*the price.*

08 (0.4)

09 SAL äh häh häh häh .hh kyllä kylläf. .hhhh ää (.)  
*yes yes.*

10 ↑palataanko siihe kahen sekunnin päästä ni sua kiinnosti  
*should get back to it in two seconds since you were interested*

11 kuitenkin toi työmaapäiväkirja,  
*in the construction diary,*

It is important to note that the salesperson produces the word *hint* 'price' (l. 7) in full overlap with the customer and thus demonstrates his ability to anticipate the customer's next action and marks the price inquiry as expected at this phase in the meeting. The phase that follows the salesperson's presentation is one that marketing research has related to the customer's demonstration of possible concerns. For example, in his influential work, Dubinsky (1981) described the seven steps of a personal selling process. For our purposes, it suffices to note that the sales presentation is followed by the step of overcoming customer objections. Still today, when price is brought up in a sales meeting, it is regularly interpreted as a part of the resistance that a prospective customer may display (e.g. Prus 1989; Manning et al. 2012), and therefore as something that needs to be overcome. However, our data do not support the claim that a prospective customer's price inquiry is a sign of resistance. In Example 2, the salesperson acknowledges the price inquiry, but postpones his answer and states a need to discuss something else first. This indicates that the salesperson considers the price inquiry as a 'real' question that needs a proper answer, not as a sign of a potential problem.

Example 2 served as evidence that a prospect may request a price quote after s/he has acquired a sufficient understanding of the salesperson's service and therefore considers the presentation phase of the meeting to be completed. Nonetheless, the actual, explicit completion of the presentation phase and the acquisition of customer's sufficient understanding remain open. Our data reveal that there are certain milestones in the path towards the completion of the presentation phase. Firstly, the salesperson should have already presented the background information of her/his company as well as the general picture of their service. Secondly, the salesperson should have demonstrated in a practical way how this prospective customer could apply the service in her/his daily business. Thirdly, the customer should be involved in the building of the sufficient understanding of the service. The most prominent of these customer involvements are the customer's requests for additional information and customer's formulations (e.g. Drew 2002) that display her or his current understanding and request for confirmation.

In the next example, the customer becomes involved in the building of his sufficient understanding by requesting additional information regarding the service that the salesperson is presenting.

Example 3a originates from the initial meeting between a VIDEO salesperson and a representative of a vocational university.

**Example 3a. VIDEO - UNIVERSITY ((34:41–35:12 of total 1:02:31))**

01 SAL      **täs on (.) ↑muutamia lisäominaisuuksii sit**  
*here are (.) a few bonus features so then*

02            **mitä (0.4) tääl voi niinku, (0.8) ku- voi upottaa kotisivulle**  
*what (0.4) here one can, (0.8) wh- can be embedded in a homepage*

03            **(0.2) voi ↑pääsee kattomaan statistiikkaa**  
*(0.2) one can get to see the statistics*

04            **että montako kertaa esitystä on katottuj ja,**  
*like how many times the presentation has been viewed and,*

05            (0.2)

06 SAL      **voi editoida, (0.6) ↑diat uudelleen (.) et (0.4) olemassaolevaa**  
*one can edit, (0.6) the slides again (.) so (0.4) into an existing*

07            **videoon tai,**

*video or,*

- 08 CUS [mm.]
- 09 SAL [tai näi poispäi. mut tää, .mhhh  
*[or so on. but this, .mhhh]*
- 10 CUS olik<sup>s</sup> ↑tossa vielä (.) vielä sitte tää (0.2) tää tota puh<sup>u</sup>vam pää<sup>n</sup>  
*was there also (.) also this (0.2) this erm talking head's*
- 11 ja sit sem  
*and then the ((makes a waving motion with his hands over his head))*
- 12 muun materiaalin ni onks se niinku staattinen se suhde  
*other material so it is that someway static the ratio*
- 13 vai pystyyks sitä jotenki,  
*or can one somehow,*
- 14 SAL .hhh (.) joo se on ↑tällä hetkellä (.) se on toi.  
*.hhh (.) yeah it is at the moment (.) it is that.*
- 15 CUS nii.  
*yeah.*
- 16 SAL ja (.) toi on hyvä kysymys koska tota on tullu - -  
*and (.) that is a good question because it has come up - -*

It is evident that the salesperson has already proceeded to the end of his presentation (see the description of 'additional features' beginning from line 1, and the concluding expression *tai näi poispäi*, 'or so on', line 9). The customer comes in with a request for information (line 10), which is related to the information that he has already acquired from the sales presentation. This request also displays the customer's desire to understand the service in more detail, and therefore it implies his interest in the service.

