

The ‘How are you?’ sequence in telephone openings in Arabic

Eman Saadah

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

esaadah2@illinois.edu

This paper reports on one particular speech activity, viz. telephone openings, to conduct a cross-cultural comparison of how Arabs perform the ritual routines of the ‘How are you?’ sequence. Using conversation analysis (CA) as a methodology, this qualitative study is based on data collected from natural interaction between Arabs. In Arabic, the ‘How are you?’ sequence is canonically scripted to function as an inquiry about the well-being and latest news of the recipient of the call as well as his/her other immediate family members. However, these telephone openings are expanded to show differences in norms of behavior from the ones reported in the literature to mark cultural identity that is unique to this speech community.

1. Introduction

In this study, I will focus on the behavior of Arabic speakers in telephone conversation openings when they call relatives and family members. As a community that is claimed to have strong social ties among its members (Ahlawat & Zaghal 1989), Arabic speakers are expected to exhibit differences in telephone behavioral patterns from communities that are characterized differently. In order to check for such a difference, the ‘How are you?’ sequence is investigated to exemplify how interactants help maintain intimacy among themselves by extending parts of the telephone conversation as a means of showing care and love for each other.

Difference in the norms of interaction over the phone in general, and within the ‘How are you?’ sequence in particular, has been investigated in previous studies. Since Schegloff’s (1968) study on the organization of conversation and later on telephone conversation openings (Schegloff 1979), the study of telephone openings has attracted a lot of attention in the field (Schegloff & Sacks 1973; Schegloff 1979; Lindström 1994; Houtkoop-Steenstra 1991; Taleghani-Nikazm 2002).

I hypothesize that the extended ‘How are you?’ sequence occurring after the summons-answer sequence in Arabic serves an important function

between interlocutors. It is routinely structured in telephone conversations among close relatives and friends and seems to be obligatory in informal interactions between such participants. The absence of this sequence or the provision of a shortened version of this sequence makes the interaction rigid and impolite which gives the impression that the caller is not friendly and sociable.

2. Telephone openings and literature review

Schegloff (1979) found that most U.S. telephone openings include an identification and recognition sequence. In addition, he identified four sequences of adjacency pairs in mundane private telephone conversation openings:

1. a summons-answer sequence (e.g. the phone rings and the callee answers 'Hello');
2. an identification and/or recognition sequence (e.g. 'Bill!'/ 'Hey Sally');
3. a greeting sequence (e.g. 'Hi'/ 'Hi');
4. a 'How are you' sequence (e.g. 'How are you?'/ 'good, how about you?') (Schegloff, 1986).

That telephone openings are found to differ in varying cultures is a well-established fact. Despite the occurrence of the 'How are you?' sequence in telephone conversation in all targeted speech communities, it has been shown that the extent and pattern vary from one culture to the other, e.g. Dutch (Houtkoop-Steenstra 1991), Finnish (Halmari 1993), Swedish (Lindström 1994), German (Pavlidou 1994), Greek (Sifianou 2002), and Chinese (Sun 2004).

Halmari (1993) studies, among other things, the 'How are you?' sequence in business telephone conversations in two different languages: Finnish and American English. For Finnish speakers, when the 'How are you?' sequence is initiated, it elicits a lengthy non-topical sequence, i.e., it is understood as question that requires an elaborate answer. However, for American English speakers, the 'How are you?' sequence in business telephone conversations is usually restricted and has the illocutionary function of a greeting and thus requires a short answer of 'I'm fine' or 'good'.

In another study, Pavlidou (1994) reports on Greek and German conversational styles, focusing on politeness in telephone calls. Investigating the 'How are you?' sequence, the researcher finds different

norms between the two cultures. She concludes that Greeks emphasize the relationship aspect of communication by using more phatic utterances, while Germans tend to focus more on the content of the conversation, are more direct, and use less phatic utterances.

