

Introduction

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The articles included in this special issue originated in a symposium on “Calling for Help” organized for the 9th International Pragmatics Association conference at Riva del Garda, Italy, July 2005. The focus of all of them is on the talk that occurs on a range of telephone helplines. Each article has a specific relevance to its particular helpline setting but also to helplines in general (Baker, Emmison, & Firth, 2005) and to the broader realms of institutional forms of talk, social interaction, and the requesting and provision of help or services of any kind. People may request and receive help in any domain of mundane interaction, and there is a range of institutional settings where help may be provided in person (in counseling, medical settings, help desks, etc.) rather than as here, over the telephone.

Many of the themes explored in these articles are of a generic kind (conditions for asking for help, reasons for making a call, states of shared knowledge and experience between participants, etc.) but in each case realized specifically with regard to each setting and to each caller’s particular business. Help calls are characterized by a generically relevant but always locally instantiated asymmetry and institutionality, while at the same time, the actions and interactions taking place are (necessarily and demonstra-

bly) grounded in members' general purpose, mundane, conversational competence. It is essentially that competence that callers and call takers bring to bear in carrying out their various and specific business.

Applications of conversation analysis (CA) to an increasingly broad range of institutional settings (Drew & Heritage, 1992b) embody the basic requirement of showing how institutionality, as with "context" generally, is a produced and oriented-to feature of participants' practices. One major feature of institutionality, in this regard, is its *goal orientedness* (Drew & Heritage, 1992a), which, in the case of helplines, includes the kind of help the service offers as instantiated in the caller's and call taker's orientations, descriptions, misunderstandings and repairs, enquiries, negotiations, proposed actions, and so forth. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, there are variations across settings, participants, and reported problems in just how clearly and reciprocally understood those goals and possible actions might be at the outset. Similarly, helplines of different kinds each entail a "special character of inference" (Drew & Heritage, 1992a, p. 24) in which one finds call takers, for example, displaying appropriately relevant kinds of "concern," "interest," "neutrality," and so forth with regard to a caller's reported problems. These "special character" features tend to be a constrained subrange of, or adaptation of, the options available in mundane social interaction (Schegloff, 1992; for a discussion with specific relevance to helplines, see Torode, 2005). It should be emphasized in this regard that helpline interactions are themselves not all of a kind but represent a range of goals and purposes even within the broader but still generally specifiable character of telephone interaction (Hopper, 1993).

CA has a long-standing interest in calls for help and in what are now called *helplines* (the term *warmlines* also applies to counseling services and the like; Pudlinski, 2005). Sacks's early work focused on telephone calls by potentially suicidal people to a psychiatric service; Sacks's 1966 thesis, *The Search for Help: No One to Turn to* (see also Sacks, 1967) examined callers' uses of social membership categories in providing a rational account for possibly killing themselves and/or of having to resort to seeking help from strangers on a phone line. Calling for help is an accountable matter, and so is providing it. It requires "good reasons" for asking and various ways of building seriousness, factual grounds, appropriateness to the service on offer, and legitimacy as a problem or complaint (cf. Leppänen, 2005). Further work in CA by Don Zimmerman, Jack and Marilyn Whalen, and others has mostly focused on 9-1-1 calls to emergency services (e.g., J. Whalen, 1995; J. Whalen & Zimmerman, 1998; M. R.

Whalen & Zimmerman, 1987, 1990; Zimmerman, 1992; see also Frankel, 1989) in which the analytic interest has been extended to various epistemic grounds for calls (callers' membership category entitlements, experiential witnessing, etc.), the organization of emergency dispatch during the call, and the call's interactional organization with regard to accomplishing that (see also Raymond & Zimmerman, this issue).

There has been a burgeoning growth in the world at large in the prevalence and provision of helplines, help desks, and call centers (Baker, Emmison, & Firth, 2001; Baker et al., 2005; Torode, 1995) ranging from medical and counseling services to technical helplines, self-help organizations, child abuse reporting, the Samaritans in the United Kingdom (akin to Sacks's [1966] LA suicide prevention center), mediation centers, legal helplines, financial services, and travel inquiries—indeed all manner of ways of using telephone helplines as an interactional medium for how people live their lives (Hutchby, 2001). A small part of that variety is sampled in the articles published here.

