Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

OPENINGS AND CLOSINGS OF TELEPHONE ENQUIRIES ON HOTEL ACCOMODATION

NGU SHING YIING
(12508)

Bachelor of Education with Honours (TESL)
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

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by

NGU SHING YIING
(12508)

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ABSTRACT

OPENINGS AND CLOSINGS OF TELEPHONE ENQUIRIES ON HOTEL ACCOMODATION

Ngu Shing Yiing

The aim of the study is to examine the openings and closings of telephone enquiries on hotel accommodation in Kuching city. The objectives of the study were: (i) to examine the structure of the opening and closing of telephone enquiries on hotel accommodation; (ii) to examine language features characterizing openings and closings of hotel enquiries. Telephone conversations between the receptionists of 37 hotels in Kuching and the researcher had been audio-recorded by using MP4. For the analysis of openings, Pallotti and Varcasia's (2006) framework for analyzing opening sequence is *greeting + identification + availability*. As for closing, Colonel-Molina's (1998) framework for analysis is *preclosing + new topic initiation + recapitulation + leave taking*. The findings revealed that the most common opening sequences are *greeting* (n=10); *greeting + identification* (n=10) shared by medium class hotels and budget hotels. Opening sequence of *greeting + identification + availability* occurs in hotels with high rating (n=2). There are more openings for hotels with high rating in a conversation rather than medium class hotels and budget hotels because one receptionist switches the customer to other receptionists. The most common closing sequences are *preclosing + leave taking* shared by hotels with different rating (n=33). The structure of opening sequence is more standardized than the closing sequence. Hotels with high rating used more formal language features or phrases such as "Thank you for calling" and "May I help you?". However, the receptionists from budget hotels use not very formal language such as "hello" and "XXX" (hotel name) to greet the customers. As for closing, language features used are similar among hotels such as "Ok", "Welcome", "Thank you" and "Bye bye". However, some receptionists from budget hotels use language features such as "ah" or "mmh" to close the conversation. The data for the study can be used as authentic material for English for Professional Purposes in future.

ABSTRAK

**PERMULAAN DAN PENUTUP DALAM PERTANYAAN TELEFON
TENTANG PENGINAPAN DI HOTEL**

Ngu Shing Yiing

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menyelidik permulaan dan penutup dalam pertanyaan telefon tentang penginapan di hotel di Bandaraya Kuching. Objektif-objektif dalam kajian ini adalah: (i) untuk menyelidik struktur dalam permulaan dan penutup untuk pertanyaan telefon tentang penginapan di hotel; (ii) untuk menyelidik ciri-ciri bahasa yang mewatakkan permulaan dan penutup untuk pertanyaan hotel. Dialog-dialog telefon antara penyambut-penyambut tetamu dari 37 hotel-hotel di Kuching dengan penyelidik telah direkod dengan menggunakan MP4. Untuk menganalisis permulaan, bingkai kerja daripada Palloti dan Varcasia (2006) yang telah digunakan dalam kajian in ialah sapaan + pengenalpastian + ketersediaani. Bagi penutup, bingkai kerja daripada Colonel-Molina (1998) yang telah digunakan dalma kajian ini ialah prapenutup + topik baru permulaan + rekapitulasi + perpisahan. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan urutan permulaan yang paling kerap ialah sapaan (n=10); sapaan + pengenalpastian (n=10) yang dikongsi oleh hotel-hotel yang bertaraf sederhana dan bajet hotel-hotel. Urutan permulaan untuk sapaan + pengenalpastian + ketersediaan berlaku di hotel yang bertaraf tinggi. Hotel yang bertaraf tinggi mempunyai lebih banyak permulaan dalam satu perbualan daripada hotel yang bertaraf serderhana dan bajet hotel kerana seorang penyambut tetamu akan diganti dengan penyambut-penyambut tetamu yang lain. Urutan penutup yang paling kerap ialah prapenutup + perpisahan yang dikongsi oleh hotel-hotel yang bertaraf berbeza. Hotel yang bertaraf tinggi menggunakan ciri-ciri bahasa yang lebih formal atau frase seperti "Terima kasih kerana memanggil" dan "Bolehkah saya membantu kamu?". Tetapi, penyambut tetamu dari bajet hotel menggunakan bahasa yang tidak formal seperti "hello" dan "XXX" (nama hotel) untuk menyapa tetamu. Bagi penutup, ciri-ciri bahasa yang digunakan adalah sama antara hotel-hotel seperti "Ok", "Sama-sama", "Terima kasih" dan "Bye bye". Tetapi, sebilangan penyambut tetamu dari bajet hotel menggunakan ciri-ciri bahasa seperti "ah" dan "mmh" untuk menutup perbualan. Data untuk kajian ini boleh digunakan sebagai bahan pengajaran untuk EPP pada masa hadapan.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A	Availability
CA	Conversation Analysis
EPP	English for Specific Purposes
ESL	English as a second language
G	Greeting
I	Identification
NNS	Non native speaker
NS	Native speaker

