Wrong Number Telephone Encounter : A Study on a Bangla Speech Community

Monjurul Alam[*]

Abstract : Studies have shown that norms for interaction differ from culture to culture and community to community (Sun, 2002). However, when compared we notice essential similarities between the interaction patterns in different speech communities. In this current study, the author attempts to shed some light on the conversation norms of Bangla Speech Community by studying some wrong number telephone encounters. The aim is to document the interaction patterns of Bangla Speech Community and to analyze to what extent these patterns conform to and deviate from the canonical opening sequence and in the process to reveal the socio-cultural norms of conversation of the Bangla Speech Community. The study discloses several patterns of responding to the wrong number telephone call.

Introduction

The norm for interaction in one culture is not often appropriate in another culture (Sun,2002) and the mode of interaction vary from culture to culture, country to country, and time to time. According to Gumperz (1982) there are differences in the ways of carrying out and signaling the particular speech activities in all cultures. As two interlocutors signal their cultural membership and interpersonal relationship through interaction, conversation analysts are interested to scrutinize encounter openings to understand how social relationships function. Thus telephone conversation, among other modes of interaction, has been considered to be a potential site for understanding and comparing cultures and social behaviors.

In this paper the author has tried to extend the scope of scrutiny through a study of wrong number telephone encounters in a speech community, namely the residents of metropolitan city Dhaka, the

[*] Associate Professor, Institute of Modern Languages, University of Chittagong.

capital of Bangladesh. The language that this community converse in is Bangla, a vibrant language of Indo-European language family. The author has explored how the members of this large metropolitan community respond to wrong number telephone calls with a view to understanding some aspects of the interaction pattern of this speech community. As in our everyday life we often encounter wrong number telephone enquiries we are likely to identify the conversation norms of this Bangla speaking community. The researcher while making some wrong number telephone calls to some Dhaka households for eliciting their responses has situated the "wrong number" inquiry sequence within the four canonical adjacency sequences of telephone openings proposed in terms of North American telephone conversation, by Schegloff (1986) and which had later been claimed by Hopper, Doany, Johnson, & Drummond (1990/91), Hopper (1992) to be universal with regard to telephone conversation openings in general. In this study, firstly, the responses to "wrong number" sequences of Dhaka residents (henceforth Bangla data) were recorded and transcribed by distinguishing these from the canonical sequence. Secondly how the conversation subsequent to the wrong number adjacency pair continues were traced, that is, the patterns of maintenance and closing were identified. And then these responses were analyzed and evaluated to find out to what extent the interlocutors of the study conformed to and/or diverged from the canonical telephone opening sequence. Finally, some perspectives on the telephone conversation norms and practices, that is, the use of Bangla language in telephone conversation, in general, in Dhaka (for that matter Bangladesh) speech community were discussed.

The author feels, like other forms of naturally occurring talk, in wrong number telephone conversation people not only demonstrate their telephone etiquette but also signal their sense of politeness and cultural membership. Moreover, as a unique adjacency pair, wrong number telephone sequences in this study will shed light on naturally occurring talk from a different perspective to "to illustrate cultural patterns and to seek cultural explanations for observed sociolinguistic behavior" (Sun, 2002; p. 86). Because, J. Knuf (2003) maintains that all telephone conversation reflect some level of content planning, at least on the caller's part. Thus although the caller in this project is aware that the call is pre-planned, the callee is fully unaware of this pre-

fabrication and is likely to respond as naturally as always. So the data that has been presented here is, no doubt, representative of naturally occurring talk. The research question in this project is:

How do the Bangla Speech Community people respond to wrong number telephone calls and what interaction patterns and socio-cultural norms of conversation do these responses reveal?

Literature review

Telephone conversation, especially the beginning, has been studied quite extensively by conversation analysts such as Sacks, H., Schegloff, E.A., Jefferson, G. (1974) (cited in Hopper, 1992), Schegloff (1986), Hopper (1990-91, 1992) and others during the last thirty years or so. But no studies have been done on wrong number telephone encounters so far.   Again, these studies and research were concentrated only on European languages while studies on South Asian and other languages are few and far between. Most of the studies to date concentrated on the conformity to and variance from the canonical sequences proposed by Schegloff (1986). However these studies documented to what extent these varieties reflected in the opening sequences account for the specific cultures, that is, what is universal and what is culturally loaded in telephone openings.

