Introduction to Discourse Analysis – Assignment 2
Task 5

Introduction

Conversation analysis approaches conversations as social interactions, relating the surface form of talk to the underlying actions of participants. In this work, I look at a short conversation, applying the *sequential organisation* approach. In particular, I use the concept of *preference* to analyse how potentially socially problematic actions – asking for a big favour, and refusing to help – are realised.

Theoretical background

Sequential organisation explores how actions (requesting, inviting, telling...) are ordered when they surface in conversation; how an action influences successive actions so that orderly sequences of talk are created.

Conditional relevance (Schegloff, 1968) describes how one action makes certain next action(s) relevant (suitable, or even required for talk to proceed orderly), e.g. a question inviting an answer. Thus, long sequences consist of basic units – *adjacency pairs*; defined by Sidnell (2010, p. 64) as pairs of elements:

1. Adjacent
2. Produced by different speakers
3. Ordered as a first pair part (FPP) and a second pair part (SPP)
4. Typed, so that a particular FPP provides for the relevance of [occasions] a particular SPP (or some delimited range of SPPs)

The *type* of a pair can be e.g. greeting-greeting or question-answer, an example pair of the latter type being:

(E1) from Liddicoat (2007, p. 107)

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John:  What time' s it?
Betty:  Three uh clock.
```

Notice how John stops speaking, giving Betty space to produce an SPP (otherwise, there would be no interaction!) and Betty's producing of a *relevant* SPP – if she stayed silent, John could repeat/restate his question (*require* an SPP) or interpret Betty's silence as a response. By producing a matching SPP, Betty also shows understanding of the preceding FPP and the conversation can continue smoothly.

Importantly, an FPP can occasion many possible SPPs (including non-verbal ones, e.g. Betty showing John her wristwatch), but they are often unequally valued: "some responses are problematic for social relationships, while others are not" (Liddicoat, 2007, p. 111). Usual/unsurprising reactions are termed *preferred* (e.g. the answer in E1); less socially appropriate/normal are *dispreferred* (e.g. if Betty answered "I don't know"). Aware of social norms, participants typically treat the two types differently in speaking. Preferred reactions (e.g. accepting an invitation) surface as short and immediate:

(E2) from Casson et al. (1981, p. 58)

```
B: Why don't you come up and see me some[times
A:                                       [I would like to
```

while dispreferreds surface in ways that mitigate potential negative social impact:

(E3) adapted from Liddicoat, p. 110

```
Harry:  I don' have much tuh do on We:nsday.
        (.)
        w' d yuh like tuh get together then.
        (0.3)
Joy:    huh we::llhh I don' really know if yuh see
        i' s a bit hectic fuh me We:nsday yih know
```

Joy's rejection is weak, comes with 0.3s delay, a hesitant "we::ll", hedges ("I don' really know", "**a bit** hectic"), and explanations (accounts) rather than a clear refusal. These common signs – *dispreference markers* – contrast with the shortness, overtness and lack of account (*preference markers*) in E2.

Importantly, FPPs can be dispreferred too (e.g. requests) and are then "held back as later topics" and "accompanied by accounts and mitigations, which occur before the request itself" (Liddicoat, 2007, p. 122):

(E4) from Liddicoat, p. 122

