"SOS 112 what has occurred?" Managing openings in children's emergency calls

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the initial exchanges in calls to the Swedish emergency services, focusing on callers' responses to the standardised opening phrase *SOS one one two, what has occurred?*. Comparisons across three age groups – children, teenagers, and adults – revealed significant differences in caller behaviour. Whereas teenagers and adults offered reports of the incident, child callers were more prone to request dispatch of specific assistance units. This pattern was only observable when children were accompanied by an adult relative, which leads us to propose that child callers may be operating under prior adult instruction concerning how to request help. The second part of the analysis examines the local organisation of participants' actions, showing how turn-design and sequencing manifest the local concerns of the two parties. The analysis thus combines quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the ways through which the parties jointly produce an early sense of emergency incidents. These results are discussed in terms of children's agency and competence as informants granted to them by emergency operators, and how such competence ascriptions run against commonsense conceptualisations of children as less-than-full-fledged members of society.

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1. Introduction

Although children's participation in society's affairs is subject to much theorising (e.g., James et al., 1998; James and James, 2004), surprisingly few attempts have been made to empirically explore children's agency in real-life encounters with the public services. This article highlights some features of children's participation in service related telephone calls by examining how young callers accomplish opening sequences when calling for emergency assistance.

Overwhelmingly, emergency calls stand out for their brevity and topically narrow focus (e.g., Wakin and Zimmerman, 1999; Zimmerman, 1992a) and count as an instance of highly specialised and goal-oriented institutional talk. Their structure can be broken down into five distinct phases (Zimmerman, 1992b): (1) opening and identification of the trouble; (2) request for assistance; (3) interrogative series; (4) response; and (5) closing.[1] It is fair to say that the opening exchanges have received far more research attention than the other phases of the calls, which may be taken to indicate the institutional significance of the initial alignment of the type of business and concerns that the two parties bring to the interaction (cf. Cromdal et al., 2008; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1990). One institutionally specific feature of emergency call openings is that operators tend to hear the very summons as a token of the caller's need for help. That is to say, their pre-beginning orientation towards every call is to treat it as a virtual emergency (Zimmerman, 1992b). A further characteristic of emergency calls is the specialisation of the operators' opening phrase (Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987), which identifies the institution as, specifically, an emergency assistance service. A third feature of emergency call openings is their reduction to strictly service-relevant topics (e.g., Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987), characterised for instance by the absence (or occasionally displayed avoidance) of greetings and other mutual courtesies, that are commonplace in mundane telephone calls (Schegloff, 1986a, b).

Such elements of reduction and specialisation provide for a normative organisation of the opening exchange, where the operator's identification of the service creates an expectation for the caller to use the very first topical slot to state her/his reason for calling, where that reason is already taken to be an urgent need of emergency assistance. In other words, the organisation of the opening sequence is geared towards the parties "achieving an institutionally constrained focus to the talk" (Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987, p. 175) already

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from the outset, and Cromdal et al. (2012) point to the procedural consequentiality of two different opening routines in the work of Swedish emergency rescue operators. In this article, we ask how such focus is achieved in calls phoned in by children who report on a variety of emergency incidents.

The present article builds squarely on previous work in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, which has a longstanding interest in explicating the accountable features of members' practical reasoning and organisation of action in a range of work settings, including those where members of the general public engage with professional representatives of service organisations (e.g., Drew and Heritage, 1992; Sacks, 1992, vol. 1; Watson, 1986; Wowk, 1989). Our analysis contributes to prior work on service-related telecommunications (cf. Edwards, 2007) by focusing on children's use of a dedicated telephone service. In highlighting the practical concerns of young callers and by showing how such concerns are being manifested and handled as part of the routine work of call-taking, this article also contributes to a broader scope of sociological inquiry into children's participation in society's business (e.g. Cahill, 2010; Clemente, 2009; Cromdal, 2009; Hutchby, 2010; Silverman et al., 1998; Speier, 1976, Thornborrow, 1998; Waksler, 1996).