Many studies claim that the 'How are you?' sequence—which is part of the opening sequence of telephone conversations—is also an instance of *phatic communion*. Phatic communion is a term that is attributed to Malinowski (1923) and affiliated with anthropology, and has been borrowed into various fields (e.g. semantics, sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, and communication). Phatic communion, according to Malinowski, refers to a type of speech people get involved in aimlessly to create ties of union which merely fulfill a social function. This term has been also used to describe responses to the inquiry 'How are you?' in telephone conversation. For example, Coupland, Coupland, & Robinson (1992) identify a range of strategies elderly people use to achieve degrees of phaticity when they respond to a scripted 'How are you?' question in interviews about health-related issues.

Sun (2004) discusses the common expression about well-being, 'How are you?', between female participants in Chinese. The researcher focuses on studying phatic talk in terms of deictic reference. While involved in small talks, a Chinese speaker might choose to replace the second person deictic pronoun 'you' with other terms such as 'mother' if one of the participants in the telephone conversation is the mother of the other. This verbal behavior between interlocutors shows deference, awareness of social status, and politeness, especially when addressing seniors. Some interlocutors might choose to drop the pronoun, using a pro-drop form, and add adverbials following or preceding the main component, e.g. 'doing well lately'. Sun claims that in interpersonal calls, the inquiry 'How are you?' has dual functions: a statement of purpose when it is preceded by comments such as 'Long time no see/calling' and a phatic communion.

Generally, the 'How are you?' sequence in Arabic telephone conversation is characterized by lengthy and detailed turns among interactants. However, this extended and elaborate version depends on several factors. First, it depends on the type of relationship between interactants. Unlike distant relationships, among close relatives and friends a detailed version of this sequence is always expected. Second, gender of the participants is an important factor that mandates the nature of this sequence. Female callers tend to personalize this sequence and ask mainly about one's, partner's, children's, and other immediate family members' well being. This can be extended to inquire about recent events or latest news

regarding this particular person or any of his immediate family members. On the other hand, though male callers ask about the well being of the other interactant, his/her spouse, and children, the inquiry is different in nature. This sequence is more routinized and fulfills the function of mere asking and not necessarily eliciting genuine responses from the other caller. Third, the nature of this sequence depends on the reason for the call, whether formal or informal. Formal reasons include the caller asking about specific information or extending an invitation to the callee, while informal reasons include situations when interactants call each other to chat with no particular purpose. Of course, unlike in informal calls, in which the purpose for the call is to keep in touch, formal calls are characterized by shortened ‘How are you?’ sequences in which the caller gets to the reason behind calling the other shortly after the call starts. In other cases, we find overlap between these factors which renders a differently structured sequence than what is expected. For example, even when participants call each other for a specific reason such as to extend invitation to a party, they might get involved in an extended ‘How are you?’ sequence. This is indicative of a more polite and respectful interaction which is not uncommon between members of the Arabic speech community.

3. The ‘How are you?’ sequence in Arabic

Based on the data collected for this study, the ‘How are you?’ sequence in telephone conversation in Arabic has a dual function: general and specific. The sequence has a general function in that it might include several inquiries within an interaction. The turns are normally expanded to ask about the well-being of the callee, his/her news, and finally wishing him/her that everything would be fine at their side. These questions in most cases require a formulaic response, e.g. *alhamudulellaah*, ‘thanks to God’. On the other hand, the ‘How are you?’ sequence has also a specific function. This sequence can be condensed in nature in that it incorporates all these in one turn. Depending on purpose for the call and on the callee’s response, this sequence can lead to the initiation of the first topic.

As the data below show, the ‘How are you?’ sequence in Arabic telephone conversations can be expressed in more than one turn. Native speakers typically believe that the first time serves the function of breaking the ice and sensing from the callee’s voice and response if this is a good time to proceed with the call. Such an inquiry has a routinized response even if there are recent news or events that need to be revealed. This response which typically denotes one’s well-being and thanking God for the present state of affairs is shared by all Arab community members and is obliged

by religious beliefs. Therefore, this structured reply has cultural and religious roots which result in this conventionalized response. Normally, the second part of the 'How are you?' sequence is almost identical to the previous one but with more inquiries to include, among other issues, asking about physical well-being, latest news, and inquiries about the addressee's children. It is also routinely followed by a typical rejoinder that expresses the caller's wish for everything and everyone to be good at the other participant's side.

