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The Discourse of Voicemail

Abstract

This paper attempts to determine to what degree voicemail messages can be considered a discourse genre – that is, to what degree and in what ways they appear to be uniform across speakers. Thirty-seven voice messages were recorded from the cellular phones of three University of Michigan students. The messages were analyzed in terms of their overall structure, the discursive functions that were executed therein, and the specific words, phrases and prosodic strategies that were used to execute certain functions. The messages were found to have highly uniform openings and closings, and the message bodies were found to reduce to a small set of discursive functions. In addition, certain words, phrases and devices appeared frequently and in predictable locations within the messages. It is concluded that voicemail message-leaving is a highly structured act governed by conventions that arise both from face-to-face conversation and from the specific constraints of the medium.

1. Introduction

In an age in which technology increasingly facilitates long-range communication, voicemail has become a ubiquitous feature of American life. Voicemail systems of one kind or another are widespread in both domestic and institutional contexts, and the ability to leave an effective and appropriate message is an essential part of many people's lives.

Answering machines, the predecessors of modern digital voicemail¹, were originally used only by businesses or working professionals (Gold 1991: 243). Their usage spread, however, and by the mid 80's the an-

¹ The terms "voicemail," and "voice message" are used synonymously throughout the paper, and there is not meant to be any distinction between answering machines and modern voicemail systems. Although the technology has changed, the communicative task facing a person who wishes to leave a message is essentially the same.

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swering machine was “an expected feature of everyday life” (Dubin 1987: 28). The advent and proliferation of cellular telephones has not only increased the importance of voicemail in our lives; it has also changed its function. Voicemail no longer serves just as a medium for service transactions; it is an important social channel through which relationships are built and maintained.

Voicemail is a form of **mediated interactional discourse**; i.e. communication that does not involve the participants being face-to-face. The mediating factor brings with it a particular set of communicative challenges that shape the discourse that is produced. With voicemail, the caller is attempting to communicate with the callee, but the two are not interacting in real-time. In other words, unlike in an actual conversation (whether live or by telephone), “the course of the action [i.e. the course of the caller’s message] does not depend on coordination and synchronization of reciprocal action” (Alvarez-Caccamo/Knoblauch 1992: 474). While this constraint is common to other media such as letters, memos and email, voicemail is distinct in that it is an oral form of communication (Alvarez-Caccamo/Knoblauch 1992: 475). Essentially, callers “are compelled to perform an ironic task: They are to speak as if they are talking to a someone, or at the very least a something, when in fact they know they are not” (Gold 1991: 244).

That irony seems to be largely lost on us now. For most of us, (at least, for those on whom this study was conducted – i.e. students at a large American university), leaving voicemail is such a routine activity that we give little thought to the peculiarities of the medium.

This was not always the case, however. In the early days of answering machines, the prospect of having to leave a recorded message appeared to cause many people considerable anxiety (Gold 1991; Dingwall 1992; Dubin 1987). Perhaps it was unfamiliarity with the medium, the sense that there were no established conventions for leaving an oral message, or unease with the idea that one’s voice would be available for revision at a later date. One writer to *Dear Abby*² in 1979 who had purchased an answering machine shortly after they became available to the public complained that it was “a total flop. People kept call-

² *Dear Abby* is a widely-syndicated advice column that was started in 1956 by Pauline Phillips, who wrote under the pen name Abigail Van Buren. The column continues to be written today by Phillips’ daughter, Jeanne Phillips, under the same pseudonym.

ing and hanging up the minute they realized they were talking to a recording.” Abby’s suggestion: “Hire an answering service which performs the same duties as a private secretary. People who call you,” she advised, “want to speak to a real person, not to a machine” (quoted in Dubin 1987: 29). In fact, declining to leave a message seems to be the preferred strategy wherever answering machines and voicemail are relatively uncommon (Dingwall 1992).

With enough exposure, however, people overcome their inhibitions and learn to negotiate the constraints imposed by a particular communicative medium. Any “recurrent communicative problem” will give rise in time to what Luckmann (cited in Alvarez-Caccamo/Knoblach 1992: 476)³ calls “**communicative genres**”: “pre-cut communicative patterns which provide solutions” to these problems (Alvarez-Caccamo/Knoblach 1992: 476). This study aims to determine to what extent and in what ways voicemail has become such a genre.

Previous researchers have found in voice messages a three-part structure: an opening, a body, and a closing section (with one researcher including an optional ‘postscript’ section) (Alvarez-Caccamo/Knoblach 1992; Liddicoat, 1994; Gold, 1991). In addition, researchers have found that this structure remains constant across cultures (Alvarez-Caccamo/Knoblach 1992; Goutsos 2001; Liddicoat 1994).

This study adheres to this intuitive three-part model of voice messages, but it aims to take a closer look at the internal structure of each section. It describes the organizational structure of voice messages and seeks to answer the following questions: What **discursive functions** are executed, and which of those functions are most common? What specific phrases and strategies are used to execute each of these functions? To what degree are these phrases and strategies individual, and to what degree do they appear to be common to a wider culture? What discursive and prosodic strategies do people use to overcome the specific communicative challenges posed by voicemail? How much do voice messages follow a pre-set structure?

³ See Luckmann, Thomas 1989: Prologomena to a social theory of communicative genres. In *Slovene Studies* 11, 159-166, cited in Alvarez-Caccamo/Knoblach 1992: 476.

2. The data

Thirty-seven voice messages were recorded from the cellular phones of three University of Michigan students. The subjects are all between the ages of 18 and 20. All thirty-seven messages were received naturally; i.e., none of them was solicited for the purpose of this study. The messages were transcribed and for each message the subjects were asked to describe their relationship with the callee (close friend, parent, boss, co-worker, etc.) . The data comprises twenty-three speakers, several of whom left multiple messages. The data can be grouped as follows:

25 messages from 13 friends (all within two years of age of the subjects.)

