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# Emergency Communication

The Organization of Calls  
to Emergency Dispatch  
Centers

Giolo Fele

palgrave  
macmillan

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Dispatch Centers

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# Introduction

**Abstract** This chapter is an introduction to the volume, where aims, methodology, context and analytical tenets are specified.

**Keywords** Conversation analysis • Emergency calls • Workplace studies  
• Transcription

Emergency situations are a particularly rich subject of study for researchers interested in social interaction and communication practices. It would seem that, in emergency situations, the normal procedures and routines that regulate matters in ordinary life are suddenly accelerated and assume an unexpected appearance. Emergency conditions concentrate collective relations, dynamics of meaning and communication processes to an extent not found in other social situations.

The interweaving of routine and urgency characterizes a certain number of professional activities in which, as the American sociologist E.C. Hughes (1971, p. 316) pointed out, “one man’s routine of work is made up of the emergencies of other people”. Thus, a large number of studies on the professional treatment of emergencies within organizational structures set up for this purpose have been conducted. In addition to ethnographies of the work that operators perform in the field—both in emergency vehicles (Hughes, 1980; Mannon, 1981; Metz, 1981; Palmer,

1983) and at the scene of an accident (Büscher, 2005)—important studies have focused on the work in emergency response centres as “coordination centres” (Martin et al., 2007; Suchman, 1993, 1996, 1997). The activities performed in these emergency response centres or Public Safety Answering Points (PSAP) that manage requests for help have been the subject of a growing number of studies in Europe, the United States, South America, South Africa and Japan.

One important direction of research on emergency response work has focused on communication between the citizen who calls with a request for help or assistance and the operator (a call-taker) who responds.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with the principles of conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992), this research analyses the social organization of emergency calls by following the sequential development of verbal interaction.<sup>2</sup> Studies on calls requesting an emergency response deal with the communicative process as a case of ‘talk as work’ (Drew & Heritage, 1992), or institutional interaction (Arminen, 2005). It is this aspect that is mainly dealt with in this book.

Conversation analysis (CA) or talk-in-interaction is an analytical approach that studies the organization of talk between ‘parties’ (Sacks et al., 1974).<sup>3</sup> A conversation is considered as a sequence of ‘turns at talk’. There are methodical procedures to follow in taking turns (Sacks et al.,

<sup>1</sup> See Heritage and Clayman (2010), Drew and Walker (2010), Cromdal (2012), Garcia (2013), Gerwing (2015), Kevoe-Feldman (2019). The analysis of emergency calls was initiated and is inspired by the seminal work of Don Zimmerman (and colleagues). There is also a substantial amount of literature on helplines. For an early reference, see Baker et al. (eds.) 2005. For a review, see Bloch and Leydon (2019) and Hepburn et al. (2014). On childbirth helplines, see Kitzinger (2011), Potter and Hepburn (2003), and Hepburn (2005). On suicide helpline calls, see Iversen (2021). For a discussion of the difference between divergent ways of ‘getting help’ by telephone, and, in particular, for a comparison between helplines and emergency calls, see Francis and Hester (2004, chap. 6), and Kevoe-Feldman and Iversen (2022). For a comparison between emergency calls and other service calls, see Wakin and Zimmerman (1999). For telephone healthcare advice calls between nurses and callers, see Leydon et al. (2013); Leppänen (2010); Danby et al. (2009). For calls between call-takers employed by the emergency medical services call centre and callers from the general emergency call centre in the Western Cape (Cape Town, South Africa), see Rafaely and Whitehead (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Previous work on calls for help—mostly addressed to the police—is sparse (see Antunes & Scott, 1981; Bercal, 1970; Broadhead, 1986; Gilsinan, 1989; Shearing, 1974). For a symbolic interactionist perspective, see Manning (1988).

<sup>3</sup> There are several good introductory publications to conversation analysis. For a limited sample, see Heritage (1984); Maynard (2013); Sidnell (2013). See Clayman et al. (2022) and Lynch (2000) for an examination of the ethnomethodological roots of conversation analysis.

1974), just as there are in repairing troubles in talk (Hayashi et al., 2013; Schegloff et al., 1977). CA relies on the perspectives of participants in order to describe how ‘parties’ talk: that is to say, on adopting this approach, each participant is viewed as showing in each of his/her turns the ‘interpretation’ of what the other has just said in the previous turn; each next turn exhibits or embodies what a participant has understood of the previous turn. An emergency call is considered to be a particular case of talk-in-interaction. Compared to ordinary calls, those to emergency response centres exhibit a reduction and specialization of their organization: they are relatively brief communicative events, and they are focused on one main goal (Eglin & Wideman, 1986): that is, requesting, soliciting or asking for help and assistance. The work of the call-taker is to ascertain and examine step-by-step the caller’s request, solicitation or demand before granting (or refusing) help. All this work must be done under strong time pressure, where the precision and accuracy of the reconstruction of the events at the basis of the emergency call collide with the necessity to act promptly. This book explores some of the situations where this tension between opposite requirements is clearest.

