Introduction

Simona Leonardi

1. Telephone conversations

Since the end of the 1960s, telephone conversations have been a favourite topic for conversation analysts, starting with Schegloff and Sacks (Schegloff 1968; Schegloff/Sacks 1973). The main reason for this is that it is pure verbal interaction where the elements of body language, gestuality and facial expression that play such a significant role in face-to-face conversation are missing, or rather, can only be discerned, if at all, insofar as they are reflected in the auditory channel.

Telephone conversations are studied first of all because they are conversations tout court and not for their distinctive properties, and analysis of these verbal interactions is facilitated because they are unburdened with non-verbal elements. The detailed study of telephone conversations has served first of all to throw light on certain recurrent phenomena also found in face-to-face conversation, such as the organisation of conversational turns and their management and alternation (Sacks/Schegloff/Jefferson 1974; Schegloff 1996), adjacent pairs and conditional relevance (Schegloff 1968; Schegloff/Sacks 1973), and the concept of preference and repair (Levinson 1983; Pomerantz 1984).

1.1. Distinctive features of telephone conversations: the opening

1.2. Distinctive features of telephone conversations: the closing
2. Genres of telephone calls

2.1. Closeness and distance

2.2. Institutional and emergency calls

2.3. Radio (and TV) call-in programmes

3. Telephone conversations and cross-cultural and intercultural analysis

Schegloff’s works on telephone openings (in particular Schegloff 1968, 1979 and 1986) and closings (in particular Schegloff/Sacks 1973) delineated a model which then became ‘canonical’. This then served as the basis for cross-cultural and intercultural studies. Cross-cultural studies compare the phases of a call in a particular language and culture with the sequences in another language and culture – often using the sequences identified by Schegloff, with – among other aims – that of establishing whether or not they are universal.

The first cross-cultural study was conducted by Godard (1977), who compared American and French calls; in Godard’s view, one major difference was that American openings demonstrate that when the receiver of the call responds, he or she is generally open to interaction, while in France calls are considered an intrusion on one’s private space. For this reason callers generally open the interaction by excusing themselves, unless, that is, it is a call between people who know each other well.

This study and the reactions it produced from Schegloff (e.g. Schegloff 1986: 147; Schegloff 2002b) throws light on the different perspectives adopted by conversational analysis and cross-cultural and anthropological linguistic analysis. While for the latter it is essential to highlight the changes from one language to the next, what interests conversation analysts is examining what happens at the level of the organisation of the interaction, in other words at a greater level of abstraction, which can subsume under a single organisational criterion what appears at close hand as two different articulations. In fact, Schegloff (1986: 147) stresses that if differences are noted between one culture and another, from his perspective it is important to examine whether in the organisation of the calls there is some other factor capable of motivating those differences or whether a more general description may not make it possible to see different practices as alternatives, thereby taking them as different expressions of the same organisational criterion. For example, the same considerations (for instance the existence of close relation-
ship between the two participants) that permit the absence of a ‘howareyou’ sequence in US opening sequences can also be invoked for the absence of excuses for intrusion in French (see Schegloff 1986: 147).

In line with the studies of Schegloff, Theodossia-Sousia Pavlidou compares the organisation of sequences in German and Greek calls, focusing first on openings (Pavlidou 1994) and then on closings (Pavlidou 1997 and 1998). In the study on openings she highlighted how purely phatic sequences are much more widespread and significant for the development of the conversation in Greek. For example, from an examination of the articulation of the ‘howareyou’ sequence, she concludes that this is a reinforcement of the interpersonal tie for Greek speakers, while for the Germans it is merely a brief ‘buffer’ to avoid moving immediately to the point of the call, which would go against the norms of politeness.

As Hao Sun (2002: 89) notes in a review of the application of cross-cultural communication studies to telephone conversation, one area that has been the focus of many studies is the very first sequence of the opening phase, the summons/answer. If in the United States the response to a ringing phone in a private home is Hello, Houtkoop-Steenstra (1991) and Halmari (1993) note that in Dutch and Finnish cultures respectively the first turn of the recipient consists of self-identification by surname. Lindström reaches similar results regarding Swedish, where the first turn of the receiver normally consists of self-identification by surname or even by phone number. Analysing calls in Germany, Berens (1980) confirms the results of Bethge (1974), also revealing that in the majority of calls the first turn of the recipient, the answer to the call, contains self-identification (see also, in this volume, Marui/Schwitalla, Thüne and Varcasia for further details about this first phase in German).

