

# Language Technology 2: Natural Language Interaction

[www.coli.uni-saarland.de/courses/late2-09](http://www.coli.uni-saarland.de/courses/late2-09)

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dialogue phenomena

a dialogue system engages in interaction with a human  
*as a participant/agent*

so, it needs to have a model of what such interaction(s) looks like  
→ a model of dialogue(s)

easy and pleasant interaction is an essential design aspect  
→ what characterizes an easy and pleasant interaction?

how do we know what conversations look like?

study human-human conversations

→ ultimate benchmark for “naturalness”

→ BUT dialogue systems have specific requirements

study human-computer conversations;

data collected in interactions with actual systems

→ realistic, but confined to implemented functionality

study simulated human-computer conversations;

data collected in Wizard-of-Oz studies, where a human simulates the system

## characteristics of conversation

human-human conversation shows specific characteristics

humans do simplify their language in human-computer interaction, however, the essential characteristics remain

## spontaneous spoken dialog

linguistic properties: cohesive devices

structure manifested in the dialog partys' contributions

speech-related phenomena:

pauses and fillers („uh”, „um”, „...”, like, you know,...”)

prosody, articulation

disfluencies

overlapping speech

dialog specific phenomena:

dialog acts/speech acts, dialog sequences, grounding

## spontaneous vs. practical dialogs

topic drifts vs. goal-orientedness → joint activity

both (narrative) monologue and dialogue involve interpreting

information status

coherence/rhetorical relations

contextual references

intentions

dialogue additionally involves:

turn-taking

initiative and confirmation strategies

grounding

repairing misunderstandings

today: dialogue phenomena

turn taking

initiative and collaboration

common ground

joint activity

speech acts

dialogue structure

turn taking

## turn taking

dialogue participants take turns, much like in a game: A, B, A, B

dialogue turn → a continuous “contribution” to the dialogue  
by one speaker

though it is not entirely obvious when a turn in natural dialog is finished,  
turn-taking appears fluid in normal conversation:

minimal pauses between speakers (few hundred ms)  
less than 5% speech overlap

how does it work?

# turn taking

conversation analysis (Sacks et al. 1974)

when can one take a turn:

Transition-Relevance Points (TRP) → places where the dialog/utterance structure allows speaker shift to occur (typically at utterance boundaries, but also smaller units)

syntax (phrase boundaries), intonation, gaze, gesture;  
cultural conventions may apply

who speaks next:

at each TRP (current speaker A):

1. if A selected B as next speaker, B should speak
2. if A did not select the next speaker, then anyone may take a turn
3. if no-one else takes a turn, then A may (continue)

to get a turn if not selected, a speaker must “jump in” at a TRP

initiative and collaboration

## initiative and collaboration

who is in control of the dialogue progression?

being the one who's talking does not necessarily mean being in control, e.g., just answering a question

how to decide whether to take initiative?

dialogue initiative vs. task initiative

human-human conversation: varied initiative pattern

either participant can assume initiative, depending on knowledge, skills, situation, etc.

## initiative and collaboration

conversation (communication in general) is a **joint activity**

- has a purpose (agreed on by the participants)

- involves collaboration/cooperation

collaboration (being cooperative): helping each other to accomplish communicative goals by, for example,

- cooperative interpretation beyond literal meaning (inference)

cooperative answering

- complying with requests or directives when possible

- providing more information than requested (when it is relevant or useful)

- correcting false presuppositions or misconceptions

- intensional answers and generalizations

taking initiative when this helps to accomplish the joint activity

## collaboration: common ground

entering a conversation, dialogue participants presuppose that there exists certain shared knowledge → **common ground**

introduced by Stalnaker (1978) based on older family of notions: *common knowledge* (Lewis, 1969), *mutual knowledge* or *belief* (Schiffler, 1972)

## collaboration: common ground

entering a conversation, dialogue participants presuppose that there exists certain shared knowledge → **common ground**

stock of knowledge taken for granted, i.e. assumed to be known both by the Speaker and the Hearer  
sum of their mutual, common or joint knowledge, beliefs, and suppositions

sources of the assumptions:

evidence about social, cultural communities people belong to, academic backgrounds, etc. (*communal common ground*)

direct personal experiences (*personal common ground*)

