

ASKING FOR INFORMATION!

Differences in the interactional structure of openings in Finnish and German telephone calls

Luise Liefländer-Koistinen
University of Joensuu, Savonlinna

The paper deals with interactional differences in Finnish and German phone calls, with a particular emphasis on the openings of phone calls. The material used consists of 12 Finnish and 12 German phone calls made by students to the secretary of a university department. In this article different "scripts" of openings are distinguished. They are to be found on different levels of discourse: a general or universal one, a culture-bound level (level of conventions) and an individually determined level, i.e. an "idiosyncratic script", determined by the communicating person in question. The results show that there are "culture-bound scripts" as well as idiosyncratic ones to be found in the openings of the phone calls. In intercultural communication, e.g. between Finns and Germans, it seems to be important to respect the conventions of the other culture - the culture-bound script should always be taken into consideration.

1. Introduction

The aim of the following paper is to find out differences between Finnish and German natural discourses - by which I mean naturally occurring interaction¹ - of the type: "Asking for Information!". Here I am going to deal with phone calls, especially the openings of calls as relatively standardized parts of natural discourses².

On the basis of the openings of phone calls my material provided me with - and on the basis of previous research (Liefländer-Koistinen & Neuendorff 1989, 1991) - I formed the hypothesis that there are three different

¹ Cf. Brinker & Sager 1989:13.

² Compare also D. Neuendorff's paper in this book. There has been some research about openings in phone calls, cf. Schegloff 1968 and 1979, Berens 1981, and phone calls in general cf. Kanth 1982, Hess-Lüttich 1990.

"scripts"³ for openings, one on a general or universal level - compare e.g. Schegloff's concept of phone call openings as "summons-answer-sequences" (1968:1075f.), another one on the level of conventions, I should call this a "culture-bound script"⁴ and the third one is a subject-orientated, an individually determined one, an "idiosyncratic script"⁵, that means it depends on the communicating persons in question.

In the first part of this article I shall give a short presentation of the universal level as presented by Schegloff's concept (e.g. Schegloff 1968,1979) then I will present the culture-bound level: first I shall look for conventions in the openings of the Finnish and the German phone calls and then I will compare them with each other. In the third part examples of idiosyncratic scripts will be identified.

1. The material of this study

Our corpus consists of 65 Finnish phone calls taped by the secretary of a Finnish university department and 52 German phone calls taken by the secretary in a German university department. For this pilot study I used the first 12 phone calls made by Finnish students to the secretary and the 12 calls from German students to the German university department (until now we have got only 12 German calls of this type). The students asked for

³ See Beaugrande & Dressler 1981:91 "SCRIPTS are stabilized plans called up very frequently to specify the roles of participants and their expected actions. Scripts thus differ from plans by having a pre-established routine".

⁴ Compare e.g. Michael Clyne 1981 and 1991, Astrid Stedje 1990, Jaakko Lehtonen 1990. Clyne et al. 1991:258 write: "Communication breakdown in interethnic situations is very often a result of the hearer's failure to understand the speakers communicative intent because of culture-bound differences in rule variants. Much of the literature on contrastive pragmatics contrasts direct and indirect single-utterance realizations of speech acts in different cultures. Our data suggests, however, that the illocutionary force is achieved through a complex of realizations over a more extensive stretch of discourse. Often there are recurring scripts or schemata featuring a particular speech act."

⁵ Also Schegloff (1979:68) points out: "When examining a large number of openings, it is striking that some run off quite straightforwardly, in a very nearly, if not totally, standardized way, while others look and sound idiosyncratic - almost virtuoso performances."

information about their studies and got their replies from the secretary of the departments. The calls were taped on a tape recorder (we got the permission of the conversation partners afterwards) and then transcribed according to the "Textnotationssystem" demonstrated by Brinker & Sager (1989:41f.).

