

# SEQUENTIAL AND INTERPERSONAL ASPECTS OF ENGLISH AND GREEK ANSWERING MACHINE MESSAGES

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## Abstract

The paper studies the genre of answering machine messages (AMMs) in English and Greek from a comparative linguistic perspective. The analysis of extensive data in both languages shows that the length of most AMMs is restricted (25 to 30 words) and related to the gender of the caller rather than the language used. It is also found that Greek and English AMMs follow the same generic pattern, consisting of three main phases (opening, main body and closing) and their sub-parts. Messages in the two languages mainly differ with respect to the optional and obligatory parts they allow in the pattern, their respective order within the main phases and the particular signals used. Thus, a generic pattern for AMMs can be established across the two languages as emerges from the use of specific signals of sequential relations. At the same time, AMMs in both languages show a central interpersonal concern for creating a dialogic sphere of communication by incorporating the absent recipient's participation. Sequential patterns in this genre are thus intimately interrelated with the interpersonal aspects of communication.

**Keywords:** Answering machine talk, Generic structure, Sequential, Interpersonal relations, English, Greek

## 1. Answering machine messages at the end of the 1990s

In one of the first studies of answering machine talk, Gold pointed out that further investigations of answering machine messages were needed "from larger and more culturally diverse data bases" (1991: 254). This call for cross-linguistic research in genres of everyday, spoken communication has remained, almost a decade later, unanswered. By contrast, contrastive discourse studies have concentrated on written texts, mainly with a view to compare rhetorical devices of argumentation across languages.

In particular, contrastive discourse research has focused on 'contrastive rhetoric' (e.g. Kaplan 1977; Connor and Kaplan 1987), academic communication (e.g. Clyne 1987; Duszack 1997), parallel texts (Hartmann 1980) or intercultural communication (e.g. House and Blum-Kulka 1986). All these studies share a preoccupation with an analysis of argumentative patterns or pragmatic properties of discourse rather than structural issues. (For a detailed discussion, see Goutsos 1997: 114-118). What is missing is a detailed examination of the organizational properties of a large variety of texts, including genres of spoken discourse. In this sense, we have not yet dealt with what Gleason considered "the most interesting of all contrasting problems: The differences in the way connected discourse is organized and the way that organization is signalled to the hearer or reader" (1973: 274).

This paper is an attempt to contribute to the cross-linguistic understanding of discourse, by focusing on the mediated genre (see Scollon 1998) of answering machine messages. This emphasis is appropriate for several reasons. First, by studying mediated genres in languages other than English, we would be able to establish which features of these new genres are typical of the medium they exploit and which are accidental or due to language-specific or cultural preferences. Our findings would contribute towards "separating out the contributions of the medium from those of human users" - something which Herring (1996: 4) mentions as a key issue in studying computer-mediated communication. In addition to this, it must be noted that the conditions of production and reception of mediated genres allow people from different linguistic backgrounds to communicate with each other, challenging thus our perceptions about expected communicative norms. A cross-linguistic analysis would be necessary in order to find out how different cultural groups achieve similar tasks in discourse.

Finally, it is imperative to study new, mediated genres in their own terms rather than in terms of how they differ from other, spoken or written genres, since, nowadays, after some considerable time of familiarity, users seem to be, as Baron puts it, "increasingly relaxed about the technological limitations of the medium" (1998: 165). This is certainly true about answering machine technology, which, at the end of the 1990s, is no longer considered new or unfamiliar in the societies under examination. This observation is confirmed by the database used in this research, in which only a few messages register the anxiety of the callers at having to communicate through a machine, in contrast to the findings of earlier studies (Dingwall 1992). Of course, it would be difficult to assess the degree of avoidance, since machine-shy callers do not leave any indication of their attempt to communicate<sup>1</sup>. At any rate, it seems that we increasingly have to describe a situation in which the participants in new genres of technologically mediated communication are more familiar with these and less familiar with traditional genres like letter-writing.

For the above reasons, the focus of the study is on structural aspects of communication through answering machine messages (AMMs). To address the lack of cross-linguistic research, my database includes messages which use both English and Greek, involving participants from both the same and different, cross-linguistic backgrounds.<sup>2</sup> In particular, I am going to analyze the generic pattern that can be established with reference to data in the two languages, the related signals of sequential relations (in terms of Goutsos 1997) and the interpersonal aspects of communication through AMMs. The sequential and interpersonal aspects of communication refer to two basic linguistic (meta-)functions (Halliday 1985): The former to the segmentation and identification of discourse units and the latter to the expression of the relations that hold between participants, as well as the stance towards what is communicated (see Georgakopoulou and Goutsos 1997: 83ff.). The contrastive analysis will allow us to find

out how sequential and interpersonal functions are realized in English and Greek in the genre of AMMs.