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You know that  $p$

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I know that you know that  $p$

You know that  $p$

You know that I know that  $p$

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I know that you know that  $p$

I know that you know that I know that  $p$

**...ad infinitum!...**

You know that  $p$

You know that I know that  $p$

You know that I know that you know that  $p$

collaboration: joint activity

**communication relies on collaboration**

Gricean Cooperative Principle + principles of rational behaviour  
cooperatively interpret and contribute  
establishing shared knowledge (adding to common ground) → grounding

collaboration: joint activity

the **Cooperative Principle**

participants expect that each will make a “conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange” (Grice 1975)

collaboration: joint activity

cooperation manifests itself in **Maxims of Conversation** by which conversation participants abide

maxim of quality

maxim of quantity

maxim of relevance

maxim of manner

adherence is assumed, but violation (of course) possible  
flouting maxims → conversational implicatures

collaboration: joint activity

discourse participants

“read between the lines”

conversational implicatures due to Gricean maxims

informativity principle: try strongest interpretation

cooperatively accommodate implicit assumptions if possible

accommodation of presuppositions: adjusting common ground  
unless conflicting information

resolving reference to entities in common ground

if not possible, repair problems (if relevant)

## speech act theory

entering a conversation we (typically) have a certain intention

paradigmatic use of language: making statements...

...BUT there are also other things we can *do* with words

I name this baby Jonathan

I christen this ship „Queen Mary”

I promise I'll never do this again

I bet it'll rain this evening

Do this again and see what happens!

Leave me alone!

The University accepts no responsibility for.....

I declare war on Liliput.

I apologise.

I object.

## speech act theory

entering a conversation we (typically) have a certain intention

aspects of the speaker's intention:

- the act of saying something

- what one does in saying it (requesting or promising)

- how one is trying to affect the audience

## speech act theory

certain *actions* we take in communication are designed to get our interlocutor(s) to do things on the basis of understanding of what we mean

doing things with words: Austin, 1962, later Searle, Davis  
→ **speech acts**

## speech act theory

Austin dubbes utterances such as I chisten this ship „Queen Mary” **performatives** in contrast to **constatives**

observe:

1. performatives cannot be false, but they can fail to do things
2. performatives are not a special class of sentences;  
some sentences are explicitly performative, others can be implicitly so  
performative/constative dichotomy does not really exist;  
both are special cases of illocutionary acts

## speech act theory

constatives vs. performatives

constatives: utterances used to make true/false statements or assertions

The snow is green.

performatives: utterances used to change the world

performative are ordinary declarative sentences which are not used with any intention of making true or false statements; they are not true/false

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## speech act theory

how can things go wrong?

assertives fail when they are false

failed performatives?...

...not false, but rather improper, unsuccessful → **infelicitous**

## speech act theory

**felicity conditions** → conditions that must be fulfilled for a performative to succeed

- A. (i) there must be a conventional **procedure** having a conventional effect (e.g., wedding, declaring war, christening, betting, etc.)  
(ii) the **circumstances** and persons must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure
  
- B. the procedure must be **executed**
  - (i) **correctly** (e.g., using the right words) and
  - (ii) **completely** (according to conventional expectations)
  
- C. (i) persons involved must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and **intentions**, as specified in the procedure and  
(ii) if consequent **conduct** is specified, the relevant parties must follow the rules of conduct

## speech act theory

if conditions not fulfilled performatives may fail to do things

categories of infelicities:

**misinvocations**, which disallow a purported act (see A. above)

**misexecutions**, in which the act is impaired by errors or omissions (see B.)

**abuses**, where the act succeeds, but participants do not have the expected thoughts and feelings (C.i.)

## speech act theory

### examples of violations of felicity conditions:

spouse to spouse in a society without divorce: “I hereby divorce you”

random individual saying the words of the marriage ceremony

a clergyman baptising a baby with a wrong name

A: Wilt thou have the woman to thy wedded wife ... so long as you shall live?

B: ??? Mhm.

