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COMMUNICATING ABOUT ROLES IN HUMAN INTERACTIONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we investigate the structure of communication in interpersonal planning.

Human action is mostly interpersonal and thus reveals the ability of actors to cooperate. Interpersonal plans contain both actions to be performed by the planner and actions to be performed by partners. In order to obtain cooperation, the planner has to induce the partner to perform the action assigned to him in the plan; this requires that the planner causes the partner's intention to perform such an action. The most usual way for the planner of achieving such a result is through communication.

To deal with communication within the context of action, we assume the standpoint of speech act theory (Searle, 1969). We consider inducing the partner to perform an action as a perlocutionary act performed by the planner. We assume that such a perlocutionary act is performed via an illocutionary act of the directive type (Searle, 1979), like an action of requesting.

In Airenti, Bara and Colombetti (1983a, b), we have argued that interpersonal action is regulated by script-like structures which we call games. Games define the roles of the actors within the interaction and in particular mediate between the request of the planner and the motivations of the partner.

In this paper we suggest that the communicative transaction aimed at gaining the cooperation of the partner is always paralleled by communication about the roles to be played by the actors in the game. The analysis of communication about roles is therefore necessary to account for the performance of the perlocutionary act of inducing, either successful or not.

2. INDUCING A PARTNER TO COOPERATE

In the following we shall analyze examples of communicative transactions of the type described in Fig. 1, where an illocutionary act of request is performed in order to induce somebody to execute an action.

(1) Anna needs a stamp, gets into the nearest shop and asks the shopkeeper for the local post office.

(1.a) the shopkeeper gives the information requested



Fig. 1.

- (1.b) the shopkeeper answers he is not an information office
- (2) Alexandra meets a well known psychoanalyst at a party and tells him her last dream
 - (2.a) the psychoanalyst stoically accepts to listen
 - (2.b) the psychoanalyst replies giving her the phone number of his office
- (3) The boss and his secretary are sitting in their office with the window open.
 - (3.a) the boss says it is cold and his secretary stands up and closes the window
 - (3.b) the secretary says it is cold and the boss replies she can close the window

In example (1) Anna addresses a partner proposing an interaction different from his expectations. In fact Anna thinks she can get the information she needs by playing a courtesy game, with the shopkeeper. The reply of the shopkeeper depends on his motivation to play the proposed game besides his usual role of dealer. The main point here is that Anna does not propose the interaction specific to the context of the shop, but a more general and broadly applicable one.

A different case is shown in example (2), where Alexandra proposes to the partner to play his usual professional role, but in an inadequate setting. Response (2.b) can be attributed to a refusal by the psychoanalyst to meet the request on the basis of a wrong context. Instead, response (2.a) can be viewed either as the playing of a politeness game, quite appropriate in the party context, or as the extension of the psychoanalysis game beyond the usual setting.

In example (3) the same statement assumes two different meanings depending on the respective roles of speaker and hearer. We can explain case (3.a) considering the statement of the boss as a request that the secretary close the window. In case (3.b) the statement of the secretary can be interpreted as a request of permission to close the window. Both cases admit alternative explanations according to different intentions of the actors. In (3.a) the boss could have no intention of indirectly requesting the cooperation of his secretary. In this case, her response could be interpreted either as a misunderstanding or as an intentional redefinition. In case (3.b) the statement of the secretary could be an indirect request that the boss close the window. Also the answer of the boss can be viewed either as a

actual misunderstanding or as an intentional redefinition.

The analysis of the examples shows that communicative exchanges are based on the roles played by the actors in the interaction. In fact, roles are determinant for playing a communicative act, for understanding it, and for planning the response. We must therefore postulate knowledge structures (games) which codify such roles in a specified context and are used for the functions just mentioned. Moreover, in order to explain why the partner accepts the role proposed by the planner or rather makes a new proposal, we must take into account the motivations of the partner.

3. COMMUNICATING ABOUT ROLES

We think of games as knowledge structures defining which actions should be performed by each player, at a given level of abstraction. The role of the player in the game corresponds to the actions assigned to him in that structure. The game provides for validity conditions which characterize the context in which it is supposed to be played. In order to be played by two actors, a game must be shared, i.e. known to both of them, and it must include the two actors as possible players in the given validity conditions. Games may be shared by everybody (e.g. general laws of social behavior), by a group of people (e.g. in professional practice or in the underworld), or by a very restricted group (e.g. a family, or two old friends).

Different kinds of games are played on the basis of different motivations. For instance the motivations which underlie professional practice are different from those involved in friendship. For our purpose a motivation can be regarded as a mental structure which generates an intention under given conditions (compare with the concept of theme in Wilensky, 1983). For example, the motivation of preserving one's life generates the intention to run away from a dangerous situation.

In Airenti, Bara and Colombetti (1984), we provide for a formal treatment of the inference processes which underlie planning and understanding communicative transactions on the basis of games and motivations. The critical feature of motivations for playing a game is that they always contain, among their activation conditions, the fact that the planner is proposing himself as a player of the game. For instance, if one asks for a coffee in a coffee shop, he is proposing himself as a client and thus activates the waiter's motivation to do his job.

