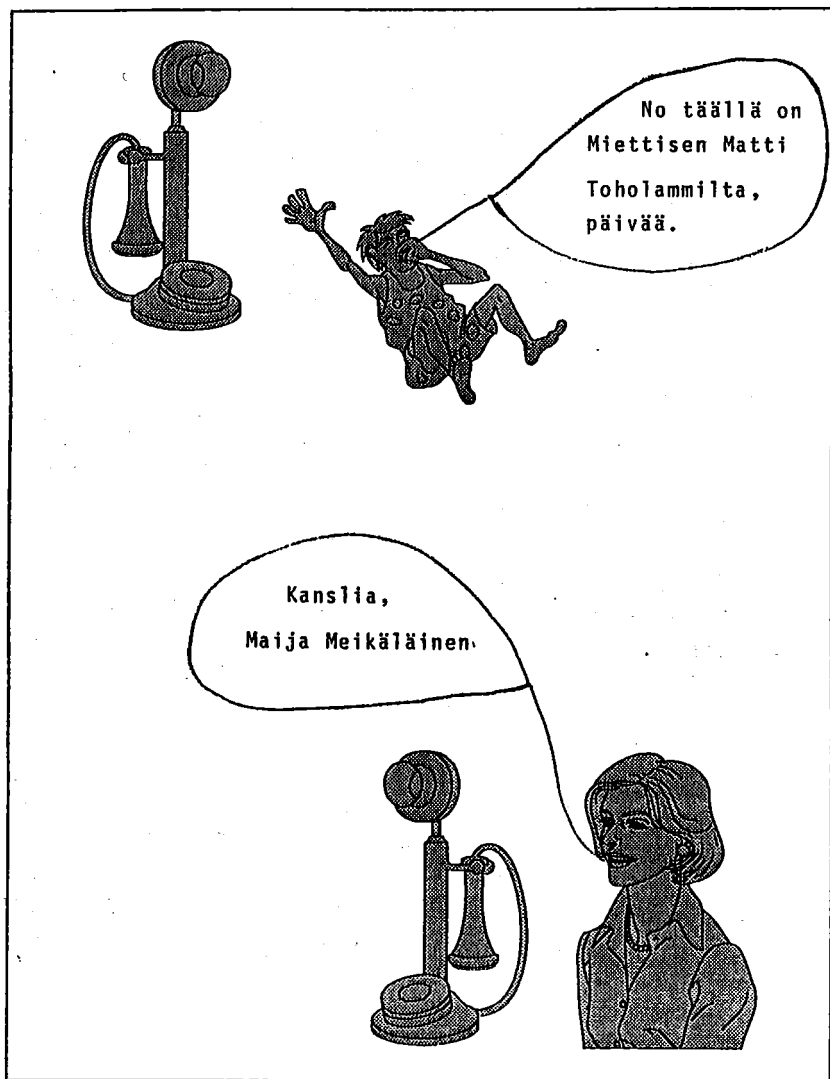


COMMUNICATION ON THE TELEPHONE: THE WAY STUDENTS ASK FOR INFORMATION IN FINNISH AND GERMAN UNIVERSITIES

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This paper investigates differences in verbal telephone behaviour in Finland and Germany. The material used includes Finnish and German phonecalls made by students who asked for information about their studies. According to Schegloff (1972-1979) there is a "sequence of summons and answers" to be found in the opening of phonecalls. Clark and French (1981) differentiate between "topic termination, leave-taking and contact termination" in regard to the closing of phone calls. The analysis of the openings and closings to be found in Finnish and German calls is based on these models, which means on a universal level. According to my material, however, there seem to be some culturally specific differences in international patterns when beginning and ending a phonecall in Finnish and German universities. My hypothesis is that there are three different levels of communication working together: universal, culturally specific and subject-oriented or idiosyncratic. I would claim that there are in Finland and Germany historically developed culturally specific conventions and I shall try to show these on the basis of my corpus. The awareness of such phenomena is important because interactional differences in cross-cultural communication, e.g. in phonecalls, can lead to misunderstanding and even ill feeling.



1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I am going to deal with interactional differences between Finnish and German phone calls of the type **Asking for information**. It is well documented in the literature that three parts of spoken discourse can be differentiated: opening – topic talk – closing. While the opening and closing are relatively ritualized or standardized parts of telephone conversation (see Schegloff 1979; Schegloff & Sacks 1973; Clark & French 1981), there has not yet been much research about topic talk.

Here I shall deal with openings and closings of Finnish and German telephone calls.

2. MATERIAL

The corpus of this study 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. The callers were students asking for information about their studies and people from the university staff asking for information regarding their jobs. They got their replies from the secretary of the department. The calls were taped on a tape recorder – we got the permission of the callers afterwards – and then transcribed according to the “Textnotationssystem” demonstrated by Brinker & Sager (1989: 94 f.).