5 messages from 4 acquaintances (all within two years of age of the subjects)

5 messages from 2 family members

3 messages from 3 institutions (2 from callee's place of work and 1 from a scholarship organization)

2.1. Transcription Conventions

Commas indicate short pauses; ellipses indicate longer ones. Periods mark the 'ends of sentences,' as defined primarily by 'prosody that creates a sense of conclusion' rather than by syntactic or semantic measures. XX indicates parts of the message that are indiscernible, while parentheses indicate speculative transcription of parts that are partially inaudible. An underscore marks a word that is phonetically lengthened (*so_*). A dash following a word marks a repair (messages [21] and [31] in Appendix). Names of persons are given as capital letters; a given letter or pair of letters represents the same person across all messages. Phone numbers are omitted, and the names of organizations and specific scholarships have been changed. (See Appendix for full transcriptions.)

3. The Message Opening

Speaker #	Message #	Message Text	Relationship of caller to callee
1.	[1]	Hey L...	Best friend
	[2]	Bitch,	
	[3]	Hey bitch, it's E.	
2.	[4]	Hey L this is B it's about five thirty Wednesday	Friend
3.	[5]	Hello, L, it's uh V, it's Wednesday, night around, oh god knows what time like seven o'clock, seven thirty. Seven thirty.	Friend
	[6]	So L, I haven't heard from you did you get my memo? [laughter] That's right bitch, it's me.	
4.	[7]	Hey L it's O,	Friend
5.	[8]	Hello, L, my love	Friend
6.	[9]	Hey L it's M.	Friend
7.	[10]	Hey L, this is C callin'	Acquaintance
8.	[11]	Hello. It's Q.	Friend
9.	[12]	L, it's A,	Friend
	[13]	Hey baby it's me.	
	[14]	Hi babe it's me.	
	[15]	Hey honey it's me.	
10.	[16]	Hey M, it's L,	Friend
	[17]	Hi M, it's L calling back,	
	[18]	Hi M it's L calling.	
11.	[19]	Hey M, it's O.	Acquaintance
	[20]	Hey M it's Dad.	Father
	[21]	Hey M it's Dad, um.	
	[22]	Hey M it's Dad,	
12.	[23]	Hey M um it's, just about ten o'clock	
13.	[24]	Hey M, it's Mom.	Mother
14.	[25]	Hey M this is Z	Acquaintance
15.	[26]	Hi M, it's D calling from Kargill.	Manager
16.	[27]	Hi M, it's T.	Friend
	[28]	Hey M it's T.	

17.	[29]	Hey M, it's E,	Friend
18.	[30]	Hey M it's L,	Friend
19.	[31]	Hi, M um my name is A and I'm calling from Kargill.	Co-worker
20.	[32]	Hello, this is SC calling from the Association of TJA about the Burgess Scholarship.	Scholarship Coordinator
21.	[33]	Hey A it's R, (it's) 11:40.	Acquaintance
	[34]	Hey, it's five o'clock,	
22.	[35]	Did you just tell me to apres trois? God that's so sick A. You're so twisted. Haha	Friend
	[36]	NO GREETING	
23.	[37]	Hey A it's J	Friend

Table 1. Openings in each of the 37 messages (Note: speaker and message numbers are for reference only and do not necessarily relate to the order in which the messages were received.)

Following transcription, the number of occurrences of salient discursive elements in the message openings was analyzed:

Greeting words	Hi	6
	Hello	4
	Hey	22
	Other openings: <i>Bitch</i> [2]; address by name with no greeting word [12]; jokes [6], [35]; no greeting [36]	5
Direct address to caller	Used callee's name	28
	Used another form of address (<i>bitch, honey, babe</i>)	4
Self-Identification	Identified self by name	26
	Identified self without name (<i>it's me</i>)	4
	No self-identification	7
Other	Identified time of call	5
	No opening	1

Table 2. Frequency of occurrence of various elements in the message openings

There are three basic elements that typically appear in the message opening, in the following order: (1) a greeting word such as *hi*, *hey* or *hello*; (2) direct address to the callee, and (3) self-identification.

The message typically opens with a greeting word. The most common one in this data set is *hey*. The three institutional messages do not begin with *hey*, which, along with this author's intuition as a native speaker, suggests that it is a word best reserved for interaction with peers and family members. *Hi* and *hello* were the only other greeting words that appeared, though in far lower frequency than *hey*.

There are only five messages in which none of these three opening words is used. Of these, four include some form of direct address, whether by name or by a moniker (e.g. *bitch*). In fact, 32 of the messages contain some sort of direct address, the most common form being the callee's name.

Finally, 30 out of 37 of the messages include some form of self-identification. Again, the most common method is for the caller to state his or her name (and, in the case of institutional messages, the organization on whose behalf he or she is calling). A few, however, opt for *it's me* in place of their name.

There was only one message that lacked a greeting or address altogether [36]. In all, 27 of the messages contain openings of the following form:

GREETING WORD – DIRECT ADDRESS – SELF-ID

The presence of all these opening elements is curious for two reasons. First, a greeting (i.e. greeting word and name) usually constitutes part of an **adjacency pair** (the second part being a response greeting). Since the callee is absent, however, the adjacency pair must go uncompleted. Secondly, self-identification seems to be redundant since most of the callers are readily identifiable to the callees by voice alone. (This fact was verified by the polled subjects.) In light of these peculiarities, what functions might these opening elements be serving?

It has been suggested that the communicative procedures for leaving a voice message have been simply adapted from existing techniques in telephone-based communication (Liddicoat 1994). It is possible that this typical opening sequence is a derivative from normal telephone openings and that its form has been preserved incidentally.