4. The data

The sample consists of 10 audio-taped telephone calls in Arabic that were made by 5 native Arabic speakers and recorded by the researcher. All calls were made by middle-class Arabs who ranged in age between 32 and 65. They included conversations between family members. The phone calls were all either initiated or received to the researcher's residence and all involved persons she personally knows.

In this paper, I present descriptions, analysis, and interpretations of the 'How are you?' sequence in informal Arabic telephone conversations between family members. Specifically, naturally occurring telephone conversations were analyzed to identify how the moves within the "How are you?" sequence are conducted in Arabic. Selected telephone calls were transcribed according to the transcription notation put forth by Jefferson (1984: ix-xvi). In the following examples, the top line is the talk in the native language while a literal translation appears in the second line. The third line represents the translation of talk in idiomatic English.

(1)

- | | |
|----|--|
| 01 | [[Phone rings.]] |
| 02 | Amjad: <i>allo.</i>
'Hello.' |
| 03 | Kamal: <i>assalaamu ṣalaykum.</i>
<u>peace</u> upon you-PL.
'Peace be upon you.' |
| 04 | (0.9) |
| 05 | Amjad: <i>ṣalaykum <u>essalaa::m wa raḥmatullaah,</u></i>
upon you-PL <u>peace and mercy-god,</u>
'Peace be upon you too and god's mercy,' |
| 06 | <i>AHLEin abu-lbaraa=</i>
WELCOme father-albaraa [male's name]=
'WELCOme father of Albaraa-' |

- 07 Kamal: =*abuħmeid chef ħalash shu akhbarak*
 [name-diminutive] how well-being what news-your
 ‘[name-diminutive] How are you what is your news’
- 08 *inshaallah tamaam.*
 willing god fine.
 ‘God’s willing, fine’
- 09 (0.4)
- 10 Amjad: *ħamdullelaah allah ybaarik feek (0.1) tama[am,*
 thanks god god bless you (0.1) fi[ne,
 ‘Thanks to god may god bless you (0.1) I’m fine’
- 11 Kamal: *[cheef*
 ‘how’
- 12 *Seħtak cheef omorak cheef zghaarak.*
 health-your how news-your how little ones-your.
 ‘is your health what is your news how are your
 children.’
- 13 *inshaallah mneħeen.*
 willing god good-they.
 ‘God’s willing they are good.’
- 14 (0.9)
- 15 Amjad: *walla ħamdullelaah tamaam allah <yb[aarik feek>*
 God thanks god fine god <bl[ess you>
 ‘Swearing By God, thanks to God fine may God
 bless you’
- 16 Kamal: *[ħamdullellah*
[thanks god
 ‘Thanks to God’
- 17 *alla yeħTeekel ħaafye inshaallah*
 god give you health willing god
 ‘May God give you health by God’s willing’
- 18 (0.2)
- 19 *>walla ħabbeina nsallem ħala ħammi neħTamman*
 >by god like-we say hello to uncle-my check-we
 ‘By god we like to say hello to my uncle and check’
- 20 *ħale: inshaalla ħawaleik .<*
 on him willing god around you.<
 ‘on him god’s willing is he around you’
- 21 (1.7)
- 22 Amjad: *ħayyo mawjood*
 here-he available
 ‘Here, he is available’
- 23 (0.3)

- 24 <*tfaDDal*>.
 'please.'
 25 (0.2)
 26 Kamal: *alla:(h) ykhalleek*.
 god bless-you.
 'May God bless you.'

This exchange occurs between two male family members. Kamal, 42 years old, called his younger brother-in-law, Amjad, 35 years old, to say 'hello' to his father-in-law. The father-in-law was visiting Kamal and left to his son Amjad's house in another city. Though Kamal and Amjad have a close relationship, they have not called each other for some time, that is, during all that time the father-in-law stayed at Kamal's house, a few weeks.

