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Invitations and responses across different languages: observations on the feasibility and relevance of a cross-linguistic comparative perspective on the study of actions

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This special issue of the *Journal of Pragmatics* concerns the activity of inviting and responding to invitations in authentic telephone calls in six different languages. Using Conversational Analysis to investigate telephone calls that were audio-recorded in family homes, and in one case, in a bank office, the papers here included focus on invitations to friends, family members, acquaintances and other casual recipients in ordinary and institutional conversations. We have two main goals in this special issue. First, owing to the number and size of the corpora analyzed, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the action of inviting as an interactional task; we hope to discover a clearer picture of what *speakers actually do* when they invite others to participate in social events beyond our vernacular understanding of the activity. We aim to examine in close detail speakers' linguistic and communicative conduct, both when they are engaged in extending an invitation, and when they receive, recognize and respond to it. Our second general aim bears on the uniformity of the corpora and of the settings in which the interactions took place. In all but the paper on the invitation by a bank employee to clients, calls were almost exclusively addressed to relatives, friends and acquaintances. The uniformity of the settings across the corpora, combined with the different languages in which talk was produced, provides an opportunity to draw some observations on the feasibility and relevance of comparative analysis of actions across languages. In this introduction we outline the project behind this collection, as related to the two dimensions, highlighting how these connect with the results of prior research on inviting from other approaches, perspectives and traditions.

In section 1.1 we provide a provisional characterization of the specific action of inviting. Section 1.2 focuses on the data and the method of Conversation Analysis (CA), which was adopted in all papers. In section 1.3, we review prior relevant research on invitations from other perspectives and traditions in pragmatics and in cross-language studies. In section 1.4, we return to the characterization of inviting, in the light of our prior explication of CA's view on language and social actions. Finally, in section 1.5 we outline

the major dimensions and analytic categories of the action of inviting that constitute a common thread among the papers, before illustrating each article.

1.1 Inviting as a recognizable action

Inviting is a social activity which can frequently occur among friends in ordinary interactions, and sometimes, in more formal settings among acquaintances and even unknown persons. Invitations are part of everybody's ordinary life, and an important means of increasing social solidarity; sometimes, it also used for accomplishing institutional goals. Like other actions of our everyday life, invitations are social actions; the inviter necessarily projects a forthcoming response from the recipient, thereby initiating a sequence of actions in which both participants engage in forms of mutual understanding.

However, as compared with requests and offers and other more frequent and more studied social actions, making an invitation entails additional layers of sociality and implications. These concern the commitment of both participants to participate in a future sociable occasion. When we invite someone, the implication is that recipients are willing to share their time with us. In displaying pleasure in spending time with the recipient, inviters might also show to hold (excessive) self-estimation. Furthermore, sometimes speakers extend an invitation to accomplish other unofficial, inexplicit or covert ends. Thus, in relation to these circumstances, we might want to make explicit, or hide the exact nature of our invitation, its degree of formality and so on. These dimensions, in turn, might entail the importance of *when* the invitation was conceived in relation to its actual delivery, whether it was planned, or produced spontaneously during the ongoing interaction. Additionally, there may be issues related to the *type of event* in which the recipient is invited to take part, e.g., whether it is a routine and informal gathering (Drew, 2005) or a more formal event. The invitations we analyze here occur over the phone, with the consequence that they concern some future social event; whereas in face-to-face interactions invitations might relate to a more proximate or current occasion. As we will see, these and other contingencies are variously conveyed through precise linguistic choices, whose balance and relation to the speakers' own individual goals can be reflected in the degree of in/directness, un/assertiveness and of un/politeness of the talk.

Another aspect that distinguishes invitations from requests and offers — often described as very much akin to invitations (Couper-Kuhlen. 2014; Clayman and Heritage, 2014) — concerns their being designed and understood as free from obligation, urgency or

need; a condition described as relevantly applying to requests (Drew and Couper-Kuhlen, 2014). By being the result of a voluntary decision based on the speaker's personal wish, invitations are important means for increasing social solidarity, maintaining interpersonal relationships and creating social cohesion. All these circumstances have consequences for the way in which speakers construct this activity. For instance, as shown in the papers here included, inviters tend to be very cautious in accomplishing this action, sometimes even at the risk of being equivocal (Drew, this issue). In addition, inviters show attentiveness to the invitees' conditions, as determinant for their acceptance, interspersing their invitations with references to recipients' ability or willingness to participate (Couper-Kuhlen, 2014; Clayman and Heritage, 2014; Margutti and Galatolo, this issue; Yu, this issue).

For these reasons, invitations are interesting objects for investigating the *association between linguistic forms, contextual features and pragmatic inferences* in interaction; and for understanding what are the principles to which speakers orient when doing one specific action and for doing it in a particular way.¹

1.2 Data and method

The papers here included use data from seven languages, including Chinese, English, Farsi, Finnish, French, Greek and Italian. Telephone calls have been audio-recorded in family homes, except for the paper on bank calls.

