Openings and Closings
in Telephone Conversations
between Native Spanish Speakers

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The current investigation contributes new data to a growing body of
work on cultural universalities vs. particularities in the functions per-
formed in telephone opening and closing sequences. While telephone con-
versations in many languages and cultures have been studied, the Span-
ish language is conspicuously absent in the literature. The present work
addresses this lack, augmenting available linguistic data with the novel
contribution of Spanish to the database. In this presentation, I offer my
analysis of the opening and closing sequences of 11 dyads in natural tele-
phone conversations conducted in Spanish. I attempt to determine how
closely Hispanic cultural patterns of conduct for telephone conversations
follow the sequences outlined in previous works by Schegloff, Hopper,
and other researchers. I conclude that Hispanic conversational norms do
indeed fall within Schegloff's canonical schema of universality, while at
the same time exhibiting unique sequential variations. These variations
may or may not be culture-specific, a point which can only be determined
through further investigation.

Introduction

Conversational analysis of telephone conversations is a fairly well
established area of investigation, beginning in the late 1960's with
Schegloff's (1967) dissertation on conversational openings. Since
that time, numerous researchers have advanced the study of telephone in-
teractions, both between members of the same culture (Hopper 1989; Hop-
per, Doany, Johnson & Drummond 1991; Hopper & Drummond 1989;
Lindström 1994; Schegloff 1979, 1970, 1968, 1967; and Schegloff & Sacks
1973) and across cultures (Godard 1977; Halmari 1993; Hopper & Koleilat-
Doany 1989; and Sifianou 1989). Languages investigated range from En-
glish and French to Greek and Finnish. This is clearly a broad range, in-
cluding some less commonly spoken languages; one would assume that
within such a range, most of the more commonly spoken languages would
be represented. However, in all the studies I have examined, Spanish, which
is one of the five most widely spoken languages in the world, is notable by
its absence in the literature. Hopper (1992) offers a brief description of dif-

the relevance of my investigation for second language teaching and learning

All of the researchers cited previously raise valid points to keep in mind when analyzing data from another culture based on previous research for English. However, I find very persuasive Hopper et al.'s assertion that "Schegloff's (1979) discussion of identification and recognition includes virtually every format that have [sic] been argued as being unique to Greece, France or Holland – and all from North American data!" (1990-91: 378). Overall, then, I will rely heavily on frameworks pioneered by Schegloff (1968; 1973, with Sacks; 1979) and further elaborated by Hopper (1989; 1989, with Koleilat-Doany; 1991, with Doany, Johnson and Drummond; 1992) in structuring my analysis. I will also draw on cultural implications in my discussion and conclusions, keeping in mind points raised by those researchers concerned with cultural specificity.

Methodology

The current work will focus exclusively on data collected from native speakers of Spanish from a variety of Latin American countries. While I am not specifically doing a comparative analysis with English or other languages, there will necessarily be some comparative conclusions drawn. It is through such cross-cultural comparisons that the greatest relevance to second language learning will be realized.

Research questions

I am interested in investigating three questions in particular regarding telephone conversation openings and closings. Two of them deal with the opening sequences. The third focuses on the closing. The questions are:

(1)　Does there appear to be a standard formula used in beginning a telephone conversation among Spanish speakers as suggested by Schegloff?

(2)　Do Spanish speakers move immediately to the purpose of the call, or do they follow a pattern of information exchange before the "real" conversation begins?

This is addressed by Schegloff's final adjacency pair sequence, which Hopper and Koleilat-Doany (1989: 163) list as step 4, a "how are you" or inquiry sequence in which each participant offers an initial inquiry about the other. Some of the cross-cultural studies seem to indicate that the answer to this question is culture-specific. For instance, Halmari (1993) indicates that in business calls, at least, Americans have a tendency to get straight to the point, with little in the way of preliminary pleasantries, while Finns are much more likely to make some kind of polite conversation before talking about business.

a member of that culture. Regardless of the ultimate purpose of a visit or telephone call, Hispanic etiquette requires that the participants first inquire after the health and/or activities of each other's family members. Therefore, at the beginning of a conversation, as long as the participants were asking about each others' families, I considered it to be part of the opening. Once the topic changed, I determined that to be the end of the greeting, regardless of whether they later returned to discussion of family matters.