Emanuel A. Schegloff and Harvey Sacks are considered to be the pioneers in terms of studying telephone openings from an analytical perspective and examining the structure of telephone conversation interaction. Shegloff's (1986) four canonical sequences for North American English appear in the following excerpt (p. 115; # 263):

1.	{a}			OP (ring)
		01	R	Hello
	{b}	02	C	Hello Ida?
		03	R	Yeah
	{c}	04	C	Hi, = This is Carla
		05	R	Hi Carla
	{d}	06	C	How are you.
		07	R	Okay:.
		08	C	Good. =
		09	R	=How are you.
		10	C	Fine. Don wants to know...

The four core opening sequences are indicated above in {a}, {b}, {c}, and {d} respectively: i) summons-answer (the phone ring is the summons and *hello* is the answer to that summons), ii) identification-recognition (the recognition of both the caller and the callee by each other), iii) exchange of greetings (the use of *hi* tokens in the adjacency pair; the use of naming tokens is the interactants' initiative to reaffirm their mutual identity), and iv) the *howareyou* sequence (initial inquiries about each other and subsequent answers). These adjacency pairs serve as organizational patterns for the ongoing conversation (Hopper and Chen, 1996 and Sun, 2002).

These canonical sequences provided a framework for the subsequent studies on telephone openings in various languages. Godrad (1977) (cited in Hopper and Chen, 1996; Sun, 2002 & 2004; and Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002) who studied telephone openings in French reports differences that exist between French and American summons-answer sequences. The French callers not only identify themselves after *"Allo?"* (an equivalent of *Hello*) but also apologize for intruding. According to Godrad the Americans interpret the answer to the summons as an indication whether the caller can go ahead with his intended inquiries or topics whereas the French view it as an indication of the answerers signaling to be interrupted in the midst of his other business. This is why the French callers offer an apology in the opening sequence. Sifianou (1989) (cited in Hopper and Chen, 1996; Sun, 2002, & 2004; and Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002) mentions that the Greek uses a variety of tokens (such as *"leyete"* meaning 'say' or 'speak', *"parakalo"* meaning 'please', etc.) while the callee first answers the phone. They hardly apologize for potential intrusion. So the issue of identification is overt in French and English but covert in Greek, and the Greeks enjoy the freedom to develop personalized styles in answering the phone. According to Houtkoop-Steenstra (1991) (cited in Hopper and Chen, 1996; Sun, 2002, &2004; and Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002) the Dutch considers not self identifying in answering the home telephone as impolite and both the caller and the callee identify themselves overwhelmingly. Lindstrom (1994) (cited in Hopper and Chen, 1996; Sun, 2002, & 2004; and Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002) studying the Swedish telephone conversation openings, reports that the Swedes use a variety of responses in self identifying, such as using first and/or last name, station-identification i.e. phone number after saying 'hello';

however, in most cases their self identification is followed by identification via the phone number. In his comparative study of Greek and German conversation openings Pavlidou (1994) (cited in Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002; and Sun, 2004) reports, both Greeks and Germans use phatic utterances in their summons-answer sequence, but with different purposes. The Greeks use it for signaling and/or enhancing interpersonal relationships where as the Germans use phatic utterances to reduce face threat (Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002).

Hopper and Chen (1996) in their study of Taiwanese Mandarin language, in terms of telephone openings, suggest that the Taiwanese use distinctive greeting tokens accompanied by relevant formality depending on the person they are interacting. Hopper and Chen (1996) reported three distinctive greeting tokens and formality of address used by the Taiwanese to display their interpersonal relationships.

Studying the Chinese telephone openings, Sun (2002) reported that the Chinese use conversation sequences according to relationships and contexts. In terms of callers' identification, the Chinese use a technique, called "invited guessing" (Sun's, 2002 term) and it is a means of strengthening "shared understanding, mutual trust, and the affect bond" (p.108). Sun (2004) in her study observed that analysis of phatic talk in telephone conversation, that is, presently being done based on English conversation norms is inadequate in terms of Chinese data that features both address and relation oriented themes. Sun also suggests that phatic expressions in Chinese telephone conversation openings convey a variety of meanings: defining relations, marking a specific sequence, conveying the purpose of calling, etc.