Example 1 starts with the typical summons-answer and greeting sequences. As we can see, Arabs, like many other cultures, regard the ringing of the telephone to be a summons which is answered typically by *allo*, 'hello' in line 2. This response to the summons provides the caller with resources to identify the callee. In line 3, the first pair part of the greeting sequence is produced. By uttering the greeting only, this first pair part has another function, namely, is to identify the caller by providing the recipient with his voice sample. This is an indication that there is a preference in Arabic telephone conversation to resort to other-recognition over self-identification. However, in other cultures, self-identification seems to be the preferred norm in caller and recipient exchanges (cf. Jorden and Noda, 1987, Park, 2002). The second pair part comes after a long silence. This might be justified by the fact that both participants did not call each other for some time, so it took the recipient some time to recognize the identity of the caller. However, in the reply, the greeting is uttered with more emphasis than the surrounding talk and includes recognition of the caller, (line 6), which indicates the callee has identified the caller through his voice. Amjad identifies the caller by a specific address term that is widely used by Arabic community members, *abulbaraa*, literally 'father of Baraa' (Baraa is a male name in Arabic). This address term is commonly used by a younger person when addressing an older one. Using '*abu* + the name of eldest male son' of the caller is considered more formal and respectful than addressing with one's first name, but not as formal as addressing with Mr. or Dr—commonly used when a member has a doctorate degree. Amjad's choice of this address term shows his awareness of the age difference and preference to use a somewhat formal term which indicates politeness.

As soon as Amjad identifies Kamal and greets him (lines 5 and 6), Kamal produces the next turn in latched position. Within this very short interaction between the two males we find two overlaps by Kamal with Amjad's turns. In line 10, there is an overlap when Amjad replies to Kamal and just before he is about to start another topic. Kamal's overlap with Amjad's turn results in the termination of Amjad's turn and the start of Kamal's. Kamal assumes the role of talk organizer and initiator and this is expected since he is the one who initiated this telephone call. The second overlap occurs in line 15 and again results in the termination of Amjad's turn. In line 7, at the beginning of the first pair part of the 'How are you?' sequence, Kamal produces a diminutive address term which is indicative of love, affection, and a strong relation between the two participants. This is similar to nicknames people usually assign to their children. Also, the use of this address term in this interaction also highlights the age difference between the interlocutors.

After performing two typical sets of the 'How are you?' sequence, Kamal proceeds by introducing the purpose for the call, viz. checking if his father-in-law is available to talk to him (line 19). Although Kamal ultimately makes a switchboard request, we can see that he went through the 'How are you?' sequence with the person who answered the phone in which he asks about the answerer's well-being, news and family.

(2)

- | | | |
|----|--------|---|
| 01 | Qasem: | <i>essalaamu salaykum,</i>
Peace upon-you
'Peace be upon you' |
| 02 | | (0.1) |
| 03 | Kamal: | ^aywa <u>sammi</u>
'yes my uncle' |
| 04 | | (0.1) |
| 05 | | <i>essalamu salakum cheef halak shu akhbarak.</i>
peace upon-you how you what news-your.
'Peace be upon you how are you what are your
news.' |
| 06 | | (0.5) |
| 07 | Qasem: | <i>allahi yhaeek allah ysalma[k (0.1) ke-</i>
God welcome-you god bless [you(0.1) ho-
'May God welcome you God bless you ho-' |
| 08 | Kamal: | <i>[cheef Sehtak=</i>
[how health-your.=
'How is your health.' |

- 09 Qasem: =*inshallah Taybeen.* =
 =willing god good-all.=
 'God's willing you are all fine.'
- 10 Kamal: =*shteknaalako.* =
 =miss-you-all.=
 'We miss you all.'