Results and Discussion

I examined the data from two perspectives. First, I did a simple count of how many of the categories for openings (Schegloff 1968) and closings (Schegloff and Sacks 1973) appeared in the data, and in what combinations to get an idea of how closely my information fit with the extant theories of universal functions.

As in English, there are certain verbal cues in Spanish that one uses to indicate that s/he would like to terminate the conversation, either face to face or by telephone. These include such interjections as "bueno…" or "pues…" ('well…') followed by a pause, or phrases such as "muchas gracias por la llamada" ('thank you so much for calling') or "me da gusto haber hablado contigo" ('it was good to talk to you'). I searched for such clues in the conversations, and transcribed the closings from that point forward to the actual end of the conversation. Very often, closings were much longer than openings, which is also in line with the function that Schegloff and Sacks propose for preclosing sequences. Since a preclosing leaves open the option for the other party to introduce a new topic of conversation, it could result that there are several preclosing gambits before both speakers decide that they no longer have any new topics to discuss. This obviously implies the possibility of a much longer closing sequence than opening.

In general, it turns out that there are close correspondences, although not necessarily exact matches, between the predicted categories and actual occurrence in Spanish. In this sense, I would argue that the correspondences support the idea of universal functions in telephone conversations across cultures, while the lack of exact fit reflects the cultural differences mentioned by such researchers as Godard (1977) and Sifianou (1989).

After this initial counting step, I returned to look more closely at the actual text to find examples in support of both concordances and differences between the data and the current theories. It is through this textual approach that specific cultural idiosyncrasies can be identified, and this will provide the most useful information for application to second language learning. After all, highlighting similarities and differences between one's own culture and another brings them to conscious awareness. Once someone is consciously aware of something, it is much easier for him/her to learn and/or remember that information and to have it consciously accessible when it is needed.

directly from identification/recognition to asking how the other person was, which is a phrase in Spanish that is capable of doing double duty as both greeting and inquiry. In Spanish speaking countries, as well as asking about the other participant, it is often typical to extend this inquiry sequence to ask about the whole family, especially if one is speaking to either a family member, or a close friend whose family is well known to the speaker. As a result, in Spanish this sequence is often more extended than merely an adjacency pair. The following extract is an example of the most typical opening sequences:

0		«rin, rin, rin»
		(ring, ring, ring)
1	Aurora:	Aló.
		Hello.
2	Ursula:	¿Aló?
		Hello?
3	Aurora:	¿Sí?
		Yes?
4	Ursula:	Hola hermanita. ¿Cómo estás?
		Hello, little sister. How are you?
5	Aurora:	Oh, Ursula.
		Oh, Ursula.
6	Ursula:	¿Cómo estás, qué dices? ¿Estás ocupada?
		How are you, what's up? Are you busy?
7	Aurora:	Acá, cocinando.
		I'm just here, cooking.
…		
19	Ursula:	¿Andan todos bien por la casa? ¿Ramón? ¿Salvador?
		How is everyone at home? Ramon? Salvador?
20	Aurora:	Sí, sí.
		Yes, yes.
21	Ursula:	Están bien. ¿Hay alguna novedad?
		Everyone's fine, then. Is there anything new going on?
22	Aurora:	Nooooo.
		Nooooo.
…		
25	Ursula:	¿Has oído algo de mi mamá o mi papá?
		Have you heard anything from mom or dad?
26	Aurora:	Sí, hablé la semana pasada.
		Yes, I talked [to them] last week.
27	Ursula:	Ya, ¿cómo está mamá?
		Yeah? How's mom?
28	Aurora:	Quería que le enviara algo por su cumpleaños del bebe.…
		She wanted me to send her something for the baby's birthday.…

in my data to stand out as contrary to the norm. In one case, the caller knew he had awakened the callee, and so an apology was obviously in order. The second case is not so clear cut, since there was no apparent reason for an apology, as evidenced by the following dialogue from dyad 6:

0		«rin, rin, rin»
		(ring, ring, ring)
1	Lucas:	¿Aló?
		Hello?
2	Teresa:	Ah, ¿Lucas?
		Um, Lucas?
3	Lucas:	¿Sí?
		Yes?
4	Teresa:	Ah, ¿cómo estás?
		Ah, how are you?
5	Lucas:	¿Con quién hablo?
		Who is this?
6	Teresa:	Soy Teresa. Teresa Portales.
		This is Teresa. Teresa Portales.
7	Lucas:	Ah, ¿cómo estás? ¿Qué tal?
		Oh, how are you? What's up?
8	Teresa:	Bien. Mira, Lucas, ojalá que no te esté molestando.
		I'm fine. Gee, Lucas, I hope I'm not bothering you.

Apparently, this dyad was not as intimate as others, as evidenced by the callee's failure to immediately identify the caller's voice. Perhaps this more distant relationship had a role in the caller's apology. The caller also mentioned before she made the call that she knew her friend was planning to watch a show that was scheduled to start very shortly; this may have been an additional influence on her decision to apologize for interrupting his evening.

The final variable aspect from my data on openings that I would like to discuss is some difference in presentation of the sequence of the elements of openings. The canonical sequence is that proposed by Schegloff which I have cited several times throughout this paper: (1) summons/answer; (2) identification/recognition; (3) greeting tokens; and (4) initial inquiries ("how are you") and answers (Hopper et al. 1991: 370). There was only one sample in my data of this canonical order of adjacency pairs. The table below summarizes the variant sequences I found. Most of these represent instances of the second part of an adjacency pair not following directly from its logical first part; although, in all cases, all the requisite information of an opening sequence is ultimately included in one way or another. For example, in cases where a sequence is not explicitly used, its function is fulfilled in covert ways, such as one person recognizing another's voice from the first word, and bypassing the tentative identification routines to go directly to

"Oh, Teresa! Hello! How are you?" The second sentence appears to be relatively superfluous for Spanish speakers who are on the receiving end of phone calls, who simply skip from recognition to inquiry, as noted above. While the callers themselves very often use the greeting immediately before the inquiry, without awaiting a response ("Hello! How are you?"), the callees are much more likely to omit it, as seen from information in the table above. It is difficult to postulate why this might be so. Clearly, based on the reactions of both participants in the conversation, this is not perceived as rude or abrupt; it is merely the normal reaction to the caller's greeting and inquiry.

Closings

Conversational closings, which Schegloff and Sacks (1979) call "terminal exchanges," were rather more difficult to determine. Schegloff and Sacks (1979: 303-304) identify markers in American English that they call "preclosings," or indicators that one party is ready to terminate the conversation but is offering the other party the opportunity to open another topic of conversation. These "preclosings" can take various forms, which the authors elaborate throughout the paper. They also emphasize the importance of taking into account surrounding context in determining that a certain word or phrase is functioning as a preclosing marker, since words such as "we-e-el-l-l" or "okay then" can also be used in other contexts that do not necessarily implicate the desire to close the conversation.

In addition, Schegloff and Sacks (1979) describe various stages of the closing (without giving precise names to them), and discuss several of these in their article. These parts of a closing do not all necessarily need to be present, as is also the case with the four sequences in openings, and in fact, they are not always all present in my data in both openings and closings.

