Natural Dialogue is Resumptive

William C. Mann
SIL International

Overview

A technical understanding of how a dialogue works requires a thorough knowledge of how language inside a dialogue depends on knowledge from outside that dialogue. In general, as dialogue participants understand their interaction, they depend heavily on knowledge which they hold before the dialogue begins. This includes knowledge about language and its use, but also knowledge about the participants’ lives. The focus of the paper is on the latter.

This paper explores this dependency, supporting the following view:

All of life, including communication, is organized with a dependence of each day’s activity on prior activity.

In order to accurately represent how a dialogue is understood, we must say how participants apply knowledge of past interactions. Linguistics shows many different ways that dependency on prior knowledge impacts language interpretation. (It is not claimed that every dialogue is “resumptive” as identified below. Rather, the view is that resumptive dialogues are the predominant case, so frequent that resumption cannot be ignored.)

For dialogue, dependence on the past often approximates continuing after an interruption. It is starting a new dialogue with someone who remembers and resumes use of the final state of knowledge of their most recent interaction. That knowledge includes memories derived from past interactions.

This is the sense of the term resumptive here.

The paper first explores a list of kinds of elements that appear to resume, with special attention to personal pronouns. It identifies some patterns of dependence on prior knowledge, and it also comments on what must happen before linguistic accounts of resumptive interaction can become common.

Scientific Goals

One of the persistent goals in science is to understand how human language works and how language is involved in human communication. This memo is organized around a specialization of that goal, seeking to explain the processes that enable human dialogue. A representative task in this pursuit is to capture and eventually explain particular dialogues, including their linguistic forms, the selectivity of expression, the consequences of that interaction and implications for further interactions.

This paper explores a narrow aspect of dialogue understanding – the dependencies between the process of understanding a dialogue and prior knowledge held by the participants. The focus is on two party, immediate interaction. It is descriptive, informal and sketchy in its approach, an exploration rather than a documentation.

Interpretation of the language used in dialogue is taken as a focal task for discussion. This task is chosen simply to facilitate discussion, not claiming that interpretation has any kind of primacy.

Depending on Past Knowledge

Every day of our lives is dominated by conditions and tasks that continue from the past. We should not be surprised to find that the language we use each day in our dialogues is likewise dominated by continuities with the past. Certainly the topics of conversation will have continuity, but do the linguistic elements of interaction also reflect the existence of such continuities?

More precisely, are there linguistic categories and structures for which reliable, consistently correct interpretation requires effective use of past knowledge? For example, are there ambiguities or other alternations that can only be resolved in the light of participants’ prior knowledge?

Below we identify a number of such cases, and suggest how the correct choice of an interpretation could depend on different past interactions.

- The correct interpretation of imperatives depends on whether the speaker has already established some directive authority over the hearer. Often, for example, interpretation of what is communicated by “Go do it yourself” will depend strongly on whether the speaker has authority relative to the addressee. “Go do it yourself” can sometimes be either a suggestion or a granting of permission, neither of which have directive force.
Honorific particles, which are part of the grammar in languages such as Korean and Japanese, are not optional. They represent, in a complex way, attitudes, conventions and social beliefs that the speaker presents toward the hearer. A change in the choice of an honorific particle may represent ordinary recognition of a change in the status of the hearer, or it may represent a very strong expression of change of the speaker’s attitude. In either case, interpretation of a dialogue requires identification of changes in use of honorifics, and thus depends on a knowledge of prior usage.

In many languages, including English, definite determiners in noun phrases are used in referring to things that are already salient, perhaps by being mentioned in past interactions. So, beginning a conversation with “I got the job!,” use of “the” in “the job” can only be interpreted by knowledge of prior interaction.

Consider the description of an interpersonal relationship as being on a “first name basis.” The freedom to address someone by his or her first name, in particular societies, represents a comfortable, familiar relationship in which the register of language use is informal. If, unexpectedly, the first name is not used in a dialogue between such participants, this can communicate a negative change in the relationship. Other interpretations are possible. It could indicate that the subject matter of the interaction requires a formal register, e.g. a reprimand in the case of a supervisor who has had some fairly informal prior interactions with a subordinate.

Interpreting first names in dialogue may thus require knowing whether the parties have been on a first name basis. (Nicknames and the use of titles of office have some similar features of interpretation.)