2. Openings of phone calls - the "universal script"

It is well documented in the literature that three parts of a spoken discourse can be differentiated: GESPRÄCHSERÖFFNUNG - GESPRÄCHSMITTE - GESPRÄCHSBEENDIGUNG⁶ (OPENING - TOPIC TALK - CLOSING⁷). While the GESPRÄCHSERÖFFNUNG (opening) and BEENDIGUNG (closing) are relatively standardized or ritualized parts of telephone conversation, the GESPRÄCHSMITTE (topic talk) may differ very much depending on the topics discussed. So there has not yet been much research about topic talk.⁸

Here I am going to deal with openings, which Schegloff (1968:1080) describes as SUMMONS-ANSWER SEQUENCES. The summon of a caller A by ringing is answered by B when e.g. lifting the receiver and telling her/his name (but as we shall see later this is not necessarily always the case). "It is an important feature of summonses and answers that, like questions and answers, they are sequentially used." (Schegloff 1968:1080) Schegloff describes this sequencing by the formula *abab*. "The *abab* formula is a specification, for two-party conversations: **one party at a time.**" (Schegloff 1968:1076) Typical of this part of telephone interaction is, according to Schegloff, the identification of the conversation partners combined with greetings. Also Berens (1981:403) says: "Interaktionspartner müssen sich also kennenlernen, um gemeinsam

⁶ Compare also Brinker & Sager (1989:94f.), Heinemann & Viehweger (1991:182f.) and Hess-Lüttich (1990:244f.).

⁷ Compare e.g. Schegloff & Sacks 1973, Goffman 1976, Clark & French 1981.

⁸ Though there have been some studies about topic talk recently, compare: Dialoganalyse 1986, Schwitalla 1991.

handeln zu können. (...) Jeder Interaktionsverlauf muß daher eine Konstituierung aufweisen." The identification of the telephone partners is, according to Schegloff and Berens, necessary for establishing a social relationship and a base for interaction between the telephone partners.⁹

Another rule for the opening of telephone interaction after greetings, identification and self-identification is according to Schegloff (1968:1078): "The caller provides the first 'topic' of conversation." There may be disturbances such as questions, small talk (e.g. about the weather) etc., but when the topic offered by the caller AB is accepted by AA the opening has come to its end. Compare the following example:

(1) AA Kanslia MH

AB JO Oulusta hei

AA no hei hei

AB kuule ihan semmosta juttua ku mä oon tässä nyt pitäny tätä välivuotta...

AA (reactive to the ringing of the phone) tells her name and the place where the call has come to, then AB tells her name and the place from where she phones (in 3 out of 12 Finnish calls the caller tells the place, where he/she has phoned from) and greets AA, and then AB (reactive to AA) answers the greeting. Let us also look at the following example from the German corpus:

(2) AA M

ja

AB guten Tag. ich hab mal ne Frage

⁹ Compare also Henne & Rehbock 1982:21: "Man kann eine Gesprächseröffnung als diejenige Phase eines Gesprächs bestimmen, in der die Gesprächspartner eine wechselseitig akzeptierte Situationsdefinition hinsichtlich ihrer sozialen Beziehungen als Gesprächspartner erreichen."

It is again AA reacting to the ringing of the phone (as a summons), she answers by telling her surname (in 11 out of the 12 German calls, in 1 case she tells only the name of the department).

In 3 out of 12 calls the caller wanted to speak with somebody else and after the self-identification of the secretary he asks for this person or place in the second turn. In these types of openings Schegloff (1979:56) finds so called "switchboard requests". Schegloff writes: "Switchboard requests are regularly followed by an identification question (e.g. 'who's this', 'who's calling', etc.) from the answerer." (1979:46) Compare example 3:

- (3) AA M
 AB Ist Herr B. wohl zu sprechen

 AA Frau B? Ja? Moment. (zu AC: Frau B)
 AB ja. Danke.

Also in the next example the caller expresses his astonishment about the (in his opinion) wrong person replying without any explicit greeting or self-identification:

- (4) AA M
 AB Ist da nicht Herr B?

 AA Nein Herr B ist gerade - außerhalb...
 AB äh - Sie kennen sich

 AA Ja, ich weiß ja nicht was Sie wollten!
 AB aber auch aus?

The caller wanted to speak with someone else and when he hears that Herr B has left, he tries to get the information he needed from the secretary. The caller reacts in the same way in the next example:

(5) AA M

AB Bin ich nicht mit der Bibliothek verbunden?