Example 2 is taken from the same telephone conversation as Example 1 and it is a continuation of the conversation of one of the participants in Example 1, Kamal, with a new interactant, his father-in-law, Qasem. Kamal wants to check on his father-in-law who was visiting him and his family and left to his son's house in a near-by city. Qasem's son, Amjad, and Kamal co-participate at the start of the telephone call, in Example 1, before Amjad hands the telephone to his father to talk to Kamal. The fact that Qasem is starting out with a greeting is evidence that he knows who is on the phone. He starts by greeting Kamal with the typical Arabic Islamic greeting in line 1, *essalaamu salaykum*, 'peace be upon you'. Kamal answers with a marked rise in pitch and stressed address term, *sammi*, 'my uncle'. Starting the turn with a markedly higher pitch level and a stressed address term might indicate excitement and pleasure conversing with this person. Using this address term at the beginning of a phone call serves two purposes: it shows that identification/recognition has been achieved through the voice sample of the recipient of the call. Secondly, this telephone opening can be characterized as intimate especially as the address term is suffixed by the possessive pronoun *i*, 'my' which can represent love, care, and affection towards this interlocutor. In line 5, we expect to find the second pair part of the greeting initiated by Qasem in line 1, but instead of replying to Qasem's greeting, Kamal initiates the greeting himself. This might imply that Kamal, the younger participant in this interaction, thinks that he should initiate greeting his father-in-law and not the other way around. So, Kamal provides the first pair part of the greeting sequence where he should have responded with the second pair part. Immediately following this, in line 5, he goes on with the 'How are you?' sequence within the same turn. This includes inquiry about Qasem's well-being and latest news. Qasem does not respond to Kamal's inquiries, rather he reciprocates with another inquiry, in line 9. This shows that these turns within the 'How are you?' sequence does not elicit a genuine response from the other participant. Indeed, Kamal proceeds with the conversation without showing any problem that his inquiries were not responded to by his father-in-law. Rather, these moves are conventionalized in turn-taking design within this particular sequence to signify a routinely structured pattern in telephone conversations between close friends and family members whose relationships are characterized as intimate.

This ritualized ‘How are you?’ sequence in Arabic telephone conversations is commonly replicated by a subsequent turn that is closely positioned to the former one. This is evident in Kamal’s overlap with Qasem’s turn in line 7 and rephrase of the same inquiry by asking about the other participant’s health. In the next turn, Qasem does not respond to Kamal’s repeated inquiry about his well-being and news, rather he reciprocates Kamal’s ‘How are you?’ sequence, latches it to his turn, and asks about the well-being of Kamal’s family. Likewise, the lack of response by Kamal to Qasem’s inquiry indicates that such a sequence is routinized in telephone conversation and is not necessarily answered by the other participant. Hopper and Chen (1996) show that in Taiwanese telephone openings, greeting tokens are not always reciprocated at the next turn. In other words, it is not topicalized. In the next turn (line 10), Kamal states the main reason for the call; he and everyone else in his family miss his father-in-law. It seems that Qasem’s responses to Kamal’s inquiries were not elaborate because he knows Kamal’s intention behind the call. Indeed, both participants were practical in quickly wrapping up the ‘How are you?’ sequence to proceed to more important matters.

(3)

- 01 Layla: >essalamu salayku-<
>peace upon-yo-<
'Peace be upon yo-'
- 02 (0.5)
- 03 Nora: <ahlei::n yamma>, wa salaykum essalaa:mu wa
<hello:: my mother>, and upon-you peace and
'Hello my mother and peace be upon you too and'
- 04 rahmatullahi wa barakatu=
mercy god and blessings-his=
'God's mercy and blessings'
- 05 Layla: =kei:f elhaa::l.
=how the-well-being.
'How are you'
- 06 (0.2)
- 07 keif ento: y:amma?, keif Seħhetko?,
how you-PL my mother?, how health your-PL?,
'How are you mother? How is your health?'
- 08 (0.4)
- 09 Nora: elhamdullellah rabbi el salameen keif Seħ[tik
thanks god god all creation how health[your
'Thanks God how is your health, you?'