All the studies employ the perspective and methods of Conversation Analysis (CA) (Sacks, 1992; Sacks et al., 1974; Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Drew and Heritage, 1992; Drew, 2005; Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell and Stivers, 2012). CA is a qualitative, empirical and inductive method for analyzing social interaction. The main goal of CA is to identify, describe and account for the orderly and recurrent methods, or practices, that speakers use to accomplish social actions within interaction. CA starts from the perspective that ordinary conversation is the primordial site of social life (Schegloff, 1995: 186; Drew, 2005: 74) and that participants draw on the sequential organization of interaction and on the features of turn design and turn-taking to construct and understand their own and others' social conduct.

¹ See Pomerantz and Heritage (2012) for a discussion of the preference organization for first actions. and Drew and Couper-Kuhlen (2014) for the principles that speakers follow for requesting in interaction (pp. 13-16).

1.3 Prior research on inviting

Invitations have been investigated from different perspectives and traditions, which we will briefly review here. The first issue we review concerns the characterization of the action of inviting, as related to the implications, analytic categories and dimensions in each analytic approach. The second issue concerns the feasibility and significance of cross-linguistic comparison of actions with authentic data.

1.3.1 The action of inviting: implications, categories and dimensions

Speech-act theory

The nature of the act of inviting was first addressed in early philosophical investigations within speech act theory. The prominent analytical interest of these studies was the classifications and the identification of categories of actions (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1976, 1979) that are substantiated by classes of utterances (Searle, 1976, 16-23)². Invitations very soon were targeted for their ‘hybrid’ nature (Bach and Harnish, 1979; Hancher, 1979; Pérez Hernández, 2001; Eslami, 2005). They were described as belonging simultaneously to two kinds of illocutionary acts, the commissive and the directive types (Searle, 1979). While their commissive nature accounts for the inviter’s commitment to some future course of action, the directive part casts on the act of inviting the attempt “by the speaker to get the hearer to do something” (Searle, 1979: 11). In these analysis, invitations share this hybrid nature with other speech acts: *Offering, tendering, bidding, inviting, volunteering*, and formal *challenging* (Hancher, 1979, 6).

This twofold nature of inviting has consequences. First, these two forces, neither of which dominates, are held responsible for the *equivocal* nature of these acts (Hancher, 1979, 6):

The equivocal nature of commissive directives makes them natural vehicles for social and psychological equivocation. In particular, the directive aspects of offering and inviting can be hidden, for either speaker or hearer (or both), behind the appearances of a generosity of commitment on the speaker's part. Offering, like inviting, is a

² For a description of the divergence between the line of research conducted by Austin and Searle, and Sacks’ path of inquiry, with respect to their analytic goals and strategies, see Schegloff (1992), Drew and Heritage (1992) and Levinson (2012).

potentially manipulative act, for it can be obvious (in a given case) that the act is commissive, but not obvious that it is directive as well (Hancher, 1979, 7).

In this special issue, the *equivocality* of invitations has been specifically and cogently addressed by Drew (this issue). Drew's conception of this dimension differs from that of Hancher above by its being empirically grounded in the direct observation of a "range of construction formats, including 'incomplete' invitations, negative constructions and conditional constructions" (Drew, this issue). As we will see, this feature has emerged as recurrently appearing in almost all the corpora and languages examined here.

The second consequence highlighted by Hancher concerns the fact that, owing to the directive force added to the commissive one, "Commissive-directives all look towards completion in some response by the hearer" (Hancher 1979, 7), whereby these acts are also labelled "cooperative illocutionary acts" (p.7) — a definition that indexes stronger attention for the *interactive dimension* within this tradition of studies:

But commissive directives are different from simple directives, because the responses ought to be itself illocutionary in nature, and can give rise to a peculiarly complex illocutionary situation — in effect, to a cooperative illocutionary act. (p.7)

This special issue precisely investigates the cooperative dimension in interaction, as is substantiated by *actions-in-sequence*; this being intrinsically built into the CA methodological approach, as compared to the other analytic perspectives. Rather than searching for "rules or definitions of type of actions" (Schegloff, 1992, xxviii), here we look at invitations applying what Schegloff suggests was the core of Sacks' analytic strategy:

How shall we as analysts describe the terms in which participants analyze and understand, from moment to moment, the contexted character of their lives, their current and prospective circumstances, the present moment — how to do this when the very terms of that understanding can be transformed by a next bit of conduct by one of the participants (for example a next action can recast what has preceded as "having been leading up to this"). Clearly enough, these questions are of a radically different character than those which are brought to prominence in an undertaking like that of Searle, or Austin (1962) before him (Schegloff, 1992, xxviii).

The papers here included attempt to apply this program on the grounds that "the recognition of an action is a complex process in which successive actions interlock to function as ways of validating, adjusting or invalidating the actions to which they respond" (Clayman and Heritage, 2014).

