

Telephone Calls

Edited by Kang Kwong Luke
and Theodossia-Soula Pavlidou

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Unity and diversity in
conversational structure across
languages and cultures

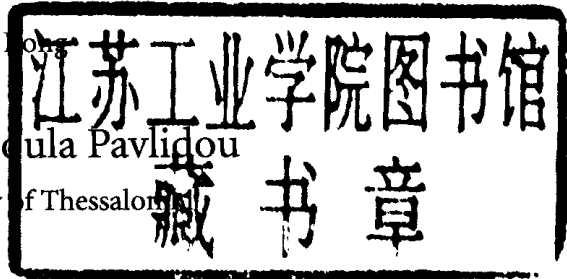
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Telephone Calls

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Volume 101

Telephone Calls: Unity and diversity in conversational structure across languages and cultures. Edited by Kang Kwong Luke and Theodossia-Soula Pavlidou.

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K. K. Luke and Soula Pavlidou
November 2002

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Introduction

Studying telephone calls

Beginnings, developments, and perspectives*

Kang Kwong Luke and Theodossia-Soula Pavlidou

1. Background

Interest in the telephone as a modern communication device goes back a long way, but the systematic study of telephone calls has only been practised for a short time relative to the history of the telephone itself. The telephone was invented by Alexander Graham Bell (1847–1922) in 1876 but the idea and, more importantly, the method of studying telephone conversations was invented by Harvey Sacks (1935–1975) almost a century later. From the very start and throughout his short but brilliant career, Sacks was keenly interested in telephone calls. This was a topic with which he started his famous lecture series; this was the topic to which he frequently returned.

In his *Lectures on Conversation* (delivered in 1964–1972 and published posthumously in 1992), Sacks began with three excerpts taken from telephone calls made to an emergency psychiatric hospital. The question with which Sacks launched his lectures was raised in the following way:

I have a large collection of these conversations, and I got started looking at these first exchanges as follows. A series of persons who called this place would not give their names. The hospital's concern was, can anything be done about it? One question I wanted to address was, where in the course of the conversation could you tell that somebody would not give their name? So I began to look at the materials. It was in fact on the basis of that question that I began to try to deal in detail with conversations. (Sacks 1992, v.1: 3)

Sacks's solution to the problem hinges crucially on his discovery of "rules of conversational sequence" (Sacks 1992, v.1: 4). He begins with the observation that a turn may provide a slot for a next turn, and when this occurs, the two turns form a conversational unit. The design of the first turn often has an effect on the form of the next slot. For example, if the service

provider (i.e. the staff of the psychiatric hospital) uses the form “Hello, this is Mr Smith, can I help you?”, this would provide for a next turn in which the caller might give *his/her* name. The form “This is Mr Smith” therefore has the function of attempting to obtain the caller’s name without actually asking a question (such as “What’s your name?”, which, as Sacks observes, might engender a request for an account, e.g., “Why do you ask?”). On the caller’s part, there are ways of “getting out of” a situation where the business of giving one’s name is due. In the slot following the service provider’s “hello”, etc., instead of giving their names, callers can initiate a sequence of their own (which is nonetheless relevant to the activity at hand), for example a repair sequence, by saying “hello?” or “I can’t hear you” as though the connection had not been properly made, or “Your name is what?”, thereby turning the service provider’s identity into a question which requires immediate attention. In either case, the business of establishing the caller’s identity gets delayed.

It is not our intention to go into a prolonged discussion of Sacks’s first lecture here. With this example, we mean only to underscore the fact that Sacks’s method of “dealing in detail with conversations” was conceived in the first instance in the context of studying telephone calls, and the fact that for Sacks, as it should be for any student of conversation, the significance of the telephone call goes well beyond the confines of the telephone line. Only a handful of students were able to attend Sacks’s lectures in 1964. But thirty-five years on, his questions and solutions have become well-known throughout the field of discourse and conversation analysis.

2. Why study telephone calls?

For a very long time in human history face-to-face conversation was *the* primordial site of speech communication. With the invention and popularisation of the telephone in modern societies a second form of conversation has become not only possible but more and more widespread. In many parts of the world, telephone conversations are now an ordinary, even indispensable, part of everyday life. Not only are businesses transacted regularly over the telephone, social relationships too are constantly being constituted, maintained, and transformed in this medium. More recently the cellular telephone has become widely available and is taking over many countries by storm. For the first time, some people are spending more time on the telephone than face-

to-face conversations.² It is clear that telephone calls have become another primordial site of speech communication and fully deserve to be studied extensively and in depth.

In the study of telephone calls different approaches have been taken. Broadly speaking, three kinds of motivation can be identified, which may very roughly be termed sociological, methodological, and inter-cultural.³ When telephone calls are studied primarily with a view to uncovering aspects of the social order, the purpose is sociological. A good example of this approach is Sacks's own work. He once commented on the study of telephone conversations in the following way:

We can read the world out of the phone conversation as well as we can read it out of anything else we are doing. That's a funny kind of thing, in which each new object becomes the occasion for seeing again what we can see anywhere... This technical apparatus is, then being made at home with the rest of the world... [The] object is made at home in the world that has whatever organization it already has. (Sacks 1992, v.2: 548–549)

Thus, for Sacks, telephone calls are interesting primarily for the insights that they offer into the production of social order. Like any other form of social encounter the telephone call provides the analyst with an opportunity to study human interaction.