AA nein - überhaupt nicht - Sie sind mit dem Geschäftszimmer

AB

AA verbunden wen wollten Sie denn sprechen?

AB ach so (lacht) ich wollte

AA

AB eigentlich nur wissen, wann Frau P Sprechstunde hat...

In the example above the secretary shows her sense of humor, when she (to the question: isn't this the library?) replies: nein überhaupt nicht! (= no, not at all!). The student reacts by laughing and then asks her question without any hesitating.

There is no identification by the caller and no greeting at all to be found in these 3 calls and an explanation for this may be that the caller got through to the wrong receiver. So far it seems that the universal script works quite well, but we shall see that this type of script is not sufficient on its own, because there is also a level of culture-specific conventions, a culture-bound script, which is not taken into account above.

2.2. "Culture-bound scripts"

According to Schegloff's model of summons-answer sequences the answerer of the phone call always speaks first. But as M. Sifianou (1989:530) pointed out e.g. in Japan many people expect the caller to be the one who speaks first. And also when the ringing of the telephone is perceived as a summons, the type of answer the caller gets may differ very much depending on culturally specific features (compare e.g. the Greek *embros* = go ahead, *leyete* = speak with the English *hallo* or reciting of the telephone number, Sifianou 1989:531). In France there seems to be a convention that callers recite the number they have dialled as a way of checking whether they have reached the intended place (compare Godard 1977).- Also the method of identification and self-identification seems to differ a lot depending on culture-bound conventions, the kind of social contact attempted (official or private relationship) and the individuals who are getting into contact on the telephone.¹⁰ I should define culture-bound scripts as "stabilized plans called up very frequently to specify the roles of participants and their expected actions" (Beaugrand & Dressler 1981:91) and dependent on a special culture and society.

Let us now have a look at the Finnish and German material provided to find out what kind of culture-bound scripts we can find in these openings of phone calls between students and the secretary of a university department.

In the openings of the Finnish phone calls there are usually 3 GESPRÄCHSSCHRITTE (turns) to be found (in 11 out of 12 calls):

- (6) AA Kanslia MH
 AB no täällä on KJ Toholammilta päivää

 AA päivää
 AB mä aion pyrkiä opiskelemaan sitä...

¹⁰ Eg. in Russia the receiver of a phone call is expected to recognize the caller by his voice, if he knows him, without any self-identification of the caller. (Personal communication from Marja Jänis and Hannu Kempainen.)

In the German calls there are only 2 GESPRÄCHSSCHRITTE (turns) to be found in the openings (in 9 out of 12 calls). For example:

(7) AA M

AB Guten Tag. mein Name ist PB bin ich hier richtig bei der Studienberatung...

In 11 out of the 12 Finnish calls there is self-identification by the caller to be found. The caller identifies himself usually by using his Christian name as well as his family name (and so does the secretary) and this depends on the kind of social contact which is intended to be established: the caller cannot assume that the receiver knows him, because she/he is calling an official institution: a university department. (Of course some of the calling students have already studied in the department and do know the staff.)

There appears to be some variation in the using of the name by the callers: in 6 out of 11 calls in which the caller identifies her/himself, the caller gives his family name first and then the Christian name like e.g. "Koistisen Kalle, terve". This seems to be, on the one hand, a question of dialect (this type is more often used in eastern Finland), on the other hand this may express colloquial style.¹¹

In the German material the caller identifies her/himself, only 8 times, 4 times by giving his Christian name and his family name, 4 times only the surname. Only in 1 case does the caller also give the place from where she is phoning:

(8) AA M

(leise) guten Tag

AB U Seminar für Klassische Philologie, guten Tag - äh ich

AA

AB hab eine Frage...

¹¹ I have to thank Hannu Kemppainen and Jukka Mäkisalo for their helpful comments. About the different use of forename and surname in the Swedish and German community compare also Stolt (1988:33).

This example could be called an insider-phone call and that may be the reason why the place is mentioned, because a student calls from one university department to another to get the information she needs. In none of the other German phone calls is the place from where the call comes mentioned.

