A Single Theory of Dialogue

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Abstract

This memo concerns the issue of what are appropriate expectations of future
theories that apply to dialogue. It identifies several different foci for which very distinct
theories would be expected, and then explores further the case of coherence in dialogue. It
finds the expectation of a single theory, even for this restricted aspect, to be implausible,
suggesting that a collection of theories that jointly cover the topic is a more appropriate
expectation and more easily achieved.

+++ Dialogue (or conversation) is one of the significant topics in linguistics, partly because of the
important roles that it is given outside of linguistics. All of the classic domains of text interpretation --
law, religion, literary studies, philosophy and the communication sciences, give prominent roles to
linguistic interaction and to its participants. In common culture, the so called “folk linguistics,” the role
of conversation turns out to be significant as well, providing influential starting points for technical work.
Informally, in linguistics, the importance of dialogue is not particularly controversial. There is generally
a respect, if not an interest, toward having one’s theoretical orientation include dialogue.

Even with respect, there is not much of a consensus on what views of dialogue are credible and
what a really credible view would be like. We want to take a few small steps here toward sorting this
out.

The key question for this memo is:

What are reasonable expectations for linguistic theories of dialogue?

Under that there are several aspects worth focusing on. The focus of this memo is simply
numerosity. At what level should we expect single theories in competition, rather than multiple theories
in collaboration, as, for example, physics and chemistry mostly collaborate rather than compete?
Whatever level we choose, the single theories at that level must

1. Cover the entirety of some identifiable scope, and
2. Combine to cover larger scopes of phenomena.

Unfortunately, without having a consensus on the nature of dialogue or diverse natures of types of
dialogue, we do not have a range of “levels” in the sense used above.

Another way to address the same issue is to ask what the phenomena being addressed depend on.
If we have a dependency, say, of interpretive outcomes – what text “means” – on particular lexical items
in particular languages, then we expect to require a distinct version of the theory of that phenomenon for
each language.

Some phenomena appear to be language independent. It is quite plausible, for example, that the
qualitative basis of coherence of dialogue is the same in most languages.

In this view it is not appropriate to say, as above, “linguistic theories of dialogue.” Instead we
must explore theories of particular phenomena in dialogue. This reduces the problem and at the same
time postpones the integration of theories. We can sketch out an enumeration of phenomena, chosen to
allow selectivity (not full coverage in any sense):

- Language structures found in dialogue
- Understanding dialogue
• Participating in dialogue (including generating language and responding to the language of another)
• Coherence of dialogue
• ...

My present interest is to choose “Coherence of dialogue (or conversation)” and then, with some notion of what must be included, go on to study included items, and then finally reassess the indicated shape of theory (theories) of dialogue. There are diverse approaches to identifying the nature of coherence in dialogue, some specific to dialogue and some more general. My memo “Coherence in Dialogue” is available at http://www-ref.usc.edu/~billmann/dialogue/decoherence.htm. Focusing on issues of Separability (setting aside Completeness and Consistency), we can seek to find what would constitute a non sequitur in dialogue.

1. One of the views of (separability) coherence in dialogue, currently not validated, says the following:

2. In parts of some dialogues the participants are engaged in collaborative behavior,

3. This collaborative behavior is work in pursuit of goals that are mutually known, each participant committed to them, and possibly some of the goals being joint goals in the sense used by Clark or Tuomela (Clark 1996; Tuomela 2000). Such goals are identifiable in context, they can persist over long intervals of dialogue, and within such intervals every statement can be judged as to whether it appears to be offered in service of those goals. Any exception is a candidate at least to be judged as a non sequitur.

The approach seems valid for this restricted class of dialogue intervals, and so we can expect to be able to identify a partial (descriptive) theory of coherence for them. Dialogue Macrogame Theory (DMT) is an effort in that direction; see the website above. Preliminary DMT accounts of tutoring, map following, administrative phone calls, travel agents’ work and other collaborative domains exist. Where DMT applies, it seems quite plausible that the collaboration is the major factor creating the appearance of coherence, and thus that another approach to coherence might, for those intervals, find no other basis of coherence.

With DMT as an approach to collaborative intervals of dialogue, we may discover that it applies more broadly. For example, it may apply to medical interviews in which the patient (and the researcher viewing the dialogue) have no idea what the physician is driving at. Preliminary efforts to apply DMT in that way have appeared to succeed.

Even accepting the preliminary appearances from DMT, this leaves two problems.

1. For many dialogues, perhaps the majority of dialogues, a full length DMT account is not possible. In other words, DMT fails to apply.

2. For dialogues where DMT does apply, the notion of what is a non sequitur, what is an exception to collaborative behavior, varies.

So we can say that this account is an inherently partial one. It seems reasonable to expect that other accounts will be similarly partial. And judging by the way that DMT seems to produce a partial success, it is implausible that some comprehensive basis for describing all coherence in dialogue will be found.

It is common to treat conversation or dialogue as though they were technically homogeneous. Some parts of (Craig and Tracy 1983) (see the coherence memo mentioned above) do so. Searle, in his exploration of conversation (Searle 1991), does as well. Such approaches may simply be too broad to succeed.¹

¹ I have had the opportunity to search for literature on other similar topics, including models of intention in
What should we expect instead? What course of research efforts seems more likely to succeed? Before we say “Here is a comprehensive theory of dialogue coherence,” several stages can be anticipated:

2. Validation of such theories, and possible correction of them or extension of coverage.
3. Addition to the set of theories so that substantially full coverage is achieved.

All of that will not be enough. Even given this imagined collection of validated theories achieving full coverage, reconciliation of the parts is needed. Reconciliation will likely require substantial cooperative effort.

References