- 10 ENTI?
YOU?
 'YOU?'
- 11 [(*alla yeTeeko*)]
 [(god give you-PL)]
 'May God give you all'
- 12 (0.5)
- 13 Layla: *walla tamaa::m. wallalḥamdullellahhh.*
 by god fine::: And thanks god
 'By God I'm fine. And thanks to God'
- 14 (0.17)
- 15 *kol eshi tamaam.*
 Every thing fine.
 'Every thing is fine.'
- 16 (0.2)
- 17 Nora: *mm A:KEED?*
 'mm SURE?'
- 18 (0.9)
- 19 Layla: *aa::h wall:a la::hh elḥamdu:lellaah=*
 'O::h by God no:: thanks to God-'
- 20 Nora: *ʔo keif edeike:::?*
and how hands-your:::?
 'and how are your hands?'
- 21 (1.0)
- 22 Layla: *^LAA zai ma homma bes ya ſni ḥa:ssa akhaff eshwayya*
 ^NO as them but mean feel bit little
 'No as before but I feel better a little bit
- 23 *ensahalla.*
 willing-god.
 'by God's will.'
- 24 (0.5)
- 25 Nora: *tabe insaalla enshaalla ensh=*
 alright willing-god willing-god willi=
 'alright God's willing God's willing willi='
- 26 Layla: [*inshaalla*
 [willing-god
 'by God's will-'
- 27 Nora: [*alla kareem=*
 [god generous=
 'God is generous'
- 28 Layla: *inshaalla yamma >inshaalla.<*
 willing-god my mother >willing-god.<
 'By God's willing mother >by God's will<'

- 29 (0.2)
 30 ^*laa*: *aḥsan shwayya ḥassa ḥaali walla*.
 ^no: better little feel myself by god.
 ‘No I feel a little better by God’s name.’
- 31 (0.4)
 32 Nora: *mmm:::*.
 ‘mmm:::’
- 33 (0.2)
 34 Layla: *inshaaʔallah. keif aḥwalkum ento?*
 willing-god. how being-you-PL. you-PL?
 ‘God’s willing. How is everything with you all?’
- 35 (0.4)
 36 Nora: >*haina*<
 >here-we<
 ‘Here we are’
- 37 (0.2)
 38 Layla: (*uish?*)
 (what?)
 ‘What?’
- 39 (1.5)
 40 Nora: *maashi ḥalna <elḥamdullella::>*.
 Okay being-we <thanks go::d>.
 ‘Doing fine thanks to God.’
- 41 (1.2)
 42 Nora: *ʔE:::H?*
 ‘ʔE:::H?’
- 43 (1.53)

Example 3 is a portion of a conversational interaction between Layla and her daughter (Nora) that occurs within the long telephone call from which examples 1 and 2 were extracted and analyzed. Layla has not been feeling well lately because she is under medication for treating cancer. This medication has side effects that affect her health in general thus making her feel sick all the time. It also causes numbness in her hands and feet. Kamal, Nora’s husband initiates this call to greet his father-in-law who was visiting them and left two days ago. In example 1, Kamal talks to his brother-in-law, Amjad, and in 2 to his father-in-law, Qasem before he hands the phone to his wife, Nora, to talk to her mother, Layla.

In Line 1, it is shown that Layla’s response is rushed and there is also cut-off in the final word. This can be attributed to Layla’s prior knowledge of the caller’s identity. Obviously, the identification / recognition sequence is achieved smoothly. Nora immediately identifies the answerer’s voice and

responds with two greetings and the appropriate address term. The first greeting indicates welcoming the other participant and includes an address term, *ahlei:n yamma*, 'welcome, my mother'. However, the second greeting is the actual response to the mother's greeting in the first pair part. Nora's response to the greeting, *wa salaykum essalaa:mu wa rahmatullahi wa barakatu*, 'and peace be upon you too and God's mercy and blessings' represents the full and long response to the first pair part of the greeting in the prior turn. To Muslims and Arabs, this is considered the best way of reciprocating the greeting in line 1. By Islamic teachings, if a person is greeted with the greeting *essalamu salaykum*, 'peace be upon you', the other interlocutor has to respond appropriately in the second pair part.

Responding with two greetings is not uncommon between Arabs as has been shown in Example 2 by two other interlocutors and represented here in this new set of data. Nora's response immediate response, in line 3, is low, the sound is stretched, and stressed. This could signal an enthusiastic and respectful caller who identifies the other party right away and is eager to be involved with her in this interaction. Using the address term 'mother' and replying with the complete version of the Islamic greeting—which is considered a relatively long reply to a greeting— show that the caller is respectful and wants to respond with a better greeting than the one she was greeted with.