In some social situations, for example in Tanzanian family life, it is obligatory to recognize status differences when starting a conversation after a time of separation. The forms of greetings must match the relationship between the parties. Age difference is one of the factors. In an actual example of the use of Tanzanian Swahili, a younger brother greets a sister, 6 years older, with a peer greeting signifying equal status. The sister replies “Greet me properly!” The brother begins again, greeting the sister with deference, and takes a lower status. [citation of Tanzanian linguist]

In this conversation, or in a hypothetical alternative in which the greetings are accepted, the sister’s first reply communicates how the relationship is to be resumed.

Unexpected changes in presuppositions can produce dramatic effects. Imagine a couple, daily discussing their future in terms of “If we get married...” If, in a new dialogue, one uses the phrase “When we get married...”, that change communicates a dramatic change in their relationship.

Interpreting Pronouns

Personal pronouns deserve a more extended treatment than the items above. Many languages have more than one pronoun form that can be used to refer to a particular person. It is especially common to have more than one form for referring to the addressee in dialogue, the so called 2nd Person Singular forms comparable to the singular “you” in English.

There is often a contrast between a “familiar” form and another form. What “familiar” signifies varies from one language to another, and the kind of contrast represented by the other form also varies. The table below gives some representative cases.  

---

1 NOTE TO REVIEWERS. The data to fill this table are available; some items were temporarily lost in a computer event. The familiar vs. other distinction for each of the languages is confirmed. The table will be filled before final submission. Certain citations must also be redetermined.

2 What is given for each language is a partial, highly simplified account, suitable only for showing the wide distribution of such distinctions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Familiar (or similar) Form</th>
<th>Usage of the Familiar</th>
<th>Altern ate Form</th>
<th>Usage of the Alternate Form</th>
<th>Familiar Form Sentence</th>
<th>Alternate Form Sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hindi</td>
<td><em>tu ; tum</em></td>
<td>children, low status persons; respected older person¹</td>
<td><em>aap</em></td>
<td>Formal: high officials, outside family, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td><em>anh</em></td>
<td>“older brother”</td>
<td><em>ong</em></td>
<td>&quot;grandfather/ respected, highly placed person.”</td>
<td><em>Anh did dau vay?</em></td>
<td><em>Thua ong, ong di dau the?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amharic</td>
<td></td>
<td>family, close persons</td>
<td>Polite: respected, highly placed persons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German *</td>
<td><em>du</em></td>
<td>familiar</td>
<td><em>Sie</em></td>
<td>formal</td>
<td><em>Du bist sehr kräftig!</em></td>
<td><em>Sie sind sehr kräftig!</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish *</td>
<td><em>tú</em></td>
<td>familiar</td>
<td><em>usted</em></td>
<td>formal</td>
<td><em>¿Tú eres muy fuerte!</em></td>
<td><em>¿Usted es muy fuerte!</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French *</td>
<td><em>tu</em></td>
<td>familiar</td>
<td><em>vous</em></td>
<td>formal</td>
<td><em>Tu es très fort.</em></td>
<td><em>Vous êtes très fort.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In some of these languages, indicated by *, there is a lexicalized way of saying “Do not use the familiar form with me.” In Spanish, for example, one can say “¡No me tuteas!” using the verb “tutear,” which means: to use the familiar form. Saying it in that way communicates disrespect, an insult. Saying it in the formal form “¡No me tuteas!” would be more acceptable; “¡Por favor, no me tuteas!” is even more polite.

In French there is a contrast between 2\textsuperscript{nd} person singular pronouns *tu* and *vous*, called the familiar and formal forms. Between adult peers, the use of *tu* is restricted to addressing family members and very close, well known and highly approved friends, and is further restricted to mutual use. So in dialogue if one party begins to use *tu*, or stops using *tu*, this communicates a dramatic change in that person’s attitudes and expectations toward the other. Beginning to use *tu* can be a delicate negotiation.

Note that several of these examples involve alternations between expected and unexpected forms. Such alternations cannot be identified or interpreted without knowledge of prior interactions.

**Characterizing Dependence**

Interpretation of language which depends, or might depend, on prior knowledge is often complex and subtle. I have no general characterization of it, but here are some comments that may be useful.

**Resumption of the most recent interaction**

---

² In each language except Vietnamese, for both forms, the sentence means “You are very strong.” For Vietnamese they resemble “Where are you going?” and “Respectfully, sir, where are you going?”

