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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study designed to investigate the kinds of responses people produce during wrong-number telephone calls and to discover the rules that appear to govern the choices of the responses and their relationships. Fifty-seven calls were placed at different times during the day over a period of several weeks. The sentences used to elicit responses and the number of utterances per call were noted. All utterances were judged to be grammatical, for the most part elliptical constructions or abridged sentences. In all of the calls, the person called spoke first. In terms of the rules governing responses and relationships, the telephone appears to work as a control over those using it. Upon a summons, one must pick up the phone and speak. The answerer pauses to allow the caller to provide the topic, and alternative question-answer pairs follow. The person called does not inquire the caller's name or his reasons for calling, and his answers do not digress from the topic. Brevity, relevance, politeness, and clarity prevail, and in the case that politeness and clarity conflict, the latter takes precedence. (CLK)

# A STUDY OF RESPONSES TO WRONG-NUMBER TELEPHONE CALLS

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the kinds of responses people produce during wrong-number telephone calls and to discover the rules that appear to govern the choices of the responses and their relationships.

The writer placed fifty-seven telephone calls: nineteen between eight and nine o'clock in the morning, twenty-eight about twelve noon and ten calls about midnight; the total number being completed over a period of several weeks. The responses were not taped, but were transcribed immediately after each call was completed.

The following sentences were used to elicit responses:

1. Is this the John Birch Society office?
2. Is this the Republican Party Headquarters?
3. Hello, is this _____(number)?
4. Is this the Kit Kat Theater?
5. Hello, may I speak with the manager, please?
6. Hello, may I speak with Margaret Burgess, please?
7. Hello, May I speak with Frankie Zapetto, please?
8. Hello, Margaret? (to females)
   Hello, Frankie? (to males)
9. Hello, I would like to speak to Jerome, please.

Forty females, sixteen males and one child (caller's judgment) responded. In thirty-one calls, the caller, at some point in the interchange, used the expression "wrong number." In two instances, the answerer "thought" the caller had the wrong number. In seven cases, the caller was told she "must" have it. And in eleven instances, the answerers responded that "they were sorry" that the caller had reached the wrong number. Five persons asked what number was being called, and four volunteered their numbers. One answerer volunteered the family name in response to the greeting "Hello, Margaret?" The following response revealed the answerer's ability to pull the caller's teeth.

I. A: _____(company name) (male)
   B: Is this the Kit Kat Theater?
   A: No, it's not a theater. I can pull your teeth. (laugh)
   B: I'm sorry...(interrupted)
   A: That's all I can do. (laugh)
   B: I'm sorry, thank you.
   A: Bye, bye.

In a total of thirty-one persons responding to an "Is this...?" question, one half seemed to regard the answer "No" or "No, it isn't," without further comment, to be sufficient.

In response to the caller's apologies for the interruption, thirteen persons responded with "OK" while the others replied with various expressions of pardon or acknowledgment such as:

| | |
|---|---|
| That's all right. | Certainly! |
| You're (very) welcome. | That's OK. |
| You bet. | |

No person exhibited any noticeable anger or displeasure through the intonation of the voice. Two of the ten persons called at midnight volunteered information, and eight out of ten directly accepted the caller's apologies. With the exception of Example 1, all calls were an orderly sequence of utterances from a marked beginning to a marked closing.

The briefest responses (both in number of utterances and number of words) were elicited by Sentence 3, "Hello, is this _____(number)?"

II.
A: Hello (female)
B: Hello, is this ____?
A: No, _____(her number).
B: Oh, I'm sorry. Thank you.
A: You bet.

III.
A: Hello (male)
B: Hello, is this _____?
A: No, it isn't.
B: Oh, I'm sorry.
A: OK.

Sentence 4, "Is this the Kit Kat Theater?" evoked humorous responses and laughter. Most persons responding to this question seemed to have difficulty understanding it. For eleven out of eighteen persons, either the entire question or the noun phrase was repeated. In contrast, nine in ten persons responded quickly and without hesitation to Sentence 1. "Is this the John Birch Society office?" and Sentence 2, "Is this Republican Party Headquarters?"