```
Jim:  well my car has broken down an they don' know
      if it will be fixed by then an' I w' z wondering
      if I c' d borrow your car.
```

Following his previous (preparatory) explanations of the pitiful situation, in E4 Jim provides a lengthy account before wording the actual request indirectly, using "was wondering" and "could".

When moving beyond single adjacency pair, the SPP of one pair can become the FPP of the next pair, giving rise to longer action sequences. Alternatively, a pair can be expanded by adding an element before (pre-expansion), between (insert-expansion) or after (post-expansion) the FPP and SPP. Indeed, the added element can itself be a longer sequence. With regard to preference, a pre-sequence may, as already hinted, precede a dispreferred FPP and check if some preconditions are met (e.g. if the other person needs their car right now) and/or make the request less dispreferred by perhaps first explaining the situation. An insert-sequence can be employed e.g. before a dispreferred SPP to mitigate the contrast with the FPP (similar to delaying the SPP using a pause like in E3). Finally, a post-expansion adds to the pair – either in a *minimal* way which effectively closes the sequence (such as adding "Right, okay" in E1), or in a *non-minimal* way where the added "third pair part" itself becomes an FPP, occasioning some next action.

Analysis

The data (Fig. 1) is a short call; Donny calls Marcia, starts describing how his car broke down, he needing to be somewhere else (supposedly soon, and hence needing another car). Marcia reacts, explaining she would love to help but she herself has to go (supposedly using her car). Then, Donny concludes he would call someone else and closes the conversation quickly.

I chronologically step through and describe the excerpt's sequential organisation, particularly with respect to Marcia's reaction (L21-23). (All adjacency pairs marked also in Fig. 1.)

L1-2 is a typical *summons-answer* pair (Liddicoat, 2007, p. 126), a pre-sequence enabling a conversation to begin. Notice Donny's non-verbal action (L1) – face-to-face, it could be "Hey, Marcia!". As an FPP, L2 asks the caller to identify themselves, and Donny does that in L3&5. Marcia's interruption (L4) I find ambiguous – she could signal recognition of Donny, or confirm her identity after Donny addressed her. Either way, Donny continues, finishing in L5. The standard greeting-greeting pair (L3&5, L6) ends the call's opening. Notice the brief form; often, "how are you?" would be added.

After the opening, which can be viewed as a pre-sequence, Donny pushes the conversation

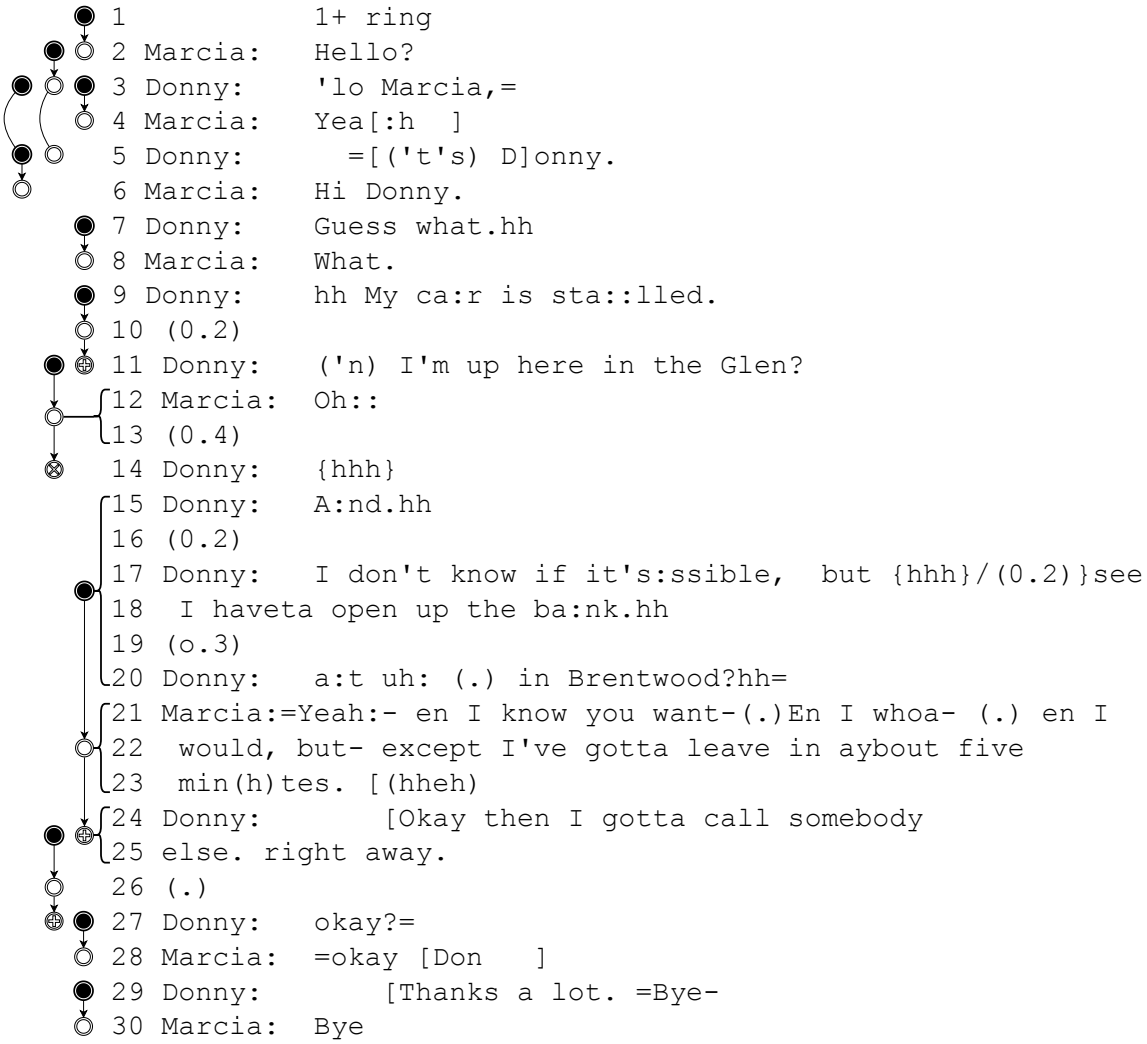

Figure 1: The data; sequence organisation marked on the left. Black/blank circles mark FPPs/SPPs, respectively; $\otimes$ and $\oplus$ mark minimal/non-minimal post-expansions, respectively. Where connected by lines without arrowheads (L3,5) or curly braces (e.g. L21-23), it means multiple lines forming one pair part.

forward with a further pre-sequence (L7) – a *pre-telling* (Liddicoat, 2007, p. 136) pair; signalling he has something to tell, and Marcia giving a "go-ahead" (L8). Then, Donny's telling unravels (L9-L20), which will later turn out to be another pre-sequence. Donny's FPP (L9) announces unfortunate news, inviting a sympathetic SPP, but silence follows (L10) – attributable to Marcia's lack of relevant response. Hence, Donny post-expands

(L11), introducing further bad news, making a sympathetic reaction even more relevant (or even required). To L11 as an FPP, Marcia finally responds (L12-13), but her "Oh::" I see merely as signalling receipt of new information (see detailed analysis of "oh" by Heritage (1984)). Then, Marcia goes silent (L13), not taking further stance or assessing Donny's situation (the silence can also be Donny giving her space to continue). Eventually, Donny accepts Marcia's position; closes the telling sequence by minimally post-expanding (L14 – merely an outbreath) before moving on.