Alvarez-Caccamo and Knoblauch (1992: 496) have also convincingly demonstrated that voice messages, “instead of representing a disjunction in the verbal interactional history of any given pair of participants...are very productively embedded in such a history of callers and callees.” It seems that callers treat their messages as interactional, despite the asynchronicity between the caller and the callee. Perhaps the adjacency pair formed by the greeting and caller address is intended to be completed at some later date, or perhaps the caller is completing a pair that was initiated in previous interaction with the callee.

Gold (1991: 247) has also pointed out that “The bigger the mismatches in time and space between communicators, the more information that must be given in order to try and transcend the potential for miscommunication.” In real-time conversation with friends and family members, self-identification is inappropriate because it constitutes information that is presumed to be shared by both participants. It may be, however, that the need to avoid potential miscommunication via voicemail outweighs the pragmatic norms for when shared information needs to be made explicit (Gold 1991: 247).

I suggest that voicemail greetings also serve another practical function. In face-to-face interaction, participants are generally aware of each other’s identity before conversation begins. With voicemail, callers’ identities have to be established from their voices alone. If the caller were to launch into the body of the message without preamble, they would be burdening the message with a double task: making the identity of the caller known as well as carrying out whatever phatic or informational function it was designed to execute. The callee would be more likely to spend time processing who the message came from rather than apprehending its meaning. These formulaic opening sequences serve to prepare the callee, to give them time to set up in their minds a context for the message so that they can devote their cognitive resources to the body of the message.

Two of the openings depart from the normal schema in a noticeable manner: with something like a joke rather than a greeting word.

(Example 1)

So L, I haven’t heard from you did you get my memo? [laughter]
That’s right bitch, it’s me. [6]

Did you just tell me to apres trois? God that's so sick A. You're so twisted. Haha [35]

That these opening were intended to be humorous was evident not only from the altered tone of voice in which they were delivered, but from the fact that they concluded with laughter on the part of the message-leaver before normal tone was assumed for the body of the message. Though these messages differ in form from the majority, however, they in fact seem to still serve the same functions. First, they prepare the callee for the message by delaying the start of the body of the message. And, since both messages come from people who are close friends of the callees, their voices alone may serve as identification. (Note that caller [6] still identifies himself after his joke: *That's right bitch, it's me.*) Both callers still address the callee by name, showing that they are still in some sense adhering to the expected opening routine. Both also exhibit interactional/conversational language: they both involve questions posed to the callees, and the second one even contains, in the question *Did you just tell me to apres trois?*, a reference to the message prompt⁴. In fact, part of the humor may derive from the fact that the callers deliberately take the interactive element too far in a medium that does not afford synchronous interaction. Most questions in the data are phrased indirectly (*I was wondering if...*); the fact that these direct questions cannot be answered in real time is part of what makes these openings funny. They may also be funny because the callers are aware that they are breaking established procedure in their openings. Despite this break, however, these openings serve the same discursive functions as more typical openings.

Gold (1991: 252) has suggested that humor in voice messages may be a means of “mitigating discomfort (or irony)” arising from the peculiarity of the medium (parentheses hers). Again, such a sense of irony was probably much more common fifteen years ago when voice-mail was not so widespread, but it may be that there is still a lingering awareness of the mediating machine and that this awareness manifests as humor. Unfortunately, however, this study has no way of determin-

⁴ Although an analysis of how the content and structure of the message prompt affect the message that is left would certainly be interesting and fruitful, it is outside the scope of this study.

ing whether humor occurs more frequently in voice messages than in everyday conversation.

4. The Message Body

4.1. Message Structures and Functions

The following table contains a break-down of the discursive functions executed in the body of the voice messages and the order in which they appear. Discourse markers that mark boundaries between these functions are given in brackets at the location they occur at in the message. Because words like *so* may have not only a discursive, but a lexical function, discourse markers were only transcribed as such when they were accompanied by pauses or distinctive prosody that clearly marked unit boundaries.

Speaker #	Message #	Message Text	Relationship
1.	[1]	Opening, [pause], joke, [um], justification, [um], call request, [and um], caller info, [so um], call request, joke, [so], closing	Best friend
	[2]	Opening, joke, [alright, well um], call request, [and um], caller info, joke, [so um uh, yeah], call request, closing	
	[3]	Opening, [um], callee information, [so um...], call request, [um], caller info, callee information, [um], call request, humor, [so um], call request, closing	
2.	[4]	Opening, justification, caller info, invitation, well wishing, closing	Friend
3.	[5] ⁵	**	Friend
	[6]	**	
4.	[7]	opening, [uh], call request, closing	Friend

⁵ **These two messages were too long to productively transcribe and segment. The middle parts have been omitted, and only the openings and closings were used for analysis.

5.	[8]	opening, justification, call request, callee information, [so], well wishing, [right], closing	Friend
6.	[9]	opening, apology/justification, request, [um], caller info, [so], request, [so-], response request/closing	Friend
7.	[10]	opening, justification, callee info, [umm, XX, yeah], call request, closing	Acquaintance
8.	[11]	opening, justification, call request, justification/explanation, call request, closing	Friend
9.	[12]	opening, justification, request (for company), caller info, same request, closing	Friend
	[13]	opening, request, [um], justification, [so], thanks, [uh], call request, invitation, closing	
	[14]	opening, justification/invitation, caller info, [soo], explanation, [so um...], call request, well wishing, closing	
	[15]	opening, request, explanation, [um so yeah], call request, closing	
10.	[16]	opening, [um], caller information, [so], closing	Friend
	[17]	opening, [um], justification, caller information, [so yeah], call request/invitation, caller information, [umm], invitation, [so], call request, joke, [so], call request	
	[18]	opening, [um], justification/joke, laughter, [um], caller info, [so, um,], justification, [anyway], caller info, [so], call request, thanks, [um, otherwise,] closing	