Following the greeting sequence, the callee starts with the elaborate and expanded typical Arabic 'How are you?' sequence. Layla inquires about the well-being of her daughter. In order to do so, she uses the default version of 'How are you?' *kei:f elhaa:l*, 'how is the well-being' with no suffixed pronoun. Using this general form makes the inquiry broader to include not only the caller but everyone else. This in turn prepares for the next portion of the turn in which Layla explicitly uses the first person plural pronoun *ento:*, 'you all' to include every one at the callee's side. She also extends the first pair part turn to inquire about the health of everyone by suffixing the second person plural pronoun *ko*, 'your' to the noun. In line 9, Nora chooses to reciprocate her mother's inquiry with the full version where an abbreviated shortened response is normally and typically used. This long response is followed by a reciprocated inquiry about the mother's health and is overlapped by the mother's next turn. Nora's inquiry about the mother is very specific in nature in which she focuses the mother's health (lines 9 and 10). This is evident by suffixing the noun with the second person possessive pronoun *k*, 'your' and then using the second person pronoun *enti*, 'you'. This shows the caller's intention to include only the mother in her inquiry and not other family members. By asking only about the mother and her health, the caller

constructs a ‘How are you?’ sequence that does not follow the common elaborate pattern normally produced by other members in the Arabic speech community. This could have resulted from the callee’s overlap with the caller’s turn which forced the caller to shorten her turn to give a chance to the other participant to proceed with hers. It is worth noting that Nora consumed the normal length of such a turn with her lengthy greeting’s reply.

This portion of the ‘How are you?’ sequence where the caller inquires about her mother’s health is topicalized, (line 9), because of the mother’s health condition. Nora produces other turns that might be considered rejoinders to the turn where she asks about the mother’s health, viz. line 20. The specificity about the mother’s health is stressed by asking about her hands in particular (in line 20). In previous adjacency pairs, the mother is fully cooperating and provides lengthy responses in her second pair part turns; that is in lines (13, 15, 19, 22, 23). In these turns, Layla does not initiate any new topic but addresses her daughter’s worries and ensures her that she feels good. The daughter’s inquiry about the mother’s health lasts for few turns—specifically, three turns—before Nora brings this topic to an end when Layla assures Nora that she really feels better in her lengthy turn, (lines 28 and 30), after which Nora brings this to an end.

Example 3 shows that the typical ‘How are you?’ sequence in intimate family relations is sometimes topicalized with extended ‘question/answer’ adjacency pairs about a specific issue that might be brought up as the conversation unfolds. Usually, the ‘How are you?’ sequence is resumed after that topic has been talked about and both participants feel that it can be satisfactorily brought to an end. In line 34, the ‘How are you?’ sequence is again resumed—after an extended interruption with the mother’s inquiry about the well-being of everyone at her daughter’s side. The daughter provides a response which is not typical to such an inquiry. Her response is rushed, compressed, and abbreviated which prompts the mother to topicalize such an answer. However, in line 40, Nora states that she and her family are doing fine before she becomes silent for some time and then produces some vocalizations after which the mother changes the subject and proceeds with the conversation. All in all, the daughter does not contribute a lot to this interaction so far and her tone and answers indicate worry and concern which is stated clearly in the present ‘How are you?’ sequence.

5. Summary and concluding remarks

To summarize, the 'How are you?' sequence performed by family members from the Arabic speech community shows universal as well as specific patterns. Universal patterns in that like telephone conversation performed by members from other speech communities, the 'How are you?' sequence is one main component in the openings of Arabic telephone conversations. For Arabs, intimate interpersonal relations shape the nature and design of telephone openings resulting in a distinctive signature that is considered to be unique and different from other speech communities. Norms of behavior in telephone openings in Arabic have also specific cultural patterns in that an expanded 'how are you?' sequence between Arab family members is a sign of intimacy. This sequence is not normally topicalized unless there is a reason. In such a case, the sequence is interrupted momentarily to inquire about that specific issue and afterwards it is resumed. Telephone openings among family callers tend to be condensed (in that they consist of several TCUs within a turn), fast, and expanded (in that they stretch over several turns). Using a conversation-analytic framework, it has been shown that the organizational functions of such interpersonal communication is undoubtedly culture-specific.