Taleghani-Nikazm (2002) in her comparative study of Iranian and German telephone conversation maintains that the Iranians in their telephone conversation openings extend their *howareyou* sequence beyond the interactants and use a set of *howareyou* sequence for enquiring the well-being of their respective families whereas the German use of the *howareyou* sequence is routinized. However, the Iranian living in Germany use the norms appropriate for Iranian culture when they converse with their German counterparts due to pragmatic transfer and it often results in misinterpretation and conversation breakdown. So the implication is that in acquiring one's native language one also acquires the norms of their native culture.

According to Hopper and Chen (1996) although the canonical opening sequences are supposed to function between intimate interactants, it is not always the case. Intimate interlocutors often bypass the identification-recognition sequence as they can recognize each other through vocal sounds. Again, Whalen and Zimmerman (1987) (cited in Hopper, 1992) notes that the openings between strangers are marked by reductions in the sequences of the canonical openings.

Methodology

In this project, using conversation analysis methodology, the author tries to identify the cultural dimensions in the format and interactional routines of telephone conversation in terms of wrong number telephone encounters in Bangladesh (Dhaka) speech community. The main focus of this study is the responses produced by the callee in the adjacency pair involving the request of the caller to speak to a person who is not a dweller of the residence in which the call has been made. The initiative is to illustrate how socio-linguistic and cultural issues contribute to the nature of response produced by the callee in such a situation.

Usually, in strangers' telephone openings the callers go straight into business after the summons-answer adjacency pair, reducing the greetings sequence (Hopper and Chen, 1996). So in this study, while planning the wrong number inquiry sequence, the author proffered the inquiry, *"Hello, Rafique Shaheb Kee Bashai Achen?"* for Bangla data straightway after the response of the callee to the summons. The caller, in all the cases, remains constant in the initial inquiry turn for controlling the elicitation from the callee. The calls were made using a recording device attached with the home telephone set. After the recording, the data were transcribed using a transcription convention (please see Appendix A) adapted from four different sources (DuBois, 1991; Jefferson, 1979; Schiffrin, 1987a; Sacks et al., 1974) (cited in Schiffrin, D., 1994), as the researcher, deemed them to be appropriate for this analysis. For all the Bangla data please look at Appendix B.

The author has shown the ring of the phone as a turn of the caller as the ring, as summons, has all the properties to be considered as a turn. In the Bangla data transcription each turn consists of three lines: the

top line is the original talk in Bangla, the transliteration of the Bangla language in English (done by the researcher) is shown in italics in the second line and the third line contains the English translation of the turn. However, in the top line, the English words used by the interlocutors have been kept intact to show the trend of convergence of Bangla Speech Community people to English language. Although a few of the prosodic features are shown in the transcription, most of them were not taken into consideration for this particular project.

Participants/Informants and sampling technique

This study used a group of people belonging to the Bangla Speech Community of Dhaka, Bangladesh (native speakers of Bangla language) as informants. The informants were chosen randomly from a pool of home phone numbers collected through personal contacts by the researcher. The researcher, who played the role of the caller in the conversations recorded, is also a native speaker of Bangla, that is, an insider of the same community. However, all the telephone conversations recorded are the proceedings of the calls made by the researcher as a complete stranger to the informants. The researcher had no idea about the social status of the informants, except for the fact that the Bangla data informants live in a monolingual and ethnic metropolitan city society.

Data collection

The study presented here used a data corpus of 20 audio-taped telephone conversations in Bangla language. The Bangla data are the recordings of Nation Wide Dialling (NWD) calls made by the researcher from Chittagong to Dhaka and the recordings have been done over the period of three days. At the beginning of the data collection procedure, the researcher collected home phone numbers by contacting his friends and relatives living in Dhaka. As the phone numbers cover a greater part of Dhaka city and as Dhaka is a metropolitan capital city where people from all regions of Bangladesh reside the data can be considered representative of the telephone conversations in Dhaka. The Bangla data were recorded using Bangladesh Telecommunications Company Limited (BTCL) service lines and the recording quality was not up to the mark. However, the researcher being a native speaker of Bangla could transcribe the data quite easily.

