

Structures in Three-Person Decision-Making Dialogues

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Abstract

In an effort to learn something about how group decisions emerge from the contributions of individual members, we collected a set of five 15-minute, 3-person decision-making meetings. I will discuss seven varieties of structure that manifest themselves in this seemingly unstructured data.

1. There are frequent repairs, but the repairs are all partial instantiations of a single, general pattern.
2. The repaired utterances are almost all grammatical sentences or smaller “standard” constituents, such as prepositional phrases or noun phrases, though possibly broken off.
3. Content segments are co-constructed by the three participants across multiple utterances, where the content is first expressed poorly, then expressed well, then referred to anaphorically, and the other fragments of the dialogue can be classified as either expressions of relations among subpropositions, requests for confirmation (including mitigations), and confirmations.
4. The order of content segments respects the partial ordering imposed by the ideal plan for the task they were to perform (global coherence), except where earlier parts of the plan need to be repaired or need to be referred to for the sake of explanation.
5. The order of content segments is underdetermined by global coherence, but the flow from one segment to the next can be characterized by common local coherence relations such as similarity, figure-ground, change of state, causality, and contrast.
6. The relative status of the participants influenced the roles they adopted, with the most powerful taking the responsibility for group consensus, the next most powerful freer to explore alternatives, and the least powerful making but almost never defending suggestions.
7. Syntax and lexical signals are of no help in determining the points at which decisions are made; the chief determinants are the status of the participants and the local coherence structure.