11.	[19]	opening, news, [um], request/ command, joke, laughter, closing	Acquaintance
12.	[20]	opening, [um], caller info, joke, [so], closing	Father
	[21]	opening, [um], justification, [um], request, [umm, so yeah], caller info, closing	
	[22]	opening, justification, [umm], caller info, caller info, request, [anyway], closing	
	[23]	opening, caller info, [and uh. anyway uh], call request, [and uh, and uh], closing	
13.	[24]	opening, justification/ information, [so], well wishing, response request, closing	Mother
14.	[25]	opening, [umm], request, [uh], explanation, [so], call request, closing	Acquaintance
15.	[26]	opening, justification/ explanation, call request, closing	Manager
16.	[27]	opening, justification/apology, [um], explanation, well wishing, [um], call request, invitation, closing	Friend
	[28]	opening, justification, [um], explanation, [umm], response request, [um], well wishing, closing	
17.	[29]	opening, [um], justification, [so uhh], closing	Friend
18.	[30]	opening, [um], justification/ explanation, [uh, yeah], call request, closing	Friend
19.	[31]	opening, justification, [umm], explanation, [so um, yeah], call request, closing	Co-worker
20.	[32]	opening, apology/justification, [uh], explanation, [um], explanation reiterated, closing	Scholarship Coordinator

21.	[33]	opening, [um], justification/ request, closing	Acquaintance
	[34]	opening, justification, call request/closing	
22.	[35]	joke, laughter, [anyhow um], justification, callee info, justification/explanation/ invitation, call request, closing	Friend
	[36]	explanation, [so-, anyhow], well wishing, closing	
23.	[37]	opening, [umm], justification/ question, explanation, [so], question/request, [but um], caller info, closing	Friend

Table 3. Discursive functions executed in the message body

This data sustains the observation of Alvarez-Caccamo/Knoblach (1992: 489) that “In principle, messages could consist of anything [i.e. jokes, threats, dramatic monologues] ...But in fact, there is a limited range of things callers do when leaving a message.” The data gathered reduces to a fairly concise set of discursive functions:

- a) **Joke:** marked by distinctive prosody and voicing and sometimes by subsequent laughter
- b) **Justification:** generally follows the intro; the reason why the caller is calling. In some cases it is explicit:

Example 1

so um uh, yeah just gimme a call when you get this. Aright? Bye. [2]
Hey L, this is C callin' I was just callin' to chat. [10]

...while in others it is implicit:

Example 2

Hello. It's Q. I haven't talked to you in like, four years. [11]

(The attitudinal past appears frequently in justifications.)

- c) **Call request:** A request for a return phone call. The most common formulation is *gimme a call*. This and *give me a call* occur a total of 21 times in the data.

- d) **Response request:** a request for a response that is not explicitly a phone call

Example 3

and please let us know how it goes. I love you. Bye bye. [24]

- e) **Caller info:** generally information about what the caller is doing at the moment or what the caller will be doing in the near future; sometimes functions to tell the callee when the caller will be available to receive a return call
- f) **Callee info:** generally speculations about the caller's recent activities what the caller is doing at the moment or what he or she may be doing in the near future
- g) **Invitation:** a distinct kind of implicit justification for the call.
- h) **Well-wishing:** expressing hope that the callee is doing well, etc.
- i) **Apology:** There are only 3 instances of overt apologies in the data.

Example 1

Hey L it's M. Sorry to hound you about this but I was wondering [9]

Hi M, it's T. I wanted to apologize for not coming to your play this weekend [27]

I'm uh sorry, I didn't get back to you when you phoned last week [32]

(In [9] and [27] the apologies seem also to be functioning as justifications for the call.)

- j) **Request:** a request for action that does not consist of contacting the caller
- k) **Explanation:** an elaboration of the justification for calling.

Call requests occur 27 distinct times throughout the data; in four of the messages ([1],[2],[3], and [17]) they occur more than once (although three of these are from one person, suggesting that this kind of repetition may be an individual idiosyncrasy).

In addition, there are references to prior calls from the callee:

Example 5

Hey L it's M. Sorry to hound you about this but I was wondering [9]

Hi M, it's L calling back, um, I just wanted to call you back [17]

Hey L...I'm...tryin' call you back. [1]

...as well as one reference to a call that never came:

Example 6

Hey M it's Dad, um. You haven't called to give me the directions or anything [21]

References to past calls (real or expected) are generally encoded into the justification for calling. There are also references to calls that the caller intends to make:

Example 7

So um just gimme a call or I'll call you back when I'm back on campus. [1]

Umm...I guess I'll call back later tonight. [22]

These references to both past and anticipated communication show that the voice messages are grounded in a shared communicative history between the caller and callee. Of course, the majority of the messages come from family members and friends of the subjects, so this history is presumed; but the explicit references to this history make clear the prominence of voicemail in the subjects' daily lives. Voicemail is not just a practical tool, as it once was, but an important medium for everyday social interaction.

4.2. The Structure of the body

Justification for calling tends to occur immediately following the opening, while well-wishing and requests for return calls tend to closely precede the closing. Outside of these patterns, however, there does not seem to be a fixed order to the execution of different discursive functions within the message. It is likely that the presence or absence of the above categories and their ordering varies according to external factors like individual preference, how recently the caller and callee have spoken (if it all), etc. It is unfortunately not within the scope of this study to explore these factors; however, the basic functions identified above could be used, it seems, in such studies in the future.

4.3. Boundaries between discourse functions

Boundaries between functional units are frequently marked with *so*, *um* and *uh*. Other markers like *alright* are common but are generally incorporated into sections rather than used to denote boundaries. (*Alright*, for example, frequently occurs in closings.)

The extensive presence of discourse markers is another indication of the interactional origins and basis of voice messages. Callers seem in some ways to be creating one-sided dialogues (Gold 1991; Alvarez-Caccamo/Knoblauch 1992) or perhaps adapting techniques from normal real-time telephone conversation (Liddicoat, 1994).