## 2. Data and length of messages

The corpus drawn upon for this study includes 270 answering machine messages from a larger database of 12,000 words. These messages were left in two answering machines (one was my own and one a female friend's) over a year period from June 1994 to June 1995. Less than half of the messages were left by female speakers, whereas less than a quarter of the total number are in English. The answering machines were also situated in two different countries, Britain and Greece, so that data include messages from both female and male speakers, speaking in two different languages (English and Greek) and calling to two different countries. The composition of the answering machine messages corpus can be seen in Table 1.

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
<i>English</i>	17	31	48
<i>Greek</i>	151	71	222
<i>TOTAL</i>	168	102	270

**Table 1:** Composition of AMMs corpus

A first glimpse into the characteristics of the messages in the two languages can be gained by a comparison of their length. In the total of 270 messages, the mean average length of a message is 37.19 words, the median being 28 words. This figure includes results from 8 Greek messages, which extended to more than 100 words (ranging from 100 to 440). After the exclusion of these extreme messages, the average length falls considerably, as can be seen in Table 2:

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
<i>English</i>	48	45.20	44.67	18.02
<i>Greek</i>	214	29.18	22.40	20.79
<i>TOTAL</i>	262	32.02	27	21.19

**Table 2:** Length of normalized AMMs

Table 2 would seem to indicate that English speakers leave longer messages than Greek speakers, in contrast to our stereotypical preconceptions about the relative talkativeness in the two cultures. However, this is not a statistically significant result, since the P value is >0.5 (0.955). Finally, the participants' gender seems to be a significant factor in the length of messages, although not within the same language. The relevant results appear in the Table 3:

<sup>1</sup> Or leave only a minimal indication, the sound of hanging up as recorded by the answering machine. As a matter of fact, the number of these minimal 'messages' is very restricted in my database (less than one sixth of the total calls).

<sup>2</sup> Discussion of the related issue of code-switching between the languages used in these data is outside the scope of this paper.

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>Std. error mean</i>
<i>Greek male</i>	151	27.54	20.16	1.64
<i>Greek female</i>	63	33.13	21.88	2.76
<i>English male</i>	16	46.20	20.79	4.91
<i>English female</i>	32	44.71	18.02	3.20
<b>TOTAL</b>	262	32.02		

**Table 3:** Length of normalized AMMs according to genre

The data in Table 3 would seem to indicate that Greek female speakers use roughly six more words than Greek male speakers, whereas English male speakers use roughly two more words than English female speakers. However, both these results are not statistically significant, since the *P* value in the Independent Samples Test is  $>0.5$  (0.796). What is statistically significant is the overall difference between female and male speakers: The mean for female speakers is 36.95, whereas the mean for male speakers is 29.22 and this is significant according to the T-Test.

In sum, the length of the messages is variable, although most AMMs are about 25 to 30 words. (This roughly corresponds to half a minute of talk in the answering machine). Longer messages are rare and gender seems to be a more important factor (women leave longer messages than men) than language (English or Greek) in defining the length of the message.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Generic structure of AMMs

Answering machine talk is a unique genre, constituting a technologically mediated form of communication that occurs in the absence of an interlocutor. Since, strictly speaking, callers answer to the recorded message the recipients have already left in their answering machine, we could argue that answering machine talk is a genre of asynchronous or delayed communication. Nevertheless, in comparison with other genres of asynchronous communication, we can observe that the contribution of the interlocutors is restricted to one turn only and there is no real interaction between the two participants. (In this sense, it is more appropriate to talk about a recipient of the message rather than a 'callee').

Because of the brevity of this unique turn, the information given should be compact and well-organized into manageable chunks. The typical structure of AMMs reflects this need, but, at the same time, reveals the crucial interpersonal concerns of the caller. The detailed analysis of AMMs in my database indicates that most participants employ similar structural parts in achieving the task of communicating a message in relatively limited time span. We can distinguish between three sequential phases (opening, main body and closing) and their sub-parts. An idealized diagram of the generic structure of answering machine messages is presented in Table 4:

PHASES	PARTS
(Opening)	address to recipient (self-identification) greeting
Main Body	reason for calling
(Closing)	(pre-closing) call-off greeting

**Table 4:** Generic structure of AMMs  
[( ): optional element]

Table 4 summarizes the generic structure of answering machine messages by pointing out obligatory and optional elements. The main body of the message is obligatory, while optional are its peripheral phases (opening and closing). Within the three phases, some parts also appear as a rule, whereas other ones seem to be optional. The *opening phase* consists of the caller's direct address to the recipient of the message, the self-identification of the speaker and a greeting. The *main body* or message phase consists of an explicit reference to the purpose of the message. The *closing phase* is realized by a call-off, followed by a farewell greeting and optionally preceded by a pre-closing part with a topic bounding expression.

