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How Routine are Discourse Routines?

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Many analyses of conversation have focused on the routine sequencing of language in speech events such as the beginnings of telephone interactions (Schegloff, 1968;1986). If patterns in language data are routine or script-like, they should occur frequently in appropriate samples. Yet after investigating 25 telephone openings, Hopper (1989:190) concludes, "When all exceptions are considered, one is left with a considerably greater number of non-routine calls than routine ones. What is the status of a model of a routine which is, in actual full occurrence, not all that frequent?" It seems clear that systematic quantitative analyses are needed to increase understanding of the establishment and operation of discourse routines. Currently, the greatest efforts to quantify discourse phenomena are being made by computational linguists motivated by the possibility of exploiting discourse patterns in technologies for automated language processing. Moreover, the issues that Hopper raises should be of great concern to these researchers, since the patterns observed by language experts must also be "observed" by computer software in order to be useful. Therefore, the proposed paper will report the results of some initial efforts to examine discourse routines quantitatively.

Results are based on data collected when 32 pairs of students performed decision-making tasks such as planning a getaway weekend. Half interacted face-to-face, while the other half interacted by typing messages for display on a partner's computer monitor. The interactions were coded by associating each utterance unit with three functional categories: a Move function (suggesting, requesting information, requesting action); a Response function (agreeing, complying with a request); and an Other function (discourse marker, orientation, metalinguage). The coding system makes it possible to investigate two types of routines. Adjacency pairs can be considered the simplest discourse routines since they consist of two sequential pair-parts, and many request/compliance pairs occur in the interactions. In addition, there is a high density of decisions in each interaction, and these appear to follow a routine in which the decision is oriented by stating a goal (*ok next day*), then a suggestion is formulated (*we can go to Florida*), and finally the partner expresses agreement with the suggestion (*Florida ok*).

To observe the extent to which utterances conform to request-compliance and orientation-suggestion-agreement sequences, we treated the series of events as the output of a probabilistic information source. Memoryless, first order and second order Markov analyses were performed on each interaction individually and also by combining the interactions obtained from each modality. Several ways of performing the analyses were experimented with, since each utterance event represents a Move-Response-Other triple.

Data from the computer-mediated interactions exhibit the greatest conformity to routines. Condon and Cech (1996) introduce the term *compression* to describe the strategies that allow participants in computer-mediated interaction to accomplish the task in 5 times fewer utterances (average 55 vs. 255). They utilize more discourse routines and produce more utterances that combine discourse functions than participants in face-to-face interactions. Simple descriptive statistics from these interactions illustrate the frequency with which utterances in computer-mediated interactions conform to the decision routine: 47% of utterances following orientations are suggestions, and 66% of utterances following suggestions are agreements. Adjacency pair routines occur with comparable frequencies. Additional evidence that the frequency of routines is identifiable comes from the Markov analyses.

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