

Coherence and Meaning in Situated Dialogue

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In face-to-face conversation, speakers use all the means at their disposal to get their ideas across. They talk, they gesture, but they also carry out practical actions in the world. These diverse actions seem to advance the communicative enterprise through common principles of discourse coherence. In this talk, I review the empirical and philosophical underpinnings of this expansive understanding of discourse coherence, and sketch a number of formal case studies analyzing situated dialogue using this approach.

Intuitions about coherence, I suggest, tap into the conventions interlocutors follow to work effectively and meaningfully with one another in conversation. These conventions establish implicit connections among communicative actions, and trigger appropriate changes to interlocutors' information and attention. Accordingly, to formalize coherence, we need representations in logical form that capture what information the speaker is committed to and what entities are at the center of attention in the discourse. Both dimensions are key to model deictic reference in situated utterances, to capture the relationship of gesture and speech, and to track how practical demonstrations update the conversational record.

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