These three phases observed in the data of this research tie in with the structural patterns observed in English data in previous studies by e.g. Liddicoat (1994), who studied answering machine communication in Australia and Gold (1991), whose data comes from the United States. The latter has identified four sections in answering machine messages, adding a postscript to the greeting, body and closing parts found in our research<sup>4</sup>. More importantly, it can be argued that the opening and closing phases are similar to openings and closings in telephone conversations (e.g. Schegloff 1986), something which indicates that the generic structure of AMMs is moulded by similar interactional pressures as those found in face-to-face communication.

As expected, the typical structure of AMMs presented above is not found in all messages but is idealized, in the sense that there are frequent variations involving elements that are omitted. Example (1) below is one of the fullest realizations of the generic structure<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> The possibility of a postscript, although not realized in our data, could be considered part of the closing phase, as it is usually surrounded by closing elements. Its function seems to be that of an aside that provides the caller with an opportunity for further talk before the closing of the message.

<sup>5</sup> The division of AMMs into lines follows the verbal clues of the messages, i.e. it is based on pauses and intonational patterns that indicate phrase units. Transcription conventions largely follow Georgakopoulou

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that this refers to the gender of the caller and not that of the recipient, i.e. the owner of the answering machine. In a larger database, it would be interesting to compare same gender with cross-gender communication.

## (1) DII41 [male]

*Hi* (greeting) *Dionysis* (address to recipient)*it's Marcus here* (self-identification)*ehm I tried to get you a couple of times today but your answering machine's been on**eh:m I bought a new fridge for the flat**and eh:m I was wondering when y'know to bring it round**so if you if you (were) in tonight**Thursday night I'm phoning**maybe you could give me a call and we can arrange something* (purpose)*OK?* (pre-closing)*thanks**see you later* (call-off) *bye* (farewell greeting)

As we can see in (1), the main body phase may be extended to include, apart from the purpose part, a background to the purpose section (*ehm I tried to get you...*). AMM (1) is also unusual because it includes an acknowledgment section (*thanks*) in the pre-closing part. An acknowledgment section is also found in more formal messages in English, where it takes up all parts of the closing phase, as seen in (2) and (3):

## (2) DII98 [female]

*Hello* (greeting) *Dionysis* (address to recipient)*it's Gill here in Collins* (self-identification)*could you phone some time this morning* (purpose)*thanks* (acknowledgment)

## (3) DII115 [female]

*Hello* (greeting) *it's Securicor here in Glasgow* (self-identification)*(we have kept) an express parcel for you**(the problem) is they haven't put your address on it**( ) Kelvinbridge**if you could possibly phone us and give us your full address* (purpose)*the number is 0124 56 78 90**and could you ask for Ann**thank you* (acknowledgment)

In contrast, in Greek messages where acknowledgment is found, this is accompanied by other parts of the closing phase, as in (4)<sup>6</sup>:

## (4) DII13 [male]

*éla djonisi* (address to recipient) *kalispéra* (greeting)*Vangelis* (self-identification)*Vangelis**píra na do ti kánis**I called to see how you are**e: de tháme spíti apópse tha::**páre me an thes mesti vdomáda tiléfono jatí dvrio efimerévo* (purpose)*call me if you want during the week because tomorrow I'm on duty**fcharistó poli* (acknowledgment)*thanks a lot**ja* (farewell greeting)*bye*

More generally, the generic structure of AMMs is subject to a considerable degree of variation in both its opening and its closing phases. However, different preferences for variation can be established for English and Greek messages. English messages tend to have a more fully-fledged structure, in which self-identification almost always appears as an obligatory part. Self-identification also always follows directly the address to the recipient part. In contrast, self-identification is frequently omitted or postponed in Greek messages, sometimes even until the very end of the closing phase. It might be argued that this omission depends on the relation between caller and recipient; when this is intimate, as in (5) below, the caller assumes that the receiver of the message will recognize who they are, so they do not feel the need to identify themselves.

## (5) K22 [female]

*dína* (address to recipient)*Dina**páre me tiléfono-áma borésis endáksi?* (purpose)*give me a call when you can okay?**ja* (farewell greeting)*bye*


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and Goutsos (1997).

<sup>6</sup> Transcription of Greek data is broadly phonetic. It should be noted that interpersonal elements like *lipón*, *endáksi* etc. are given a roundabout translation to help the non-familiar reader. Their full meaning can be captured only in terms of their structural position and function in each specific example and that is why they are not translated when they are the point of discussion. Phatic elements such as *re* are also left out in

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translation, when they do not concern the main point of discussion.

Since both recipients are Greek, callers speaking in Greek might be thought of as presupposing a degree of intimacy, something which would explain why self-identification is missing more often in the Greek messages. However, the relation between caller and recipient could also be intimate in the case of callers speaking in English, as happens with many AMMs in our data. In addition, it is significant that in Greek messages the address to recipient part is almost always there, as a rudiment of the opening phase. This happens in cases where the closing phase is entirely omitted as in (6) or even when all phases are reduced to the minimum as in (7):

(6) DII102 [male]  
*éla re ðjonísi* (address to recipient)  
 come Dionysis

*pu krívese ma pu píjes me tétjo gjeró ma ðen íne ðinatón*  
 where are you hiding where have you gone in such weather it's impossible

*pu borí na íse maftó to gjeró*  
 where could you be in such weather?

