

PRESEQUENCES AND INDIRECTION

Applying speech act theory to ordinary conversation

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This paper contrasts the analysis provided by speech act theory for utterances of the form "Do you know + [embedded WH-question]" with the analysis demonstrably arrived at by participants in actual ordinary conversations. The analyses are found to diverge with respect both to the sets of alternative interpretations accorded the utterances and the priorities attributed to them. This result is related to the disattention in speech act theory to the temporal and sequential properties of talk-in-interaction.

Consider utterances such as "Do you know who's going to that meeting?" or "Do you know where Leo is?". They are of just the sort to which speech act theory has called special attention, and for which it appears to be specially useful. A rudimentary but roughly correct account might proceed as follows.

Taken literally (and setting aside for the moment the problems invoked by references to 'literal meaning'), such an utterance appears to be a request for information, the information being about the state of the recipient's knowledge. Conventionally in speech act theoretic analysis, this is the direct speech act such an utterance is doing.

Clearly enough, this is not the ordinary force of such an utterance, not its ordinary interpretation. Through various mechanisms that need not concern us here, such an utterance is ordinarily understood, and is meant to be understood, as a request for the information mentioned in the embedded question - here "who's going to that meeting?" or "where's Leo?". This

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Much of the basic argument in this paper was first presented at the Conference on the Possibilities and Limitations of Pragmatics, held in Urbino in 1979. It formed part of a larger presentation in the colloquium series on Discourse and Pragmatics at the 1983 Linguistic Institute at UCLA, and of a presentation to the Science Forum on 'Language Processing in Social Context', held as part of the commemoration of the 600th anniversary of the founding of Heidelberg University.

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request for the embedded question's information is termed the indirect speech act the utterance is doing.

For utterances of this form – “Do you know + embedded WH-question” – then, speech act theory tells us that there are two possible understandings: the direct and indirect speech act interpretations. Ordinarily it is the latter which is understood by a recipient.

As it happens, the two utterances taken as prototypes above have been extracted from actual ordinary conversations. They were taken from a small collection of fragments of ordinary conversation which exemplify what can be called ‘fourth position repair initiation’. Since this will be the subject of a fuller account elsewhere (Schegloff *ms*), here a minimal sketch will suffice.

The term ‘repair’ is used to refer to efforts in talk-in-interaction to deal with trouble in speaking, hearing and/or understanding the talk (Schegloff et al. (1977)). The practices of repair are in various respects organized by reference to where it is initiated, and that is in turn best characterized by relationship to the trouble-source, i.e., the talk which is being repaired. The main positions from which repair is initiated have previously been characterized as (1) same turn as contains the trouble source, (2) the transition space following possible completion of that turn, (3) next turn, and (4) third turn (i.e., typically, next turn by same speaker as produced the trouble-source). Here, an additional position is being noted.

Fourth position repair initiation occurs under the following circumstance. A schematic transcript will be useful.

A: T1
B: T2
A: T3
B: T4

A produces some turn at talk, here being called T1; this talk will turn out to include/be the trouble-source. The recipient of T1 produces a response to it, T2. T2 appears to *A* to be an adequate/appropriate response to T1. Following T2, and building upon the sequence T1-T2, *A* produces a next turn – T3. Upon hearing T3, *B* ‘realizes’ that T2 had been based on a ‘misunderstanding’ of T1. Then in T4 – fourth position relative to the trouble-source T1 – *B* initiates repair. This repair ordinarily takes a form such as, “Oh! You mean ---” or “Oh! You + (some named action)”. Alternatively, the recharacterization of what *A* meant or was doing may be omitted, and the fourth position repair initiation takes the form, “Oh!” + a response to T1 under the revised understanding.