A few minutes later, the prospect poses another question concerning whether the software can be used on a mobile phone. The salesperson responds by providing technical information concerning the product: recording is possible with certain operating systems, but not with Windows (the prospect has a Windows phone). As Example 3b illustrates, shortly after the salesperson's response, the customer makes a price inquiry.

**Example 3b.** VIDEO - UNIVERSITY ((38:23–38:40 of total 1:02:31))





- 15 CUS [no en] sitä mä >miet-<=mä nään täst  
[well I don't] that's what I >tho-<= I see from this
- 16 oikeestaan saman tien ku mö- >meil on<,  
actually right away because wo- >we have<,
- 17 SAL nii,  
yes,
- 18 CUS nää samat järjestelmät ni >mie< tiiän aika tarkkaan mitä tää  
these same systems so >I< know quite accurately what this
- 19 on syöny (°--°) ei tarvii niiku,  
consists of (°--°) there is no need like,
- 17 SAL ni[i, ]  
ye[s, ]
- 18 CUS [(-)] sen puoleen perustella sitä (.) sitä et  
to explain it for that matter (.) that so
- 19 q) tota=<sup>↑</sup>hinta (.) <sup>↑</sup>hinta tietyst on nyt se asia mikä  
erm=price (.) price of course is now the thing that
- 20 q) kiinnostaa tässä.  
one is interested in here.

Instead of resuming the presentation, the salesperson initiates a new sequence by soliciting the customer's opinion of the product (lines 2–3). During business-to-customer telemarketing calls, a similar type of opinion query acts as a pre-sequence to a possible sales proposal. In other words, if the prospect assesses the product positively, this raises an expectation to accept the possible sales proposal, or at least it diminishes the probability of declining the offer (Mazeland 2004). Here the prospect produces a weak positive assessment of the product, which allows the salesperson to move on to making the actual transaction-proposal (line 10). Nevertheless, the turn is interrupted by the prospect (line 15). By taking the turn from the salesperson, the prospect first displays the sufficient, previously acquired knowledge regarding the same type of product. Attached to the prospect's previous turn, the price inquiry begins with the object *hinta*, 'price', which is prosodically marked as the beginning of the new phase. The turn structure also emphasises the price as the only piece of information the prospect is looking for (Hakulinen 1975).

This section has established that there is a specific slot within a B2B meeting for a customer to initiate a price discussion. This slot occurs after the salesperson has presented the service, the

customer has acquired sufficient understanding of it, and the customer recognises the value that the service could offer her/him. Most of the time, both the customer and the salesperson are ready to move from the presentation phase to the price discussion. However, as Example 2 demonstrates, the salesperson may also explicitly refuse to move on to the price discussion, until he considers the potential value-building phase to have been fully delivered.

Our data consist of 13 video-recorded B2B meetings, and 9 of these meetings concern a customer inquiring about a price. This raises a question regarding those meetings where the customer does not produce a price inquiry. When and why does the prospect refrain from asking about the price? Thus far, we have stated that the slot for the customer's price inquiry occurs after the presentation phase, when the customer has acquired a sufficient understanding of the service and its potential value. The evidence suggests that during the sales discussions when prospective customers do not clearly recognise the potential value that the service could bring to their company, they do not initiate a price inquiry. For example, in the only TRACK video that does not include the customer's price inquiry, the salesperson ends up offering a free test period for the service. This test period would enable the customer to realise what the service can offer them and possibly reconsider purchasing it. Overall, we argue that the customer's price inquiry is a positive signal for the salesperson: the customer may indicate her or his interest towards the service and a readiness to proceed to the next phase, negotiating the potential business transaction.

