Introduction to Discourse Analysis – Assignment 2
Task 5

Introduction

Theoretical background

Within Conversation analysis as focused on *actions* in talk, not just on speaking itself, Sequantial organisation explores how actions (requesting, inviting, telling...) are ordered when they surface in interaction (conversation); how an action influences successive actions so that orderly sequences of talk are created.

The concept of *conditional relevance* (Schegloff, 1968) describes how one action makes certain next action(s) relevant (suitable, or even required if the talk is 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 utterances:

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 adjacency pair of the latter type being:

> (E1) from Liddicoat (2007, p. 107)
>
> ```
>  John:   What time' s it?
>  Betty:   Three uh clock.
> ```

Notice too how John stops speaking to give Betty space to produce a SPP (or else there would be no interaction!) and how Betty produces a *relevant* SPP – if she stayed silent,

John could repeat his question (his FPP *requiring* a 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 continues smoothly.

Importantly, a FPP can occasion multiple SPPs (including non-verbal actions, 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, p. 111). Usual/un-surprising reactions are termed *preferred* (e.g. Betty's particular answer in (E 1)); the 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 their 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 not overt at all, comes with 0.3s delay, a hesitant "we::ll", hedges ("I don' really know" and "**a bit** hectic"), and explanations (accounts) rather than a clear refusal itself. 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, 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 the first 2 lines of (E4) Jim provides a lengthy account before making the actual request in an indirect way

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, preceed 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 more relevant (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 a FPP and makes some next action relevant.

Analysis

At a high level, the data (Fig. 1) is a short call; Donny calls Marcia and starts describing how his car broke down while he needs to be somewhere else (supposedly fairly soon and needing a new car to get there). Marcia reacts, explaining she would love to help, but she herself needs to leave very soon (supposedly using her car). Then, Donny closes the talk very quickly, planning to call someone else (supposedly to borrow a car from them).

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

L1-2 is a typical summons-answer pair (discussed in Liddicoat (2007, p. 126)), a pre-sequence without much own meaning, but enabling a conversation to begin. Notice the non-verbal action of Donny in L1 (face-to-face, it could have been "Hey Marcia!"). As a 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 and finishes in L5. L3&5 with L6 is a standard greeting-greeting pair, here ending the call's opening. Notice the brief form; commonly, an added "how are you?" could prolong the opening.

After the opening, which itself can be viewed as a pre-sequence, Donny pushes the conversation forward with a further pre-sequence in L7 – a *pre-telling* (Liddicoat, p. 136) pair: He signals having something to tell and Marcia gives a "go-ahead" signal (L8). Then, Donny's telling itself runs from L9-L20 (which will later turn out to be a long pre-sequence). Donny's
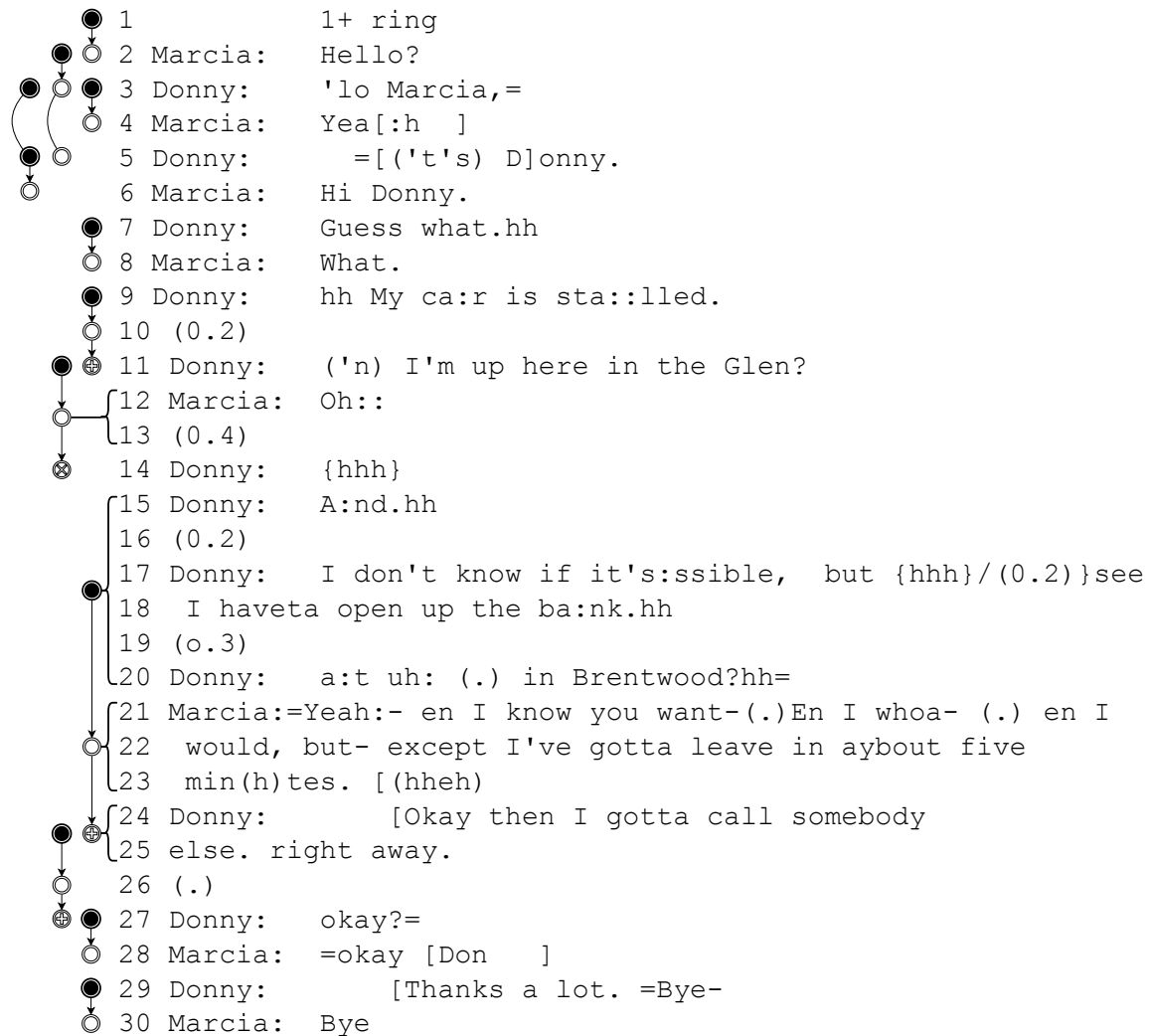
```
●  1              1+ ring
● ○ 2 Marcia:   Hello?
● ○ ● 3 Donny:   'lo Marcia,=
    ○ 4 Marcia:   Yea[:h  ]
● ○   5 Donny:      =[('t's) D]onny.
○     6 Marcia:   Hi Donny.
    ● 7 Donny:    Guess what.hh
    ○ 8 Marcia:   What.
    ● 9 Donny:    hh My ca:r is sta::lled.
    ○ 10 (0.2)
  ● ⊕ 11 Donny:   ('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
```