Occasionally, sections are separated by a pause, but this seems to be a dispreferred marker. This may be related to a broader discomfort among Americans with long pauses in interactions; if so, then the separation of discursive sections by pauses is probably culturally variable. It is important to note, however, that because voicemail is an audio-only format, long pauses could be misconstrued by the hearer as signaling the end of the message, or some difficulty on the part of the caller. They may as such be ruled out by the pragmatic requirements of the medium.

4.4. Humor in messages

11 of 37 of the messages incorporate some kind of joke or humorous device. That a given section is intended to be humorous is often made clear by the content, but it is always marked by distinct voicing or prosody; and it is bounded by laughter, a discourse marker, and finally a return to normal prosody. Two of the messages, [11] and [17], are delivered entirely in an altered voice that is clearly intended to be humorous. (This fact was also verified with the two people who left the messages.)

Though humor may be partially a response to irony, as indicated earlier, it may also be a response to the message prompt itself. The prompts of two of the subjects are humorous, and it was to these two subjects that 8 of the 11 humor-containing messages were sent. In fact, as seen earlier, one of the messages [35] contains a specific reference to the prompt:

Example 8

Did you just tell me to apres trois? God that's so sick [35]

Research by Buzannell *et al.* (1996) suggests that students leaving messages on their professors' machines may choose their message content or style of delivery based on the prompt. Although in that study the callers were attempting to contact authority figures (so that they perhaps had a stronger motive to respond to what those authority figures said in their prompts), it is possible that callers in general are more likely to leave humorous messages when the prompt itself is humorous.

The choice to include humor is probably also personal. Five of the messages come from two speakers (1. and 22.), who included humor in each of their messages.

5. Message Closings

Speaker #	Message #	Message Text	Relationship
1.	[1]	So, I will talk to you soon, I hope. OK. Bye.	Best friend
	[2]	so um uh, yeah just gimme a call when you get this. Alright? bye.	
	[3]	So um, just gimme a call whenever you are free, and, I love you and break a leg! Bye.	
2.	[4]	and hope all goes well and I will talk to you soon. Thanks bye.	Friend
3.	[5]	So talk to you later. Bye.	Friend
	[6]	but yeah gimme a call, and I will talk to you soon. Bye.	
4.	[7]	gimme a call back. Bye.	Friend
5.	[8]	Right, talk to you later. Bye.	Friend
6.	[9]	let me know and I'll see you later. Bye.	Friend
7.	[10]	I hope to hear from ya. Bye.	Acquaintance
8.	[11]	Umm, XX, yeah you should call me. Kay bye. Love you.	Friend

9.	[12]	I'm in the tech booth, come visit me. I love you. Bye.	Friend
	[13]	Uh gimme a call, and we can go have dinner later too. OK, bye.	
	[14]	so um...just gimme a call and have a good class, and all that stuff. Love you. Bye.	
	[15]	Um, so yeah. Gimme a call when you get this. Love you, bye.	
10.	[16]	So, we'll see you a little bit after six, we're running late to rehearsal. Bye_.	Friend
	[17]	So, just gimme a call whenever. Thanks, bye.	
	[18]	I will talk to later and, yeah. Love you bye.	
11.	[19]	K, I'll see you later. Bye.	Acquaintance
12.	[20]	So I'll see you, uh, in a couple hours. Aright? See ya. Bye.	Father
	[21]	Ok? I love you, and I'll talk to you soon. bye.	
	[22]	Anyway, I love you, I'll talk to you soon. Bye.	
	[23]	and uh, and uh I love you and I'll talk to you soon. Bye.	
13.	[24]	and please let us know how it goes. I love you. Bye bye.	Mother
14.	[25]	so, just gimme a call back. Aright, bye.	Acquaintance
15.	[26]	If you can or cannot could you please gimme a call, the number is ----- . Thanks.	Manager
16.	[27]	call me back, let's hang out cause hopefully you're not so busy anymore. Alright, bye.	Friend
	[28]	Aright, talk to you later. Bye.	
17.	[29]	so uhh, talk to you later. Bye.	Friend
18.	[30]	Call me back. I'll talk to you later. Bye.	Friend
19.	[31]	so um, yeah let me know if you're interested, just call back at the center and let us know. Thanks. Have a good day.	Co-worker

20.	[32]	Thanks so much. Bye.	Scholarship Coordinator
21.	[33]	Thank you. Bye.	Acquaintance
	[34]	Gimme a call, thanks.	
22.	[35]	Alright, have a nice night. Bye.	Friend
	[36]	And I'll see you in Blood Wedding.	
23.	[37]	Anyway, bye bye.	Friend

Table 5. Ending sections in each of the 37 messages (including the closing and, where appropriate, functional units from the body for ease of reference)

In conversation, closings can consist of negotiation, verification of the topics discussed, and/or simple goodbyes. Voicemail presents a unique problem for closing, however, since no interactional feedback is available. The singularity of this task was evident in the early days of answering machines, when people showed “a tendency towards inability to close” (Dubin 1987: 30). Dubin found that, except when making requests, people tended to simply fade out at the end of messages rather than constructing a definitive conclusion. Even in their more recent study, Alvarez-Caccamo and Knoblauch (1992: 494) argued that “there is an indefinite variety of elements in the closing section [of voice messages], and messages can take very different forms.”

That variability seems not to be present in this data, however, which presents a remarkable uniformity in the closing sections. To begin with, 31 of the messages end in *bye*, and two end in *bye bye*. Of the remaining four, one contains *bye*, though it is not the final word [11], and the other three conclude with *thanks* [26], [31], [34]. As with the opening sections, *bye* might seem to be a redundant feature of voice messages. After all, other signals – the sound of the caller hanging up, the machine’s acknowledgment that the message is over – tell the callee when the message has concluded. Letters, emails, and other mediated genres do not display this feature, so why should voice mail? Again, it seems likely that saying farewell is a feature that has persisted from real-time conversation.