### Customer-initiated price discussion as a sequence

This section presents an analysis of how a prospect and a salesperson discuss about the price. The price discussion sequence (hereafter PDS) consists of three basic parts: firstly, the prospect asks about the price. Secondly, the salesperson provides an answer, and thirdly, the prospect acknowledges the received information. We refer to these three parts respectively as a price question, a price informing, and a price receipt. However, the PDS in our data involves a pre-

second insert expansion (Schegloff 2007: 106–109) that is initiated by a salesperson before the price informing. While it may seem that the salesperson uses an insert expansion simply to request information that is needed for the price informing, we will demonstrate that above all the expansion serves more business-oriented functions.

Let us first review a simple case that has a rather compact PDS. In Example 5, the prospect has inquired about details of the service, and the salesperson is finishing his answer. Shortly after, the prospect presents the price question and this initiates the PDS. (In the Example, the letter q marks the customer's price question, the letter a refers to the salesperson's price informing, and the letter r indicates the customer's price receipt.)

**Example 5. TRACK – SHEET METAL ((49:04-50:03 of total 54:56))**

- 01 SAL     **mut se [löytyy täältä listalta kuitenkin.**  
          *but you'll find it on the list anyway.*
- 02 CUS             [°joo°.  
                  *yes.*
- 03 CUS     **joo. juuriki.**  
          *yes. right.*
- 04 SAL     **joo.**  
          *yes.*
- 05 SAL     **.mt .hhh yes hh.**  
                  *yes*
- 06 SAL     **[tota tota.]**  
          *well well.*
- 07 CUS     **[aika       ] ↑pienet on meidän (.) meidän tarpeet mut toi,**  
          *our needs are (.) are rather modest but umm,*
- 08             (3.0)
- 09 SAL     **[joo-o.**  
          *u-huh.*
- 10 CUS     **[kyllä tämmönen,**  
          *surely this kind of (thing)*
- 11             (2.0)
- 12 CUS     **q) minkäs ↑hintanen tämmönen ↑olis.**  
          *what would be the price for this kind of (thing).*
- 13 SAL     **.hhh tää on tota >niin niin< (1.8) teit oli (.) montako käyttäjää**  
          *this is erm um um (1.8) you were (.) how many users*

- 14            **teitä kaiken kaikkiaan oli.**  
*you had again altogether.*
- 15 CUS        **joku (.) al<sup>↑</sup>le <sup>↓</sup>kymmenen.**  
*around (.) under ten.*
- 16 SAL        **alle kymmenen eli #öö# sanoitko (.) #ö#**  
*under ten so                    did you say (.)*
- 17            **seittemän käyttäjää #suurin piirtei#.**  
*roughly seven users.*
- 18 CUS        **(vai) kahdeksa.**  
*(or) eight.*
- 19            (.)
- 20 SAL        **a) kaheksa. (0.2) #joo.# odotas hetki. .hhh meillä on sillä >tavalla**  
*eight. (0.2)    yes.    wait a moment.                    we have it in that way*
- 21            **a) että meillä on< perusmaksu tällä mejän palvelulla kolkytätähensä**  
*that we have the basic fee for our service thirty-nine*
- 22            **a) euroa (.) olemassa.**  
*euros being.*
- 23 CUS        **mm:?**
- 24 SAL        **a) kuukausitasolla ja sitte (.) seittemän euroa per <käyttäjä>**  
*on a monthly level and then (.) seven euros per user*
- 25            **a) kuukaussa. tarkoittaa sillon että, (0.2) .hhhh kuu<sup>↑</sup>kausihinta**  
*per month. then it means that (0.2)                    the monthly price*
- 26            **a) teille on >yheksäkytä<viis euroa kuukaussa. hh**  
*for you is ninety-five euros per month.*
- 27            (0.4)
- 28 CUS        **r) <sup>↓</sup>joo.**  
*yes.*
- 29            (0.2)
- 30 SAL        **eli (.) ei (.) ei paha. (.) missään nimessä.**  
*so (.) ) so (.) not bad (.) in any ways.*