*pu borí na íse*  
 where could you be?

*ðe boró na katalávo*  
 I cannot understand

(7) DII104 [male]  
*kalá sto spíti su káðese kaθólu yútso?*  
 well do you stay at all at home Goutsos?

*epitélus ðilaði epitélus*  
 at last [= for goodness sake], well, at last

AMM (7) lacks most parts of the structure and appears to be like an indirect comment on the fact that the receiver of the message is not at home. However, interestingly enough, the address to the recipient part (*yútso*) is not missing. This indicates that, while self-identification may very well be absent, other-identification i.e. address to the recipient tends to be present. In general, it appears that Greek messages have more elaborate opening and closing phases. These phases are also found in full in more messages than in the English data. As we will see below, Greek messages also involve signals of contact in both peripheral phases, as well as sign-off parts in the closing phase.

The main body phase seems to be similar in both English and Greek data and usually involves a request for callback. This request may appear as the only purpose of call, as in (2), (3) and (5) or as a separate part ("give me a call"), different from the reason of calling ("I just called to...") as in (1) and (4) above. Other purposes include wishes ("happy birthday"), arrangement of meetings or talk about business matters.

What is surprising about the purpose of call, which is the only obligatory part of the generic structure, is that it takes up only a small part of the overall message. It can roughly be estimated that only five to six words are used in the main body phase of the message, where the caller informs the recipient of the purpose of call. The rest of the message is used to address and greet the recipient of the message, to identify oneself, to give the recipient a final greeting, to sign-off etc. Irrespective of individual preferences, English and Greek AMMs seem to be primarily concerned with the sequential tasks of opening and closing the communication and the interpersonal tasks of identifying the caller (mostly, in English messages) and the recipient (mostly, in Greek messages). In other words, in both languages the parts relating to sequential and interpersonal functions in AMMs are almost always present alongside the main, ideational or information-imparting part. This finding concurs with Scollon's (1998) implicational hierarchy in mediated communication, according to which requirements of channel and relation are given precedence over the topic of telephone calls. In order to illustrate the importance of sequential and interpersonal aspects it is necessary to turn now our attention to the signals of structure and the corresponding relations they indicate.

#### 4. Signals of sequential structure

The management of interpersonal relations and the achievement of the main purposes of AMMs in relatively short spans of time constitute serious tasks for the callers, which would be impossible to achieve without the use of a range of signals. These signals deal primarily with the sequential concerns of opening, establishing the main purpose and closing the communication (Goutsos 1997: 164 ff.) and seem to be specialized in both languages with regard to each one of these functions.

The most prominent *opening signal* in English messages is the greeting *hello*. This usually precedes the recipient's name (address) and the caller's self-identification as in the following:

*hello Dionysis, it's Gill again*

*hello Dionysis, it's Farat here*

*hello Dionysis*  
*this is ehM Barry Fielder*

Less frequently, the recipient's name is left out and there is a move straight to self-identification and the purpose of call:

*hello it's Farat here, just ringing to wish you happy birthday*

However, the address to the recipient is much more common: The name of the recipient is the most common lexical item in our corpus, found in 68% of messages.

The same patterns are also observed with the more informal *hi*:

*Hi Dionysis it's Marcus calling here*

*Hi Dina (Lynn)*  
*Hi this is Lesley*  
*Hi it's Marcus here*

*Hello*, however, seems to be more frequent, being the second most common lexical item in the English data.

In Greek AMMs the first opening signal is *éla*, a phatic element which is the imperative form of the verb *érxome* "come", "come on" (Tzartanos 1991). This is the second most frequent lexical item in Greek AMMs and is usually accompanied by the name of the recipient in the address to recipient part, as shown below:

*éla δjonísi* (address to recipient)  
*éla* Dionysis

*o xristos íme* (self-identification)  
 it's Christos

As we can also see from its use in the closing phase, the item *éla* is a signal that establishes channel contact. In many cases, the opening *éla* is also accompanied by other phatic items such as *re* and *vre*, which emphasize the familiarity between caller and recipient.

In the absence of *éla*, the opening phase starts with the name of the recipient and a greeting or the reverse:

*δjonísi kaliméra*  
 Dionysis good-morning

*δjonísi ja*  
 Dionysis hi

*ja δjonísi*  
 hi dionysis

Less frequent signals of opening are *lipón* and *filácja*. The former is a common discourse marker, usually corresponding to the English 'well' and used for signalling sequential relations (Georgakopoulou and Goutsos 1998). In AMMs it is used to introduce the address to the recipient part of the message or the self-identification part:

- *lipón δjonísi*  
*lipón* Dionysis

*ímaste me to xári edó*  
 we are with Haris here

- *lipón o vagjélis íme*  
*lipón* it's Vaggelis

The latter, *filácja*, a diminutive of *filjá*, 'kisses' is used in a marginal case and serves the phatic function of opening the channel through a stereotypical formula of affection:

*dina filácja polá, íme kalá, plirosa dekaestá xiljádes sto kapsi xthes*  
 Dina, lots of *filácja*, I am well, I paid seventeen thousands yesterday at Kapsis

As can be seen from the above, the name of the recipient is also prominent in openings of Greek AMMs. In fact, it is found in 70% of the messages and is also the most frequent lexical item, as in the English data.