The last chapter of the book is inspired by the analytical principles of ‘workplace studies’ (Luff et al., 2000; Heath & Luff, 1996; Hindmarsh & Heath, 2007), and it is focused on how operators at emergency response centres (call-takers, dispatchers and supervisors) perform their tasks in a climate of intense collaboration (open or tacit) in which communication technology (radio, fixed and mobile telephones, fax machines, etc.) and information management (CAD, etc.) are part of a social and collaborative use of instruments. Workplace studies show that the resolution of ambiguities and the decision-making, the categorization and the classification of events are the product of subtle joint management by the operators working together on emergencies.

The book is based on analysis of audio and recorded real data, not on interviews or reconstructed scenarios. The recordings have been collected in different periods of fieldwork (which began in 2003 and is still ongoing) in three call and dispatch centres in Northern Italy. The main material on which the book is based derives from research conducted on the emergency call and dispatch centre Trentino Emergenza 118, a dedicated number to answer health and medical emergencies. At the time of writing, the

organization of the emergency call and dispatch centres in Italy is undergoing legal and institutional change. A single Europe-wide emergency number (112) is being progressively adopted in several Regions, among them Trentino. This means that now there are two kinds of PSAP in place: one dedicated to answering all the calls made to the emergency number (first-level PSAP) and one mobilized according to three specific kinds of emergency (depending if one needs medical staff, police, or firefighters—second-level PSAP). My analysis is designed to raise analytical points and not to provide a description of different systems. I hope that its main findings will be of general interest, beyond national and organizational specificities—although, when relevant, I take those specificities into account.

The data were collected in 2003 for research that is still ongoing and amounted to about 45 hours of video recordings of ordinary working days, plus all the related incoming and outgoing audio communications via radio and telephone. The calls were transcribed and analysed according to the principles of conversation analysis (Hepburn & Bolden, 2013). Names and other identifying tokens were cancelled or altered for the sake of privacy.

The book is organized into seven chapters. In the second chapter, I focus on emergency calls in their overall structural organization. I describe their constituent parts, starting with the openings. I then consider the different ways in which help can be solicited by the caller. I examine the ways in which the call-taker assesses the credibility and the pertinence of the call. Thereafter, I analyse the ways in which the call can be brought to a close and the help granted. Finally, I examine difficulties that may arise in handling the call.

In the third chapter, I examine in particular the ways in which the place of the emergency may be formulated. How to locate the scene of an emergency is a major task for the call-takers. I examine different ways to describe places and the callers' orientation to the importance of locating the emergency. At the same time, part of the call-taker's job is to work the call so that the place of the emergency can be ascertained with precision. What emerges is that place descriptions are made not to describe a state of the world, but in order to be used, that is, made practically recognizable.

The fourth chapter deals with calls that are not emergency calls. In particular, I examine how callers design their turn so that the call-taker immediately realises that the call is not an emergency. I show that formulating the action one is doing is a powerful method to make clear what the

speaker is doing. I analyse cases in which the caller uses a formulation to make it clear that she/he is asking for information, not asking for help.

The fifth chapter deals with a possible problem in calling for help. Often the call is made by a third person who has limited or no knowledge of what has generated the need for an emergency intervention. Claims by the caller of limited or no knowledge about the case are delicate interactional matters because the caller should be able to offer grounds for his/her request. I show the ways in which callers deal with this problematic aspect in their turns, and the conditions under which help is nevertheless granted even in the absence of information.

The sixth chapter deals with language difficulties in emergency calls due to the fact that the caller is not a speaker of the call-taker's language and that the call-taker does not understand the caller's language. Using a single case analysis, I focus on a call where a professional interpreter is sought. I describe the language trouble between caller and call-taker, the ways in which the professional interpreter was recruited, the conversation of the interpreter with the caller, and the interpreter's rendering of the caller's need. I argue that the work of the interpreter is less than that of a translation machine and more that of the coordinator of meanings and understandings.

The seventh chapter focuses on the tacit collaborative work between call-takers and dispatchers in dealing with emergency calls. I analyse the dispatch of aid as a collaborative product of dispatchers and call-takers alike through forms of complex interactional work. Besides considering the dispatch as a specific form of radio communication between the emergency call centre and the ambulance on the ground, I observe through the use of video recordings the subtle and delicate collaborative work of dispatchers and call-takers. This hidden work does not appear in any official records, but at the same time not only is it at the core of the activities in the emergency call centre, but it offers a splendid illustration of the subtle ways in which the organizational culture of emergency professionals reveals itself.

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