Each of the articles included in this special issue explores help calls of one kind or another in terms of a generic feature of interaction (reasons for the call, the need for professional help, both parties' prior knowledge of matters reported, etc.) with regard to its local realization in the specific setting. For example, Emmison and Danby examine calls to a "kids' helpline" focusing on accounts for calling or reasons for the call, which are a generic feature of calls of any kind (Schegloff, 1986). Emmison and Danby focus on the local adaptation of *reasons for calling* to the norms of their specific interactional setting with its policy of "we listen, we care" rather than "solving problems" as such. They propose (for their corpus) separating the trouble account from the *reason for calling now*. This may reflect the presentation of troubles of a long-term nature. There is a difference between calls seeking help with long-term problems (e.g., neighbor disputes; Edwards & Stokoe, this issue) in which a problem's extended and recurrent nature is an attended-to feature of making it relevant and serious enough to warrant professional help, and on the other hand, emergency calls in which *help now* is, generally, the point of the call. In emergency calls, problem descriptions (occurring initially as *reasons for calling*) typically attend to urgency and immediacy. Similarly, the timing of help provision (dispatch) is a business whose urgency is shared by both parties to the call, although not always visibly to both (J. Whalen, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 1988). The seriousness and urgency of a problem and its solution are matters managed in situ, on and for each occasion, by both parties to the call.

With regard to the actual interactional business transacted on helplines, *help* is only a general gloss on those activities, although it is often a participants' gloss on what is being offered ("How can I help you?") and asked for ("I wonder if you can help me"). It remains for analysis to show, in each case and in each setting, just what is being requested and provided. Callers may resist the notion that *help* is what they need. For example, te Molder (2005) showed how callers to a counseling service may present themselves as merely looking for "someone to talk to," although just such a service might itself, of course, be glossed as help of a kind. Call takers may also display a disinclination to offer help as such (Emmison & Danby, this issue; see also Danby, Baker, & Emmison, 2005, and Edwards & Stokoe, this issue, on normative orientations to self-help). Clearly, *reason for calling* is an important locus for aligning callers' purposes with those of the service on offer as well as for callers to provide initial formulations of their problems (Zimmerman, 1992; cf. Tracy, 1997, on interactions involving a mismatch between how callers and call takers may be "framing" the nature and purpose of the service; J. Whalen et al., 1988, on differences in "agenda" between emergency callers and call takers; and Frankel, 1989, on mismatches between call takers and callers to a poison control center in the amount and kind of information required prior to the provision of potentially urgent advice).

The work done in providing a *reason for calling* also varies in the case of repeat calls by the same caller (Shaw & Kitzinger, this issue) in which the status of prior calls, for what is known and remembered from them, feature in how problems, ongoing advice, and the relationship between caller and called are topicalized and handled. Other variations in *reason for calling* occur with callbacks and follow-up calls made by the service itself or, indeed, first calls by the service to persons to whom they have been referred by other agencies, all of which are frequent call types in the neighbor mediation corpus used in the article by Edwards and Stokoe. As the provision of telephone helplines extends to virtually all aspects of life (Firth, Emmison, & Baker, 2005), some kinds of help, such as the emergency services, are inevitably more familiar and better understood in advance of the call and at its opening than others such as neighbor dispute mediation or a child abuse helpline. In the latter cases, the nature of the service on offer and the appropriateness to that service of the caller's problems may require more elaborate or subtle negotiation (e.g., Potter & Hepburn, 2003). Relevantly, however, Raymond and Zimmerman note the special and extended nature of 9-1-1 calls that seek advice or information rather than report an emergency.

Another theme cutting across several of the articles is what might be characterized as psychological matters: in particular, what participants remember and display of that remembering of previous calls (Shaw & Kitzinger, this issue); how emotional distress and empathy are displayed and work interactionally (Hepburn & Potter, this issue; cf. Potter & Hepburn, 2003); and how participants' differential and intersecting states of knowledge and suppositions about that intersubjectivity provide for differences through time in the successive, independent reporting of a publicly witnessed event (Raymond & Zimmerman, this issue). In each article, the approach taken is to explore such matters in terms of their production, orientation, and interactional antecedents and consequences (cf. Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 2005). The public display and management, within talk-in-interaction, of participants' epistemic, emotional, and intentional states generally are an increasingly central analytic concern across a broad range of studies of talk-in-interaction (e.g., Edwards, 2006, 2007; Goodwin & Goodwin, 2000; Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Potter & Hepburn, 2003; te Molder & Potter, 2005; J. Whalen & Zimmerman, 1998; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006).

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