For researchers who are sociologically inclined, telephone calls have several attractive properties which are not found in other kinds of data (cf. Schegloff 1993: 4548–4549). First, unlike face-to-face conversations, telephone calls are characterised by a lack of visual information. While this is a disadvantage from one point of view, the advantage is that recordings of telephone calls can give a more faithful rendering of the original speech event compared to recordings of face-to-face conversations. Audio recordings of face-to-face conversations are less faithful in the sense that the visual information available to the participants is not similarly available to the analyst. Recordings of telephone conversations, on the other hand, provide the analyst with exactly the same amount of information as was available to the participants themselves. There is, then, a sense in which, in studying telephone conversational data, “what you see (or hear) is what you get”. One could of course make video recordings of face-to-face talk, but even with video cameras it is not always possible to obtain a full record, including all the participants' facial expressions and gestures, as the camera can only view the speech event from one angle at a time. Second, one is more likely to obtain relatively good quality recordings

on the telephone, and clear recordings are essential to successful and accurate transcriptions. Third, in spite of new features like conference calls, telephone calls are still mostly dyadic events. Face-to-face conversations may involve three or more participants, making it hard to identify speakers when doing transcriptions. Multi-party conversations also tend to contain complicated shifts and changes in participant pairings and groupings which pose further difficulties for data transcription and analysis. Telephone conversations typically do not contain such complications. Finally, telephone calls tend to have clearly defined boundaries, making it possible for the analyst to study conversational beginnings and closings, as well as the structure of a conversation as a whole.

It can be seen from Sacks's quotation above that in the sociological approach the analyst's interest in the telephone call is almost incidental: it is studied for what can be seen through it. In contrast to this, telephone calls can be studied in their own right. What features of telephone calls might be universal? What features are empirically found to vary from situation to situation, from language to language, or from culture to culture? Studies with these and similar aims might be described as methodological or cross-cultural in character.

The most well-known framework for the study of telephone calls in their own right is the one first put forward by Schegloff in 1968. Schegloff's work has been very influential. Nevertheless, it is clear that, for all its power and suggestiveness, the framework is based on North American telephone conversations conducted via the (American) English language. It is therefore quite natural that subsequent researchers have attempted to examine its validity in other linguistic and cultural settings. While Schegloff's original intention may not have been to make universal claims or predictions, once telephone calls are investigated by researchers with different backgrounds, it is inevitable that questions of universality and cultural specificity would be raised. Thus, studies of telephone calls with a methodological aim are concerned with the extent to which Schegloff's original framework holds under different cultural and linguistic conditions.

It is not difficult to understand why telephone calls have a special attraction for researchers with a cross-cultural agenda. When it comes to making comparisons across linguistic and cultural settings telephone conversations provide us with as close a situation as we could get to controlled experimental conditions. Due to the requirement of naturalness, it is not usually possible to control for situational variables (topic, role relationship, etc.) when

collecting speech samples in face-to-face situations. As a result, it is not always possible to make systematic comparisons across data sets. However, with telephones now being almost universally available, telephone calls offer a unique opportunity for the analyst to observe how different groups of people make use of essentially the same technology to achieve essentially the same range of purposes (information exchange, social bonding, etc.) and how they go about tackling very similar interaction tasks: availability checks, identification and recognition, switchboard requests, topic introduction, closing, call-waiting, and more.

A third motivation for studying telephone calls might be described as “inter-cultural”. A typical aim here is to gain a better understanding of cross-cultural communication through comparative studies of telephone conversations. The more (and the more deeply) people study telephone conversations in different communities, the more likely one can gain a better understanding of this communication device, and the more likely one can improve the quality of inter-cultural communication and increase the chances of inter-cultural understanding.

This approach can be illustrated with reference to misalignments and misunderstandings in telephone calls. Generally speaking, telephone conversations proceed smoothly and are usually successful, but it is clear that misalignments, even failures, do occur from time to time. In some cases, people might even develop what Hopper (1992) called “telephobia”. Misalignments are more likely to occur in inter-cultural calls, the ability to make successful telephone calls being something of a test for a person’s mastery of another language and culture. People who are otherwise competent in a foreign language might nevertheless experience difficulties, even frustration, when trying to speak on the telephone, due to differences in conventions governing the use of this communication medium. A couple of years ago, one of the authors of this chapter, S (who is of Greek nationality), was working at home (in Greece) when the telephone rang. She picked up the telephone simultaneously with E, her daughter (who is Greek-German), who was working in another room. Both answerers spoke in Greek. The caller turned out to be a close relative (who is German) who wanted to speak to S’s husband (also German):⁴

(1) 1 ((telephone rings))

2 S: [Nai;]

yes

‘Yes?’