

Transfer of telephone conversations as a transition between call-takers



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Abstract

This study examines how telephone conversations are transferred and re-opened in calls to the Swedish Board for Student Support. The study relates to research on the opening and closing of telephone conversations, and how with each transfer, the reason for the call may be new to one participant, but may not be new for the other participant. The data consist of 126 calls in Swedish where transfer is explicitly oriented towards by at least one of the participants. The analysis shows that call-takers take great care to ensure that callers know that they are being transferred. Some call-takers also take care to frame the re-opened call as transferred, others do not; in the case of the latter, the interactional burden of establishing a common frame for the call as transferred falls on the caller.

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1. Introduction

When a call is made to a call-centre, it is important that the caller reaches the appropriate call-taker for the matter at hand to be dealt with correctly. If the match is not good enough for the call-taker to be able to assist the caller, the call-taker can, if the available technology and organisation allow, transfer the caller to a call-taker who is better suited to handle the call. Extract 1 illustrates how transfer can be initiated and extract 2 how a call that has undergone transfer can be re-opened.

1) SBSS 010. 00.00.20–00.00.37 CT = call-taker, C = caller
13 CT m:m: (.) .hh jag=gö: så att ja koppla
14 dej vi:dare=eftersom jag anser atteh
15 (0.5).h ditt ä:rende behö:ver
16 diskute:ra lite läng↓:re: ti↓:d då↓ va:?
17 C .mth [(.)] [okej↓]
18 CT [såhh:] [om] du väntar lite så kopplar
19 jag dej vi::dare,
20 C ja visst, (.) tack.

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21 CT tack.

 13 CT m:m (.)hh what I'm gonna do: is that I'll
 14 transfer you=because I think thateh:
 15 (0.5) your case needs
 16 to be discussed a little longer right?
 17 C .mth [(.)] [okay↓]
 18 CT [sohh:] [if] you wait a little I will
 19 redirect you,
 20 C yes su:re (.) thanks.
 21 CT thanks.

In the first extract, the call-taker transfers the call after explaining why transfer is necessary: transfer is motivated and accepted before the exchange is closed and the caller is placed on hold, waiting to be received by a new call-taker. The second extract shows how a call that has been under transfer is received and re-opened by a subsequent call-taker: the call-taker establishes at the first possible opportunity that it is a matter of a subsequent exchange, the participants greet each other, and the caller states their reason for the call.

2) SBSS 117. 00.00.00–00.00.08 CT = call-taker, C = caller

0 ((line open))
 1 CT ceessen:: anders be::rgkvist?
 2 =ja tar ö:ver samt↑alet:↑.
 3 C he::j, mitt namn e: liv petrell,
 4 CT he::j¿=he::j,
 5 (0.5)
 6 C ÖHHH:: (.) ja: har en frå::ga::¿

 0 ((line open))
 1 CT esspeessess:: anders be::rgkvist?
 2 =I take o:ver the ca↑ll:.
 3 C hi::, my name is: liv petrell,
 4 CT hi::¿=hi::,
 5 (0.5)
 6 C ÖHHH:: (.) I: have a que::stion:¿

There is ample research covering telephone conversations and the opening and the closing of calls in the field of conversation analysis (Hopper, 1992; Lindström, 1994; Luke and Pavlidou, 2002; Schegloff, 1968, 1979, 2002; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Zimmerman, 1984). Calls to emergency hotlines and call-centres have received special attention, since openings and closings are especially sensitive when callers participate in institutional calls (Cromdal et al., 2012; Linell, 2010; Whalen and Whalen, 2011; Whalen et al., 1988; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987; Zimmerman, 1984). Research on both private calls and on institutional calls emphasise how sensitive openings are to formulations. The manner in which a call is opened and how the reason for the call is established lays the way for how the institutional task is executed (Schegloff, 1979, 2002, 2007; Whalen and Zimmerman, 1987; Zimmerman, 1984). This is especially visible in data where two different opening routines are present (cf. Cromdal et al., 2012).

Despite the plethora of research on openings and closings, there is little or no research in the field of conversation analysis that explicitly deals with the transfer of a call, or with the receiving and re-opening of a call that has been under transfer. While there are similarities between what is known about openings and closings of calls and the present study, there are also differences: a call that is made to an organisation where transfer is an available resource will in many cases go from being a first exchange to being a subsequent exchange in a chain of exchanges – for the caller. For the call-takers, both the call that is answered for the first time and the call that has undergone transfer will be first exchanges. In calls undergoing transfer, while one of the participants is leaving the call, the other continues the same call, only with a new call-taker. For the purposes of this article, the entire interaction from when a connection is first made until both speakers have hung up is a *call*. Each call may comprise several *exchanges* between one person who is a constant in the call and others who are changing. The caller and the call-taker will not be on equal ground when the call under transfer is re-opened, as the caller is continuing into a subsequent exchange while the call-taker is handling the reason for the call for the first time.

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