After the collaborative transition into a new phase (lines 3–5), the prospect describes his company needs as modest and implies being interested in the service (*mut*, ‘but’, line 7, and *kyllä tämmönen*, ‘surely this kind of thing’, line 10). Again, the prospect uses the demonstrative adjective *tämmönen* ‘this kind of (thing)’ to indicate that now he sufficiently understands the service (see Example 3b). The following price question (l. 12) is a question-word interrogative (QWI) that solicits specific information, the price of the service. The prospect uses the enclitic particle *-s* in the question-word

*minkäs* to mark the beginning of a new but agenda-related sequence (Raevaara 2006). Furthermore, the interrogative re-uses the demonstrative adjective *tämmönen* and includes a conditional mood in the copula verb *olis* ('would be'). By using the conditional mood, the prospect manages to imply a non-committal stance toward a hypothetical purchase. Whereas phrasal price questions in a kiosk (*paljonko*, *how much*) imply that the customer is ready to pay (Halonen and Koivisto 2009), the clausal price inquiry posed by the prospect in Example 5 does not imply that he has decided to make a deal. Rather, it initiates a next phase within the conversation, negotiating the potential business transaction.

A 'no problem' answer to a specifying QWI in everyday English is a phrasal (that is, not a full clause) response that provides only the sought-for information (Thompson et al. 2015: 23–28). This preference occurs in Finnish kiosk encounters as well, where the clerks most often use a phrasal response to answer their customers' price inquiries, as in the sequence of a customer's price inquiry *paljonko*, 'how much', and the clerk's response *kaks euroo*, 'two euros', followed by a transition into payment (Koivisto and Halonen 2009: 57). However, the salesperson in example 5 begins to formulate his price informing as a clause (*tää on*, 'this is', l. 13). He does not repeat the conditional mood of the verb that the prospect used ('would be') but uses the indicative mood instead ('is') and this indicates a state-of-affairs that is factual rather than hypothetical. While Expanded Clausal responses to specifying QWIs in everyday English "resist the terms of the question and treat the question or the sequence as inapposite in some way" (Thompson et al. 2015: 28), our data shows that in B2B sales interaction, the Expanded Clausal responses to price questions are the default and do not necessarily treat the question or sequence as inapposite. One reason for this is that often no fixed price exists for the product or service, and the price informing therefore is not as straightforward matter as it is in other contexts. Furthermore, with her/his clausal response, the salesperson orients to the on-going sales work and can provide more information to the customer.

In Example 5, the salesperson cuts his price informing, initiates an insert expansion to request information, and continues with the price informing, only after he has received the prospect's answer (lines 13–18). The salesperson informs the price in three parts: firstly, in a clausal form, he mentions the basic monthly fee (lines 21–22), secondly, the fee that depends on the number of service users (lines 24), and thirdly, the combined sum of parts 1 and 2 per month (line 26). It is noteworthy, that the salesperson could have informed the price immediately after the customer's price question by offering a phrasal response such as “thirty-eight euros per month plus seven euros per user”. Had he done this, he would have provided information on their general pricing policy instead of the price that is tailored for the current customer. Thus, by informing the price in an expanded clausal response, the salesperson displays the price as consisting of certain parts and individually for the customer (*teille*, ‘for you’, line 26). The prospect acknowledges the price informing by using the most common price receipt in our data, *joo* ‘yeah’ (line 28). With this third-position *joo*, the prospect registers the price informing and claims to understand it, but he does not evaluate it (cf. Sorjonen 2001: 154–157).

The most principled advantages for a salesperson to initiate an insert expansion before the price informing is that it enables her/him to customise the price informing to the customer (Example 5) and to again convey all the benefits that the customer would obtain when purchasing the product (that is, to create value for the customer). Example 2 featured the customer requesting the price and the salesperson postponing his price informing. The salesperson then took nine minutes to describe applications that their service would offer. In Example 6, which is a continuation of Example 2, the salesperson returns to the customer's price question, initiates a lengthy pre-second expansion, and finally presents his price informing.