The same variety of approaches can be noted in the caller identification phase. According to Schegloff (1979), in calls between acquaintances, there is a preference in the United States for recognition of the caller by the recipient on the basis of the voice sample; in service and also emergency calls, the identification of the caller can easily be omitted without disturbing the interaction, and indeed this often happens. By contrast, Houtkoop-Steenstra (1991) and Halmari (1993) underline, respectively for Dutch and Finnish, how the lack of self-identification of the caller is only possible between close friends and in other cases is considered a serious violation of politeness norms. The self-identification of the caller plays an analogous role in the construction of interaction in German, as emerges from the above mentioned study of emergency calls by Bergmann (1993) and the study of service calls by Eva-Maria Thüne (in this volume).

The exact opposite seems to be the case for calls in Chinese, in particular between women (Sun 2002), where the identification of the caller is an interactive process of collaborative identification or invited guessing that fulfils social functions as well as having a function in structuring the conversation.
What happens is that the caller, after having confirmed the identity of the recipient, invites her/him to guess the caller’s identity. In reality, the particularity of Chinese lies in the length that such a sequence might last and the frequency with which explicit routines and comments take place (of the kind ‘guess who it is?’, ‘you’re good at recognizing people from their voice’ or ‘so you recognized me from my voice’, see Sun 2002, 96–97).

In the present volume a cross-cultural perspective is adopted by Anna Colombassi and Gabriele Pallotti (Spanish and Italian in service calls), Ichiro Marui and Johannes Schwitalla (a comparison between German and Japanese in phatic and service calls), Chiara Monzoni and Daniela Zorzi (English and Italian in emergency calls) and Cecilia Varcasia (German and Italian in service calls), while Fabrizio Bercelli’s study concentrates on the articulation of service calls in Italian, noting differences and similarities in relation to Anglo-American calls.

Conversation analysts have only recently begun to conduct intercultural studies, that is, to examine the interaction between native and non-native speakers in a given language and culture (see Schegloff 2000 for a summary of the issues involved). One such intercultural study regarding telephone calls is that of Carmen Taleghani-Nikazm (2002); taking cross-cultural analyses of call openings in Persian and German as a basis and utilising the work of Pavlidou (1994) on the function of ‘howareyou’ sequences, she examines interaction on the phone, in German, between German native speakers and speakers whose mother tongue is Persian. The ‘howareyou’ phase is particularly delicate, because speakers with a Persian cultural background tend to use their customary mother-tongue conventions in German as well. This phase is long and involves the caller ritually enquiring about the health not only of the recipient but also their entire family. Such enquiries are generally greeted with amazement and some embarrassment by German recipients, who are accustomed to a different, much briefer and ad personam ‘howareyou’ phase. This tends to cause another conversational problem, because the question is not treated as a distinctive articulation of the ‘howareyou’ phase, but as a topic of conversation in its own right.

The contribution by Eva-Maria Thüne in this volume is devoted to an intercultural analysis of interaction on the phone between German speakers and Italian speakers who have learnt German as a foreign language.

One fundamental issue for both cross-cultural and intercultural studies is what attitude to take to the ‘canonical’ models resulting from research based on telephone interaction in the United States (essentially the works of Schegloff 1968, 1979 and 1986 and Schegloff/Sacks 1973). In particular there is the question of whether these should be treated as universals – thereby necessitating the assimilation of the results of analysis regarding telephone behaviour in other languages (see Hopper 1992) – or whether different models are not more appropriate for other languages and cultures. One issue that
needs exploring, for instance, is whether the rule that the answerer speaks first, in response to the call signal, has universal validity (see Schegloff 1968: 70 «A first rule of telephone conversation, which might be called a ‘distribution rule for first utterances’, is the answerer speak first». Schegloff (1968: 1090) claims that although the answerer’s picking up of the receiver establishes the presence of someone at the other end of the line, it does not prove her/his willingness to interact. However, it emerges clearly in the work by Ichiro Marui and Johannes Schwitalla (this volume) that there are numerous cases in Japan where the recipient picks up the receiver and does not say anything. In these cases the caller speaks first, generally using the mosimosi formula (‘hello’). It is also quite frequent for the two participants to begin speaking simultaneously, generally with a channel-opening formula.

Another area for investigation is whether in cross-cultural studies it is not more appropriate to emphasize the functional model for telephone openings (see Ten Have 1999), that is to say a) establish contact, b) (re)establish a relationship, c) move towards the first topic, and then insert the structural sequences typical of a specific linguistic and cultural community.

4. Perspectives

As regards the analysis of telephone interaction from a linguistic and conversational analysis point of view (which is the one considered in this work and also in this introduction, where I have not examined the extensive sociological literature that analyses the impact and use of the telephone medium without resorting to linguistic analysis), many cross-culturally oriented studies now exist, as evidenced also by the recent work edited by Luke/Pavlidou (2002).

Greater typological differentiation would be desirable; in reality there is something of a grey area between ‘service calls’ and ‘calls between friends and loved ones’, for example communication between people who have worked for years in different companies (e.g. sales department secretaries) and who frequently exchange service calls. Clearly in such cases, even if the two participants have never seen each other and only communicate for work, their communication will be different from what is considered ‘standard’ service communication, where a private citizen calls a company on a single occasion to obtain information or a service, a situation in which the caller will certainly not expect to be recognized.