⁴ Using the second person plural conveys respect even when addressing one person.

⁵ Vietnamese has distinctions which govern addressing other persons, but the forms also make distinctions about the speaker. Kin terms do most of the work that pronouns do in many languages. For example the term *may* could be translated as “you, worthless little brother”; *chu* corresponds to “you, who are like an honored brother of my mother.” The term for grandfather, *ong* represents even higher status, and the term *cu* for great-grandfather, shows extreme deference. 2\textsuperscript{nd} person pronouns, either words or phrases, distinguish older from younger, male from female, derogatory from polite, younger from very young, family members from outsiders, paternal uncle from maternal uncle, and teachers from others. (All of the terms must be conveyed with appropriate lexical tone.)
As a general tendency, it is the state of knowledge at the end of the most recent interaction between the two parties that bears on a new dialogue. This state of knowledge may include referents (people, places, things, events), attitudes, preferences, goals, shared tasks, the state of completion of tasks and more. Exceptions can occur if one or both persons have received significant information that would revise such knowledge. Portions of knowledge can be resumed, but other aspects do not resume. Generally the medium is freshly established, there are conventional greetings and the parties freshly acknowledge each other as participants.

What resumes?

What kinds of prior knowledge are involved in resumption? Which of these kinds of prior knowledge are evidenced in linguistic elements?

Notice that in many of the examples, the critical knowledge involves interpersonal relationships. Personal social continuity, prior promises, commitments and obligations, expectations, attitudes such as respect and admiration, shared knowledge and the like are available to be affirmed, denied or occasionally created. Each such action makes a change in details of the relationship. In a sense we can say that the interpersonal relationship is, for these aspects, the construct that resumes.

When no relationship exists, conventional situational signals can substitute for relationship information. So an unknown person in a military uniform will be given the treatment accorded to persons of that particular rank. An unfamiliar money collector in a tollbooth will be given the treatment, and the money, that is appropriate for his or her role and situation. Situations are often configured so that they provide substitutes for resumptive kinds of knowledge. Culture also provides default information, based on factors such as gender, clothing, apparent age, apparent prosperity and being accompanied by known persons.

The Concept of Resumption is both Linguistic and Communicative

Resumption as a phenomenon is deeply involved with linguistics. Examples given above — pronouns, imperatives, definite determiners, forms of address, first names, honorific particles — all of these are linguistic constructs. There are other examples that could be added to the list, but these are sufficient for this paper.

Interpretation of these items cannot be represented as some sort of afterthought that is applied when linguistic study of forms and structures is completed. These sorts of interpretation are part of the linguistics of interpretation of dialogue. It is within the linguistic processes (but not only there) that the social, cultural and interpersonal knowledge must be applied.

Notice also that the alternation of interpretations identified above cannot be removed by structural analysis. The sentence “Tu es très fort.” and the sentence “Vous êtes très fort.” have, with agreement, the same grammatical structure. In context, the clear referents of tu and vous may be identical. Yet the grammatical and referential structures do not tell whether, for example, “Tu es très fort” is unexpected.

So these alternations of interpretation are not matters of structure. They are matters of communication. Communication involves more than the perfect identification of structures. It involves the interpretation of the choice of particular forms, and sometimes interpretation of the absence of particular forms.

Communication is a linguistic topic because meaning is a linguistic topic. Neither communication nor meaning is a term that represents a consensus, either in Linguistics or outside. But meaning is, in any view, inseparable from communication on one hand, and inseparable from semantics on the other. No one argues that semantics is not a linguistic topic.

Certainly moving technical efforts from a focus on linguistic structure to a focus on linguistic communication involves far more than studies of resumption could add. But to create representations of communication, providing resumptive state information will be essential to many kinds of progress.

Linguistic Modeling Today

All of the above would be a set of rather routine, uninteresting observations, except for the fact that resumptive features in linguistic accounts are rare. Mainstream Linguistics, when it follows its preoccupation with isolated sentences, makes no attempt to be resumptive. Other varieties of Linguistics that are perhaps moving toward mainstream status — Cognitive Linguistics, Linguistic Pragmatics, Discourse Linguistics, “Functional” Linguistics of various sorts, do not have a clearly identifiable framework for handling resumptive aspects of language use. My own work is no exception.⁶

We can therefore posit a need for adjustment, perhaps radical adjustment, of ideas and models of dialogue. The focus here on dialogue is a convenience; the proper scope of these adjustments would be much broader.