**Example 6.** TRACK – CONSTRUCTION ((1:11:20-1:12:10 of total 1:17:43))

01 CUS     et sit ↑se et jos tää niinku homma muuttuu paljon ni sit  
               so then the thing is if this like work changes a lot then



*per month.*

25       ->(3.2)

26 CUS -> **mites sitte ku mä oo, (0.2) (tää on) tota,**  
*what about when I have (0.2) (here is) erm,*

27       (1.6)

28 CUS -> **↑messuilla on tollee, (0.2) on Kati kirjannu tänne ylös**  
*at the exposition has like (0.2) Kati has written down here*

29       **tää o euro per (-) (.) käyttö.**  
*this is one euro (.) per use.*

30       (0.6)

31 SAL   **joo niinku sä huomaat ni tää mitä mä just ↑tarjosin on**  
*yeah as you can see this what I just offered you is*

32       **huomattavasti halvempi.**  
*is significantly cheaper*

33       (0.2)

34 CUS   **j:oo.**  
*y:es.*

After the salesperson's transition back to 'answering to the price question' (lines 6–7; for the price question, see Example 2), he initiates a pre-second insert expansion. To initiate the expansion, he uses an existential clause type, *siinä ois* 'there would be' (line 7), followed by a number of features that would be included in the deal. The salesperson uses the partitive case marking in these features (for example, *peruspaketti*+PRT, 'basic package', *työajanseuranta*+PRT, 'employee time tracking', line 8), and therefore implies that there are many possible benefits for the customer (Hakulinen et al. 2004: 1632). In his conclusion, the salesperson summarises the features that would be included in the service package, points to the number of application users and informs the customer of the total price (lines 21–24). Thus, the salesperson in his insert expansion manages to show to the customer the benefits that he would acquire with the purchase, and to frame the mentioned price against that background.

However, 3.2 seconds of silence follows (line 25). In our data, the delay of a PDS's third component, a price receipt, is a sign that a customer has a problem with the quoted price. Indeed, the customer finally begins his next turn with a question, mentioning the price estimation that his

company had received earlier. This might be a start for a haggling sequence, but the salesperson turns the tables and claims that the price that he offers is cheaper than the earlier price. The customer then implies his approval (l. 34). We argue that the customer's initial hesitation to approve the price informing in Example 6 is a result of the salesperson's postponement of the price informing (see Example 2). By postponing it, the salesperson implies that he still wants to demonstrate value to the customer. As a result, the customer may interpret that the price will be higher than he might have anticipated when presenting the price question.

Examples 5 and 6 reveal that a response to a customer's price question is often delayed by a pre-second expansion. The salesperson may use this expansion to tailor the price informing to better suit the needs of the customer and also create value for the customer, by indicating the benefits that the customer would receive in return for her/his financial investment. Earlier we argued that when a PDS occurs, this is a positive sign for the salesperson, as the prospect's price question implies her/his interest in the service. Our final examples (7a and 7b) offer us a different perspective on the function of the PDS. While it may also be noted that the prospect in Example 7a implies that he is interested in the service by asking its price, it is also clear that the outcome of the PDS is not positive for the salesperson. It is even possible to regard the price question as an 'exit device' (cf. Jefferson 1978) that the prospect uses to work his way out of the meeting.

The business meeting that we will next analyse had a troublesome beginning. The prospect demonstrated early on his problems with the salesperson and the service he was offering; for example, he requested an explanation of the salesperson's product description with a 'why' question and thus perceived the information as inexplicable or not understandable (Bolden and Robinson 2011; Hirvonen 2016: 33–34). Nevertheless, the salesperson managed to build prospect's interest in the service through demonstrating how it can be used in practice, and the prospect finally presented a price question (Example 7a).