Pragmatic and politeness theories

The linguistic practices and the pragmatic inferences of speakers in the management of inviting are relevant for another tradition of research in linguistic pragmatics: the study of

politeness rules, maxims and strategies (Leech, 1983, 2014; Brown and Levinson, 1987). As the articles in this issue demonstrate, speakers adjust their verbal conduct to the contextual features of the social event to which the other is invited; thus, either adopting a brief and straight-to-the-point format, or a more protracted, delicate or ambiguous construction (cf. Drew, this issue; Traverso et al., this issue). In pragmatic linguistics these issues belong to the domain of politeness and directness.

According to Leech (1983), invitations are acts representing politeness. His model derives from Grice's conversational maxims (Grice 1975), to which he adds a set of other politeness maxims, reflecting the speakers' pragmatic inferences in the performance of indirect speech acts. Leech considers speech acts equivalent to the transaction of goods or services between, whereby invitations (as well as offers) are described as central to politeness:

[...] it is fairly central to politeness that it involves the passing of some kind of *transaction of value* between the speaker and the other party. For example, [...]; in making an offer or invitation we offer *something* to the invitee. The "something" referred to here is something of value (either material or abstract) that is supposed to pass from one person to the other (Leech, 2014, 8)

The "weightiness of the transaction" between the parties on a cost-benefit scale (Leech, 2014, 107) intersects other analytic categories such as *self* and *other*. So, for instance, invitations (as well as offers) are considered to be polite *because* they benefit the recipient (*other*) and involve a cost to the speaker (*self*) (Leech, 1983).

The other important framework proposing an account for indirectness and politeness is the model by Brown and Levinson (1987). Although this theory was also initially inspired by speech act theory and by Grice's implicatures, it actually proposes a different view on politeness. Quite soon the authors distanced themselves from the initial direction and adopted categories of knowledge more directly demonstrable: "speech act theory forces a sentence-based, speaker-oriented mode of analysis, requiring attribution of speech act categories where our own thesis requires that utterances are often equivocal in force" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, 10).³ Their model views politeness as a socially controlled phenomenon (p. 4), in which very different types of conduct and interactional phenomena interrelate: from very specific linguistic phenomena (adverbial-clauses, hedges or impersonal verbs), to actions (offers, promises, apologies), including larger courses of actions (jokes, gossip, small talk).

³ Note that the "equivocal" nature of actions returns here.

More recently, Couper-Kuhlen (2014) has addressed some of the categories just reviewed (benefit, agency, self and other) in the performance of offers, requests, suggestions and proposals. She argues that these dimensions are responsible of the “standard linguistic formats” speakers associate to each type of action (644-645), as indicated by the small amount of overlapping forms across the different sets of actions. Invitations, however, are categorized as part of the larger category of offers (footnote 15, 638).

Cross-cultural/linguistic pragmatics

Despite Brown and Levinson’s aim to find out speakers’ assumptions behind the universal strategies of verbal interaction across three different languages (1987, 57), their book *Politeness: some universals in language use* inspired studies of cross-linguistic pragmatics and of ethnography of speaking whose main interest was to provide an explanation for the different linguistic realization of speech acts as associated to diverse conceptions of politeness as culturally based. Within this tradition, the CCSARP (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project) by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) was the first systematic work. Requests, apologies and complaints by speakers of different languages were explored using data elicited through specially devised written role-plays (DCT or Discourse Completion Tests). This study opened to the “exploration of the speech act as a cultural phenomenon” (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989: 5), with two main consequences for the notion of action they applied.⁴ First, the DCT evoked fixed situations in which the speech act was proposed as realized through a *single turn*, detached from the larger interactional setting where the action arises, develops and is answered, as in authentic interactions. Second, the analytical apparatus used to describe the realization of these acts became extremely detailed (i.e., alerts, modifiers, head-act, etc.) and politeness strategies were re-considered and re-ordered along the poles of directness/indirectness.

Studies that have adopted this cross-cultural framework to compare invitations in different languages are scarce compared with those on other speech acts. For some of these (cf. Wolfson 1981, 1989), interest for invitations intersected with that of identifying the cultural norms used by native speakers, recognizable to language learners. Wolfson distinguishes *ambiguous* from *unambiguous* invitations, as linked to a combination of grammatical features and the explicit reference to the time of the future social event. Although based on a more elaborated framework, the work by Isaacs and Clark (1990) on

⁴ See Sidnell (2009) for a review of the main differences between cross-linguistic/cultural pragmatics and CA.

English invitations elaborates on Wolfson's notion of *ambiguity* into that of *sincerity*. They contrast genuine and sincere invitations with insincere and ostensible invitations, using a set of five properties and seven features that are reminiscent of Searle's felicity conditions. Subsequently, this analytic framework was employed by Eslami (2005) to compare Isaacs and Clark's findings for English invitations with Persian invitations. Other studies on invitations combined the model of speech act theory with politeness frameworks with a different focus, as in Bella (2009), where politeness strategies preferred by younger and older participants are compared.