IV.
A: ____(company name) (male)
B: Is this the Kit Kat Theater?
A: Who?
B: The Kit Kat Theater
A: (laugh) I'm sorry, you have the wrong number.
B: I'm sorry. Thank you very much.
A: You're very welcome.

V.
A: Hello (female)
B: Is this the John Birch Society office?
A: No, you have the wrong number.
B: I'm sorry. Thank you.
A: Bye.

In response to Sentence 6, "Hello, may I speak with Margaret Burgess, please?," all the persons called (four females and one male) responded that "they" were sorry the called had reached the wrong number. Moreover, the name "Margaret Burgess" seemed to be unclear to only two out of five persons called, whereas the name "Frankie Zapetto" in Sentence 7 appeared to confuse four out of five persons. The same difficulty appeared to occur with Sentence 9, "Hello, I would like to speak to Jerome, please." In seven out of ten instances, the callees responded with a questioning "Who?," one female with the expression "With whom?"

VI.
A: Hello (male)
B: May I speak with Frankie Zapetto, please?
A: Who?
B: Frankie Zapetto.
A: You've got the wrong number, my friend.
B: I'm sorry. Thank you very much.

VII.
A: Hello (female)
B: Hello, I would like to speak to Jerome, please.
A: With whom?
B: Jerome.
A: You must be calling the wrong number. There's no Jerome here.
B: Oh, I'm sorry. Thank you.
A: You're welcome.

The length of the calls ranged from a minimum of five utterances to a maximum of eleven, an utterance being one response of caller or called. (The summons of the telephone ring is also considered an utterance.) The longest utterance group was completed with a male respondant.

| Number of Calls | Number of Utterances |
|---|---|
| 19 | 6 |
| 16 | 8 |
| 12 | 7 |
| 7 | 5 |
| 1 | 9 |
| 1 | 10 |
| 1 | 11 |

With one exception, all the utterances produced by the callees were judged to be grammatical constructions, a large percentage of them consisting of elliptical constructions or abridged sentences.

In 100% of the calls, the person called spoke first. In 100% of the calls placed to private residences, the persons answering responded with the single word "hello." In terminating the calls, thirty five of the fifty-seven persons called produced the last utterance.

| Number of Persons | Sex | Terminating Response |
|---|---|---|
| 9 | 6 females, 4 males | Uh huh. |
| 8 | 6 females, 4 males | OK. |
| 4 | 4 females | You're welcome. |
| 2 | 2 females | That's OK. |
| 2 | 2 females | That's all right. |
| 1 | 1 female | That's all right, bye. |
| 1 | 1 female | That's all right, bye, bye. |
| 1 | 1 child | OK, bye. |
| 1 | 1 female | Bye. |
| 1 | 1 male | Bye, bye. |
| 1 | 1 female | Certainly |
| 1 | 1 female | You bet. |
| 1 | 1 male | You're very welcome. |

Rules Governing Responses and Relationships

According to Marshall McLuhan in Understanding Media, the telephone demands complete participation. He offers the following illustration:

> An extraordinary instance of the power of the telephone to involve the whole person is recorded by psychiatrists who report that neurotic children lose all neurotic symptoms when telephoning. The New York Times of September 7, 1949, printed an item that provided bizarre testimony to the cooling participational character of the telephone:
>
> > On September 6, 1949, a psychotic veteran, Howard B. Unruh, in a mad rampage on the streets of Camden New Jersey, killed thirteen people and then returned home. Emergency crews, bringing up machine guns, shotguns and tear gas bombs, opened fire. At this point an editor on the Camden Evening Courier looked up Unruh's name in the telephone directory and called him. Unruh stopped firing and answered, "Hello."
> > "This Howard?"
> > "Yes..."
> > "Why are you killing people?"
> > "I don't know. I can't answer that yet. I'll have to talk to you later. I'm too busy now."