4. The "idiosyncratic script"

It seems to me important to mention that the Finnish secretary usually greets in the same way the caller has greeted her (in 10 out of 11 calls)¹² *päivää - päivää, hei - hei, terve - terve* etc. and this might be an expression of her kindness, her willingness to help (her being accommodating towards the students). Even the same particle (*no*) is used in two greeting sequences:

(9) AA kanslia MH

AB no päivää. täällä on MP

AA no päivää.

AB no tota. keneltä mä voisin kysyä...

(10) AA kanslia MH no hei

AB no TM hei

Only in 1 case does she use a different greeting:

(11) AA Kanslia MH

AB päivää tääl on KA

AA no hei

AB no tota mie kyselisin...

¹² We could call these sequences "gleichlautende Paarsequenzen". Compare Heine-
mann & Viehweger 1991:206f.

And in the other case the caller continues almost immediately (i.e. after a short pause) by giving the topic of the talk:

(12) AA Kanslia MH

AB No hei. - mä kysyisin tommosta että...

It seems to be of some interest that the caller here does not identify herself, though the receiver does not know her, and that might be an explanation for the non-greeting of the secretary. Perhaps she is not inclined to greet somebody who does not even introduce himself.

In one call some small talk even occurs in the opening:

(13) AA kanslia MH

no PÄIVÄÄ

AB no TL täällä hyvää päivää mitäs kuuluu.

AA no mitäs tässä. kesähän tähän tulee.

AB niin tulloo. oot sie vaan

AA noi mä on alkuVIIKON aina.

AB aamupäivän siellä töissä vai. (ai-jaa)

AA (juu)

AB mie siitä valantehneestä....

Only in this case does the caller wish *hyvää päivää* (=a good day) and the receiver reacts with a special emphasis on *päivää*. *How are you* is the caller's next question, which could be almost expected, answered by: summer is coming etc. Then the caller asks: are you working there only in the morning? and gets the answer: no, but only half of the week. It could be assumed that a special kind of social contact is being attempted (or that the conversation partners know each other well). Afterwards, however, the

caller just asks for some information about an official translation test and there does not seem to be any personal relationship between the interactors. In my opinion this opening might be an example of a subject-determined "script" as well as the one in example 12: the caller does not introduce herself and the secretary does not greet her.

In 3 out of the 12 German calls the secretary almost simultaneously greets the caller but with a quiet voice and without taking the turn. On two occasions she uses the same words, in one call she uses a different greeting formula:

- (14) AA M (leise) guten Tag Frau G
 AB Frau M guten Morgen hier ist GG könnten Sie so lieb sein

 AA hm hm
 AB und mir sagen, wann der Prof.R.heute Sprechstunde hat

The interaction partners in example 14 seem to know each other well - the formulation: "könnten Sie so lieb sein" combined with partner-identification gives a hint at this, too.¹³ There is, however, no small talk occurring, either in example 14 or in the whole German corpus. These types of scripts of openings could be called "idiosyncratic scripts". Compare also Schegloff (1979:68f.): "When examining a large number of openings, it's striking that some run off quite straightforwardly, in a very nearly, if not totally standardized way, while others look and sound idiosyncratic - almost virtuoso performances." Idiosyncratic scripts are important on a third, individually determined discourse level beneath the universal and the culture specific level.

¹³ This is a quite usual habit in Germany as for example between the employees at one's work-place.

5. Results

In the following figures I shall compare a) the length of the openings (number of turns) b) the kinds of greetings c) the types of identification and self-identification to be found and d) the occurrence of small talk.

Figure 1 Overall results of the comparison

	GERMAN CALLS (12)	FINNISH CALLS (12)
OPENINGS:	2 turns (9 calls) 3 turns (3 calls)	2 turns (1 call) 3 turns (11 calls)
GREETINGS		
*by the caller	9 calls	12 calls
*by the receiver		
(same words repeated)	3 calls	10 calls
(other words)	1 call	1 call
SELF-IDENTIFICATION		
*by the caller	8 calls	11 calls
*by the receiver	12 calls	12 calls
PARTNER-IDENTIFICATION	-	1 call
IDENTIFICATION of the caller by her voice	1 call	-
PHATIC COMMUNICATION	-	1 call

Figure 2 Types of self-identification by the caller

	GERMAN CALLS (12)	FINNISH CALLS (12)
CHRISTIAN NAME AND SURNAME	4 calls	5 calls
SURNAME (genitive) AND CHRISTIAN NAME	-	6 calls
ONLY CHRISTIAN NAME	-	-
ONLY SURNAME	4 calls	-

At the level of conventions there seem to be some interesting differences between Finnish and German phone calls. One such difference is in the length of the openings: the openings of the Finnish calls are longer, they consist of three turns, while the German openings consist usually only of two turns: "man kommt schneller zum Thema".