Since Schegloff and Sacks do not offer formal names for their closing sequences, I have tentatively put them into the following simplified categories: (1) preclosing, or initiation of the closing sequence (the only category for which Schegloff and Sacks do offer a label); (2) new topic introduction; (3) recapitulation; and (4) final closing. Preclosings have been discussed above. New topic introduction means simply that an introduction of a new topic of conversation after a preclosing gambit. Recapitulation involves a brief summarizing of the topics discussed and/or arrangements made. I have decided to also include such elements as sending best wishes to other family members and other shutting-down details in this category, for the sake of simplicity. Such recapitulation is often an optional element in a personal conversation, although Halmari (1993: 422) indicates that it is almost obligatory in business conversations. Final closings are the actual "goodbyes" or some equivalent appropriate to the specific context of the conversation, such as "Thank you" (generally in business or information-seeking phone calls) or "I'll talk to you later." I have looked for representations of these categories in determining the closing sequences of Spanish

Table 3. Closing Sequence Combinations and Frequencies

Closing sequence combinations	Number of occurrences
preclosing + new topic	19
preclosing + recapitulation + final closing	6
preclosing + recapitulation + new topic	4
preclosing + final closing	2
preclosing + recapitulation + preclosing + new topic	2
recapitulation + final closing	2
recapitulation + new topic	1
preclosing + recapitulation + preclosing + final close	1
Total	37

like it was headed into the final countdown, so to speak, only to take a turn and have a new topic introduced after the recapitulation, or go through a series of alternating preclosings, recapitulations, and/or new topics. This variability emphasizes the individuality and unpredictability of the communication process and highlights the difficulty of trying to analyze the process. However, it is still possible to make some tentative predictions based on the data above.

For instance, despite the two exceptions where a closing segment began with the recapitulation, it is evident that the vast majority of such sequences began with preclosing statements of some kind. Hence, one could reasonably predict that it is difficult to close down a conversation without a preclosing. In fact, the instances that begin with recapitulations arise from previous instances of a preclosing plus new topic initiation. After a few exchanges on the new topic, one of the speakers utters a recapitulative statement instead of returning all the way to the preclosing. An example of this from dyad 1 follows:

49 Ana: Está bien. Muchísimas gracias porque todavía no estoy completamente bien del catarro que me dió.
Okay, then. Thanks a lot, because I'm still not completely over that cold I caught.

50 María: Sí. A mí también me tomó como tres semanas. Bueno, tú también te acuerdas … pensé que me moría.
Yes. It took me about three weeks also. Well, you remember too, I thought I was going to die.

51 Ana: Sí.
Yeah.

52 María: Pero esa medicina china que mi mamá me lo compró me dió un buen resultado … bueno, tómatela… y mañana si te sientes mal, no te puedes concentrar … y es una barbaridad, así es que no te olvides de tomar.
But that herbal medicine my mom bought for me worked

which she then converts to a more drawn-out reason why her friend should remember to take the medicine. Ana offers another terse reply: "No, I won't forget." And so the conversation continues on, with Ana replying shortly, proffering little encouragement for continued conversation, and María refusing these preclosing gambits.

Finally, María herself utters a statement that could be interpreted as a recapitulation: "Well, it's not like I won't see you. Good luck tomorrow!" Ana follows this with another brief reply, "I hope so." But then, once again María introduces a new topic, the offer to bring Ana a Coke during her exam. They discuss this for one or two exchanges, and then María presents another recapitulation, and a statement that can easily be construed as a final closing: "Okay, I'll bring it to you then. Say hello to Bernardo for me." At this point, Ana replies with a goodbye, and the conversation terminates.

It is interesting, although perhaps not significant, that this particular conversation did not end until the caller herself finally decided she was ready to terminate it. Does this mean, then, that it is up to the caller to give final closure to a conversation? Not necessarily, according to the rest of the data. While the caller typically offers more preclosing gambits than the callee (26 as compared to 11 for the callee), the final closings are initiated approximately equally between the two, with callers performing six of them and callees, five.

In addition, new topics were initiated almost equally, with a slight advantage to the callee: callers introduced 11 new topics as compared to the callees' 15. Recapitulations were offered 10 times by callers, and 6 times by the callees. These numbers are summarized in the table below.