1.3.2 Comparative issues in Conversation Analysis

Our approach in these studies is rather different from speech act analysis, a Gricean 'conversational maxims' approach or politeness theory; we are not trying to identify the 'felicity conditions' that need to be fulfilled in order to perform a speech act, nor are we attempting to explicate how invitations relate to maxims of some sort, or to putative rules of politeness. The conversation analytic studies represented here explore how the design and (sequential) management of invitations, in each of our languages, is shaped by participants' orientations to the interactional contingencies out of which invitations emerge. One main dimension of analysis is turn design, as outlined below:

[...] a turn-at-talk is contingent in some fashion on the other's prior turn, and sets up contingencies of its own for what comes next, for how the recipient will respond (turns-at-talk are, as Heritage, 1984b: 242 puts it, "context shaped and context renewing"). The contingent connections between a turn and its prior, and the contingencies one turn creates for a subsequent (responsive) turn, generate strings or sequences of connected turns, sequences that progress on the basis of our understanding of what one another was doing in his/her prior turn(s). By interaction, then, we mean the contingently connected sequences of turns in which we each "act," and in which the other's — our recipient's — response to our turn relies upon, and embodies, his/her understanding of what we were doing and what we meant to convey in our (prior) turn. (Drew, 2012, 363)

The other dimension is the comparative issue. CA's method of analysis is *intrinsically comparative* (ten Have, 1999; Hakkana et al., 2009). In his first lecture Sacks (1992) compares the opening exchanges from a collection of telephone calls to an emergency psychiatric hospital. From the juxtaposition of the ways in which the conversation develops in the two examples, Sacks discovers and conceptualizes some of the basic conversational phenomena that will develop in later CA research. At the same time, he provides a method of

analysis that accounts for particular exchanges as cases from the abstract phenomenon under examination (Sacks, 1992: 11). The distinctively comparative method used by Sacks is described by ten Have as follows:

[...] Sacks' strategy was to compare instances which were similar in terms of their institutional setting (the psychiatric emergency service), their structural location (a call's opening), and the basic procedures (paired actions), but different in the ways in which these were used. (ten Have, 1999, 14)

Since then, the comparison of instances from a collection has become the basic operation on CA studies. (Wootton, 1989; ten Have, 1999; Curl and Drew 2008).⁵ By working with collections of similar instances of the same recognized phenomenon (*within-type comparison*, ten Have, 1999, 131) it is possible to identify the practices speakers methodically and recurrently use in dealing with that specific task. However, the relevance of comparison in CA is brought to the foreground when the patterns more frequently and regularly used are confronted with some deviant conduct. Schegloff's (1968) analysis of one deviant case in the opening sequences of telephone calls to and from the complaint desk of a police department (p.1093, ft.n.1) exemplifies the comparative basis of CA method..

A different type of comparison, perhaps more typical of CA studies, is the comparison of different speech-exchange systems (ceremonies, debates, trials, seminars, therapy meetings, etc.), and their divergence from that of informal conversation, taken as the "basic form of speech-exchange system" (Sacks et al., 1974: 730). This *across-type comparison* (ten Have, 1999, 131) has been quite extensively addressed by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (Sacks et al., 1973: 729-731), and it has opened up a prolific field in the study of interactions in institutional settings (Drew and Heritage, 1992). The comparative nature of this type of research consists in treating *ordinary conversation as a comparison* against which forms of interaction in other settings, such as the courtroom (Atkinson and Drew, 1979), the classroom (McHoul, 1978; Mehan, 1979), medical consultations (Heath, 1992; Heritage and Maynard,

⁵A complete discussion of CA analytical method is beyond our purpose here; however, the importance of comparison in CA and of the use of collections as fundamental steps in CA analytical methodology is often stressed in the articles by Gail Jefferson. Almost all her papers include a narrative section about the whole analytic process since when a phenomenon is noticed and a collection made. By way of mentioning only some of her papers that include such inspiring narratives, see Jefferson (1986, 1988, 2004, 2007). More recently, the paper by Curl and Drew (2008) on requesting has a quite extensive narration of the way in which collections were made, phenomena conceived and cases compared, including deviant cases.

