Speech Act Theory

(analysis of a dialogue)

1. Introduction

This is an attempt to analyse a part of a conversation in terms of speech acts, using taxonomies based on Searle and Bach&Harnish.

2. Description of the analysis

2.1 Selecting the dialogue:

The conversation was chosen from *A Corpus of English Conversation* (Svartvik 1980), which intends to provide some data on "spontaneous conversation among educated British speakers (educated to university level).... The recordings were made without prior knowledge of the main participants." (Svartvik 1980: 26).

I used two criteria to choose the text. First, I decided to have only two speakers (partly because of the scope of this analysis, and also because of the manageability of the transcription). My second criterion was to have a conversation that had been transcribed from its beginning so that my interpretation of the acts is not dependent on any preceding text (unavailable to me).

2.2 Transcribing the text

The next step was to transcribe the text for the purpose of my analysis. This basically meant simplifying the original transcription. I only retained the information that I was able to interpret and use in the analysis of speech acts (SA). In my transcription I recorded: the speaker distinction, tone units, nucleus of a tone unit (fall – rise), simultaneous talk, incomprehensible words and pauses (cf. Appendix 4). For brevity's sake I did not include information on: the phases of tone units (end, onset, subordinate tu), boosters (relative pitch levels) and stress (cf. Appendix 2, 3).

For the overview of symbols and conventions used in my transcription, see Appendix 4.

In the original the units are tone units, each numbered with a superscript. This numbering was kept to make it possible to refer to the original transcript.

Although Du Bois (Du Bois 1993: 4) suggests that each intonation unit should appear on a separate line, I intentionally did not follow this practice in order to be able to represent overlapping in a more "realistic" manner and make reading easier. Also, for the purpose of speech act analysis, lines containing more than one tone unit usually make up one speech act (on the contrary, one tone unit may contain more speech acts, cf. the analysis, appendix 4). Nevertheless, the majority of tone units are represented on separate lines.

Another change with respect to the original transcription was aligning the units that had occurred simultaneously. The first signs are aligned vertically to "give an iconic sense of the temporal alignment" (Du Bois 1993: 50). Instead of square brackets I used ☼ or + to indicate both the beginning and the ending of overlap (see Appendix 4)

2.3 Speech act units

The goal was to analyse the dialogue in terms of speech acts (SA). In delimiting a speech act the following criteria were used: tone units, turns and propositional content. I regarded as one SA instances where the propositional content seemed to be homogeneous (identical subject matter, even if lengthy and consisting of several propositions). This homogeneity is reflected in regarding such sequences of propositions as one SA (e.g. uninterrupted reporting on one event).

Determining the individual SA as units of discourse did not seem to pose extreme difficulties for the analysis (for purposes of serious research, more definite and explicit guidelines should be stated, however). The total number of SA identified was 37 as opposed to the total of 50 tone units. We could say that in the parts were A-B exchanges were short, a speech act roughly corresponded to a tone unit. In longer turns, however, this does not hold. On the contrary, false starts as tone units were not regarded as SAs.

After delimiting SAs, I tried to provide a taxonomy label (one based on Searle and one on Bach and Harnish). This labelling was followed by a short discussion of the illocutionary meaning and its role within the dialogue.

Both taxonomies do not seem to be very useful in labelling frequent back channel responses, verbal "nodding', etc., even though most of them can be paraphrased in some way (expressibility principle).

2.4 Related problems

The major problems I encountered in analysing the text were not strictly related to SA taxonomies but rather to associated problem of interpretation of the actual utterances. More explicitly, I had

difficulties to understand the meaning of parts of this dialogue, which naturally made it difficult to interpret speakers' intended meanings.

Part of the problem may be blamed upon the fact that the conversation was not recorded strictly for the purpose of discourse analysis but rather for a broad spectrum of purposes. This means that although the conversation is recorded from its very beginning, we lack the necessary information needed for the grounding that both speakers share, apparently being members of the same institution. (for this reason I assume it is always easier to analyse texts where the participants encounter for the first time or where at least one participant is "new"). In our case we are not given information about the place, the relationship of the speakers, they previous encounters, etc. As is apparent from the analysis, some tone units/SAs can only be interpreted situationally (e.g. tu[3,5]). This brings about a question of how verbal reactions (acts) to nonverbal acts/stimuli should be incorporated in the taxonomies. Much of this can be avoided by providing enough comments and context (or by videotaping).