Although as presented here schematically the four turns occur consecutively, this is not criterial. Other turns may intervene, engaged in other aspects of the talk, or initiating other aspects of repair. What is critical is that there be a

response to some action, and a next turn predicated on that response which triggers the 'realization' that the response was based on a misunderstanding of what was being responded to. Such components need not necessarily be in consecutive turns. In one of the instances to be examined below they are; in the other, they are not.

The great virtue of sequences of talk with fourth position repairs is that they provide an opportunity to see two different analyses by a same recipient of a same utterance in the same context. That is, virtually everything is 'held constant' between T2 and T4, which display two different analyses by *B* of the same utterance by *A*, the one at T1. This is as close as one can get to something like experimental 'control' under otherwise purely naturalistic conditions.

Since fourth position repairs afford us two different analyses of the same utterance, if that utterance is of the form "Do you know who's going to that meeting?", we can ask whether or not these two analyses are the alternatives yielded by our speech act theoretic analysis, and whether the one treated by the speech act theoretic account as having priority actually does – for example, whether it is the first one entertained and acted upon, at T2.

To anticipate the outcome: (1) the two alternative analyses are not those provided by speech act theory, although one of them is; and (2) the one which is provided by speech act theory is also claimed by that theory ordinarily to be the priority interpretation, but in both the cases to be examined here, it is *not* the recipients' initial interpretation.

In the first instance to be examined, a family is about to sit down for dinner. The mother gives advance notice of something to be discussed at the dinner table.

(1) (Family dinner)

- | | | |
|----------------|---|------|
| <i>Mother:</i> | 'z everybody (0.2) {washed for dinner? | |
| <i>Gary:</i> | {Yah. | |
| <i>Mother:</i> | Daddy 'n I have t- both go in different directions, en I wanna talk ta you about where I'm going (t'night). | |
| <i>Russ:</i> | mm hmm | |
| <i>Gary:</i> | Is it about us? | |
| <i>Mother:</i> | Uh huh | |
| <i>Russ:</i> | I know where you're go'in, | |
| <i>Mother:</i> | Where. | |
| <i>Russ:</i> | To the uh (eighth grade) = | |
| <i>Mother:</i> | = Yeah. Right. | |
| <i>Mother:</i> | Do you know who's going to that meeting? | ← T1 |
| <i>Russ:</i> | Who. | ← T2 |
| <i>Mother:</i> | I don't know. | ← T3 |

- Russ:* Oh:: Prob'ly Missiz McOwen ('n detsa) en ← T4
 prob'ly Missiz Cadry and some of the teachers.
 (0.4) and the coun } sellors.
- Mother:* { Missiz Cadry went to the-
 I'll tell you...

"Do you know who's going to that meeting?" is the trouble-source turn here, the T1. The two different analyses of it are displayed in the two different responses, at T2 and T4.

Note first that the initial understanding of Mother's utterance is neither as a request for information about the recipient's (Russ') knowledge nor as a request for the information asked in the embedded question. Each of these action interpretations would sequentially implicate a distinctive set of responses in next turn – the former makes a "yes" or "no" answer relevant next; the latter makes relevant some reference to a person or a denial of knowledge such as "I don't know". T2's talk is neither of these.

Instead, Mother's turn is first understood by Russ to be a sort of 'pre-sequence'. As discussed elsewhere (e.g., Schegloff (1979: 49–50, 1980: (13–114), Levinson (1983: 345–364)), pre-sequences are sequences produced to be specifically preliminary to determinate actions, projecting their occurrence, contingent on the response to the pre-sequence initiator. The most familiar exemplar is the pre-invitation. In appropriate contexts, "Are you doing anything?" is understood not as a simple request for information, but as a pre-invitation. Answers are ordinarily selected by reference to an interest in forwarding the sequence to an invitation, or an interest in blocking such a development. A "no" answer ordinarily elicits an invitation from the pre-invitation's speaker; a "yes" does not, although it may lead to a telling of what the invitation would have been.