Words like *bye* also may indicate that there has been prior communication between the caller and the callee and suggest that there will be further communication between them (especially telephone communi-

cation). This is supported by the observation that of the four messages that contain no word of farewell whatsoever, only one is from a person the callee described as a 'friend.' Of the other three, two are from institutions and one is from an acquaintance. Words of farewell, along with other features of spoken conversation, signal that the messages are grounded in a shared history between the caller and callee. Turns are signaled just as they are in spoken conversation, though the time lapse between responses is much greater.

In 20 out of 37 messages, the closing is immediately preceded by a request for a response on the part of the callee. Usually this is a request for a call back (**call request**), but in a few cases it is restricted to the more ambiguous *let me know* (**response request**). Here are some typical examples:

Example 9

so um uh, yeah just gimme a call when you get this. Aright? Bye. [2]
let me know and I'll see you later. Bye. [9]

In another 4 cases, a call-back request occurs very close to the closing, but with some other functional unit, such as an invitation, intervening.

Example 10

Uh gimme a call, and we can go have dinner later too. OK, bye. [13]

Here there is a sort of invitation that separates the call-back request from the closing words. (Note: In [24], *I love you* is considered to be part of the closing, so it is included with the former category in Example 9. In [13], dinner has not been mentioned before, so the (indirect) invitation to dinner is considered to be executing a distinct function.)

5 of the messages contain some kind of well-wishing just before the closing:

Example 11

hope all goes well and I will talk to you soon. Thanks bye [4]
 have a good class, and all that stuff. Love you. Bye [14]

The other 8 messages all contain some variation of *I'll talk to you later* or *I'll talk to you soon* immediately before the farewell. This is further evidence of the interactional basis of voicemail, indicating that the callers anticipate continuing their current line of communication with the callee. In the majority of cases, in fact, they anticipate continuing it by phone, as evidenced by their requests for return calls. This sense that

voice messages are grounded in a specific communicative history helps account for the presence of conversational features in what is at first glance a one-sided speech event.

6. Pedagogical Applications

Alvarez-Caccamo and Knoblauch (1992: 481) found that “cultural differences play a very small role in the pattern of messages,” (and at least one study comparing the structure of voice messages left in Greek and English found that “a generic pattern for AMMs [Answering Machine Messages] can be established across the two languages” (Goutsos 2001: 357). It may be that the constraints of the medium serve to some extent to unify message-leavers across cultures and languages.

Nonetheless, personal experience has shown that ESL learners are likely to have difficulty in planning and executing appropriate voice messages. Non-native speakers may not be aware of the strategies they use and the functions they perform when leaving messages in their native language because they do it automatically. Attention to both the form and function of voice messages can help ESL learners in initially planning messages; and, with enough practice, the skill can hopefully become unconscious. The repetition of phrases like *gimme a call, I just wanted to call you (in order) to*, and *talk to you soon* indicates that native speakers have a stock of items that are considered lexically appropriate for voice messages, something ESL learners probably need explicit instruction in. Given the importance today of being able to leave effective and appropriate voice messages, this is a skill that is worth spending time on in the classroom.

7. Conclusion

The messages gathered show a high degree of uniformity in their macro-structure (OPENING-BODY-CLOSING), as well as in the internal structure of their openings and closings. The content of the bodies of the messages reduces to a small set of discursive functions, and the distribution of several of these functions – justifications, call requests, well-wishing – is fairly predictable. The use of specific words and phrases to execute certain functions is common across callers, and there is a small set of discourse markers that are used to bound functional units.

In addition, voice messages embody and add to the communicative history of the caller and callee. They display many features that show their interactive foundation, including ritualized greetings and farewells, prosodic marking of the boundaries of functional units, and references to other phone calls both real and anticipated.

Humor seems to appear frequently in voicemail, though it is unclear whether it is a technique for overcoming the irony of talking to a machine, a response to the message prompt, or a simple conversational feature that is not uniquely triggered in voicemail.

These findings could be useful in the design of activities for ESL students learning to leave voice messages. Activities that bring attention to the functions executed and the lexical and grammatical forms therein would be particularly useful.

This study looked at a relatively small sample of messages from a restricted demographic. How voice messages vary in register and micro-content according to such factors as their overall purpose, the relationship between the caller and callee, age, and gender has yet to be thoroughly explored. What is clear, however, is that voice messages, far from being random bits of disorganized speech, are highly structured acts that are grounded in the communicative history of the caller and callee. As voicemail has come to play an increasingly prominent role in more and more people's lives, clear routines have arisen for dealing with the challenges the medium presents. It appears, despite Dear Abby's proclamation three decades ago, that people have learned to speak to machines after all.

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Appendix

Transcribed Messages

Speaker #	Text and Message #	Relationship of Caller to Callee
1	[1] Hey L...I'm...tryin' call you back. That's all I'm tryin' a do, you know. Course you can't pick up your phone when I'm available. Um, I'm just callin' you back. Um. Gimme a call when you get this. and um, I'm gonna be (hey) I'm gonna be um...uh...what am I tryina say. Uh. Oh yeah I'm gonna be XX tonight so that should be done by ten....So um just gimme a call or I'll call you back when I'm back on campus. I dunno. You know what? Not at all. I just don't know. So, I will talk to you soon, I hope. OK. Bye.	Best friend
	[2] Bitch, you just called and now you're not, picking up your phone. Gawwd. Alright, well um, just gimme a call, when you get this, I'm gonna be in all night, studying, cause I have no life, so um uh, yeah just gimme a call when you get this. Aright? bye.	
	[3] Hey bitch, it's E. Um, you're probably on stage right now, doin' your thang, so um... give me a call, whenever um, I'm pretty much...gonna be free the rest of the weekend, if you wanna call I know you're busy with the play, but um just gimme a call because we desperately need to talk. So much to say, so little time. So um, just gimme a call whenever you are free, and, I love you and break a leg! Bye.	
2	[4] Hey L this is B it's about five thirty Wednesday just thought I'd catch you before your rehearsal thought we could get dinner before you go, K and I are gonna eat at six thirty so if you want to join us please do and I hope you have a fantastic evening at your rehearsal and everything, and hope all goes well and I will talk to you soon. Thanks bye.	Friend