3. HYPOTHESES

On the basis of previous research (see Liefländer-Koistinen & Neuendorff 1989, 1991) I formed the hypothesis that three different levels of discourse can be differentiated: a general or universal level, a culture-bound level or level of conventions, and a mostly individually determined, that means an idiosyncratic one. Concerning the openings and closings of phone calls I

would assume special scripts (compare Beaugrand & Dressler 1981: 91) for these quite standardized parts of telephone conversations.

A) UNIVERSAL OR GENERAL SCRIPT



B) CULTURE-BOUND SCRIPT

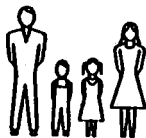


Finland



Germany (DDR)

C) IDIOSYNCRATIC SCRIPT



2433

4. GENERAL DEFINITIONS

4.1. Openings

Schegloff (1968: 1080) describes openings of phone calls as summons-answer-sequences. The summons of a caller A by ringing is answered by B when e.g. lifting the receiver and telling her/his name. Typical of this part of

telephone interaction is, according to Schegloff, self-identification and identification of the conversation partners combined with greetings, which is necessary for establishing a social relationship and a base for interaction between the telephone partners. After identification and greetings "the caller provides the first 'topic' of conversation" (Schegloff 1968: 1078). This general script of openings seems, however, not to be sufficient on its own, because culture specific conventions and idiosyncratic scripts are here not taken into account.

4.2. Closings

According to Brinker & Sager (1989: 88) and Henne & Rehbock (1982: 22) ending a phone call requires an agreement of the conversations partners about topic termination (see also Clark & French 1981). It must be initiated by a signal of at least one partner. The signal is usually given when the information obtained is given or it turned out to be unattainable.

Ending a phone call is a matter of negotiation between caller and receiver and this might be a quite complicated process (compare also Hess-Lüttich 1990). There are also stereotypical sequences, adjacency pairs, by which the call is ended. Brinker & Sager (1989) call them sequence of résumé, sequence of thanking and sequence of wishing. – Let us now have a look at the Finnish and German phone calls and compare the results with the general scripts of openings and closings above.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Openings

At the level of culture-bound conventions there seem to be some interesting differences between Finnish and German openings of phone calls. The openings of the Finnish calls are usually longer, in more than 90 % of the calls

three turns are to be found, while the openings of the German calls consists of only two turns.

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. There are also some differences in the ways of identification. In the German phone calls often only the family name is used for self-identification, while we find surname and Christian name in the Finnish material. An explanation for this might be the habit of the German society to use the "Sie-formula" for addressing, while it is in Finland quite usual to use somebody's Christian name e.g. when working in the same place.

Another interesting feature is that we usually find the greetings combined with partner-identification in the German material, when the partners already know each other. There is no such case in the Finnish calls. Greetings are never combined with partner-identification. But there is another interesting item: it seems to be quite usual to use one's family name first, in a genitive form, and then the Christian name.

An example of an idiosyncratic script is to be found in the Finnish material, too. The Finnish secretary uses in more than 80 % of the calls the same greetings the caller used. This rate is much lower in the German material. In the Finnish and German openings there are also some cases of phatic communication, which give also a hint of idiosyncratic scripts.

5.2. Closings

The results of comparing the closings of Finnish and German phone calls requesting information show quite clearly that the differentiation into different levels of discourse is necessary.

In the Finnish and in the German material we find that there is a signal given to end the call by at least one of the partners. This signal is usually given,

when the required information is obtained or turned out to be unattainable. There are the typical adjacency pairs and stereotypical formulations and particles in both the Finnish and German phone calls. So far the universal script fits.

Only on the level of culture-bound conventions, however, can an explanation be found for the fact that it is always the caller in the Finnish material who takes the initiative to end the call, whereas this is a matter of negotiation in the German calls.

It seems to be a convention in Finland that the caller, who opens the conversation, also gives the signal to end it and the receiver, who is usually used to this rule, waits for the caller's initiative.

In the German calls, however, the negotiation about an agreement of the partners to end the call might take a long time. A lot of implicit signals must often be given before the final signal is delivered. There is also the risk of misunderstanding, because the signal for ending the topic can give rise to a new one, instead of leading to the closing of the call.

6. CONCLUSION

When looking at the results above we can imagine what **might** happen, when a member of Finnish and German society phone each other. Fortunately a foreigner's communicative errors are more easily forgiven – but linguistic errors more easily than breaches of convention.

So for the success of intercultural communication it seems important to get to know and to respect the conventions of other cultures. The results reported in this paper should make a small contribution to the research in this area.

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