2006) or news interviews (Heritage and Clayman, 2002) are analyzed to identify the systematic variations between them and mundane conversation (Drew and Heritage, 1992).⁶

Another comparative dimension that is especially relevant to our purposes here is the cross-cultural/linguistic perspective, consisting in “the analysis of the *same practice* in *two* (or more) *different languages*” (Schegloff, 2009: 374; italics in original).⁷ This dimension has attracted the interest of CA analysts only recently, with a couple of studies of self-repair practices in English and Japanese (Hayashi, 1994; Fox, Hayashi and Jaspersen, 1996). In the early years of CA, research was conducted largely on American and British English data (exceptions being e.g. Moerman’s (1987) study of Thai conversations). This rested on the *emic* stance in CA research, according to which analysis should be based not on external (etic) categories or perspectives, but on those that members of a culture use in making sense of their social and physical world. Because it would prove very difficult to analyze non-native language data without superimposing on participants’ conduct values and beliefs from the analyst’s own cultural world, it has been difficult for CA analysts to work on data produced in languages and cultures different from their own (Schegloff, 2009, 372-373). Another reason that might have prevented the development of cross-linguistic comparative studies in CA might be related to its empirical nature, as well as its being based on naturally occurring data — conditions that have made it difficult to identify a stable object of comparison.

The onset of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic interest in CA stemmed from two seminal papers by Schegloff and Sacks (1973) and Schegloff (1986) based on telephone interactions, originating a consistent body of studies on telephone interactions, both between members of the same culture (Hopper, 1989; Hopper et al. 1990; Hopper and Drummond, 1992; Houtkoop-Steenstra, 1991; Lindström, 1994) and across cultures (Godard, 1977; Halmari, 1993; Hopper and Koleilat Doany, 1989).⁸ Very soon, two main positions came to the fore. One, the so-called “universalist” position (ten Have, 2002; Schegloff, 2002),⁹ considers the socially organized patterns identified in American English data (e.g. the

⁶ The references we made here are not intended to be exhaustive for the field of institutional CA, which counts, by now, an exorbitant number of studies. We mentioned here only the earlier seminal works, or collective publications in which these are included, for each institutional setting.

⁷ In the paragraphs in which we discuss the relation between CA and the cross-linguistic perspective, we will refer quite extensively to the final chapter in Sidnell (2009), in which Schegloff draws his conclusion and comments on this type of endeavor in CA.

⁸ See Luke and Pavlidou 2002 for a more detailed revision of the salient literature.

⁹ Particularly relevant to this topic is the work by Hopper (1992) and that of Houtkoop-Steenstra (1991). See ten Have (2002) and Schegloff (2002) for a detailed review of these works and their relevance for the debate universalism/variationism and culture specificity in interaction.

“canonical opening” in Schegloff 1986) a model applicable to similar interactions in other languages and cultures. Without disregarding the possible variations to the “standard” format, each variant in the concrete realization of action reflects and embodies the specific conditions and contingencies of each interaction, rather than being determined by the linguistic or cultural systems. As argued by ten Have (2002), the universalist position does not deny eventual changes over time in the recognizable standard ways of communication. The other position, by contrast, works from the assumption that significant differences in the organization of talk between members of different speech and cultural communities are determined by some cultural values and linguistic constraints, external to the situated conditions in which the interaction takes place — a position endorsed by some of the studies reviewed above in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics.

CA is interested in both what speakers do as “a matter of course,” and in “what they had done *over and above* what is canonical for openings, or in a fashion *different* from the default forms of openings (if there are any), and also what they had *not* done.” (Schegloff 2002: 250-51). Schegloff summarizes the comparative relevance of studies of languages other than English thus:

It would be a welcome development in future work in this area if investigators who have been able to specify dimensions of variations or alternative forms of realizations in this or that cultural context (as is the case in several chapters in this volume) could go on to explore and specify the import of some form not, in the first instance, by contrast to what is done in other cultures *but as a type of move-in-interaction within the culture in which it is found*. (Schegloff, 2002, 264)

This position is present in the seminal paper by Sacks et al. (1974) on turn-taking (fn. 10, 700 and 43, 729), where the authors discuss the cross-cultural validity of the turn-taking system and provide references confirming its consistency across languages or language communities.¹⁰ Wootton (1989) touches, albeit obliquely, on the debate on universalism/cultural variationism and on the role of linguistic and language-specific dimension, as when he remarks that:

I use the term ‘population of interactants’ rather than ‘members of a speech community’ because there are some suggestions that certain of the organizations located by conversation analysts may be discoverable in societies quite disparate from those in which these organizations were originally located (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1978). (Wootton, 1989, 255)

¹⁰ Schegloff (2009) discusses this claim in more detail.

More recently, the debate around universals/cultural and language specificity has been addressed by Enfield and Stivers (2007), who argue that the evidence of a robust universal framework of infrastructures for conversation is not contradictory to there being other features that are language and culture specific (Sidnell, 2009; Stivers, Enfield and Levinson, 2010).

1.4 Invitation: a ‘good partial definition’ (a reprise)

In section 1.1 we offered a provisional characterization of the action of inviting; and from what we have said so far it will be clear that the primary interest of CA is with *actions*. Linguistic (and paralinguistic) resources play a fundamental role in the speakers’ designing their turns in such a way as to *make recognizable* their actions to their interlocutors,¹¹ Indeed, the choice of the most appropriate linguistic resources play a crucial part in the construction of the particular kind of action being accomplished in that precise moment, having that precise nature, and being addressed to that particular interlocutor. However, from a CA perspective, the linguistic and paralinguistic features are not relevant *per se*, but they rather serve “to grammaticalize the contextual properties” of the particular sequential environment in which the action is done and the contextual condition associated to the action itself. (Drew, 2012, 398). This has consequences for the cross-linguistic, cross-cultural analysis of actions, some of which we will draft below.