Another problem for the analysis was a large proportion of incomprehensible utterances. This phenomenon makes any interpretation unreliable (e.g. B's comment is incomprehensible, therefore it is impossible to interpret A's reaction precisely in terms of intended meaning).

3. Conclusions

Despite being rather short and limited, this analysis of a piece of conversation displayed many of the inherent problems in analysing discourse in terms of SAs (unit delimitation, taxonomies, multiple functions of SAs). It became apparent that in a dialogue which is not task-oriented, many elements are difficult to interpret in terms of SA (short exclamations, back channels, etc.). The analysis also pointed out difficulties encountered when spoken language is dealt with (the lack of context and situation, deixis, body language etc.).

References:

Du Bois, J. S., S. Schuetze-Coburn,

S. Cumming and D. Paolino (1993): Outline of discourse transcription. In J. Edwards and M.

Lampert (eds.) *Talking Data: Transcription and coding in data*

research. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. pp. 45-89

Schiffrin, D. (1997[94]): *Approaches to Discourse*. Blackwell.

Svartvik, J. and R. Quirk (eds.), (1980): *A Corpus of English Conversation*. LiberLäromedel

Appendix 1 – Data description

Appendix 2 – A dialogue transcribed by Svartvik (1980) – **see handouts**

Appendix 3 – List of symbols – **see handouts**

Appendix 4 - Transcription conventions & Data - **see handouts**

Appendix 5 - Analysis

Appendix 1

Data description

The conversation S.1.4 (pp. 105-106) was excerpted from *A Corpus of English Conversation*, edited by J. Svartvik and R. Quirk, published in 1980 in Stockholm.

Information about speakers:

The corpus intends to provide some data on "spontaneous conversation among educated British speakers (educated to university level).... The recordings were made without prior knowledge of the main participants." (Svartvik 1980: 26).

S.1.4 is a dialogue between two speakers, both male academics aged. The participants are referred to as A and B.

Setting – no information provided (probably A's office or a common room in an institution for people to make coffee. It would have been useful to know for this way we do not know whether the meeting was planned (at least by one of the participants or completely accidental))

Our analysis is based on tone units 1-50, totalling to 274 words.

Appendix 4

Transcription conventions & Data (Conversation S.1.4 transcribed for analysis)

Transcription conventions:

speakers	A, B	note 1
speaker's identity	A>	speaker continues where he left off
tone units	^{12}	each tone unit numbered by superscript
overlap	☼, +	note 2
nuclear tone	↓,↑	
pause	·	
phonetic transcription	[]	

uncertain hearing, incomprehensibility	<<... syll>>	
tone unit continued	&	

Note 1: In participants' identification ':' is not used because the identification was explicit enough.

Note 2: overlaps are signalled by ☼...☼, or +... + . If there are many overlaps occurring within short distance ☼☼...☼☼ or ++...++ are also used.

Appendix 5

Analysis & Symbols and abbreviations

Symbols and abbreviations used in analysis:

#21	speech act no. 21
tu	tone unit
S	Searle's taxonomy (see handout on SA)
BH	Bach&Harnish's taxonomy (see handout on SA)
SA	speech act
*	comment

Analysis

A[1]⊦ Richard⊬<<↓HALLO>>

#01	A: tu[1]
S	expressive
BH	acknowledgement (greeting)
*	the proper name= addressing (vocative), establishes contact, *hallo*= greets. This tu could possibly considered as two separate SAs: addressing and greeting. Depending on the intonation, vareied amount of surprise could be expressed if the meeting had not been planned.

A[2] I've just ☼[s]☼   set out +<<syll SYLL+ [4]make some>>&

B[3]   ☼thank ↓you☼

B[5]   +<<↓THANKS>>+

>A[4] &I've just boiled some ↓water [6] ☼for having ↓coffee☼

B[8]   ☼<<3 to 4 sylls>>☼

#02	tu[2,4,6]
S	assertive, secondary: also commissive – will have to offer
BH	constative (announcing)/commissive,
*	Though the illoc. force seems to be a statement, in this point in conversation it can be seen as having a much broader function, ie the secondary illoc. force:e.g the purpose of this statement is establishing common ground, informing B about what the situation is, that he might expect to be offered some