Data analysis

Before we enter into the analysis of the collected data, the author would like to inform the readers about the way the reference to the data in the appendix has been made. For example: the reference (04: 10) refers to data no. 04 and turn no. 10. It should also be mentioned that considering the length of this paper the excerpts of the data have not been provided in the data analysis section.

Analysis of Bangla data

The analysis of the Bangla data (of Dhaka) suggests three emerging patterns in the response of the callee in the "wrong number" adjacency pair. The first pattern is that, the callee, in most cases, comes up with a counter question like *"which number have you dialed*? or, *where have you phoned*?" (e.g. 07:06; 08: 06; 09:08 &10; 10:04; 17:08; 20:08) or, *"where are you calling from*? (e.g. 02:06; 12:06) or, *"whom do you want*?" (e.g 07:04) in response to the wrong number inquiry. This counter question reveals the callee's interest to know the identity of the caller. The second pattern is that sometimes the callee responds saying any of the different variants of the expression *"no one by that name lives here"* (e.g. 03:06; 14:06; 18:04; 19:06) with a view to bypass the wrong number inquiry sequence. The respondents often add a counter question as mentioned above in order to maintain the conversation. At other times, that is, the third pattern is that, the callee simply says "wrong number" (e.g. 04:06; 05:04; 11:06; 15:06) to avoid any further conversation.

The maintenance section of the Bangla data is marked by the negotiation of identity of the caller. This negotiation continues for quite a while as the callee tends to come back to the issue every time the caller avoids the negotiation and tries to concentrate on the person being looked for. For example: in data 12, the question "আপনি কোথা থেকে ফোন করেছেন?" i.e. *"where are you calling from?"* in turn 06 is repeated in turn 14, although in a different tone. Again in data 18, the same question is put first in turn 04 and repeated in turn 08 with a view to negotiate the identity of the caller. More interestingly, in data 19, in response to the callee's turn when the caller converges with the callee by thanking to terminate the conversation, the callee starts afresh with a question about the identity of the caller (e.g 19: 06-08).

In the closings of the Bangla data, except for (08:14) the callee neither reciprocates the greeting token nor shows any sign of convergence overtly. In most cases there is no proper closing sequence: sometimes the callee hangs up after the greeting token from the caller without saying anything (e.g. 02:9-10) or, sometimes the callee even terminates before the caller's greeting token (e.g. 04:06).

Some of the data reveal the callee's resentment towards the caller as is evident in the manner of placing the counter questions (e.g 9:10), voice quality (e.g. 9:12; 15:06), or hanging up without providing any response (e.g. 01: 10; 16:06). However, the callee in some data also shows politeness in phrasing the questions. For example: The word choice "ভাই" (brother) (e.g. 02:08; 12:14), "uncle" (e.g. 06:08), "please" (e.g 07:06), "আপনি" (honorific term for 'you' "তুমি") (e.g. 12:14; 14:06; 17:08), and the use of the Bangla affix "জি" (expressing agreement with someone honorable) (08:14; 11:06) etc. used as a "reactive token" to show convergence with what the counterpart says and at the same time to express the callee's politeness and sense of honour.

Another fact that the readers might find interesting is that on two occasions in the Bangla data a second callee intervened in the conversation replacing the first callee (e.g. 02:06 & 07:12). The intervention of the second callee however does not influence the flow of the conversation, other than the repetition of the wrong number sequence. But such interventions certainly culturally loaded information.

