FIRST OR SECOND: ESTABLISHING SEQUENTIAL ROLES IN RADIO PHONE-IN PROGRAMMES THROUGH PROSODY

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ABSTRACT

Telephone opening sequences in radio phone-in programmes broadly display two structures. In some cases, radio hosts’ introductory turns, in which callers are announced and selected as next speaker, are followed by noticeable silences; in other cases, transitions are accomplished without pausing. An analysis of five corpora of radio phone-in programmes reveals that in almost all instances of pausing the caller’s first turn is designed as initiating a new sequence. In instances without a noticeable pause the caller’s first turn is designed and treated by both participants as a reply to the host’s introductory turn. An investigation of opening sequences which follow this pattern, and of deviant cases shows that the sequential roles of FIRST or SECOND are achieved primarily through participants’ orientation to each other’s prosody. Turns that are designed and treated as SECONDS display prosodic backward orientation to previous speakers’ turns. Turns designed as FIRSTS contain little or no prosodic link to prior turns. This means that even turns which could be interpreted as SECONDS on verbal and action-related grounds – such as a greeting token from the caller following a greeting token by the host – are not treated as such if they do not contain prosodic orientation. These findings show that in the

An extended version of this paper can be found in Szczepek Reed (2009).

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context of this corpus prosody is the defining factor for establishing the sequential status of turns. Callers’ first turns are not defined by their temporal position as first turns, but by their being positioned in the local interactional context as FIRSTS or SECONDS.

1. INTRODUCTION

In most two-party telephone conversations the roles of caller and called are given, which allows for the respective sequential pair parts of first and second to be distributed without negotiation. The caller has initiated the interaction, which makes their first action – the dialling of the number and resulting ringing of the telephone – the summons, and thus the initial first pair part, or first (Schegloff, 1986). Answering the telephone is responsive to the ring-tone, and therefore constitutes a second pair part, or second. Similarly, the adjacency pairs typically following this initial activity pair, such as greetings and howareyou-s, display clearly recognizable distribution of the sequential pair parts as firsts or seconds. Other conversational environments are less conducive to such clear sequential distribution of turns, and here sequential pair parts have to be designed unmistakably as such by their speakers, and recognized as such by their recipients, for adjacency pairs to be accomplished successfully. One such environment is that of opening sequences in radio phone-in programmes. Opening sequences on the radio are more varied in form than non-broadcast calls, as the primary activities such as summons/answer and self- and other-identification are initially accomplished between the caller and studio personnel off the air, previous to the encounter between caller and radio presenter. This allows the radio host, who always initiates the interaction with the caller, a small choice of first conversational activities, while certain obligatory activity constraints, such as initiation of contact, caller-identification (ten Have, 1999) and selection of caller as next speaker, still hold. Radio presenters typically have their own individual formats for initiating interactions with callers, from a potential routine including caller name and residence identification, selection of caller as next speaker (you’re on), radio station identification, host self-identification, greeting, how-are-you and thank-you-for-the-call; to caller name and residence, only. As in non-broadcast telephone conversations, all routines consist of a number of building blocks, most of which can be interlocked, or missed out completely (Schegloff, 1986: 131).

While one may assume that the role of the host’s turn as initiating the interaction and selecting the next speaker determines its sequential status as a first, the data below show that in spite of these overriding conversational activities the local sequential status of the host’s turn as first or second is negotiable. In this negotiation participants’ use of prosody, and their exploitation of the interactional significance attached to displaying awareness of each other’s prosodic patterns, play a crucial role.

Before reporting on our investigation of these issues we provide a brief introduction to our methodology and data corpus, and previous work on the role of prosody for sequence organization.