Figure 1: The data; sequence organisation marked on the left. Black circles mark FPPs, blank circles SPPs; ⊗ and ⊕ mark minimal/non-minimal post-expansions, respectively. Where connected by lines without arrowheads (lines 3, 5), and where curly braces are used (e.g. lines 21–23), it means multiple lines forming one pair part.

FPP (L9) announces unfortunate news, making a sympathetic SPP relevant, but silence follows (L10) – attributable to Marcia's lack of relevant reaction. Hence, Donny makes a post-expansion (L11) by introducing further bad news, making a sympathetic reaction even more relevant, if not socially required. To L11 as a FPP, Marcia finally responds (L12-13), but her "Oh::" I see merely as signalling receival of new information (see detailed analysis

of the role of "oh" by Heritage (1984)). Then, she goes silent (L13), not taking a stance or assessing Donny's situation (the silence can be partly attributed to Donny giving Marcia time to continue). Eventually, Donny accepts Marcia's short response and definitely closes the telling sequence by adding a minimal post-expansion (L14) – merely an outbreath – so that he can move on.

Across L15-20, Donny makes the FPP of the conversation's main sequence (the telling in L7-14 being a pre-sequence), putting forward his request. The FPP's dispreferredness is realised using multiple markers: length, hesitations (L15, then breathing in L17, and 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 asking Marcia for her car, the request comes across very clearly and Marcia reacts (her SPP in L21-23).

Marcia's reaction is also dispreferred (a refusal) and heavily marked: having short pauses, and hesitations where she stops to repair her talk (see the `word-` pattern (L21-22)). Starting with sympathetic "Yeah:" – acknowledging Donny's pitiful situation, then confirming she understands the request ("en I know you want-"), showing her willingness to help ("en I would"), before finally providing an account for her inability to help right now ("I've gotta leave in aybout five min(h)tes").

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

1. a summary/assessment proposing to close,

2. a go-ahead signal for closing,

3. the final turn, closing the sequence.

However, Marcia doesn't co-operate – 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).

Conclusions

Through sequential organisation analysis, we saw how the conversation unrolls in pre-sequences (pre-telling → telling), preparing the ground for the main sequence (a request).

5

Throughout, Marcia is minimalistic and uncooperative in her responses, which can be attributed to her being busy, but I also interpret it as early signals to Donny – in an anticipation of some request – that she would refuse. Donny ignores these, pushes on, until making the actual request. At that point Marcia cannot just signal anymore and refuses openly. The concept 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

Casson, R., Atkinson, J., and Drew, P. (1981). Order in court: The organisation of verbal interaction in judicial settings. *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 129:1006.

Heritage, J. (1984). A change-of state token and asqects of its sequential placement. *Structure of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*, pages 299–345.

Liddicoat, A. (2007). *An introduction to conversation analysis.* Continuum, London.

Schegloff, E. A. (1968). Sequencing in conversational openings. *American Anthropologist*, 70(6):1075–1095.

Sidnell, J. (2010). *Conversation analysis an introduction.* Language in society (Oxford, England). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Chichester.

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
```