2. Children's calls for assistance

There is a small but growing body of work on children's calls to telephone-operated help lines, showing from within interactional events how callers and call-takers routinely draw upon commonsense categories, expectations, and a variety of skills and competencies when engaging with one another (Potter and Hepburn, 2003; Emmison and Danby, 2007a, b; Danby and Emmison, in press, Osvaldsson et al., in press/2013). Drawing on previous work on the opening interactions in emergency calls, some of these studies examine how the call takers' identification of the service and the callers' presentation of their trouble are managed to establish a joint topic for the call.

Of particular interest for our purposes is Emmison and Danby's (2007a) analysis of the opening exchanges in calls to the Australian "Kids Help Line" (henceforth KHL), in which they observed that the callers' first presentation of trouble does not necessarily render their reason for the call. Rather, the specific reason for calling the service typically follows upon an initial narrative account of some past event(s). This order of presentation of the callers' business differs from what has been previously found in emergency calls, and Emmison and Danby (2007a) suggest that it may be a result of the different opening routines used by call takers across the two services. Specifically, the KHL call takers start out on the formula ⟨greeting+institutional identification⟩ (typically *"Hi there, Kids Help Line"*) which does not immediately prompt callers to specify their need for help. Thus, in contrast to much of the work on openings in emergency calls, Emmison and Danby's (2007a) analysis proposes to 'problematise[.] the idea of the "reason for the call" as the sole conceptual device for characterizing the core business performed in call openings.' (p. 24).

Naturally, the work of emergency assistance operators differs in important respects from that of call takers of a counselling service. For instance, the KHL call takers do not ordinarily deal directly with matters of life and death, nor do they have any means of dispatching personnel to assist the caller; so the type of help they may offer is never – quite contrary to the emergency operator – to "send somebody over". But perhaps more than anything, the work of the two institutions differs in the potential degree of urgency.

We will return to these matters in the second part of the analysis. However, it needs bearing in mind that our analytical interest is not strictly with comparing children's emergency calls with their engagement in other services accessible via telephone. Rather, we seek to examine how young callers deal with the routinised aspects of the opening sequences as they report on a variety of emergency incidents. Therefore, we will draw on studies of young persons seeking other types of assistance only insofar as this may highlight the institutionally specific concerns of the parties involved in producing and receiving emergency reports. Our analysis starts out by a simple comparison of two different types of call openings across three age groups of callers, then proceedes to explore in some detail the interaction taking place in these different opening sequences to examine the participants' lay and professional orientations as well as the local concerns that can be shown to inform their actions.

3. Methods and materials

The present study is drawn from a larger research project dealing with social interaction in children's calls to the Swedish emergency services, SOS-Alarm. Our corpus currently holds over 120 real-life calls coming in through the emergency number 112 to one of the smaller dispatch centres. The calls were collected over a period of three years, which included over 200 days of fieldwork at the dispatch centre, during which the authors would listen in to the unceasing stream of incoming calls and learning about the practice of call taking and dispatch work (see also Cromdal et al., 2008).

3.1. Corpus and categorisation

For the purposes of this study, we examine a subset of 40 calls with children, focusing in particular on the participants' very first actions after the line has been opened.[2] For comparative purposes, we also examine the opening actions in adults' calls (44 calls) as well as in calls phoned in by teenagers (38 calls). The assignment into the two age groups "children" and "teenagers" was carried out either by operators together with the researchers simultaneously listening to the calls or, in the absence of researchers at the centre, by the operators themselves, who were previously asked to tag all the calls that they have received from callers from the two age groups. For comparative purposes, the researchers also tagged a collection of calls from adults.[3] All the tagged calls were then retrieved electronically from the

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[2] In the case of multiple calls reporting on the same event, we only include the opening sequences of the first call, as subsequent calls concerning an incident which is already being processed are often treated differently than first reports. The reason for this is of course that much of the relevant information may already be known to the operator, and dispatch activities may already be initiated.

[3] The general principle for including calls into this group was to represent the entire span of adult life (including young adults, middle aged persons as well as senior citizens—these assessments were continously discussed by the operator and researcher listening in to calls), as well as a broad scope of incidents, including for example, burglaries, fires, traffic- and workplace accidents, and a variety of purely medical (i.e., non-accidnet) emergencies.