The first observation concerns whether cross-linguistic comparison of social actions is indeed feasible, considering the context-reflexive nature of social actions. Because each action (activity or project) being carried out in interaction *is a particular one*, its features and dimensions cannot be taken for granted as “natural” on the basis of its abstract belonging to pre-determined categories of action types (requests, offers, invitations, apologies and the like). Ultimately, when we use one of these terms to indicate a specific action,¹² we refer either to *one variant of that action*, that is recognizable to us, or to *a variety of ways in which speakers accomplish recognizably similar actions* (interactional tasks) or solve a similar problem, each in different contextual conditions. So, the question is: What exactly do we analyze or compare when we label conduct as an “invitation”? For this reason, one limitation

¹¹ For an illuminating example of this point, see the analysis of the first example proposed by Drew (2012). Relevant to our focus here is also the analysis of invitations in fragments 18a, 19 and 18b.

¹² In this regard, see Sidnell (2017).

of our study might be whether we have set out with an intuitive conception of the action, for which the term “invitation” is merely a gloss (Sidnell, 2017, 322). The solution comes from Schegloff. In what follows, he outlines one of the prototypical ways in which a piece of CA research might be accomplished:

The conversational-analyst notices what *seems transparently to be a recognizable Action A*: complaining, hedging, joking, disagreeing, etc., — and other participants respond in ways that display that they have understood it as A; and the analyst asks what it is or what was about that talk, what practice of talking and other conduct has issued in the constitution of a recognizable Action A and its recognition of it as A by co-interactants? (Schegloff, 2009, 376; italics added)

The object of analysis of our project (in Schegloff’s words, our “Action A”) is *the action of inviting as we recognize it, as participants recognize it, and as it was designed to be so recognised*. Also, because we are interested in invitations occurring in conversations over the phone, this poses specific limitations to the contextual conditions for its realization. One being that in our data recipients are invited to participate in *future* social events, rather than being invited to take place in an ongoing and present activity, as may sometimes happen in face-to-face interactions. It is on this regard that Sacks’ observations below, concerning an invitation performed in face-to-face interaction in a therapy group, are particularly relevant to our purpose:

We want to be able to build a method which will provide for some utterance as a ‘recognizable invitation.’ Two tasks - at least - are involved, and these two are closely related. One task is to construct what I’ll call a ‘partial definition of an invitation.’ What makes it partial is that, while it is a way of doing invitations, it is clearly not all the ways. There are other ways, and those would be other partial definitions.” (Sacks, 1992: 300)

This has very important consequences for how invitations are formed, in terms of the linguistic, para-linguistic and corporeal resources that speakers employ in performing action. As we will see in the papers here included, although speakers use embody what is recognizable as extending an invitation, they are variants of it. In each, speakers select among the resources available to them, in that precise moment and in that environment, only those that serve to address the specific contextual conditions that are relevant for accomplishing the action. Therefore, our description of invitations in section 1.1 is only *one* of the many potential partial definitions of the act of inviting, and involves a distinctive configuration of contextual conditions and dimensions, as compared with the alternative realization of the

same type of action in other contexts and situations.¹³ Accordingly, the relevance of our work for previous research on invitations is more related to the identification of the dimensions that speakers display as relevant in inviting during telephone conversations, and which are generalizable across our corpora, rather than to the search for the linguistic or cultural differences between them.

1.5 Inviting over the phone: the contextual dimensions of the action

All the articles in this special issue focus on the interconnected work of the inviters, in constructing and delivering the action, and of the recipients, in understanding and responding to it. The contributions demonstrate how inviters select those practices that enable them to tailor the action to the interactional contingencies in which the invitation takes place, with reference to the following contextual dimensions: (i) the *moment* in the call, (ii) the *recipients' conditions* in relation to the invitation and to the social event to which they are invited, and (iii) the *type of social event* represented in the invitation. Concerning the first dimension, three positions have emerged as significant, along with some variants: the invitation is the reason for the call and it appears in the opening of the call; the invitation is triggered by something previously said and occurs during the conversation; it is produced toward the closing of the call. With respect to the second dimension, all our contributions have found that, in most cases, speakers display a certain cautiousness (or 'equivocality'), as evidenced by the preference for formats conveying *low assertiveness* and *high indeterminacy*. The third dimension is the *type of social event* that is described in the invitation. In what follows we will introduce the papers, outlining how these three main dimensions are addressed in each contribution.