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the background of the research. It goes on to explain research problem, aims of the study, operational definitions of terms, significance of the study and scope of the study.

1.1 Background of the research

Language is important in our lives whether it is in written form or in spoken form. Language is used for doing many things. There are three functions of language which are primarily for action, information and entertainment (Halliday, 1994). In a workplace, a lot of communication takes place which is in the form of different modes such as email, telephone, fax, letters, memo, and notice board, but the most popular means is the telephone. It is the best and most accessible public relations instrument we have in business (Miculka, 1993). It is used because we can get instant response or reply, and it is speedy and direct, and it is also the fastest way to get information clearly and it can be a shortcut to securing information, setting up appointments, checking on potential problems or solutions, or maintaining goodwill with business associates (Miculka, 1993). Telephone is becoming the primary tool for industrial communication (Comstock, 1990). It is commonly used for achieving some business purposes. We may ask for information of hotel accommodation or complain about the hotel services. We may pose some questions to hotel receptionists in

order to get information on reservation, as facilities and services for sale whether individually or in various combinations are offered by hotel (Medlik, 1980). The receptionist will open telephone conversation before customer asks questions about hotel accommodation. This is referred to opening of telephone conversation (Blue & Harun, 2003), for example,

Good evening. X Hotel.

How can I help you? (p. 80)

In this situation, the receptionists do the openings of telephone conversation before customers make any enquiries about hotel accommodation or hotel services.

Vallen and Vallen (1996) stated that most often reservations are made by telephone, although reservations arrive by letter and by fax sometimes, or even directly across the desk on occasion, and the hotel's reservation office may receive reservation inquiries directly. Thus, it is important for the hotel receptionists to know the hotel discourse as well as hospitality language because front-line staff (as hosts) in the hospitality industry who are able to communicate effectively with guests are needed worldwide (Blue & Harun, 2003). Having looked at the background of the research, we move on to research problem.

1.2 Research Problem

There are some research done on telephone conversations for different purposes such as in tourism industry and for business calls. For the studies of telephone conversations, researchers have looked at the opening and closing of telephone conversation more than the content of the call.

According to Sifianou (2002), Sacks was the pioneer of the research of opening sequence in telephone conversations and the research was developed by Schegloff (1968, 1979, 1986). Pallotti and Varcasia (2006) stated that Schegloff's (1968, 1979, 1986) framework of opening on North American telephone conversations consisted of *summons/answer*, *recognition/identification*, *greetings* and '*how are you?*' enquiry. Various studies on telephone conversations such as business conversations (Bowles, 2006; Douglas-Cowie & Cowie, 1998; Halmari, 1993; Pallotti & Varcasia, 2006; Pantahachart, 2003; Steuten, 1997), interpersonal conversations (Hopper & Chen, 1996; Hopper, 1992; Colonel-Molina, 1998; Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2002; Lee, 2006; Park, 2002; Sifianou, 2002; Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002a, 2002b), textbook dialogue (Wong, 2000), CA-based material (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006), talkback radio program (Chen, 2005), and mobile phone (Arminen, 2005) had used Schegloff's framework to do their studies on telephone conversations. The common elements in the opening of telephone conversation that were shared by the researchers were *identification* and *recognition*. However, the opening sequences which are *greeting, identification* and *availability* would be used to analyze the data in the study. Pallotti and Varcasia (2006) had added one more element in Schegloff's (1968, 1979, 1986) framework which is *getting to business*. Bowles (2006) had also added one more element in canonical opening proposed by Schegloff which is *reason-for-call* sequence. Mobile phone conversations' openings, which have some distinctive features of their own had been focused in more recent research (Arminen, 2005; Arminen & Leinonen in Arminen, 2005; Hutchby & Barnett in Arminen, 2005).