There is a trend that advocates looking for universal tendencies when analyzing telephone openings; however, cross-cultural exemplars show that differences in the norms of interaction of this structured activity are well established. Each telephone conversation is shaped and marked with a distinctive pattern that is influenced by a particular culture, sex of interlocutors, their relationships, and the reason for the call.

By conducting this research project, I have expanded the set of languages and contexts investigated for the purpose of attesting that differences are in fact present in telephone behavior. By examining such differences, the focus, next, is not on these differences per se but on the divergent behaviors that characterize every speech community as unique in and of itself. This in turn leads to a more inclusive picture of larger cultural contexts and supports the comparative cultural analysis that academicians struggle to describe. The aforementioned—empirically-grounded—accounts of how the organization of telephone openings is designed in Arabic are by all means rich resources for language teachers. By exposing one important speech activity; namely, cultural etiquette of telephone conversations to language learners, I argue that more details and culturally-sensitive material are, with no doubt, far and better reaching tools across the other language and eventually to the minds and hearts of its users.

REFERENCES

- Ahlawat, Kapur S. & Ali S. Zaghal. 1989. Nuclear and extended family attitudes of Jordanian Arabs. In Boh, Katja, Giovanni Sgritta & Marvin B. Sussman (eds.), *Cross-cultural perspectives on families, work, and change*. New York: Haworth Press.
- Coupland, Justine., Nikolas Coupland, & Justine Robinson. 1992. "How are you?": Negotiating phatic communion. *Language in Society* 21, 207-230.
- Halmari, Helena. 1993. Intercultural business telephone conversations: a case of Finns vs. Anglo-Americans. *Applied Linguistics* 14, 408-430
- Hopper, Robert & Chia-Hui Chen. 1996. Languages, cultures, relationships: telephone openings in Taiwan. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 29(4), 291-313.
- Houtkoop-Steenstra, Hanneke. 1991. Opening sequences in Dutch telephone conversations. In Boden, Deidre & Don Zimmerman (eds.), *Talk and social structure*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jefferson, Gail. 1984. Transcription notation. In: Atkinson, John Maxwell & John Heritage (eds.), *Structures of social action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jorden, Eleanor & Mari Noda. 1987. *Japanese: The Spoken Language*. Yale University Press.
- Lindström, Anna. 1994. Identification and recognition in Swedish telephone conversation openings. *Language in Society* 23, 231-252.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1923. The problem of meaning in primitive languages. Supplement to Ogden, Charles Kay & Ivor Armstrong Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 146-152.
- Park, Yong-yaе. 2002. Recognition and identification in Japanese and Korean telephone conversation openings. In Luke, Kang Kwong & Theodossia-Soula Pavlidou (eds.), *Telephone calls: Unity and diversity in conversational structure across languages and cultures*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Pavlidou, Theodossia. 1994. Contrasting German-Greek politeness and the consequences. *Journal of Pragmatics* 21, 487-511.
- Schegloff, Emanuel. 1968. Sequencing in conversational openings. *American Anthropologist* 70, 1075-1095.
- Schegloff, Emanuel & Harvey Sacks. 1973. Opening up closings. *Semiotica* 8(4), 189-327.
- Schegloff, Emanuel. 1979. Identification and recognition in telephone conversation openings. In Psathas, George (ed.), *Everyday language: Studies in ethnomethodology*. Irvington, New York.
- Sifianou, Maria. 2002. On the telephone again! Telephone conversation openings in Greek. In Luke, Kang Kwong & Theodossia-Soula Pavlidou (eds.), *Telephone calls: Unity and diversity in conversational structure across languages and cultures*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Sun, Hao. 2004. Opening moves in informal Chinese telephone conversations. *Journal of Pragmatics* 36, 1429-1465.
- Taleghani-Nikazm, Carmen. 2002. A conversation analytical study of telephone conversation openings between native and nonnative speakers. *Journal of Pragmatics* 34, 1807-1832.