1.5.1 The articles

¹³ For example, Sacks proposes the following partial definition of the face to face invitation in the therapy group: "If a new person comes into some place where there is some set of persons engaged in, for example, talk, then one of the pre-present persons can make an invitation to the entrant by using a phrase to start off with, like "We were doing," plus the naming of some activity that is something like 'category bound' to a category which, once made relevant -and it's made relevant by the naming of the activity- can be seen convergently to hold for some part of the pre-present persons and the entrant." (Sacks, 1992, 301).

The analysis of invitations in English by Drew highlights their cautious nature, conceptualizing the feature of *equivocality*. Drew views this connected to the lack of assertiveness and indeterminacy shared by the diverse linguistic, lexical and syntactical formats inviters use. Because subsequent contributions refer, in one way or another, to such cautiousness or equivocality, although realized with different linguistic solutions in each corpus, the paper serves as an introduction. Moreover, Drew discusses the initiating character (or *firstness*) of social actions, and specifically, of invitations, explicating the implications for their sequential deployment in the conversation, with reference to the two main positions in the call: the reason-for-calling and the interactionally-generated types. Drew's contribution encompasses *all* the relevant dimensions which speakers orient to when doing invitations: "the sequential and *interactional circumstances* (environment) in which the invitation is being made, and the *kind of occasion* that is represented in the invitation" (Drew, this issue).

The following two papers each focus on invitations occurring in one of the two main interactional circumstances envisaged by Drew. The paper by Margutti and Galatolo focuses on reason-for-calling invitations in Italian, showing that they take three main formats; each with a different combination of syntactical features (affirmative or interrogative) and construction strategies (compact or extended construction). By using one of the three formats, speakers design the invitation to lean more toward its informative or requesting nature. In the first case, the inviter foregrounds information concerning the kind of occasion to which the recipient is invited; in the second, the action of requesting the recipients' company and their commitment is emphasized. The analysis shows that each function —informing and requesting — also connects to different ways of representing the social event as more of a pre-planned public occasion or as a more spontaneous and private one, with specific requirements on the recipients' commitment to the future activity.

Bella and Moser focus on the ways in which invitations in their Greek corpus are produced as occasioned by previous talk, giving invitations an impromptu character, in contrast to the pre-planned nature of those that, instead, are produced as the reason for the call. Authors show that many of these locally occasioned have a negative-interrogative construction, triggering the delayed acceptance by the recipient after a negotiation sequence in which the invitee exhibits hesitation. Following this delay, inviters re-issue the invitation, "providing further interactional evidence that they are actually committed to the invitation and that its acceptance is truly desirable." (Bella and Moser, this issue). They demonstrate that these invitations embody the inviters' orientation to eventual conditions projecting a

negative resolution whereas, at the same time, the delay of acceptance works as a specific practice whereby these invitations are recurrently repeated and reformulated by the inviters.

The focus of the paper by Taleghani-Nikazm similarly explores the relationship between the linguistic forms and the interactional environment in which invitations are produced in Farsi. Again, invitations that are the reason for the call and to pre-planned social occasions are compared to invitations that have been occasioned by prior talk. The paper shows that the first type of invitations is recurrently constructed with the imperative, whereas the latter is typically delivered with the interrogative format “do you want to X”. The author compares the second format with that which is regularly used for offers; thus, suggesting that with these invitations the inviter is understood as taking care of the recipients’ hypothetical state of need. In both the invitation types here analyzed, invitees’ rejections are met by inviters with the reissuing of the invitation and the removal of the grounds for rejection.

This link between the format of the invitation and the projected type of recipients’ response is the focus of the paper by Yu and Wu. The paper identifies the distributional pattern of three main formats in Chinese (Mandarin) invitations: imperatives, interrogatives and declaratives, together with other lexical features and constructional strategies. It is shown that, through each format, inviters project their assumptions about whether recipients would be able to accept the invitation, according to what the authors term the “success-scale” of the invitations. Their analysis also shows that the high degree of contingency involved in invitations affects the way the action is constructed and managed. Yu and Wu identify the pre-closing position in the call as relevant for the design and understanding of this type of invitation, arguing that invitations in this position are produced for “ritual functions” and that this pro-forma nature determines their being free from taking into account any constraints on the inviter’s side.

Like the paper on inviting in Chinese, Routarinne and Tainio’s investigation of inviting in Finnish focuses on the syntactic and morphosyntactical features related to their sequential deployment in a call. They identify three basic syntactic structures: declarative, interrogative and imperative, albeit accompanied and combined with other grammatical variations. Routarinne and Tainio add to the granularity of our understanding of invitations another contingent circumstance in the making of reason-for-call invitations: the distinction between invitations that are totally *new* for the recipient and those that are *reissued* after a prior first instance in a preceding call or conversation. In line with the preceding papers, their analysis shows that recipients do not have strong obligations for accepting, with the inviter being the party sustaining the major responsibility for the action.