Besides the research on the openings of telephone conversations, previous researchers also had examined the closings of telephone conversations. Schegloff and Sacks (1973) were the pioneers in examining the closings of telephone conversations. Researchers such as Halmari (1993), Colonel-Molina (1998) and Takami (2002) had used Schegloff and Sacks's (1973) framework on closings of telephone conversations

in their studies. The closing sequences in Schegloff and Sacks's (1973) study consisted of *pre-closing, new topic initiation, recapitulation and final closing*. Pantahachart (2003) had used Clark and French's finding as his framework in examining the closing of telephone conversation. The common elements of closing of telephone conversation that were shared by the researchers were *pre-closing* and *leave-taking*. Closing sequence of *preclosing, new topic initiation, recapitulation* and *leave taking* were used in analyzing the data of the study.

A lot of studies (e.g. Douglas-Cowie & Cowie, 1998; Halmari, 1993; Steuten, 1997) are done on the discourse structure of telephone conversations in western countries rather than Asian countries (Pantahachart, 2003). However, researchers had focused more on the openings of telephone conversations rather than the closings of telephone conversations. There were differences in the openings and closings of telephone conversations in the studies done by previous researchers in western countries such as European countries (Pallotti & Varcasia, 2006), Ireland (Douglas-Cowie & Cowie, 1998), Spain (Colonel-Molina, 1998), the Netherlands (Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2002), Greece (Sifianou, 2002), Finland (Halmari, 1993; Arminen, 2005), Germany (Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006) and Middle-East countries such as Iran (Taleghani-Nikazm, 2002a; 2002b). However, only a few studies were done on telephone conversations in Asian countries such as Taiwan (Hopper & Chen, 1996), Japan (Takami, 2002) and Thailand (Pantahachart, 2003). Studies need to be done on the openings and closings of telephone conversations in Asian countries. An indication of difference in the discourse structure of telephone conversations in Malaysia is the findings from Ting and Lau (2007) on the handling of telephone calls by learners of English as a second language (ESL) in an English for Professional Purposes course (EPP). Ting and Lau found that ESL learners tended to exclude the opening self-identification stage and simplify the closing stage of the telephone enquiry which deemed unprofessional in Western business communication, are acceptable in Malaysia. In a lot of business communication course, western telephone

convention which is taught to the language learners may not applicable to the authentic context in Malaysia. This is because the culture in Malaysia may be quite different from the foreign culture. For example, the foreign people may open and close telephone conversation with polite manners. They may greet the interlocutors when they answer the phone and close the conversation by saying thank you. These cultural differences may affect the openings and closings of telephone conversations in different setting. Therefore, it is important to study telephone convention in Malaysia context in systematic manner. Thus, this study will focus on how the hotel receptionists in Malaysia open and close telephone conversations and language features characterizing openings and closings of telephone conversations. It is to examine how the hotel receptionists open and close telephone conversations.

1.3 Aims of the Study

This study aims to analyze the openings and closings of telephone enquiries on hotel accommodation.

The objectives of the study are to:
i.   examine the discourse structure of openings and closings of telephone enquiries on hotel accommodation
ii.   examine the use of language features characterizing the openings and closings of telephone enquiries

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study is significant because the result of this study can be used as authentic materials for EPP classes. It is important to let the students of EPP classes to know the authentic conversation in order to prepare them for making the business calls in real life. Besides, Wolfson (1989) states, "It is crucial for language learners to

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learn the norms of speaking in the target language and its community" (cited in Takami, 2002). For that reason, it is important to carry out this study to examine the openings and closings of telephone conversations in order to provide authentic materials for the language learners who want to pursue their career in business setting such as hospitality industry.

The previous studies have focused more on the opening sequences rather than closing sequences. This is because opening sequences are more structured than closing sequences. Closing sequences are quite fluid. Thus, there are no enough studies on closings. The opening sequences and closing sequences in telephone conversations are different in different countries, such as North America (Schegloff, 1968, 1979, 1986), Spain (Colonel-Molina, 1998) and Thailand (Pantahachart, 2003) based on the cultures of the countries.

Moreover, fewer studies were done in Asian countries. Therefore, study needs to be done on the opening sequences and closing sequences in telephone conversations in order to see the differences of openings and closings of telephone conversations between the Asian countries (Hopper & Chen, 1996; Pantahachart, 2003; Takami, 2002) and western countries (Arminen, 2005; Bowles, 2006; Colonel-Molina, 1998; Douglas-Cowie & Cowie, 1998; Halmari, 1993; Houtkoop-Steenstra, 2002; Huth & Taleghani-Nikazm, 2006; Pallotti & Varcasia, 2006; Schegloff, 1979; Sifianou, 2002; Steuten, 1997).