Discussion

In canonical sequences for North American English or, other Englishes the answer to the summons is invariably "Hello" with a rising intonation. But in Bangla data "Hello" is often accompanied by a phatic utterance "স্লামকুম" (Slamkum) a colloquial utterance for the Arabic greeting expression "আস্সালামু আলাইকুম" (Assalamu Alaikum) meaning "peace be on you" (e.g. 01:02, 02:02, 07:02, 08:02, 11:02, 12:02, 16:02, 18:02, 20:02). However, whether this expression is always a greeting or not is not clear from the intonation in the Bangla data. Sometimes it sounds like a greeting, but at other times it does not sound so. As a member of mainstream Bangla speech community, the researcher's emic view about this expression is that it denotes (and/or

connote) both – a greeting and a routine response as an integral part of the answer to the summons of the caller. Probably we need to delve deep into the speech community and gather more data to understand its significance. Again, the Bangla data does not provide any evidence of uttering the identity of the callee in the summons-answer sequence like those of French, Dutch, or Swedes mentioned in the literature.

In the wrong number inquiry sequence, there are a number of instances of counter questions in the Bangla data (e.g. 02:04, 06:04, 07:04, 08:06, 09:08, 10:04, etc.). The maintenance section consists mainly of the negotiation of the identity of the caller (e.g. 02:04-06, 03:10) and thus may be considered as extension of the wrong number inquiry sequence (e.g. 05:12, 13:06). In the closing section, the Bangla data hardly show any convergence between the caller and the callee and the conversation ends, in most cases, rather abruptly.

If we look into the details of the Bangla data, the interlocutors, especially the callee, show a tendency of getting back to Schegloff's (1986) second canonical sequence identification-recognition, as evidenced in the negotiation of the identity of the caller mentioned above, which has been replaced by the wrong number adjacency pair as a deliberate plan of the caller.

One of the difficulties in conducting this research was recording the NWD calls. As the telephone network of BTCL is not modern enough the channel of communication was interrupted by technical difficulties. Sometimes the dialogues echoed, utterances got broken and often there were ups and downs in voice quality. There are the reasons why the researcher decided not to concentrate on the prosodic features elaborately. If the prosodic features could have been captured well it could have enhanced the overall analysis of the data. So this is a limitation of the study. Another limitation is the small sample size. In future another study by collecting more data needs to be done for gaining better insight and to achieve generalizability of the answers to the research questions discussed above.

Research findings (perspectives on Bangla telephone conversation)

Although Bangladesh is a traditional and conservative ethnic society; it is not free from the wave of global change. English as a world language is imprinting an enormous influence on Bangla Speech Community

society and it is reflected in all modes of conversation too. In terms of telephone conversation, the readers must have noticed by this time that there is a tendency of using, rather inserting English words and expressions into the Bangla sentences. For example, the expression "wrong number" in Bangla is "ভুল নম্বর" which is also used in BTCL recorded messages; but other than only one instance in Bangla data (e.g. 13:04) in all the cases the Bangla Speech Community informants have used the English Term. Again, while responding to the counter question "কত নাম্বারে ফোন করেছেন আপনি?" (i.e. *Which number have you dialed*?) the caller (in this case, the researcher who belongs to Bangla speech community) utters the phone numbers in English throughout all the conversations (e.g. 03:13, 06:07, 07:07, 08:07, 09:11, 10:05; 12:07; 14:07; 17:09; 18:05;), even though Bangla language has a separate and well established numerical system. The reader would agree that we also notice the same in other instances of Bangla telephone conversation.

The relentless effort of Bangla Speech Community participants in negotiating the identity of the caller is not only an indication of conformity to Schegloff's (1986) canonical sequence but it has a deep rooted cultural dimension also and the researcher's emic perspective in Bangla Speech Community society and culture testifies to this fact. The callee in Bangla culture is not willing to provide any information to a stranger as wrong number calls are frequent in Bangladesh and it always bears a negative connotation in the sense that the wrong number caller could turn out to be a dangerous person. Thus the abundance of counter questions in the Bangla data, as discussed above, is due to the belief (of the Bangla Speech Community people and society) that the caller has not just called the wrong number mistakenly rather there may be an ill motive behind the call. Considering the wrong number call as a potential threat or danger the callee, has often chosen not to talk beyond the summons-answer adjacency pair (e.g. 01:10; 16:06).

At the same time the negotiation of identity in Bangladesh telephone conversation also resembles the Chinese "invited guessing" (Sun, 2002) in the fact that, neither the caller nor the callee is willing to spell out their identities overwhelmingly. Only in two cases in the Bangla Data some indirect information about the identity of the callee has been provided: on one occasion identity of the owner of the telephone and

the household who happens to be a male was provided by the female answering the call (e.g. 10:06); and in another, only the location of the household (e.g. 07:10).