---

⁶ Reports of recent work by Deborah Tannen, Deborah Schiffrin, Barbara Johnstone and others suggest beginnings of a change. See also (Alberti 2000).
Going Resumptive -- technical and professional considerations

To discuss how existing models might be extended to be resumptive, or even be replaced by new resumptive editions, we must talk about the structure of Linguistics and allied fields. The challenge of creating resumptive linguistic models is not primarily technical. Linguistic accounts today are not resumptive because for a very long time, almost no one felt a need to have such accounts.

Communication is definitely a linguistic topic. Socially, the field of Linguistics owns one of the essential elements of any detailed account of communication -- the lexicon. Linguistics is unlike any other field in its rich, deep and diverse treatment of the formation of words, their categorization and use in building syntactic structures. It is inevitable that comprehensive accounts of communication which include the word level will be linguistic accounts.

Despite the general social significance of the topic of communication, within Linguistics it is being neglected. Many good reasons for this past neglect can be given, but my concern here is for the future.

About 2 years before this memo was written, I made a focused effort to identify what, in a technical sense, the literature says that communication is. I was asking “What is communication? Ontologically, in Linguistics, Philosophy or any nearby field, what has been said?” A report of this search is on one of my websites.

To summarize that report, there are very few definitions of communication that identify its nature. That is, there are few that I could find in broad reading, and also few known to the high quality, scholarly email list that I asked. The nature of communication has seldom been a concern, like meaning, it has been presumed to be obvious.

In contrast, there are dozens of technical fields that concern themselves with particular aspects of communication. There are even dozens of technical fields that have “Communication” in their names. Some of these fields have been defined in dialectic opposition to particular ideas about what linguists believe about communication. Craig has surveyed these fields in an effort to design some organizing scheme for them (Craig 1999). He found the fields to be beyond enumeration. Except inside Linguistics, there is a very high level of interest in accounting for communication. But Linguistics owns the lexicon.

There are several kinds of changes that would be helpful in moving toward resumptive linguistic models of dialogue:

- Linguistics already employs assumptions about memory, but generally only tacitly. Words, phrases, grammatical patterns must be remembered from day to day so that we can talk. Linguistics needs to talk explicitly about memory more often, and be more explicit about the assumptions it uses.
- Similarly Linguistics needs to talk much more about resumption, the contributions of each participant, and how their memories are involved.
- Perhaps most important of all, Linguistics needs to show a much more widely shared desire to account for communication.

Conclusions

Starting with the scientific goal of modeling natural language, modeling dialogue is an advantageous focus. The interpretation of natural dialogues is a particularly informative focal task.

The issue here is this:

Can dialogue interpretation be well modeled in isolation, or does interpretation of particular dialogues depend on knowledge of previous dialogues and other prior conditions affecting the speakers?

The linguistics of ordinary talk in dialogue shows many kinds of ways in which dialogue participants rely on information from the past. Use of personal pronouns, imperatives, definite determiners, first names, greetings, honorifics and other kinds of linguistic devices depend on past knowledge. The interpretation of those items, when found in dialogue, depends on past knowledge as well.

The use of past knowledge in dialogue interpretation goes beyond the identification of linguistic structures. It involves the effects of those structures, i.e. the identification of communication in the dialogues.

The examples in this paper suggest two sorts of patterns of use of prior knowledge:

- Resumption: To an important degree, dialogue participants begin where they left off in previous interaction.

---

7 Download pdf or doc form from [http://www-ref.usc.edu/~billmann/WMlinguistic/eq-sent.pdf](http://www-ref.usc.edu/~billmann/WMlinguistic/eq-sent.pdf) or [http://www-ref.usc.edu/~billmann/WMlinguistic/eq-sent.doc](http://www-ref.usc.edu/~billmann/WMlinguistic/eq-sent.doc) respectively.
Interpersonal Relationship: Dialogues depend in diverse ways on remembering the relationship already established between the participants. Keeping track of this relationship would strongly support dialogue interpretation. This kind of relationship includes shared knowledge, but also many other more personal things.

Considering the problem of creating resumptive models of language use, it may be that the obstacles are as much professional and social as technical.

References