Across L15-20, Donny starts the conversation's main sequence (following the pre-request telling), putting forward his request. His FPP's dispreferredness is heavily marked by: length, hesitations (L15, breathing (L17), tokens "a:t u:h" (L20)), pauses (L16, 17, 19, 20), only slowly moving to the point, placing it after a hedge ("I don't know if it's:ssible") and a warrant ("see I haveta open up the ba:nk"). Without directly requesting Marcia's car, the request comes across clearly and Marcia has to react (L21-23).

Marcia's reaction is also dispreferred (a refusal) and heavily marked: with short pauses, and hesitations where she stops to repair her talk (the `word-` patterns (L21-22)). Starting with sympathetic "Yeah:" – acknowledging Donny's pitiful situation; then confirming she understands the request ("en I know you want-"); showing willingness to help ("en I would"); before finally providing an account for not helping ("I've gotta leave in aybout five min(h)tes").

Without directly refusing, Marcia's SPP is understood by Donny; he non-minimally post-expands (L24-25), acknowledging Marcia's refusal ("Okay then") and mitigating its dispreferredness by outlining contingency plans (to call someone else). The post-expansion is also an FPP – summarises the main sequence and starts a typical *sequence-closing sequence*, which (Liddicoat, 2007, p. 168) normally consists of:

1. summary/assessment proposing to close,
2. go-ahead signal for closing,
3. final turn, closing the sequence.

However, Marcia uncooperatively stays silent (L26), upon which Donny post-expands (L27), repeating his suggestion-to-close more explicitly ("okay?"). To this FPP, Marcia responds quickly with the preferred go-ahead SPP (L28). Then, Donny readily closes the conversation with a typical closing pair (L29-30).

Overall view and conclusions

Through sequential organisation analysis, we saw the conversation unrolling in pre-sequences (opening → pre-telling → telling), preparing the ground for the main request sequence. Throughout, Marcia is minimalistic and uncooperative – perhaps because being busy, but I also interpret it as early signals to Donny: Figuring out that his speaking is only a pre-sequence, she anticipates *some* request and signals unavailability to help. Donny ignores these signals, pushes on, until making the actual request. At that point, Marcia cannot just signal anymore and refuses openly.

The framework of *preference* lets us see how – although both participants are in a hurry – the strong social norms make them present the dispreferred request and refusal in characteristic, elongated ways.

References

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Appendix – the raw data

Marcia and Donny, stalled

```
1          1+ ring
2 Marcia:  Hello?
3 Donny:   ’lo Marcia,=
4 Marcia:  Yea[:h ]
5 Donny:     =[(’t’s) D]onny.
6 Marcia:  Hi Donny.
7 Donny:   Guess what.hh
8 Marcia:  What.
9 Donny:   hh My ca:r is sta::lled.
10 (0.2)
11 Donny:  (’n) I’m up here in the Glen?
12 Marcia: Oh::
13 (0.4)
14 Donny:  {hhh}
15 Donny:  A:nd.hh
16 (0.2)
17 Donny:  I don’t know if it’s:ssible, but {hhh}/(0.2)}see
18  I haveta open up the ba:nk.hh
19 (o.3)
20 Donny:  a:t uh: (.) in Brentwood?hh=
21 Marcia:=Yeah:- en I know you want-(.)En I whoa- (.) en I
22  would, but- except I’ve gotta leave in aybout five
23  min(h)tes. [(hheh)
24 Donny:      [Okay then I gotta call somebody
25 else. right away.
26 (.)
27 Donny:  okay?=
28 Marcia: =okay [Don ]
29 Donny:      [Thanks a lot. =Bye-
30 Marcia: Bye
```