1.5 Operational Definitions of Terms

The terms that will be defined are discourse structure of telephone conversations, openings of telephone conversations, closings of telephone conversations and language features.

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Discourse structure of telephone conversations

The generic structures of business conversations are focusing on openings and closings of telephone conversations (e.g. Douglas-Cowie & Cowie, 1998; Halmari, 1993; Pantahachart, 2003; Steuten, 1997).

The table of the generic structures of business conversation is shown in chapter 2 in Section 2.3.

Openings of telephone conversations

Openings are used to exchange greetings and to perform a basic process of identification and recognition (Hopper, Liberman & McLemore, Lindstrom, Schegloff cited in Douglas-Cowie & Cowie, 1998). For opening sequences, the framework for analysis found by Douglas-Cowie and Cowie (1998); Pallotti and Varcasia (2006); Pantahachart (2003) are used in the study. Pallotti and Varcasia (2006) have found comprehensive stages which are *greeting, identification* and *availability*. However, Douglas-Cowie and Cowie (1998); Pantahachart (2003) have found two stages which are *greeting* and *identification*, but not *availability*. Each stage and its function are shown as follows.

Greeting   ("hello" or "good morning")
Identification (speakers identify themselves)
Availability   (the receivers state their availability to the caller's request)

(Pallotti & Varcasia, 2006, p. 5)

The example of opening of telephone conversation by hotel receptionist is shown as follows.

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Good evening. X Hotel.

How can I help you? (Blue & Harun, 2003, p. 80)

From the example shown by Blue and Harun (2003), the receptionist greets the customer, identified his hotel and offers his availability to help.

The details of the stages of the openings of telephone conversations are shown in chapter 2 in section 2.3.1. The table of the summary of the openings of telephone conversations will be shown in chapter 2 in section 2.3.1 in Table 2.

Closings of telephone conversations

For closing sequence, the framework for analysis includes compulsory elements which are *preclosing* and *leave taking* based on the study done by Douglas-Cowie and Cowie (1998), *new topic initiation* (Colonel-Molina, 1998) and *recapitulation* (Halmari, 1993). Each stage and its function are shown as follows.

Preclosing stage (preparedness to close- usually by stating the result of the transaction and often inviting agreement that it has been taken) (Douglas-Cowie & Cowie, 1998).

Leave taking stage (completion has been agreed is signaled at the end of a call) (Douglas-Cowie & Cowie, 1998).

New topic initiation (a new topic of conversation is introduced after a *preclosing* gambit) (Colonel-Molina, 1998).

Recapitulation (the reason for the call, already discussed in the *business transaction* stage is briefly summarized or repeated) (Halmari, 1993).

The details of the stages of the closings of telephone conversations are available in chapter 2 in section 2.3.3. The table of the summary of the closings of telephone conversations will be shown in (Appendix 1).

Language features

Language features refer to the words or phrases that used to characterize the opening stages and closing stages of the telephone conversations. For opening of telephone conversation, the words used to characterize the *greeting* sequence are "hello" (Colonel-Molina, 1998; Pallotti & Varcasia, 2006; Pantahachart, 2003; Steuten, 1997) and "hi" (Halmari, 1993), while the phrases characterizing the *greeting* sequence are "good afternoon" and "good morning" (Douglas-Cowie & Cowie, 1998; Steuten, 1997). For the *identification* sequence in the openings of telephone conversation, phrases are used to characterize the *identification* sequence such as "Thank you for calling XXX" taken from Transcript 1(see Appendix 1). For *availability* sequence in telephone conversation, language features such as "can I help you?" (Pallotti & Varcasia, 2006) are used.

For closing of telephone conversation, words used in *preclosing* stage to preclose a telephone conversation are "Well.." (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973; Takami, 2002) and "Ok.." (Colonel-Molina, 1998; Halmari, 1993; Pantahachart, 2003; Steuten, 1997). On the other hand, phrases used in *leave taking* sequence to close a telephone conversation are "thank you" (Douglas-Cowie & Cowie, 1998; Halmari, 1993; Takami, 2002) and "bye bye" (Douglas-Cowie & Cowie, 1998; Pantahachart, 2003). The details of language features characterizing the openings and closings of telephone conversations will be discussed in chapter 2 in section 2.3.2 and section 2.3.4.