**Example 7a. VIDEO - CONSULTANCY ((15:29–16:48 of total 23:04))**

- 01 SAL yleensä henkilöstä kiinni innostuuko ne videoitte  
usually it depends on the person if one gets excited to
- 02 hyödyntämisestä #vai ei#.  
making use of the videos or not.
- 03 CUS q) joo. .thhh (0.2) selvä? mhhh mitä lysti mak#saah.  
yes. (0.2) got it? what does the fun cost.
- 04 (.)
- 05 SAL .thhh(0.8)↑mä katoi teil oli #ne- °y- em- e-°(0.2) (ideoman)  
(0.8) I checked you had fo- y- em- e-
- 06 mukaa neljätoista henkilöäh°. hh su- >niinku<, (0.2)  
according to (Ideoma) fourteen people umm (0.2)
- 07 kakstuhattakakstoistah. (.) mi- minkälaine teil on,  
in two-thousand twelve (.) what kind of
- 08 (0.2) e- [henkilö↓m:ää[rä (niinku ny-),  
staff number you have like no-
- 09 CUS [.thh [no< mhh hhh >toi\_on< tän (.)  
well it is a bit
- 10 tyyppisessä organisaatios vähän vaikee määritellä  
difficult to define that in this type of organisation
- 11 mut joo. kyllä. (.) s[iis ] f- fyysisesti palkkalistoilla  
but yes. sure. so ph- physically on the payroll
- 12 SAL [>joo.<]  
yes.
- 13 CUS on nel[jätoist. [.nff  
there's fourteen.
- 14 SAL [joo. [sit: teil on niinku näitä senior ar-  
yes. then you have umm these senior ar-
- 15 CUS joo.  
yes.
- 16 SAL advaisereita ketkä tekee,  
advisors who work
- 17 CUS >joo<.  
yes.
- 18 (.)
- 19 SAL niinku keikkanah.  
like temporarily.
- 20 CUS joo.  
yes.
- 21 SAL a) joo, .hhhhhh (0.2) joo >no me ↑haluttais< tehdä hh sillä taval  
yeah, (0.2) yeah well we would want to do it in a way

22 a) et jos nyt päätät et lähettää ottaa ↑käyttöön tääh (.)  
*that if you now decide that let's start using this (.)*

23 a) [ja<  
*and*

24 CUS [ei pä- ei pääteftähf.  
*let's not decide.*

25 (.)

26 SAL fehh hef°y- m-° jos o- #y- tota: e-#(1.0) jos (.) tehdää  
*if erm. (1.0) if we make*

27 ftämmönen hyp- ehhe hypoteesif, (0.2) fniin£, .hhhh eö::m me  
*this kind of hyp- hypothesis, (0.2) then we*

28 a) järjestettäs niinku ↑koulutukset tähän liittyen, (0.2) eli, (.)  
*would organize like the training as a part of this, (0.2) so (.)*

29 a) niitä vois olla #m::# (0.4) kahdesta nyt >jos sanotaa et<  
*there could be (0.4) from two now let's say*

30 a) teil on, (0.2) teillä vois olla niinku<, (0.2) #e-# ei välttämättä  
*you have (0.2) you could have like. (0.2) not necessarily*

31 a) heti niinku, (.)useita kymmeniä käyttäjiä ni varmaanki sit selviäis  
*immediately um (.) several dozens of users then surely one could*

32 a) yhdellä kahdella koulutuksella. (0.2) ja käyttöönotto, .hhhh (0.2)  
*do fine with one or two training sessions (0.2) and the introduction (0.2)*

33 a) nää koulutukset, (.)ja ensimmäise vuoden lisenssi, (.) on  
*these training sessions, (.) and the license for the first year, (.) is*

34 a) tuhatyheksänsataa eu°roo°.  
*one-thousand nine-hundred euros.*

35 CUS r) °okei.° .mthhh  
*okay.*

36 SAL a) ja,  
*and,*

37 CUS t[ota: nythä me ei kaikki neljätöista ei missään tapauksessa sitä,  
*erm now in any case all fourteen of us won't be*

38 SAL [si-

39 (0.2)

40 CUS käytetä et meil on meil on, .hhh (bäk offisia) <siitä>, (0.2) siitä  
*using it cause we have have. (back office) of it (0.2) of it*

41 nyt tuota, (1.2) °i- ehho niinkun; (1.4) °p- kä- käytännös°  
*now erm, (1.2) like; (1.4) pr- practically*

42 melkee puolet.  
*almost half of it.*

43 (1.0)

44 CUS vaikuttaaks tää hintaan.  
*does this affect the price.*



46 (0.2) et meil on niinku, .hhh isoille organisaatioille (mul on)  
*we have like, for big organisations. (I have)*