	coffee (our knowledge tells us that such a statement can be expected to be followed by an offer (adjacency pair) by the speaker). Also the speaker may want to thus apologize for the distractions that are going to take place during the conversation. This way A also indicates he is willing to talk, not work, explains why he is where he is, perlocutionary force is to make B stay
#03	tu³
S	expressive (thank),
BH	acknowledgement thanking
*	- difficult to determine what B thanks for: it could be thanking for A's inviting B into his office or offering a chair by a gesture, or something that A had done for B earlier (this is not very likely, there would probably be an anaphoric pronoun). Therefore this thanking responds to something situational. These units thus do not seem to contribute to "wording" development of the dialogue (sequencing) since they probably respond to nonverbal stimuli. They may be thought of as a part of an introductory phase of the conversation, establishing/setting a situation.
#04	tu⁵
S	expressive (thank)
BH	acknowledgement (thanking)
*	cf. #03
#05	tu⁸
*	unknown

>A⁷ cos I haven't ↓had time for ↑tea

#06	tu⁷
S	assertive
BH	constative (informing, explaining)
*	A continues stating, explaining (insures B that he is having a break which signals that B is welcome)

A⁹ ☼would☼ you ↑like some

B¹⁰ ☼↓yes☼

B¹¹ ↓yes

#07	tu⁹
S	commissive (offer)
BH	commissive (offer)/directive when understood as question
*	Aasks directly, interr., y-n question, but the illoc. force is rather an offer than a question, though it is not entirely apparent from B's *yes* answer (tu¹¹). The preterite form is more indirect (polite) and it is stereotypical of offers (form-function)
#08	tu¹⁰
S	a
BH	agreeing (but not as a commissive, rather as a constative, supportive)
*	this *yes* seems to be a backchannel response to the A's tu⁷ rising tone (in this conversation all rising tones are followed by some kind of the hearer's supportive reaction). It appears simultaneously with *would* but it is a reaction to A's previous statement
#09	tu¹¹
S	assertive
BH	constative (affirming)
*	B answers the question + accepts the offer (multiple SA)= backward looking

Marginally, it could be seen as a commissive – B commits himself to drink up what he is going to be given. It could also be seen as a directive in that giving this answer the speaker attempts to get the hearer (A) to do something = forward looking |

A¹² ↓thanks for your ↑invitation you <<[h∂u] throwing a ☼↓party☼>>

B¹³   ☼↓**yes**☼

#10	tu¹² (thanks for your invitation)
S	expressive (thanking)
BH	acknowledgement (thanking)
*	A thanks, refers back – invitation he had received previously;
#11	tu¹² (you [h∂u] throwing a ☼↓party☼)
S	assertive
BH	constative
*	A brings out the topic, does not asks for information, he knows already about the party from the invitation. Because the tone is falling (does not express uncertainity), it could be understood as an appeal to the hearer to provide extra information.
#12	tu¹³
S	assertive
BH	constative
*	B confirms what A asserted

B¹⁴ <<4 to 5 sylls as ↓well>>

#13	tu¹⁴
*	probably- a statement providing brief information (e.g. Peter was invited as well)

A¹⁵   ☼ **that's ↓good**☼

>B¹⁶   ☼**I don't ↓know**☼

>B¹⁷ I <<don't know whether I'll>> drink coffee at this time of ↑day

>B¹⁸ ☼if☼ there ↓were any ↑tea ·

A¹⁹   ☼<<↓**yeah**>>☼

#15	tu¹⁵
S	expressive (praise)
BH	acknowledgement
*	commenting on the preceding piece of info, judgement: approval, giving feedback, sequencing
#16	tu¹⁶,¹⁷
S	assertive (expressing doubt about speaker's previous decision)/directive
BH	constative/directive
*	The difficulty in analysing tu¹⁶,¹⁷ lies in distinguishing whether tu¹⁶ is a response to the judgement in tu¹⁵ or whether it is just a false start. The fact that tu¹⁵ and tu¹⁶ are uttered simultaneusly suggests rather the analysis of tu¹⁶,¹⁷ as one SA. B refers back to the offer of coffee, sequencing far backwards, trying to express doubt that he had not reacted well to A's previous offer. As if thinking aloud, B indirectly rejects coffee. Even if not followed by tu¹⁸ , his utterance would function as a directive (i.e. asking A for something else). This utterance also brings about a changes in subject (B may not want to talk about the party – evasive function).
#17	tu¹⁹
S	assertive/expressive(*you're right, I'm with you, I'm listening to you*)/directive – permission *Keep talking*
BH	constative
*	*yeah* simultaneous with *if* in tu¹⁸, back channel response to the rising tone in *day ....* / can be rephrased:
#18	tu¹⁸
S	directive
BH	directive
*	*if there were any tea (I would like some)*,... indirect (conditional cl.) asking about the possibility of having tea (rising tone and pause). Using an explicit performative, this could also be viewed as a

	constative. But the illoc. force is definitely that of a directive (asking for st.)