3	<p>[5] Hello, L, it's uh V, it's Wednesday, night around, oh god knows what time like seven o'clock, seven thirty. Seven thirty. Anyway, um, I'm calling because um I know that on your facebook it has like a picture of a horse, Equus, equine, horse [laughter] ...'scool. Um, anyway. But um, good news, I should be getting a car and I need it this time I should be getting a car this week and I spoke to this dude I was like, you know I did the whole mechanical report, (project) report, history of it, blah blah blah, called the guy and I was like I wanna buy the car, and he was like good, tomorrow morning... [middle omitted] ...but yeah so, let me know um, what's going and um hopefully, um, so I can come to your show. So talk to you later. Bye.</p>	Friend
	<p>[6] So L, I haven't heard from you did you get my memo? [laughter] That's right bitch, it's me. Anyway, umm, I'm really excited I'm hoping I'm, almost a hundred percent sure I'm getting that car this weekend... [middle omitted] ...maybe we could work out getting like, me, a ticket or something and uh, I could pay you back later, but yeah gimme a call, and I will talk to you soon. Bye.</p>	
4	<p>[7] Hey L it's O, uh, gimme a call back. Bye.</p>	Friend
5	<p>[8] Hello, L, my love, I miss you, so gimme a call when you get a chance, I'd love to talk to you. I know you're getting closer to the end of Equus, so I hope it's going well. Right, talk to you later. Bye.</p>	Friend
6	<p>[9] Hey L it's M. Sorry to hound you about this but I was wondering, what time you might be around, for the follow-up test, um I have class till one, so I'll be back at like one fifteen so if you're around then if you have a couple minutes it's really fast, um, I would appreciate it if you could do it so_, let me know and I'll see you later. Bye.</p>	Friend

7	<p>[10] Hey L, this is C callin' I was just callin' to chat. I know you're probably really busy with um, school and everything, but if you get a chance, if you could call back my number is -----, I hope to hear from ya. Bye.</p>	Acquaintance
8	<p>[11] Hello. It's L. I haven't talked to you in like, four years. So you should call me. And we could talk. Because, I have some ridiculously funny stories for you that you'll probably laugh at, and I'm sure you have some of the same. Umm, XX, yeah you should call me. Kay bye. Love you.</p>	Friend
9	<p>[12] L, it's A, I'm bored. Come keep me company during the freshman review, showcase thing. I'm in the tech booth, come visit me. I love you. Bye.</p> <p>[13] Hey baby it's me. I_ have a favor to ask of you. I was wondering if you wanted to rub my back or could rub my back later um it's really, really hurting and I_ can barely walk, cause it hurts and I have a show this weekend. So, that would be awesome. Uh gimme a call, and we can go have dinner later too. OK, bye.</p> <p>[14] Hi babe it's me. I was wondering if you wanted to go grab some dinner, at sixish, tonight, L and my rehearsal starts at six thirty so...if you wanted to eat something before then I know we're going to J's for a potluck after rehearsal but L and I probably won't get there till about 11, so um...just gimme a call and have a good class, and all that stuff. Love you. Bye.</p> <p>[15] Hey honey it's me. I was wondering if I could use your iron. I need to iron a shirt, for tonight. Um, so yeah. Gimme a call when you get this. Love you, bye.</p>	Friend

10	<p>[16] Hey M, it's L, um, I just wanted to let you know that A and I brought you a little bit of food, from the cafeteria, cause we didn't think you'd get a chance to eat. So, we'll see you a little bit after six, we're running late to rehearsal. Bye_.</p> <p>[17] Hi M, it's L calling back, um, I just wanted to call you back, I am also in East Quad and planning on leaving for the Frieze Building probably around 5:45, so yeah, if you just wanna give me a call back whenever, that'd be great and maybe we can walk together, I'm thinking of getting something to eat around 5:30 umm, hopefully you can eat with me, but if not, I guess that would be ok too, so, just gimme a call back and if I don't pick up then you can just kind of wait for me to call back afterwards. So, just gimme a call whenever. Thanks, bye.</p> <p>[18] Hi M it's L calling. Um, I was just calling because, um, A has frightened me. [laughter] Um, I was, um, preparing my monologue for my audition today. It's from the short play in your collection um, called Be Aggressive and, it's the monologue that Laura says about her mother. And she said – A was like what happens to her and I was like well I dunno and she was like well you should know because they'll probably ask you. So, um, I was just wondering if you happened to know offhand, cause I think you said you read it but I'm not sure. Anyway, my audition's around 5:00 today, so if you get this just gimme a call back and if I don't pick up just leave a message, um, giving me any information you possibly can that's great um, otherwise, I will talk to later and, yeah. Love you bye.</p>	Friend
11	<p>[19] Hey M, it's O. No there's no homework for semantics XX it's due on Tuesday, pages 119 122 and 126, so, we'll talk more about those today though so don't worry about it, nothing due today um, come to class. For once. [laughter] K, I'll see you later. Bye.</p>	Acquaintance