A: I bet you 6 pence it will rain

B. Oh, rain would be great!

place a bet without intending to pay it off

to promise to do something with no intention to do it; “paper marriage”

## speech act theory

„the performative formula”

explicit performatives have a specific linguistic structure → normal form (NF)

1st pers. sing., present tense,

allows “hereby”

“performative” main verb etc.

I (hereby) warn you.

## speech act theory

BUT utterances that do not have the NF of a performative can nevertheless be performative → implicit performatives:

You are hereby warned. (not 1.p.sg.)

Watch out! (none of NF characteristics)

You are going to burn your hands.

AND a sentence in performative NF need not be used as a performative at all:

A: How do you get me to throw all these parties?

B: I promise to come

conclusion: performatives are not a special class of sentences;  
rather the term “performative” designates a function any utterance can have.

## speech act theory

performative **and** constative utterances

an utterance can be both constative (“truth-bearer”) and performative (“action-performer”)

A storm is coming.

constatives and performatives are both subject to felicity conditions; when felicity conditions do not obtain, one can argue these sentences are neither true nor false, just inappropriate (cf. presupposition failure!)

both felicity and truth are gradual matters

France is hexagonal.

conclusion: constatives and performatives are not necessarily disjoint phenomena

## speech act theory

utterances have both a (propositional) meaning (they say things) and a force (they do things)

a theory should clarify in what ways by uttering sentences one might be said to be performing actions

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→ utterances are multi-dimensional *acts* that affect the context in which they are spoken

**locutionary** act: uttering something with a certain „meaning”

**illocutionary** act: act performed by means of uttering the words  
→ utterance’s „conventional force”

**perlocutionary** act: what is brought about as a result (intentionally or not)  
→ how hearer is affected: convincing the hearer, persuading, surprising, making sad, laugh, etc.

# speech act theory

assertive	<b>S</b> commits to sth being the case; get <b>H</b> to form or attend to a belief
directive	<b>S</b> attempts to get <b>H</b> do sth
commissive	<b>S</b> commits to future course of action
expressive	<b>S</b> expresses psychological state, feeling twrd. <b>H</b>
declarative	<b>S</b> changes the state of the world

# speech act theory

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„comment”, „suggest”, „swear”, „boast”,  
„conclude”, „claim”

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„love”

declarative

**S** changes the state of the world

„resign”, „name”, „fire”, „baptize”, „pronounce  
husband and wife”

# conversation structure

## conversation structure

global: overall structure of an entire conversation

local: relations between pairs or sequences of turns

# conversation structure

## global structure

### generic structure of a conversation:

opening: “initialization” (establish contact, greetings, pleasantries)

body: exchange about the subject matter(s) (accomplishing task(s), discussing topic(s)), sometimes a task is ended by a summary

closing: winding down, farewell, breaking contact

conventions apply in all sections

## conversation structure

### local structure

some turns specifically select who the next speaker will be

→ **adjacency pairs** (Schegloff 1968)

regularly occurring, conventionalized sequences

adjacent turns

produced by different speakers

ordered: First^Second

typed: particular First requires a particular Second

# conversation structure

## local structure

some turns specifically select who the next speaker will be

→ **adjacency pairs** (Schegloff 1968)

greeting : greeting

complement : downplayer

offer : acceptance

question : answer

accusation : denial

request : grant

## conversation structure

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→ **adjacency pairs** (Schegloff 1968)

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offer : acceptance

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set up next speaker expectations ('significant silence' dispreferred)

conventions introduce *obligations* to respond (and preferred responses)

insertion sequences: APs can be embedded (e.g., "sub-dialogue",  
misapprehension-correction, clarification)

## conversation structure

significant silence (option 1 at a TRP)

it A selects B to speak next, but B doesn't speak,  
then (assuming B has heard & understood) B's silence can be interpreted  
as a hesitation to give a dispreferred Second

e.g., B does not know the answer to A's question,  
B's response to A's offer or request is negative, etc.

other cases (silence at options 2 or 3 at a TRP) are just insignificant delays  
(pauses or lapses)

next

how dialogues are modelled  
and how all this is used in dialogue systems