Self-identification of the caller seems to be a convention in Finland and Germany as well, but there are more cases of violation in the German material. I would draw the same conclusion concerning the greetings by the caller and the receiver, too. Here we could see a kind of idiosyncratic script of the Finnish secretary, too, using usually the same greetings the caller used. Phatic communication appeared only in 1 of the Finnish openings, which were also longer than those in the German examples. The reason might be that the conversation partners usually did not know each other before calling.

Some other culture-bound features concerning identification and self-identification should also be mentioned here: in Germany it is a convention to use (besides your Christian and family name) only the surname for self-identification and this depends on the habit in German society, of using the "Sie-formula" for addressing somebody else (if not a member of the family or a close friend). In Finland it is quite usual to call somebody only by his Christian name also if he or she is for instance only working in the same place. That might explain why surname and Christian name are used for self-identification in our corpus.

There is also one case of partner-identification to be found in the German material. This is a quite usual habit in Germany when greeting somebody known before. The reason why there is only 1 case in this material might be again that the conversation partners are mostly strangers to each other. In the Finnish material partner-identification is not to be found (and indeed it seems to be unusual in Finland) but there is another interesting item: it seems to be quite usual - at least in eastern Finland- to use one's family name first (in a genitive form) and then the christian name.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I concentrated only on one part of spoken discourse and a quite limited material of Finnish and German phone calls. In future the whole corpus has to be looked at and more aspects of discourse analysis should be regarded. D. Neuendorff has looked at the endings of the same phone calls (in this publication). This could be only a start for the research to be done. To me it seems clear, however, that different levels of discourse work together. The universal script of phone call openings has to be widened. The level of conventions, which provides us with culture-bound scripts, should always be taken into consideration. Also idiosyncratic scripts seem to exist, though it is quite difficult to recognize them.

For the success of intercultural communication (for instance between Finns and Germans) it seems to be very important to recognize and respect the conventions of the other culture. Perhaps the results reported in this paper could make a small contribution to this kind of cross-cultural research.

References

- Berens, F.J. 1981. Dialogeröffnung in Telefongesprächen. In *Dialogforschung*, 402-417.
- Beaugrand, R. de & W. Dressler 1981. *Introduction to Text Linguistics*. London: Longman.
- Brinker, K. & S.F. Sager 1989. *Linguistische Gesprächsanalyse*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt.
- Brown, P. & S. Levinson 1978. Universals in language usage. In Esther N. Goody (ed.) *Questions and politeness*. Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology 8. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 56-289.
- Brown, P. & S. Levinson 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clark, H.H. & J.W. French 1981. Telephone "goodbyes". *Language in Society* 10, 1-19.
- Clyne, M. 1981. Culture and Discourse Structure. *Journal of Pragmatics* 5, 61-66.