These examples suggest a variety of options in the order of the opening phase parts of AMMs in the two languages. Most English messages have the following order, with the possibility of omitting the address to recipient:

greeting – (address to recipient) – self-identification  
 e.g. *hi Dionysis it's Janet*

Greek messages on the other hand, seem to select between two orders:

a) contact – address to recipient – self-identification

e.g. *éla δjonísi, o xáris íme*  
*éla* Dionysis, it's Haris

or b) address to recipient – greeting – self-identification

e.g. *δjonísi kaliméra, i ántzi íme*  
 Dionysis good morning, it's Angie

In other words, the greeting accomplishes the opening in both languages, although in Greek a contact marker may also be employed for the same purpose.

The signalling of the purpose of call is also different in the two languages. In Greek messages, the purpose part is usually preceded by *lipón*. Although this is also found in the other phases, its most frequent use is to frame the purpose of call, as below:

*lipón ja xtipa mu éna tiléfono mólis jirísis*  
*lipón* give me a call as soon as you're back

In the most common pattern, *lipón* is used immediately before the expression detailing the purpose of the message, which means that sometimes the main body phase starts without any signalling:

(8) DIII61 [female]  
*δjonísi i ólya íme*  
*vriskómaste sti kopexáji apó mja anomalia tis ptísis katalavénis*  
*ce tha ímaste ylaskóvi ávrjo to proi*  
*lipón* kalítera na min érθis sto aeroδrómjo

Dionysis it's Olga

we are in Copenhagen due to an irregularity of the flight, you understand,  
and will be in Glasgow tomorrow morning  
*lipón*, you better not come to the airport

Alternatively, *lipón* may signal the beginning of the main body phase as in (9):

(9) DII137

*éla vre o andréas íme*

*lipón ótan jirísis ci an íse se katástasi na milísis ce den éxis pji*  
*páre me na se rotíso káti pu thélo*

c'mon, it's Andreas

*lipón* when you come back and if you can talk, if you're not drunk  
give me a call so I can ask you about something

Another, less frequent marker that is related to the purpose of call is *kalá* ("good", "OK"). This is mostly used before the request for callback as in (10):

(10) K31 [female]

*éla moré konstandína de boró na yrápso ce tis dío*  
*na yrápso móno ti mia*  
*se parakaló endáksi?*  
*kalá páre me tiléfono endáksi?*  
*ánde ja*

c'mon Konstantina, I can't write both  
can I write only one,  
please, OK?  
*kalá* give me a call, OK?  
*ánde* bye

By contrast, in the English messages there is no parallel signal with the same function, although a candidate is clearly the item *just*, which very commonly occurs in the purpose of call unit. This is found either in formalized expressions as:

*I just phoned to let you know I'm having a party*  
*I'm just phoning to see if you're going out tonight*

or in less routine-like expressions, such as:

*I'm just returning your call*  
*I was just wondering if any mail has arrived for me*  
*Just ringing to wish you happy new year*

In these examples, *just* is used to mitigate the imposition of the call, in accordance to the strategies of negative politeness that appear in English, whereas Greek speakers do not

commonly use such hedges but employ a direct imperative for referring to the purpose of call (cf. Sifianou 1992).

AMMs in both languages use a broad range of signals for signalling the closing phase. In the English messages, *anyway* signals the transition from the purpose of call to the closing phase of the message, serving thus as a signal of pre-closing:

(11) DII106 [male]

[...]

*hope everything is well with you*  
*anyway*  
*see you later*  
*bye*

This use of *anyway* as a discourse marker depends, as Ferrara (1997) points out, on the appropriate intonation pattern in which it is employed, namely the rise-fall intonation contour (Ü), followed by a pause. The same intonation pattern is used with *OK then* in (12) below:

(12) DII50 [female]

[...]

*so if you can ring and leave a message about when I can call you tomorrow*  
*evening*  
*that will be (fine)*  
*OK then*  
*bye*

Similarly, markers like *OK* and *alright* can be used with an interrogative intonation pattern to indicate the pre-closing part, as in (13) and (14):

(13) DII48 [female]

[...]

*ehm (.) I'll wait for your call then*  
*OK?*  
*bye*

(14) DII129 [male]

[...]

*we'll give you a buzz when we get back*  
*alright?*  
*bye*

Finally, the use of *thank you* for acknowledgment in examples like (2) and (3) also signals the pre-closing part of the corresponding closing phase.