The above examples suggest that the telephone appears to work a particular control over those who use it. The first rule is that when the telephone summons its keeper, he must pick it up and speak into it. Both the mechanism, the educational system, and Emily Post seem to have conditioned the keepers of telephones across America to believe that the "correct way to answer a house telephone" is "hello." More bluntly, Amy Vanderbilt directed: "When the phone rings, pick it up and say hello." In the study, forty-five persons responded with "hello." (For the appropriateness of an "etiquette" book as a reference, see Erving Goffman, Behavior in Public Places.)

Beginning with the answerer's hello, Schegloff's "distribution rule" controlled the conversations. In all of the calls, the answerer paused to allow the caller to provide the first topic of conversation. From that point, with only one exception, the answerer and the caller alternated in question/answer pairs to clarify the caller's topic, or in cases where understanding was immediate, they completed the conversation with an apology/acceptance utterance pair.

In nineteen instances, the "click" of the receiver being placed in the cradle was the reply to the caller's apology. There was nothing more for the caller and the answerer to discuss. The transaction was complete--the summons was clarified; all questions were answered. In most cases, the caller's need to apologize was satisfied; in thirty-five out of fifty-seven calls, the

answerer acknowledged the apology and closed the conversation. (According to Nancy Loughridge, author of Dictionary of Etiquette: "All phone conversations end with 'Good-bye.' Only a servant or a switchboard operator would end a conversation with 'thank you.'")

Both a distribution rule to give order to the dialogue and the auditory clues were necessary for achieving satisfactory communication in a situation devoid of visual clues. In addition, a third control seemed to be the rules that Robin Lakoff describes in "The Logic of Politeness; or Minding Your P's and Q's." The persons called did not inquire of the caller's name nor her reasons for calling, suggesting that the caller's status as "unknown person" precluded such inquiries. With the exception of Example I, the answers did not digress from the topic nor did they interrupt the sequence of the dialogue, and, without exception, they answered the questions of the caller.

It might appear that courtesy was violated when some answerers laughed after the "Kit Kat Theater" question. The laughter was not interpreted by the caller as being directed to her personally. Rather the connotations of the title "Kit Kat Theater" would seem to have been cause for amusement. In most instances, even with the laughter, the answerer accepted the apologies of the caller and acknowledged the thanks, raising the intruder/caller from a mere intruder/stranger status. This was also particularly evident in the midnight calls for Sentence 8 and the responses to Sentence 6.

Lakoff also talked about the speaker's attitude toward the social context--specifically his assumptions about the people talking, their feelings about him, the significance of the situation and the information, the rank relationship, and the status the speaker wants. In these responses, the question may be one of "Did it really matter?" Were convention and routine governing the patterns? The investigator was polite to the answerer, and when the answerers discovered the call was "misdirected," they had essentially two choices--to be rude or to be polite. They chose to be polite. The rule for the social context--here the wrong-number telephone call--would seem to call for politeness. Another rule that no doubt may be operating, and which may be telephone-specific because there are no visual "markers" for the participants, is that intonation influences response. Polite questions evoke polite answers.

Rules that Lakoff calls "rules of pragmatic competence"--be clear and be polite--were also operating in another manner. The rule of clarity was particularly evident in the instances where (as in Sentences 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8) the initial utterance of the caller was not clear: "who" and "what" were not only responses, but also requests for clarity. Furthermore, this rule may explain the use of the brief "no" as a simple response in the interest of clarity. The clarity rule seemed to dominate internally, apparently taking precedence over politeness, whereas the politeness rule seemed to dominate at openings and closings. (An exception may be the expression "I think you have the wrong number," illustrating a rule that one "suggests" an error has been made, rather than telling a person he is wrong.)

The calls seemed to evoke similar sequences of responses and similar lexical choices with few deviations. Each call was a miniature formal conversation. Brevity, relevance, politeness and clarity prevailed, and when politeness and clarity conflicted, clarity appeared to assume precedence.

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