- Clyne, M. et al. 1991. Intercultural communication at work in Australia: Complaints and apologies in turns. *Multilingua* 10: 3, 251-173.
- Dialoganalyse* 1986. (ed. by Hundsnurscher, F. & E. Weigand) Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Dialogforschung* 1981. Jahrbuch 1980 des Instituts für deutsche Sprache (ed. by Schröder & Steeger). Düsseldorf (IDS 54).
- Ehlich, K. & J. Rehbein (eds.) 1979. Sprache in Institutionen. In Althaus, H.P. & H. Henne & H.E. Wiegand (eds.) 1979. *Lexikon der Germanistischen Linguistik*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 338-345.
- Ehlich, K. & J. Rehbein 1986. *Muster und Institution*. Tübingen.
- Glindeman, R. 1987. *Zusammensprechen in Gesprächen*. Tübingen (RGL 73).
- Goffman, E. 1976. Replies and responses. *Language in Society* 5, 257-313.
- Godard, D. 1977. Same setting, different norms: Phone call beginnings in France and the United States. *Language in Society* 6, 209-219.
- Grice, P. 1975. Logic and Conversation. In Cole, P. and J. Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics IX: Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press, 41-58.
- Heinemann, W. & D. Viehweger 1991. *Textlinguistik. Eine Einführung*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Henne, H. & H. Rehbock 1982. *Einführung in die Gesprächsanalyse*. Berlin, New York (SLG Göschen 2212).
- Hess-Lüttich, E.W.B. 1990. Das Telefonat als Mediengesprächstyp. *Muttersprache* 100, 244-258.
- Kanth, R. 1982. Verbale Konstituierung und Auflösung von Telefongesprächen. Gesprächsanalytische Aspekte mediengebundener Kommunikation. Diss. Braunschweig.
- Kommunikationstypologie* 1986. Jahrbuch 1985 des Instituts für deutsche Sprache. Düsseldorf (IDS 67).
- Lehtonen, J. 1990. Kulturbedingte Attributionen als Erklärung interkultureller Kommunikationsschwierigkeiten. *Interkulturelle Kommunikation*. Forum Angewandte Linguistik Bd. 21. Frankfurt a.M., Bern, New York, Paris, 73-74.
- Liefländer-Koistinen, L. 1990. Partikeln und Übersetzung. Zur Rolle der Modalpartikeln beim literarischen Übersetzen. University of Joensuu, Faculty of Arts. Studies in Languages 18.
- Liefländer-Koistinen, L. & D. Neuendorff 1989. Making phone calls in German and Finnish. *Papers from the Eleventh Scandinavian Conference of Linguistics*. Vol. 2, 368-384.

- Liefländer-Koistinen, L. & D. Neuendorff 1990. Auskunft erbitten. Telefongespräche im Deutschen und Finnischen: Unterschiede in ihrer interaktionalen Struktur. *Akten des VIII. Internationalen Germanisten-Kongresses Tokyo 1990. Band 4*. iudicium 1991, 483-494.
- Metzing, D. (ed.) 1981. *Dialogmuster und Dialogprozesse. Hamburg*. (Papiere zur Textlinguistik 32).
- Schank, G. 1981. *Untersuchungen zum Ablauf natürlicher Dialoge*. München. (Heutiges Deutsch I, 14).
- Schegloff, E.A. 1968. Sequencing in Conversational Openings. *American Anthropologist* 70, 1075-1095.
- Schegloff, E.A. 1979. Identification and recognition in telephone conversation openings. In G. Psathas (ed.) *Everyday language. Studies in Ethnomethodology*. New York: Irvington, 23-78.
- Schegloff, E.A. & Sacks, H. 1973. Opening up Closings. *Semiotica VIII: 4*.
- Schwitalla, J. 1991. Das Illustrieren - eine narrative Textsorte mit zwei Varianten. In *Erscheinungsformen der deutschen Sprache. Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Hugo Steeger*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 189-204.
- Sifianou, M. 1989. On Telephone again! Differences in telephone behaviour: England versus Greece. *Language in Society* 18:4, 527-544.
- Stedje, A. 1990. Sprachliche Handlungsmuster und interkulturelle Kommunikation. *Interkulturelle Kommunikation. Forum Angewandte Linguistik*. Bd. 21. Frankfurt a.M., Bern, New York, Paris, 29-40.
- Stolt, B. 1988. Kulturbarrieren als Übersetzungsproblem. In G. Magnusson & S. Wahlén (eds.) *Teaching Translation*. Stockholms universitet, 32-49.
- Strecker, B. 1987. *Strategien des kommunikativen Handelns*. Düsseldorf. (IDS 73).
- Teichtmeyer, B. 1984. *Das Gespräch*. Berlin.
- Tiittula, L. 1987. *Wie kommt man zu Wort?* Frankfurt a.M.: Lang.
- Widén, P. 1988. Fachsprache und Kommunikation. *Der Ginkgobaum* 7:5, 28-31.