On the other hand, the analysis of the Bangla data does not suggests explicitly whether the interlocutors are much aware of the Face Threatening Acts (FTA) as posited by Brown and Levinson (1987) or not. As Brown and Levinson (1987) in their politeness theory posited that FTA is an act that challenges the face wants (self-image) of the interlocutors and these (FTAs) may threaten the speaker's or the hearer's face. As the data reveals, in answering the wrong number calls the callee chooses, in most cases, does not seem to consider this fact. However, there are traces of performing the FTA with mitigation where the callee uses some expressions that shows politeness, as discussed in the analysis above (see e.g. 02:08; 06:08, 07:06, 08:14, 11:06, 12:14, 14:06, 17:08, etc.). Again, the Bangla data does not clearly indicate the interlocutors' conformity to Grice's (1975) cooperative principles, especially in terms of the maxims of Quantity and Manner. Most of the conversations in the data are fairly long and the participants often go beyond the topic in question, as has been discussed in the analysis section. If the cooperative principles were maintained, according to the canonical sequence, the wrong number enquiry would almost resemble the switch-board responses.

So the analysis of Bangla data suggests that telephone etiquette and the use of Bangla language in telephonic conversation in Bangladesh is not fixed, rather the norms and practices of telephone conversation is in the formative stage; because telephonic conversation although used widely now-a-days is a comparatively new mode of communication for Bangladesh speech community. And it would not be any earlier than two decades that Bangladesh people started using telephones widely. Thus the naturally occurring telephone conversations in the Bangla data reveal the socio-cultural instability, especially in terms of the mode of conversation; it also reveals the ongoing tension between maintaining the traditional culture and the emerging realities.

Conclusion

The very nature of telephone calls involves two persons in a conversation. It is equally true for both the calls from intimates and those from complete strangers. Whoever the caller may be, or

whatever the reason behind the call, the ringing of the phone summons the callee to respond to the call and as soon as the callee picks up the receiver and utters *"hello?"* with a rising tone, an unnamed bond is created between the caller and the callee and both the parties are engaged in a speech act. Wrong number telephone calls are no exceptions. So the things that we learnt from this particular project is that "telephone openings, *whether from intimates or from strangers*, are interactionally compact" (Schegloff, 1986; p. 112; italics is the emphasis shown by the researcher): the participants often utilize conversational strategies or conversation routines to negotiate interpersonal relationships (Gumperz, 1982) and these are true for Bangla data as well. Thus, the study of the telephone conversation analysis certainly helped us to understand, to a certain extent, the interactional patterns and socio cultural norms of conversational behavior of Bangla Speech Community (in this study, of Dhaka, Bangladesh).

In addition, as the data in this project suggests, telephone conversation analysis may also have important implications for second language teaching and learning in general and in Bangladesh context in particular as English language is imprinting huge impact in the socio-cultural activities of Bangladesh speech community. So, while learning and teaching a second language, the norms, pragmatics and socio-cultural realities surrounding that language need to be learnt and taught too. Because, according to Austin (1962) (cited in Cameron, 2001) when the answerer says *"wrong number"* "আপনি ভুল নাম্বারে ডায়াল করেছেন" or *"you got the wrong number"* it has a perlocutionary force on the hearer – i.e. the force of request that the answerer can't help the caller in finding the person the caller is looking for, or the answerer does not know that person. Again, when the answerer says "sorry" it is doubtful whether he/she is sincerely sorry or not; or, the callee's hanging up after the greeting token from the caller does not always indicate that the callee is being impolite; although "greeting reciprocity ratifies a state of mutual participation" (Goffman, 1963; p. 100).

To the best of the knowledge of the researcher, no attempt has so far been made to analyze Bangla telephone conversation. So the researcher, believes that this study and the analysis of Bangla data, although they are rudimentary in nature (like baby-steps), may pave the way to future investigations into the interaction pattern in general

and telephone conversation norms of Bangla Speech Community speech community in particular.

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