This is a conversation analytic study examining how two ways of answering emergency calls have different implications and consequences for the ensuing interaction. In an older corpus of 22 calls to a Swedish emergency center, the calls were routinely answered with an identification phrase “ninety thousand” (i.e. the telephone number 90 000) or “SOS ninety thousand”, whereas the 52 calls in a recently collected corpus are routinely answered with an identification phrase followed by a question, taking the format “SOS 1-1-2, what has occurred?” The analysis shows how the different answering formats affect what is being brought up at different sequential positions during call beginnings, and also how the standardized relational pair of “help provider” and “help seeker”, each with its respective rights and obligations, is constructed. The article concludes with a discussion of the benefits of the latter way of answering emergency calls, arguing that it helps making the distribution of responsibilities among the interactants clear, and that it allows for a truncation of an unnecessary sequence. In this way, the latter format enhances topical progression and promotes institutional relevance.

Keywords: Conversation Analysis, Ethnomethodology, emergency calls, institutional interaction, opening sequence, SOS Alarm, Swedish.