Having looked at the operational definitions of discourse structure of telephone conversation, openings of telephone conversations, closings of telephone conversations and language features, we move on to the scope of the study.

1.6 Scope of study

The study only focuses on the openings and closings of telephone conversations, but not on the content of telephone calls which is negotiation or business transaction. Besides, the study emphasizes on the hotels, but not other business transaction such as book shop.

This chapter has introduced the background of the research, research problem, aims of the study, operational definitions of terms, the significance of the study and the scope of the study. The next chapter will discuss the literature review and related studies.

CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter reviews the concepts related to making telephone enquiries in business setting, which is asking about hotel accommodation from budget hotels to higher class hotels. It covers business communication, telephone communication in business and structure of business conversation, and the aspects of opening and closing of business conversation. It also explains the stages which may occur in the opening and closing of business conversation and language features from previous studies.

2.1 Business communication

According to Ludlow (1992), communication is a personal process which transfers information and involve some behavioural input. It can also be very formal and informal. The form of communication depends on the nature of the message to be passed. It also depends on the relationship between the sender and the receiver. In other words, communication depends on the field, tenor and mode. Derewianka (1990) suggests that the field is the topic of the text. The tenor can be defined as the relationship between the participants. The mode means the channel of communication being used such as written text or spoken text.

Communication serves different purposes which are interpersonal and transactional. Interpersonal interactions are used to exchange meanings for particular reason such as exchange pleasantries and to oil the social wheels, as in the conversation with the neighbour or the discussion about holidays with workmates (Brown & Yule 1983; McCarthy 1991 cited in Burns & Joyce, 1997). Transactional encounters are used for a practical purpose, such as making the appointment for a new passport, the sales enquiry or the discussion about promotion (Brown & Yule 1983; McCarthy, 1991 cited in Burns & Joyce, 1997).

A type of transactional interaction is business communication. It is communication where a product, service, or organization is promoted. It also deals with legal and similar issues. Communication can happen in different business settings such as hotels, tourism, marketing and meeting. For instance, enquiries about the service or the product that they want. They may ask about the hotel receptionist about accommodation because they want to know the prices of the rooms and the facilities provided by the particular hotel.

Business communication is delivered through different means which help them to get the particular information that they need. The examples of means for business communication are face-to face, business meeting, telephone, emails and forum boards. However, Pantahachart (2003) stated that the telephone is the most popular means for business transaction. People tend to use telephone to ask about the service or products that they want because it is the fastest way to get the information. Miculka (1993) claimed that the best and most accessible public relations instrument in business is the telephone. Besides, Luke and Pavlidou (2003) stated that the telephone calls have become another primordial site of speech communication beside face-to face conversation. Having looked at the concepts of business communication, we move on to telephone communication in business.

2.2 Telephone communication in business

Telephone is used as a means to make enquiries, complaints and reservation, for example, asking about the hotel accommodation, making reservation, and making complaints about the poor service provided by the hotels. There are similarities and differences between telephone conversation and normal conversation. According to Pantahachart (2003),

Telephone conversation is similar to normal conversation in many ways, it is quite different from face-to-face conversational interaction. This is because on the telephone conversation we are obstructed with visual contact and have to rely on listening and concentrating on what we hear, also on speakers' voice—its tone and the words used. Therefore, Fisher (1996: 16-17) points out that listening effectively is the way to decrease the risk of, for example, misunderstanding the speaker's problem, failing to understand the business situation, and misinterpreting the speaker's comments, so it is necessary to listen and concentrate on important points, keep an open mind during the telephone conversation, and stay involved in the conversation by concentrating and holding up the speaker's end of the conversation. (p. 2-3)

Furthermore, Kuen (2001) stated that the findings in her study on the communicative needs in a Malaysia business context showed that the telephone conversation was the most frequent communicative event that the sales personnel participated in. All the sales personnel in her study acknowledged the fact that the crucial tool for them to prospect for clients, contact them and then, to follow through the whole sales deal right up to the provision of after sales service was a telephone. Moreover, the telephone conversation was regarded by the sales personnel as the fastest and most convenient mode to do sales and was preferable to writing (Kuen, 2001). Luke and Pavlidou (2002) stated that business is transacted regularly over the