47 tietty yläraja sinne. (.) käyttäjämäärälle. (.) mut se ei oikestaa  
*a certain upper limit (.) for the number of users (.) but it doesn't actually*

48 niinku ratkase hirveesti °et° kuinka paljo, (0.4) niinkun sitä  
*umm effect much on how much (0.4) umm what*

49 (.) kuinka monta käyttäjätunnus°ta°. (0.2) °sillä on°.  
*(.) how many usernames (0.2) there is.*

50 SAL e[t s-

51 CUS [ku meille riittää todennäköst viis kuus käyttäjä°tunnusta jos  
*because we will probably need five six usernames if*

52 me (käytetään.)°  
*we (use.)*

53 SAL joo se on aika tyypillinen määrä [mitä sitte niinku  
*yeah that is quite typical number which will then umm*

54 CUS [°joo°,  
*yeah,*

55 SAL >loppu(je)lopuks sit [ni-< niitä on.  
*be there in the end.*

56 CUS [joo.  
*yeah.*

57 SAL a) .hhhh mut se, °(0.2) ö: (1.0) n- niinku <koulutus>, (.) >ja<,  
*but the umm training, and,*

58 a) ensimmäise vuode käyttö ois tuhatyheksä>sataa euroo< ja se j  
*first year of use would be one-thousand nine-hundred euros and*

59 a) jälkeen, (0.4) niinkun, .hhhh hhh s\_on #t- ym# sata<, (0.6)  
*after that (0.4) like, it's t- hundred (0.6)*

60 a) y- ös::: satakolkytyheksän euroah?  
*one-hundred thirty-nine euros?*

61 (0.2)

62 CUS -> v::uodessa.=  
*a year.*

63 SAL =eää kuussa.  
*monthly.*

64 CUS -> †kuussa.  
*monthly.*

65 (0.4)

66 SAL per kuukausi. [niink- per, niinko,  
*per month. like- per like,*

67 CUS r) [°mmh°

68 SAL #ja# se\_on kuukauden irtisanomis (.) ajalla.  
*and it is with a one-month (.) notice.*

By posing the haggling question (l. 44), the prospect assumes that the number of users would affect the price of the service. This issue was, after all, raised by the salesperson in the beginning of his price informing. Even so, the number of users does not seem to especially matter (see lines 45–49). It therefore becomes evident that a salesperson may request the number of potential users for purposes other than to establish the price for the service. The question regarding the number of users initiates a pre-second expansion and during this time, the salesperson may display that s/he tailors the price for the customer (see Example 5).

The salesperson returns to his price informing by repeating the information given before the prospect's haggling question. The salesperson then quotes the fee that would be charged after the first year. The interval of this fee is not explicated, and the prospect – with hesitation in his voice – assumes it would be a yearly fee (*v::uodessa*, 'in a year'; note the word-initial sound stretching in line 62). The salesperson corrects this to a monthly fee ('ehm in a month', line 63), and the prospect expresses his surprise by repeating the noun phrase and adding stress to the first syllable (*↑kuussa*, 'in a month', line 64). This is an implicit non-acceptance and the salesperson responds to it by merely confirming that the prospect had heard correctly (a further repetition 'per month', line 66). By offering only a repetition of the previously given interval, the salesperson does not acknowledge the prospect's implied stance of the price being too high. In other words, as Clark et al. (1994) explain it, a salesperson's turn that only confirms a customer's implicit non-acceptance maintains the salesperson's preferred position and passes over the opportunity to produce a response which would yield to the customer's position (such as "But we can reduce the price by..."). The prospect produces the minimal price receipt with a closed mouth, and this is a harbinger for the rejection that he presents shortly thereafter (data not shown).

Examples 7a and 7b demonstrated to us that the PDS may function as an exit device by giving the prospect a reason to decline the proposed deal and to end the business meeting. In example 7a, the

design of the price question (*mitä lysti maksaa*, ‘what does the fun cost’) was already potentially implicative of a no-deal decision by the prospect, and the interruption of the salesperson’s hypothetical proposal (see lines 21–27) further reinforced this. Finally, the prospect used the price informing that he received from the salesperson as a resource to claim that the ‘price is too high’, and the meeting was subsequently soon over (Example 7b). In other words, the grounds for declining the salesperson’s offer arose during the PDS, whereas the price question was ambivalent in relation to the customer’s implication of (lack of) interest in their business collaboration.