The typical closing phrase is *see you (later/tonight etc.)*. The call-off of the message is thus achieved with an arrangement for future contact, also evident in parallel phrases like *speak to you later* etc. This occurs before the final greeting, *bye*, as in the following:

(15) DII41 [male]

[...]

maybe you could give me a call and we can arrange something

okay?

see you later

bye

The farewell greeting *bye* (and *bye bye*, more rarely) almost always marks the end of messages. More rarely, there is a sign-off phrase like *love* or *all the best*, as in (16):

(16) K4 [female]

[...]

thanks very much

see you tonight

love

Jane

bye

These letter-like phrases, however, do not complicate much the basic order of parts in the closing phase of English AMMs, which can be summed up in the following:

pre-closing	(call-off)	greeting
anyway <sup>^</sup> , OK then <sup>^</sup>	see you (later)	bye (bye)
OK?/alright?	(speak to you later/soon)	
thank you		

Greek messages, on the other hand, have a much more elaborate pattern of closing, involving a wider range of signals. First, the marker *kalá* ("good, fine") is used, with the appropriate intonation pattern (rise-fall contour, followed by pause), for the transition from the purpose of call part to the closing of the message. A similar marker, used with the same intonation pattern, though, usually, with a longer pause, is *aftá* ("that's it", a plural neuter form of the demonstrative article *aftós* = 'this').

Confirmatory phrases with interrogative intonation patterns are also found in Greek messages, involving *endáksi* ("OK, alright") and *éjine* ("done" a past tense form of *yínete* = 'happens'), as in (17) and (18):

(17) K22 [female]

konstandína

páre me tiléfono áma borésis

endáksi?

ja

Konstantina

give me a call when you can

endáksi?

bye

(18) DII113 [male]

ðjonísi o jóryos íme

páre tiléfono re si

ópote borésis

éjine?

ánde ja

Dionysis it's Yorgos

give me a call, you

when you can

éjine?

ánde bye

The difference from English messages lies in that these signals of pre-closing are accompanied by contact markers, as in (18) or in the examples below:

kalá ánde ja

kalá éla ánde ja

Apart from *éla*, which we have also already found in the opening section, the most common signal in the closing phase of the message is *ánde* ("c'mon"), an exhortative marker of obscure origin (Tzartanos 1991). This is used after a pause and precedes the greeting and/or other parts of the closing phase, as in the following examples:

ánde tsáo filácja

ánde ciao kisses

ánde ja xará ta léme

ánde goodbye we'll speak (later)

Although *ánde* is primarily a contact item like *éla* with a similar function, its occurrence in the closing phase is conventionally related to pre-closing, as is also suggested by data from informal telephone conversation (Pavlidou 1997:149).

The call-off part is achieved in Greek messages by phrases that also refer to arrangement for future contact. The typical phrases *tha ta púme* or *ta léme* in Greek refer to future verbal communication ("we'll speak", literally "we will say them" and "we say them", respectively) and, usually occur before the final greeting (cf. Pavlidou 1997). In many messages, however, these lexical phrases trigger the omission of the final greeting, as in (19):

(19) DII116 [male]

éla ðjonísi

xítipa kaná tiléfono re

éjine?



*ánde ta léme*

*éla* Dionysis  
give us a ring  
OK?

*ánde ta léme*

Finally, common greetings are *ja* as in (17) and (18) above, as well as *ja xará* and *tsáo*. A further difference from English messages concerns expressions of sign-off, which include *filjá* ("kisses") and, most commonly, *filácja*, a letter-like closing, also found in the opening phase earlier. The place of sign-off is either before or after the final greeting, although in the second case only *filácja* occurs in the data.

These variations define a different order of parts in the closing phase of Greek AMMs, which can be summarized as follows:

pre-closing	contact check	(call-off)	(sign-off)	greeting	(sign-off)
<i>kalá^/aftá^</i> <i>endáksi?</i>	<i>éla/ánde</i>	<i>ta léme</i> <i>θa ta púme</i>	<i>filácja</i> <i>filjá</i>	<i>ja (xará)</i> <i>tsáo</i>	<i>filácja</i>

To sum up, parallel signals of sequential structure are used in English and Greek AMMs to indicate similar phases and sub-parts, which, however, follow different preferences for ordering as well as for occurrence (optional and obligatory parts differ in the two languages). Greek messages seem to be more elaborate in their signalling, developing an almost formulaic character, as can be seen from messages like (19), which is almost throughout composed of markers. Furthermore, Greek messages develop more sub-parts in the opening and closing phases, including such elements as contact items. The function of signals in English and Greek answering machine messages and their place in structure is summarized in Table 5:

		English	Greek
OPENING	Contact		<i>éla, lipón</i>
	address to recipient	NAME	NAME
	self-identification	it's NAME	NAME ime
	greeting	hello, hi	<i>ja, kaliméra</i>
MAIN BODY	purpose of call	just	<i>lipón</i>
CLOSING	pre-closing	anyway ^, OK then ^, OK?, alright?	<i>kalá^, aftá^,</i> <i>endáksi?, éjine?</i>
	(acknowledgment)	thank you	<i>fcharistó</i>
	contact		<i>éla, ánde</i>
	call-off	see you	<i>ta léme/θa ta púme</i>
	fine greeting	bye	<i>ja, tsáo</i>
	sign-off		<i>filácja</i>

**Table 5:** Summary of sequential signals in AMMs

In both languages, AMMs use a well-developed range of signals devoted to the indication of sequential rather than interpersonal relations. Nevertheless, these signals predominate in the - comparatively extensive - parts relating to the interpersonal aspects of the message (opening and closing phase) rather than the main body phase, concerned with the informational purpose of call. It must be noted that this finding comes in contrast with Liddicoat's finding that there are not many closing components in his data, since closing is "not necessarily achieved cooperatively" (1994: 297). Our data would seem to indicate that speakers of AMMs are overridingly concerned with the opening and closing of communication and devote considerable time and resources to these phases. These sequential concerns are, without doubt, linked to interpersonal considerations in the construction of AMMs.

### 5. Interpersonal relations: Creating a dialogic sphere

The detailed identification of signals in AMMs has suggested a rather complex picture for the achievement of structure both in the English and, more so, in the Greek data. It could be argued that AMMs have developed routinized patterns for the indication of the major structural phases and parts, indicated by - more or less - specialized signals. Without doubt, this tendency for stereotypical patterning is due to the limitations of the medium, which call for brevity and concision. This tendency is a feature of pre-planning, situating answering machine talk in an intermediate position in the continuum of planned - unplanned discourse (Ochs 1979).<sup>7</sup>

What is particularly interesting to ask is why so many signals are used in a message that consists of, roughly, only twenty-five words, as mentioned above. In other words, why does the caller have to go at such pains in order to leave a simple message, which is usually no more than a request to call back? It is obvious that the physical absence of an addressee is a definitive factor in this. The speaker who responds to an answering machine does not have access to feedback or other paralinguistic clues, which are paramount in face-to-face communication both for the addresser's sense of orientation in discourse and for the addressee's easier understanding. This would seem to account for the fact that many structural parts seem to be obligatory or, at least, frequent, in comparison to other genres. The absence of an interlocutor in answering machine talk as opposed to face-to-face interaction can also explain why the AMM speakers explicitly identify themselves.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Dingwall points out that speakers in answering machine talk often write out in advance what they want to say in the message. According to him, people "typically put the phone down, made notes and rang again, when being answered by a telephone answering machine" (1992: 91). Again this would be especially true for callers of an older age or when answering machine technology was first introduced than in the data for this study.

<sup>8</sup> Note that Stubbs (1986) and Dingwall (1992) suggest that some of their informants maintained that they felt the need to be explicit when leaving an answering machine message, although they did not have a clear idea about what they had to be explicit about. Self-identification is an indication of such explicitness.

Speaker identification seems to be more frequent in answering machine talk than telephone conversation or face-to-face communication, because on the telephone callers can be easily recognized by voice alone, since callers' voices are usually well-known to the callee (Gold 1991: 247). To identify oneself in face-to-face discourse between familiars would, similarly, be pragmatically inappropriate, since one would be providing information that is assumed to be shared knowledge.

What seems to be more difficult to explain is why most callers feel the need to address the recipient by name in the opening phase of their message, especially since they respond to a message that explicitly mentions the recipient's name, as was the case in our data. As noted above, the recipient's name is the most frequent lexical item in both English and Greek AMMs and the address to recipient part is found in the majority of messages, even where the name of the recipient itself is absent.<sup>9</sup> Gold suggests that this ritualized greeting is "reminiscent of the ritual salutation of letters" (1991: 246), while Dingwall argues that callers first adopt a telephone manner and then switch to a letter-writing mode (1992: 94). Although this account points to a possible origin for the address to recipient part, it does not offer an explanation as to why callers use a written-like strategy at this particular point. Furthermore, this kind of analysis treats answering machine talk as a dependent genre, emerging from the combination of pre-existing genres, rather than as *sui generis*. This is particularly inappropriate if we consider that many callers in the data of this research have had little practice in letter-writing, whereas they may have used answering machine talk extensively. The Greek data is also revealing here, since there is much less formalization of letter-writing in Greek.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the actual forms of opening in Greek AMMs do not resemble letter opening but telephone (contact-NAME) or face-to-face (NAME-greeting) conversation.

A more appropriate answer would relate address to recipient to an attempt of answering machine talk at constructing a dialogic field of interaction, even in the absence of an interlocutor. The address to the recipient crucially frames the following message in terms of a dialogic communication. The creation of a dialogic sphere is also evident in the presence of extensive moves for opening and closing found in AMMs. Answering machine callers seem to perceive the situation in terms of Scollon's (1998) implicational hierarchy, which requires reference to contact and relation before reference to topic. In this way AMM speakers are crucially implicating a co-participant and, as we have seen, elaborate signalling has been developed to indicate relations to this co-participant.

