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# Reason-for-calling invitations in Italian telephone calls: Action design and recipient commitment

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## Abstract

This paper investigates three main formats for reason-for-calling invitations in Italian telephone calls and shows that these invitation formats are designed to include an informing/descriptive component and a requesting component. These two elements are encoded and foregrounded differently in the design of each format, constructing diverse ways to name, refer to or describe the social occasion that recipients are invited to attend and different ways of requesting the invitees to state their commitment to participate. Our findings provide evidence that, by using one of the three formats, speakers are able to tailor the invitation to the different contextual conditions in which they and their recipients may be when the invitation is made, as well as to the circumstances of the social event, with the inviters often displaying caution in extending the invitation. This paper also investigates the types of constraints on the degree of commitment from the invitation recipient that each format entails, offering a contribution to study preference organisation in first actions.

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## 1. Introduction

Invitations are an important part of our social life. By inviting other people to partake in social activities and events, we give others access to our own life, home, spare time, habits, friends and acquaintances. These activities have an important ritual function in maintaining social relationships, a function that strongly depends on invitations being conceived and treated as gratuitous actions, made for the pleasure of sharing experiences and social occasions with others and, therefore, constructed as free from need or obligation. When we characterise invitations as based on this lack of obligation, we point out that they *do not intrinsically concern objects, assistance, services or information to be granted or offered*, as is the case with other social actions, such as offers, requests and other related actions (Curl, 2006; Curl and Drew, 2008; Rossi, 2012; Drew and Couper-Kuhlen, 2014). This aspect qualifies the act of inviting as radically different from requesting where the action is characterised as closely linked to a condition of need, as Drew and Couper-Kuhlen (2014:2) state: “When we make a request we inherently and usually implicitly convey that we have need of something – we expose ourselves, as it were, to being seen as in wanting in some fashion”. Although invitations can be produced under certain circumstances to alleviate the interlocutor’s momentary distress (see Drew, in this issue; Bella and Moser,

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in this issue) or in return for a previous invitation (Bella, 2009), in principle, we do not invite other people because we need their help or want to offer a service. Similarly, when accepting an invitation, we do not normally mean to offer any assistance or service; although specific types of offers, such as bringing a present, might be involved in accepting invitations.

However, similar to other actions that are undertaken to obtain a responsive behaviour (i.e., ‘first/initiating actions’), invitations inevitably exert some type of social obligations on those to whom we address them, more specifically concerning the responsive actions the invitations project in subsequent turns. As argued by Pomerantz and Heritage (2013:215): “An invitation can be seen as a relational bid; accepting it ratifies the status of the relationship, and rejecting it is potentially failing to ratify it”. In line with prior studies in Conversation Analysis (CA henceforth) research on preference related to responding actions (Pomerantz, 1978, 1984; Davidson, 1984; Raymond, 2003), acceptance and confirmation are also favoured with invitations, while explicitly formulated rejection and disconfirmation are avoided or minimised. However, our analysis suggests that the fact that invitations are conveyed and understood as free from any pressure or need has consequences on the way in which the interaction develops. We will show that the gratuitous nature of invitations projects a range of possible answers, beyond the accept/reject option, as next relevant actions.

In this article, we explore preference principles in the formation of invitations by focusing on the way in which these actions are formed and delivered as *first actions*. The literature on invitations, and particularly that based on naturally occurring data and moreover in an Italian context, is quite scant. In the introductory essay of this issue, we provided a comprehensive literature review of the prior research on invitations (including the ethnography of speaking, intercultural pragmatics and other cognate fields) since the earlier philosophical discussions that followed the work of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1976) on the conceptualization of speech acts and of their felicity conditions. For the specific purposes of this article, it is worth highlighting that despite the recent interest in studying first actions in CA, apart from a few sparse references to invitations in studies with a different focus, little research has been conducted to date on the formation and delivery of the act of inviting. With rare exceptions, such as the work of Drew on the use of reportings in invitation sequences (1984, 1992),<sup>1</sup> the action of inviting in CA has focused more on the responses of the recipients (Davidson, 1984; Barraja-Rohan, 1994) and has been treated as akin and almost complementary to offers, requests, suggestions and proposals (Couper-Kuhlen, 2014; Clayman and Heritage, 2014; but see Drew, 2013 for a detailed analysis of turn design in delivering casual and impromptu invitations as compared to those designed and deployed as reason-for-calling).

Drawing on previous studies on offers and requests (Curl, 2006; Curl and Drew, 2008; Rossi, 2012; Couper-Kuhlen, 2014; Drew and Couper-Kuhlen 2014; Clayman and Heritage, 2014), this paper sheds light on the implications of using specific formats in the delivery of invitations as associated with contingent interactional conditions, thereby contributing to CA research on preference organisation of first/initiating actions; a less developed domain than that of second/responding actions (Pomerantz and Heritage, 2013). The paper focuses on invitations produced in their homes by members of two families in calls to friends, acquaintances and other casual interlocutors that were specifically made for the purpose of inviting. Like other types of first/initiating actions, invitations can also be designed in different ways, according to whether the invitations are to be understood by the prospective invitees as taking up an autonomous and preconceived decision or, in contrast, as a consequence of some topic that has been previously mentioned. In the context of telephone calls, these two types of actions are identified as “reason-for-call” or as “interactionally generated” (Sacks, 1992a,b:Spring 1972, lecture 6; Drew, 1984:148, footnote 1; Curl, 2006:1259).

This article focuses on invitations of the first type and shows that speakers employ three main action formats in this position, including specific linguistic forms and larger patterns of turn design. Due to the initial position of the invitations in the call,<sup>2</sup> the contextual conditions underpinning the activity cannot be anchored in prior talk *within* that same conversation but must be contained or referred to in the construction of the action. Therefore, in delivering these types of invitations, speakers accomplish multiple actions at the same time, such as providing the relevant information about the social event and the terms of the invitation (*informing*), describing the related circumstances that might be understood as relevant for future plans or events (*reporting*, Drew, 1984), as well as soliciting the recipients’ availability (*requesting*). As an outcome, speakers design turns that include and variously combine an *informative* component, in which future social occasions and their conditions are described (i.e., timing, place and other co-participants), and the *request* (implicit or explicit) of the recipients to state their participation commitment. The predominance of one or the other of these two components, together with the choice between a more compact or elaborated description of the conditions of the invitations and of the

<sup>1</sup> A more in-depth discussion of the work of Drew will be provided later in the section dedicated to the reason-for-calling invitation type 2.

<sup>2</sup> Not all the reason-for-calling invitations in our collection were deployed in the “anchor position” (Schegloff, 1986:117). Some of them occurred far from the call-opening sequence, and sometimes, the invitations came up even after other topics were discussed. These, however, were markedly introduced as “high priority” topics through the same markers used to introduce the first topic (e.g., “by the way” and “listen”) (Curl, 2006:1259), followed by formulations of actions (e.g., “I wanted to ask” and “I just wanted to say”).

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