We conclude in this section by summarising our findings related to the PDS. Firstly, according to our data, the prospect can formulate her/his price question in two main ways. It can be formulated as a QWI and to include the verb *maksaa*, ‘to cost’, in it, as in Example 7a (‘what does the fun cost’). Alternatively, the price question can be implemented by using a declarative utterance that includes the noun *hinta*, ‘price’ (‘well of course one thing what I know that when I go to present this to our owner is the price’, Example 2). These options are utilised in different types of sequential contexts. The prospect uses the interrogative option when s/he understands that the salesperson’s presentation has been completed, and her/his price inquiry initiates a transition to a next phase (this question is often preceded by an explicit marking of a transition by the prospect, such as *selvä*, ‘clear; all right’, or *no nii*, ‘ok then; all right’). On the other hand, the prospect uses the declarative option after s/he has brought the sales presentation phase to an end by evaluating the presentation or the service/product. This evaluation is either volunteered by the prospect (Example 2) or elicited by the salesperson (Example 4), and it is followed by the prospect’s declarative price question.

After the customer’s price question, the salesperson initiates an insert expansion. In it, s/he builds value for the customer and/or seeks the information needed to tailor the price to her/him. The salesperson’s answer is in the form of a clausal response. The use of a clausal response form can be a result of the delayed answer, and it can function to explicate the features that sum up a certain total price. Most importantly, the clausal price informing allows the salesperson to provide more

information for the customer. Finally, the PDS is completed by the prospect's third position turn (price receipt). In our data, the most frequent price receipt is *joo*, 'yes'. By using the particle *joo*, the speaker acknowledges the price and implies her/his acceptance of it, but does not explicitly evaluate it. If the prospect does not produce a third-position price receipt, s/he implies a problem with the price and might proceed into a haggling sequence.

## Summary and conclusions

This study analysed the customer-initiated price discussion sequence (PDS) in real-life B2B sales encounters. We focussed on three aspects: how and when the customer requests a price as well as how the PDS unfolds after the price inquiry. Our analysis suggests that the sequential place, the syntactical format of the inquiry and the structure of the PDS, are carefully designed to serve business-oriented functions. Furthermore, our study challenges the frequently held conception in the marketing literature that the B2B sales negotiation of the product/service price constitutes a challenge and an obstacle for the salesperson to overcome.

Within a B2B meeting, there is a recognisable place for the customer to initiate a price discussion. This place occurs after the salesperson has finished presenting her/his company and the product, followed by the prospect's display that s/he has been sufficiently informed about the product and has understood its potential value to her/his company. The price discussion therefore has a relevance place. This place is also frequently a turning point where both the prospect and the salesperson jointly move from the presentation and value-building phase into a phase where the anticipated business-transaction negotiation is to be conducted.

During B2B sales interaction, the salesperson is primarily in charge of the course of the conversation, including the execution of the presentation and value building. However, by allowing the customer to initiate the PDS, the salesperson is not in danger of moving onto the money talk

prematurely, before the value has been established and the customer has acquired all the relevant information. The price itself may be considered as the deal breaker, depending on how the salesperson has succeeded in presenting the value of the service to the prospective customer. Thus, one may distinguish a line where the prospect uses a price question as a preferred excuse to decline an offer and retreat from a negotiation, but also as a resource to close a deal and to conclude negotiation.

Overall, this study has demonstrated that the customer's price question is a promising signal for a salesperson as well as a critical phase in a B2B meeting. In B2B interaction, the customer has not decided to buy when s/he requests for a price quote – a fact that is reflected in her/his design of the price inquiry (full clause question). The salespeople take the customer's indecision into account when informing the price: they initiate an insert expansion to tailor the price for their customer and at the same time, they display the price as consisting of certain parts and/or iterate the value that the customer would receive when buying the product. The PDS is an essential part of the on-going sales negotiation, and during the PDS, the success or failure of the salesperson's value building presentation transpires.

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