In Fig. 2 we give the complete sketch of a communicative transaction within an interpersonal plan, following the formal model presented in Airenti, Bara and Colombetti (1984). In order to induce the partner to perform an action, the planner has to induce the partner to play his role in the game which assigns to the partner the desired action. Such a result can be achieved if the partner has an adequate motivation which, as we have already seen, requires that he is convinced that the planner in turn intends to play his role in the game. Therefore, the planner has to convince the partner about his own intentions, and this amounts to performing a second perlocutionary act.

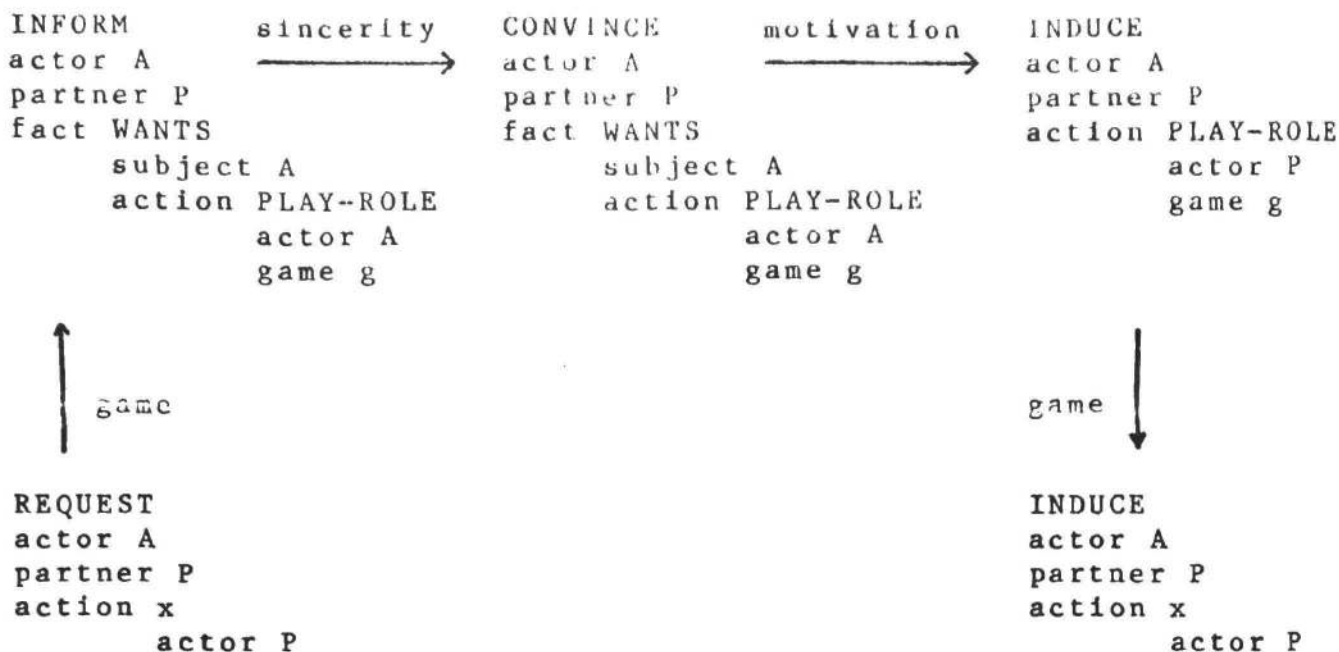


Fig. 2.

In order to convince his partner, the planner must perform the illocutionary act of informing him about his intention to play his role. The action of convincing is successful if the partner understands the illocutionary act and if he assumes that the planner is sincere. The main assumption here is that the illocutionary act of informing the partner about one's intention to play is realized through the illocutionary act of requesting the desired action within the validity context of the game.

Going back to example (1), we can now provide for a complete interpretation. The request of Anna is understood by the shopkeeper as the act of informing him that Anna wants to play the role of a person needing help in a courtesy game. The shopkeeper thinks that Anna is sincere about her intention and is therefore convinced she actually wants to play that game. If now the shopkeeper is motivated to play his role in the game we have case (1.a); otherwise we are left with a case similar to (1.b). Note that in this case it is reasonable to assume that the shopkeeper believes in Anna's sincerity; this can by no means be taken for granted in more complex interactions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The main theoretical implications of the model we have presented are:

- the request of an actor, intended to induce a partner to perform an action, is always paralleled by communication about the respective roles, in order to meet the partner's motivation to cooperate

- communicating about the respective roles requires only that the request is performed within the validity context of the game. Therefore the action that the planner has to perform is the same described in Fig. 1
- an action of inducing may be performed through the same request, via different game-motivation pairs. For instance in (2) the psychoanalyst could have interpreted Alexandra's request as a seductive approach and either accept or refuse the interaction on that basis.

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