Finally, an interesting little phenomenon occurred in the final closing itself. Schegloff speaks of adjacency pairs, in which an initial utterance prompts a coordinated response from the hearer. In the final closing, I did find such pairs. However, I also encountered, with equal frequency, final closings in triplets rather than pairs. One person would utter "Goodbye,"

Table 4. Frequencies of Termination Exchanges:
Dynamics of Termination Exchanges

	Caller	Callee	Totals
Who initiates preclosings?	26	11	37
Who initiates new topics?	11	15	26
Who initiates recapitulations?	10	6	16
Who initiates final closings?	6	5	11

the second would respond in kind, and then the first person would repeat it once more before hanging up. There did not appear to be any attempt by the other interlocutor to match this repetition by the first person, which leaves the interaction in a triplet rather than a pair. The following excerpt is an example of this:

Peru, between different interactants, had five. Similarly, the woman who called Chile attempted four preclosing gambits with her daughter, and five with her mother before successfully terminating the respective conversations. On average, local calls and domestic long distance calls required about two preclosing gambits before closure was reached.

One reason for this could be that there is a much greater possibility that people will call locally or domestic long distance more often than they will call internationally. Hence, there is less "new" news that happens between telephone calls, and it is consequently easier to terminate the conversation. On the other hand, when the length of time increases between phone calls, not only is there more time for new things to occur in the respective lives of the participants, but there could also be an increased anxiety to talk to the other party. For this reason, people will look for reasons or excuses to maintain contact with their loved ones for as long as possible.

Summary and Conclusions

The data presented in this current work supports Schegloff's and Hopper's assertions of certain conversational universals across languages and cultures, especially relating to telephone discourse. Both of these researchers outline elements of telephone openings and closings, focusing on similarities across cultures. Hopper and Koleilat-Doany (1989: 176) state it plainly in regard to openings: "Certainly we do not claim that every telephone opening sounds just like those in the United States. Rather, there is a certain set of jobs that must get accomplished to do the opening of a state of conversational speaking."

This certain set of jobs is performed by the informants in my data, in accomplishing both openings and closings. The four standard opening sequences identified by Schegloff and summarized by Hopper recur constantly in the conversations, and the same is true of the four basic phases of a closing. The only significant difference is that such sequences may not occur in Schegloff's canonical order, or may not be explicitly present. In the latter case, the function performed by the explicitly missing sequence is always implied in another sequence.

In regard to the original questions I set out to answer, it is quite apparent that there is indeed a formulaic approach to both opening and closing a conversation. The easy manner in which the data analyzed in this study fits into the typologies which Schegloff has elaborated verifies the routinized nature especially of conversational openings. On the other hand, it was somewhat more challenging to try to match the data to distinct closing sequences, since a single utterance could potentially be interpreted in various ways. Even so, it is still fairly clear that there are certain strategies that conversational partners use to indicate their readiness to terminate a conversation. I have identified a few of these potential preclosing indicators in my data set, and then followed them through the rest of the conversation

study. Considering the focus on the use of Spanish in the business world in the present day, this latter focus could have significant implications for helping second language learners master communicative and pragmatic competence in the business environment.

Educational Implications

Wolfson (1989: 96) emphasizes the importance of knowing different cultural norms when one is learning a foreign language: "This little rule, as insignificant as it may seem, is extremely important to the learner... who might, if not shown how the two frames work, use the wrong one and thereby be misunderstood." Such knowledge feeds into a learner's communicative and/or pragmatic competence in the target language and culture, as noted above. Such studies provide concrete information to teachers who must teach the norms of daily Spanish usage to their learners; at a very pragmatic level, communicative competence on the telephone is something that is not currently emphasized in most Spanish education curricula. Perhaps if there were more solid information for the teachers to use, they could translate this into practice exercises for the classroom.

This Spanish data could also be used as a comparative tool to teach English to speakers of Spanish, if it is used in a supplementary, comparative/contrastive fashion in conjunction with the English data they need to learn. A final possible use of such studies as these is to provide a practical example of an everyday situation which all students encounter, as a springboard to a lesson on differences and similarities between the native culture and the target culture.

The above are just some possible applications of telephone conversational analysis. Clearly, it is a wide-open field, and I believe researchers and educators can and should find ways to explore and apply it in all its variety inside and outside the classroom.

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