Further evidence for the dialogic perception of answering machine discourse is the employment of direct address to the (absent) recipient as a "preclosure gesture" (Gold 1991: 248). The occurrence of a contact or an acknowledgment part in the closing phase creates again a dialogic interaction with the absent co-participant, by indicating the bounding of

the topic (*anyway, kalá, ánde*) or by attempting to elicit the recipient's consent with confirmatory signals (*endáksi?, OK?*). As Gold (id.) points out, this direct questioning is combined with intonation and pauses to create spaces for the turn of the absent discourse partner. This observation is confirmed by our data, as discussed above.

Finally, the elaborate closing sequence, especially in Greek messages, cannot be accounted for in terms of a constant switching between spoken and written techniques but must be seen as arising from the need of the caller to achieve a collaborative ending<sup>1</sup> to the message. This finding patently contradicts Liddicoat's opinion that "the contribution may be terminated without the need for negotiating a closing typical of everyday telephone conversations" (1994: 303). By contrast, AMMs in our database would seem to parallel Schegloff and Sacks' (1973) observations about the extendability of conversational endings, which they consider an important indication of the interactive achievement of conversation.

More generally, the neat division of AMMs into phrase units, in combination with the use of appropriate intonation patterns, indicates their primary interpersonal orientation. The extensive and routinized use of signals in the opening and closing phases of AMMs can be seen as an attempt at negotiating the meaning of the message with an absent participant. In this sense, we can also talk of success or failure of an AMM to the extent that this employs sufficient devices in order to construct a dialogic space of negotiation with the recipient of the message.

## 6. Conclusion

The main questions of our analysis have been the identification of typical structures for the genre of answering machine messages, the range of signalling used in it for sequential relations and the interaction between the latter with the interpersonal concerns of the speakers. The study has followed a cross-linguistic perspective, looking at data in Greek and English in which the communication involves participants with both the same and different, cross-linguistic backgrounds. It was found that Greek and English answering machine messages follow the same generic pattern, consisting of three main phases and their sub-parts, although with significant variation; messages in the two languages differ with regard to the optional and obligatory parts they allow and their respective order. English messages tend to have a self-identification part in the opening and a stereotypical "OK? - see you - bye" ending (cf. Scollon 1998). Greek messages are more elaborate in signalling the opening and closing phases, including contact markers in both and a sign-off part in the latter. Messages in both languages have developed a range of sequential signals that have developed into a succession of stereotypical or formulaic phrases.

From an interactional point of view, answering machine talk uses a spoken channel, which unusually lacks feedback. Although many features of its generic structure and signals can be attributed to the absence of an interlocutor, speakers of AMMs have developed mechanisms for creating a dialogic sphere of communication by incorporating the recipient's participation. The emphasis on the opening and closing phases rather than the main purpose of the message is indicative of the importance of interpersonal considerations. Dialogic strategies include the reference to the recipient's name in the address to recipient part, contact elements (in Greek messages) and confirmatory signals in the closing phase,

<sup>9</sup>Alternative ways to address the recipient include the use of the surname as in (7) or a pet name when the relation between the participants is very intimate.

<sup>10</sup>For instance, while there are several fixed formulas for opening or signing-off in Greek letters, writers are much less constrained to use one particular formula according to register as happens with letter-writing in English or French.

which invite the recipient's reaction by the use of appropriate intonation patterns. Sequential concerns and the overall generic structure seem thus to be interrelated with the interpersonal concerns of the speakers.

It must be noted that our analysis of answering machine messages is necessarily limited because of the particular composition of the database used. It would be interesting to compare the findings of this study with formal AMMs, as found e.g. in business communication or with messages from speakers of a different age span or other languages. On the basis of our study, we can anticipate that such contrasts would pertain to the range of signals used, as well as the order and number of parts within the phases.

One of the basic conclusions of the study is that the stereotypical structure of answering machine messages accommodates for the interpersonal concerns of the caller, aiming at the creation of a dialogic sphere, which will allow successful communication, even with an absent interlocutor. The findings of this study imply that the manipulation of generic structure and sequential relations in new genres of technologically-mediated communication is primarily related to interpersonal motivations. In this sense, the extent to which these genres share spoken or written characteristics is also related to the accomplishment of interpersonal functions within specific conventional structures. As a result, we would expect that successful communication in these genres relies on the pragmatic requirements of the situation and the felicitous use of discourse devices for indicating sequential and interpersonal relations. It is also to be expected that failures in cross-linguistic communication would be primarily due to insufficient negotiation of the dialogic sphere, as a result of each language's preferential variation in structural patterns and in the type of signals used. The discussion of cross-linguistic communication, however, has to be reserved for another occasion.

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