In the case at hand, "Do you know..." is a different type of pre-sequence – a pre-announcement (Terasaki (1976)). Pre-announcements regularly take such formats as "Guess what/who..." or "Y'know what/who..." etc. As with pre-invitations, some response types forward the sequence to its base or core action – here, an announcement, whereas others may seek to block it. If the recipient of the pre-announcement can detect what 'news' is about to be told and already knows that information, or seeks to 'heckle' the sequence, then a response that will do this is to tell the news or make a guess at it. Otherwise, the appropriate response, one which forwards the sequence to a telling by the pre-announcement speaker, is either the question word which was included in the pre-announcement ("what", "who", etc.) or "no".

In (1), Russ shows that he has analyzed mother's turn to be a pre-announcement and that he is forwarding the sequence to the announcer position by responding with the question word from the pre-announcement turn – "who".

Note that this is quite different from saying that he does not know who is going to the meeting. A moment later, when he realizes he is being asked, he shows that he *does* know. Why then does he not say earlier, here at T2, who is going to the meeting? Because he has understood the preceding utterance not to be a request for information, but to be the harbinger of an announcement, and he fit his response to the action he understood to have been done.

When mother's next turn, at T3, shows Russ that his analysis of her T1 utterance was incorrect, he reanalyzes it, and his second analysis is one of those arrived at by our rudimentary speech act analysis. He now understands it as a request for the information asked by the embedded question. In T4, he first provides a marker of enlightenment (what Heritage (1984) terms a "change of state" token), and then provides a response of the sort outlined above as sequentially implicated by such a request for information in conversational persons.

Note, however, that this analysis – the so-called indirect speech act analysis – is the one which speech act theory would propose to be the ordinary one. In this instance, however, it is tried only after another analysis has been tried and proved incorrect.

A second instance is somewhat more complicated to explicate, but identical in analytic import. In (2), the two parties to a telephone call and the person they refer to are all close friends and on a 'first name' basis. The use of 'title + last name' is an intended joke, which succeeds mainly in confusing its recipient.

(2) (TC)

- A: Hello
 B: Mister Lodge.
 A: Yes.
 B: Mr. Ford.
 A: Yes.
 B: Y'know where Mr. Williams is? ← T1
 A: What?
 B: hhhahhhah
 A: Do I know where who?
 B: Leo is. ← T1
 A: No. ← T2
 B: Oh. Okay. ← T3
 A: 's he down in Mexico or some'in? ← T2
 B: I don't know. ← T3
 A: Oh. { You're { looking { for him. ← T4
 { Y- { Y- { Y-
 B: Well Leo's brother called me up 'n uh ...

This instance is complicated by the intrusion of the joking into it, and the confusion which it produces; the consequence is that the critical components do not occur in consecutive turns, there is additional repair, and various components are done more than once. Nonetheless, in its essential aspects, this sequence is just like (1).

The trouble source turn, "Y'know where ...", is initially a trouble source in a different respect, i.e., the person reference in it is formulated to be recognizable (Sacks and Schegloff (1979)), but is problematic. A first repair initiation, "what", draws a laugh, a bit of triumph that the trick of wrong reference form has 'worked'. *A* then employs a more powerful and specifying repair initiator (cf. Schegloff et al. (1977: 369)), and its answer – "Leo is" – serves to re-invoke the initial utterance. In effect, it amounts to the original inquiry with a changed person reference, "Do you know where Leo is?", hence the re-appearance of T1 in the margin of the transcript at that point.

The response to this redone sequence start is less differentiating among its possible interpretations than was "who" at T2 in example (1). As noted earlier, 'forwarding' responses to pre-announcements take the form either of a repeat of the question word from the pre-announcement, or a "no". "No", however, can also be an appropriate response to the prior utterance interpreted as a straightforward request for information. But it becomes clear over the next several turns that this "no" is produced in response to what has been analyzed by *A* as a pre-announcement.