The French corpus examined by Traverso, Ticca and Ursi is mostly composed of reason-for-calling invitations to pre-planned social occasions. The paper connects to the Finnish article for its interest on how participants embody the inviter/invitee identities. Their analysis investigates the step-by-step development of the interaction, showing how participants take up these identities along with the progressive construction of the action. One common feature of these sequences is the use of indirect questioning formats “*je t’appelais pour savoir si*” (I was calling you to know if), “*je ne sais pas si*” (I don't know if), “*je voulais savoir si*” (I wanted to know if), and the like. Other recurrently used features such as hesitation markers, pauses, repairs and lengthening display the speakers’ particular cautiousness in accomplishing this “delicate action”, as is termed in the paper. Once again, the analysis emphasizes features that belong to the “equivocal” or “indirect” dimension of invitations.

De Stefani’s study of calls by an Italian bank employee to her clients closes the special issue. Owing to their institutional purpose, all the examples analyzed here are cases of invitations located and designed as the reason for the call. De Stefani identifies two main formats, each associated with two different conditions in the clients’ status motivating the call. In one case, the employee calls to sell new products. The call opens with an announcement in which the intention of inviting the client to meet is delivered with a declarative clause. In the other case, the employee uses an interrogative format to invite clients to meet at the bank because they have lost their privileged access to some services. The analysis shows that these two formats have different sequential consequences for the clients’ responses, demonstrating that very specific different contextual conditions can account for the grammatical choices which speakers employ in accomplishing a recognizably similar action. Furthermore, also in these institutional invitations, and in line with those in ordinary conversations, participants display that invitees can be relieved from expressing their commitment to the invitation.

Thus, in various ways all the studies in this special issue demonstrate that, across each of these languages, speakers deliver what Drew refers to as “equivocal invitations.” This is associated with a range of constructional solutions (including lexicon, syntax, morphology, and other features such as pauses, hesitations, repairs and the like) according to the different languages examined. This phenomenon links to a general grammatical incompleteness of the formats and to their lack of assertiveness. Invitations of this type convey a sense of cautiousness and delicacy on the inviters’ side and hold back from soliciting recipients to commit themselves.

To conclude, we return to the two main goals that guided this special issue - to gain a deeper understanding of the action of inviting as an interactional task, and to reflect on the feasibility and relevance of comparative analysis of actions across languages. Concerning the first goal, this special issue offers a unique picture of invitations cross-linguistically, at the intersection of speakers' language choices in the languages here represented and the contextual conditions thus made relevant. In this regard, we believe that our project offers what can be termed a description of the "infrastructure" of the action of inviting: a constellation of the contextual conditions and contingencies participants display as relevant in extending invitations to friends and family members over the phone. We argue this can work as a template for this specific type of invitation that can be tested against other corpora, languages and settings.

As for the second of our objectives, concerning the feasibility and relevance of comparing social actions across languages, indeed, much follows from what was stated above. However, it is worth adding that, having restricted our analytic focus to invitations performed over the phone and addressed to relatives, friends and acquaintances (but see the paper by De Stefani to bank clients), we propose a model for comparing action formation in authentic data across languages, in which the dilemma between the need to maintain the object of study stable for comparison (as in "truly" comparative studies) and that of preserving the empirical and inductive approach to naturally occurring data (as in the CA tradition) has been resolved.

In this, our work differs from other comparative research trends that have focused on other interactional dimensions within Conversation Analysis and ethnographic approaches. For one of these research trends the object of comparison is the description of larger sequential units such as service encounters, radio talk-shows, research meetings, small trade exchanges, and the like, in two or more languages and cultures (Traverso 2000, 2001 and 2006 on radio talk-shows and services in France and Syria, Luke and Pavlidou on telephone calls in 8 languages 2002). These analyses concern the type and forms of practices (types of activities, routines and rituals, forms of turns, politeness markers, terms of address, etc.) that relates to and map the situation and activity at hand. By contrast, in studies belonging to another recently established research trend, the comparative issue is addressed by focusing on more local or micro-interactional practices across a larger variety of languages. For instance, the object of comparison of these studies is the pragmatics of question-answer sequences in everyday social interaction (Stivers, Enfield and Levinson 2010), documenting a wide range of social actions implemented by questions (information-seeking, repair initiation, requesting

and assessing) through a coding scheme specifically devised for analysing conversation (Stivers, Enfield 2010). Other studies within this trend have focused on different features and mechanisms of interaction, such as repair (Dingemanse, Torreira and Enfield, 2013; Dingemanse, Blythe and Dirksmayer, 2014; Dingemanse et al. 2015; Dingemanse and Enfield 2015; Enfield et al., 2013), timing in turn-taking (Stivers et al. 2009; Roberts, Margutti and Takano, 2011).

Rather than focusing on the interactional and linguistic practices as related to types of events and their structure, or on more local or micro-interactional practices, here we have opened up comparison across languages to other issues, concerning how *one recognizable social action* develops, from its earlier inception to recipients' understanding and responses.

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