The proliferation of call-centres and telephone helplines or help desks suggests this type of interaction merits further study. An initial example is Baker/Emmison/Firth (2001), who examines the regularities found in the opening phases of calls to the helpline of a software company. Potter/Hepburn (forthcoming), on the other hand, analyse calls to a national
helpline in the United Kingdom for reporting cases of child abuse (organised by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, NSPCC). The study focuses on the particularity of the first turn of the caller, which in the majority of cases involves the use of expressions like be concerned about x, or alternatively is summarized by the operator as the caller having concerns. The two scholars examine the implications of this opening format and also suggest further implications for the relationship between psychology, interactions and institutions.

As we have seen, one of the characteristics of telephone conversation is that it is essentially dyadic (with the exception of ‘public’ calls to the radio or television). In reality this is a usual form of telephone calls (see Bercelli/Pallotti 2002: 177), given that this is neither an exclusive prerogative of calls, which could therefore at a pinch be included in the wider and more heterogeneous class of two-person conversations, nor can it logically speaking be argued that telephone conversation in principle excludes conversations with several interlocutors. In recent years various speaker devices enabling multi-person conversation have appeared on the market, and telephone companies now offer special contracts for conversation between a number of interlocutors. However, there is still no specific analysis of the extent of these innovations and whether they have essentially modified the characteristics of telephone communication.

One type of telephone communication that has grown exponentially in recent years is the use of cell phones. The dyadic nature of telephone communication is reaffirmed in this type of communication, the effect of which is that some people, when they receive a call in a public place, behave as if they were alone on the phone with their interlocutor. When, for example, the call becomes a heated argument or lovers’ talk, this can cause some embarrassment for people nearby. This occurs because a person using a cell phone, as Schegloff (2002a: 286) notes, is simultaneously in two different places – one is the public and possibly crowded space, the other is what is considered a private, ‘on the phone’ space.

There are not many linguistically oriented and conversation analysis studies devoted specifically to cell phone interaction. However, it has been underlined by various scholars that the first turn of the answerer almost always contains specification of where she/he is in that particular moment, for example, I’m on the train or I’m on the way to the office, etc. (see, for example Laurier 2001). There are also other features that distinguish cell phone communication from land line calls, and which make it necessary to rethink the organisation of sequences in this medium. First of all, the cell phone is personal, which means that the caller knows in advance that if someone responds, it will be the desired person. This greater certainty on the part of the caller, however, is accompanied by something that reduces the asymmetry between caller and answerer (Schegloff 2002a: 290). The display on all cell
phones indicates the number or even the name of the caller. As a result, provided the caller is part of the circle of acquaintances the answerer maintains phone contact with, and provided the call comes from a cell phone and is therefore individual, the receiver can be certain of the identity of the person he or she is about to talk to, while if the call comes from a land line the answerer may at the most hypothesize that they will be dealing with someone belonging to the restricted range of people who normally use that line. All this causes significant changes in the initial phase of the interaction: for example the sequences devoted to the identification of the interlocutors become superfluous (see Bonomo/Lee 2001). There are not as yet any published studies that analyse the extent of these changes in detail or that explore the possible effects on the entire sequential organisation of the interaction.

Schegloff (2002a: 293 ff.) outlines possible lines of investigation relating to the introduction of displays on land line phones, making it possible to ascertain the identity of the caller (Caller ID). First of all, he notes that as soon as these instruments appeared on the market, mechanisms were devised to neutralize them (Caller ID blocking), demonstrating that the caller is often aware of the position of advantage (that derives from anonymity) in relation to the answerer and wants to maintain it. Furthermore, to affirm that such a device can fundamentally alter the existing asymmetry that normally exists between caller and answerer is perhaps exaggerated. Apart from the fact that the answerer obviously cannot know the reason for the call, there remains the question of who is using the phone from which the call has arrived. On the other hand, the caller does not know how much the answerer knows. It would be interesting to investigate the form of openings where the answerer has a phone with Caller ID, and to see whether or not there is a sequence devoted to the identification of the caller; and, if so, whether and how this is different from sequences where there is no such device.

One area of study which is still somewhat undeveloped, especially in view of its potential for analysis, is that of prosody in telephone interaction (see, however, Ichiro Marui and Johannes Schwitalla’s detailed analysis of prosody in telephone conversations in Japanese and German, included in this volume). Because telephone conversation takes place exclusively on the basis of data perceived via the auditory channel, prosody plays a central role, for example in the articulation of feelings and the interlocutor’s perception of them. It would also be useful to compare and contrast this with prosody in face-to-face interaction.

5. Audio data and transcription systems

6. The contents of the volume