12	<p>[20] Hey M it's Dad. Um, I'm taxi-ing to the gate now. Or, more properly, the aircraft I'm riding in is. So I'll see you, uh, in a couple hours. Aright? See ya. Bye.</p>	Father
	<p>[21] Hey M it's Dad, um. You haven't called to give me the directions or anything. Um. when you <i>do</i> get this message, just call, if I don't get it leave a message I and you can leave me directions. The most important thing is to um, leave the name of the building. And, direction I need, immediately, I mean to, actually go to your performance, there, cause you know once I know exactly the name of the building wherever it's located I can go to MapQuest or ask for directions umm, so yeah, I got your message I'll, go to the opening performance tonight, and I'll go to the other one tomorrow. And uh, and uh we'll go out to dinner tonight or whatever, after your performance. Ok? I love you, and I'll talk to you soon. Bye.</p>	
	<p>[22] Hey M it's Dad, I'm just returning your call. Umm...I guess I'll call back later tonight. Right now I'm actually gonna go to XX and go to Beth Israel for Shabbat service so, anyway I'll call you later and uh we'll talk uh this weekend one way or another. You can send me email too and tell me, um, what the amount is. Anyway, I love you, I'll talk to you soon. Bye.</p>	
	<p>[23] Hey M um it's, just about ten o'clock about uh, fifteen minutes ago I made the deposit in your account I deposited four hundred fifty dollars, just to make sure. And uh. Anyway uh lemme know what uh, happens with your, talking to your uh Mom and G and uh, and uh I love you and I'll talk to you soon. Bye.</p>	

13	[24] Hey M, it's Mom. I just wanted to wish you good luck this weekend on your play and, umm, to let you know I sent you an email letting you know that we did mail you a small package, and it's got some money in it so I just wanted you to keep an eye out for that. So I hope you have a wonderful time and that you and dad enjoy yourselves this weekend, and please let us know how it goes. I love you. Bye bye.	Mother
14	[25] Hey M this is Z umm, if you can get back to me as soon as possible before you're doing something, uh we were just gonna, figure out, what you and Iris are gonna write about because we already kinda have like a little thing going, so, just gimme a call back. Aright, bye.	Acquaintance
15	[26] Hi M, it's D calling from Kargill. I was just calling to see if you'd be available to sub for an ACT class tonight. It's session four, it's (gonna be at) five PM tonight at the center. If you can or cannot could you please gimme a call, the number is ----- . Thanks.	Manager
16	[27] Hi M, it's T. I wanted to apologize for not coming to your play this weekend um, it turned out I had an exam on Thursday night, so I couldn't go, and then I had to work Friday and Saturday. I hope it went well and I hope there's a video so I can see you um, call me back, let's hang out cause hopefully you're not so busy anymore. Alright, bye. [28] Hey M it's T. I was wondering if you wanted to come to, a seder at my house next Wednesday um, E and P and N are coming. My mom is basically telling me to like round up all the Jews so...of course I thought of you. Umm, if you wanna come let me know and um, I hope you're doing well. Alright, talk to you later. Bye.	Friend
17	[29] Hey M, it's E, um, just wanted to see if you wanted to, still watch that movie so uh, talk to you later. Bye.	Friend

18	[30] Hey M it's L, um, I'm just calling to say hey, I have some food for you in my fridge from JS, he sends it with his love. I forgot if you're a vegetarian or not but it's a lot of chicken. Uh, yeah. XX do it tonight. Call me back. I'll talk to you later. Bye.	Friend
19	[31] Hi, M um my name is A and I'm calling from Kargill. Just wanted to call you and let you know that there's an opportunity for 20 hours of work if you're interested. Umm, it's about, his name is YN and he's looking for a tutor for his son SN and, H has emailed you about the details umm. He, wa- he basically wants you to work for 20 hours and, you'll have to drive to Detroit but you get paid for, you know the mileage, so um, yeah let me know if you're interested, just call back at the center and let us know. Thanks. Have a good day.	Co-worker
20	[32] Hello, this is SC calling from the Association of TJA about the Burgess Scholarship. I'm uh sorry, I didn't get back to you when you phoned last week I was away at a conference. Uh, your application was received, everything is in order. You'll probably get an email confirmation as well as soon as we um, are, able to get to it. Um, but thank you for your call and please be sure that your application is here and is in good order and is being considered. Thanks so much. Bye.	Scholarship Coordinator (to whom recipient applied for a scholarship)
21	[33] Hey A it's R, (it's) 11:40. Um. I was wondering if you could bring the jacket that K wore um for her entrance to S's apartment ...to the meeting today and also...just a reminder to bring the receipts. Thank you. Bye. [34] Hey, it's five o'clock, I'm just calling to check on the jacket. Gimme a call, thanks.	Acquaintance

22	<p>[35] Did you just tell me to apres trois? God that's so sick A. You're so twisted. Haha Anyhow um, I'm basically just calling cause I mean you're probably filming right now I didn't, that didn't occur to me until I called you...but I was gonna ask if you wanted to see Slither tonight just cause...it...looks funny, and kinda gross, ummm I mean there's a 9:15 show which is like in an hour...there's also an 11:20, um, but you know...whatever you wanna do. Umm I don't think uh, The Libertine is still on and I'm kinda not exactly in the mood for dead-ass serious shit, but if you are, just gimme a call. Aright, have a nice night. Bye.</p>	Friend
23	<p>[36] I take it that you remembered the, the daylight, time or whatever, it's not daylight savings time because we lose, lose an hour it's something but, I didn't and I feel like shit. I thought that I was gonna be way early and that I was gonna get there, like to, see the Idiots Karamazov L...like an hour ahead of time, you know that I would get there and I would be able to hang out I'm actually like pretty late at this point. So, I feel like a shithead. I was hoping that somebody else was a shithead too, but apparently everyone else is a good person. So_, anyhow enjoy the show if that's where you are and I hope that your show went well hon. And I'll see you in Blood Wedding.</p> <p>[37] Hey A it's J, umm I'm just wondering if you're going to the Idiots Karamazov tonight [rising tone], I know M talked about umm it, but I didn't know if it was him or you guys...I'd love to meet you guys there, umm. It's in like, a half hour, so I was just wondering if you had M's number if you're not going, but um. I'll probably just head over there and look for you guys. Anyway, bye bye.</p>	Friend

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