On that analysis, what should follow the "no" is the announcement which has been projected. "Oh. Okay." stands to that projection as "I don't know" stood to "who" in example (1), or as a mere "yes" stands to the inquiry "Do you have a match?". It is like the former of these in not providing the projected announcement. It is like the latter in being suspect of being some sort of joke or tease. Especially in the present context, in which *B* has been 'kidding around' from the start in his use of specifically wrong address and reference terms, that treatment of the flat "Oh. Okay." where an announcement was projected is a plausible understanding. *A* responds in turn with a guess at what 'the announcement', which he has taken to be 'on the way', might be. The "I don't know" he gets in return, like the "I don't know" in (1) makes clear that there is no announcement, and that the utterance in T1 was a request for the information it mentioned in the embedded question. This is the thrust of the T4, which displays the 'realization', and the revised analysis of T1.

In (2), then, as in (1), there are two different analyses of the target utterance by its recipient, one of them provided in the speech act analysis, the other not. Here, as well, the one provided is not the priority one employed, but is the second analysis arrived at by the recipient after the first is not sustainable. In both cases the analysis which is missed is a "pre-sequence" analysis of the utterance.¹

¹ This sort of thing is missed by speech act theory elsewhere as well. For example, utterances of

What a rudimentary speech act theoretic analysis misses, and I suspect a sophisticated one will miss as well, is that parties to real conversations are always talking in some sequential context. I refer here not to social contexts like offices, classrooms or families (although these may be relevant as well, once shown to be relevant), but sequential contexts formulated in terms of more or less proximately preceding and projectably ensuing talk. The latter – the real job of projecting further talk which utterances can do, for which they can be inspected by their recipients, an inspection to which speakers must therefore be reflexively attentive – are especially vulnerable to being ignored, and especially when detailed renderings of real utterances do not discipline the analysis. Such prior and prospective contexts are inescapably implicated in the real life projects, however humble or exalted, which are being prosecuted through the talk. These real life projects, and the sequential infrastructure of talk-in-interaction, are involved in the production and analysis of talk by the parties in such intimate detail that we are only beginning to understand it. But it is clear that temporality and sequentiality are inescapable; utterances are in turns, and turns are parts of sequences; sequences and the projects done through them enter constitutively into utterances like the warp in a woven fabric.

Although it could be argued that speech act theory can incorporate another category of speech act like 'pre-announcement' and establish its felicity conditions and incorporate the result into future analysis, this is not the same as incorporating sequential contextedness itself. Here the outlook is not hopeful, for speech act theory has inherited from traditional philosophy the single act or utterance as its fundamental unit. Of course, speech act theory is in the first instance preoccupied with a philosophical problematic, and the matters I have raised may be of no moment for philosophical concerns. But its discussions and results are often written in a quasi-empirical idiom which invites the interpretation that what actual people say, do and understand is being described.

It is with respect to such applications to seriously empirical data that caution is well advised. When applied to actual utterances in actual ordinary conversations, it can demonstrably yield wrong results for non-incidental reasons. By 'wrong results' I mean understanding of the utterances other than those demonstrably relevant to, and employed by, the participants. By 'non-

the form "Can I ask you a question?" invite analysis as 'requests for permission to ask a question', and that analysis has been used to support the claim that in some professional and/or interview contexts, one party – e.g., the patient in medical interviews – is not ordinarily allowed to ask questions, and asks permission to do so. But an analysis of empirical instances yields quite different analyses, all of them of a 'pre-sequence' character (cf. the discussion in Schegloff (1980: 143–146)). The connection between pre-sequences and indirect speech acts has also been noted and discussed by Heringer (1977) and Levinson (1983: 356–364). In fact, Levinson (1983: 353–354) provides a summary account of an earlier presentation of the present analysis, including some details not included here.

incidental' reasons I mean apparently constitutive aspects of this mode of analysis, which systematically fail to engage constitutive aspects of its object, i.e., talk-in-interaction, aspects such as its sequentiality.

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