A²⁰<<↓no>> · ²¹ oh [ðiii] ↓tea · ²² ↓tea or coffee

B²³ ↓right

#19	tu²⁰
S	assertive
BH	constative
*	a very unexpected reaction of A, probably just answers the question about the current presence of tea
#20	tu²¹
S	assertive (exclamation)
BH	constative-?identifying
*	resumes, repairs, as if just understood the implied meaning of the preceding utterance, exclamation, difficult to classify
#21	tu²²
S	assertive
BH	constative
*	Even though it looks as an alternative question, it does not have rising intonation *on coffee*
#22	tu²³
S	
BH	
*	*right* – difficult to interpret, it probably serves as an indicator of changing the topic. Another possibility is that B reacts to A's previous confusion about tea (which could, again, be interpreted as *let's abandon this topic and move to another*)

B²⁴ I think he [h∂] I think he probably ↓heard

B²⁵ he said is he ↑gone

A²⁶ ↓yes ·

#23	tu²⁴ + tu²⁵ *he said*
S	assertive
BH	constative
*	statement, providing info, beginning to talk about what B wants to talk about, false start, fragmentary clauses
#24	tu²⁵ *is he ↑gone*
S	directive
BH	directive
*	a true y-n question, illoc. force: asking for info, secondary function: seeking reassurance that B can talk about a third person (multiple function)
#25	tu²⁶
S	assertive
BH	constative
*	reply, assurance

A ²⁷ well he ☼[st] he [?] he ↓first of☼ all ²⁹ came up to my ↑room

B²⁸   ☼<<7 to 8 sylls>>☼

#26	tu²⁷, ²⁹

S	assertive
BH	constative - reporting
*	reporting on previous events, statements
#27	tu[28]
*	unknown

A³⁰ and said would I☼<<please>>☼come at↓four o'clock ☼☼today · ³¹<<at>↓four☼☼ -

B³²   ☼↓yes☼

B³⁴   ☼☼oh ↓yes ³⁵<<have you got

some ↓milk for ↑me>>☼☼

>A³³ and then [∂]☼☼ - and☼☼ then he [∂:h] · sent a ↓message

B³⁶   ☼☼<<3 to 4 sylls>>☼☼

>A³⁷ <<by>> Stanley Johnson saying << can I>> come at ↓four

#28	tu[30,31,33,37,?38]
S	assertive
BH	constative - reporting
	A continues reporting on previous events, although he is simultaneously accompanied by B's comments, but does not interrupt his SA.
#29	tu[32]
	back channel response, cf. #17
#30	tu[34]
	back channel response, cf. #17
#31	tu[35]
S	directive
BH	directive
	request for milk, y-n question, rising tone, *some* biased towards positive answer, this points to the directive illoc. force (*Give me some milk... I'm asking you to give me some milk*).
#32	tu[36]
	unknown

A³⁸ ☼<<3 to 4 sylls>☼

B³⁹ ☼<<but this was☼ ↓because>> ⁴⁰ of ↓me

B⁴¹ because I said I <<wanted>> to ↓go at four ↑thirty I ☼↑ think☼

A⁴⁴   ☼↓oh -☼

#33	tu[39,40,41,42]
S	assertive
BH	constative
	B tries to give his explanation to the facts mentioned by A
#34	tu[44]
	backchannel (rising tone on *thirty*)

B⁴² <<it's not conv>>↓enient   B⁴³ +yes it ↓is+

A[45]   +→so [∂]+   [46] is that ↓all ·

#35	tu[45,46]
S	directive
BH	directive
	asking B whether he has finished

B[47] **yes Tim's ☼<<having that · I ↑know☼**

A[49]   ☼↓yeah [50] is this <<↓boiling>>☼

#36	tu[47,48]
S	assertive
BH	constative
#37	tu[49,50]
S	directive
BH	directive
	back channel + question, suggestion

B[48] **but>> he couldn't decide ☼☼whether to or not [51]<<7 to 8 sylls do you☼☼ think**

   that's a photo>>

A[52]   ☼☼ <<I>> think this is boiling☼☼

A[53] **I've just boiled <<syll syll>>**

(cont.)