

LECTURE 8: AGENT COMMUNICATION

An Introduction to Multiagent Systems

<http://www.csc.liv.ac.uk/~mjw/pubs/imas/>

2 Speech Acts

- Most treatments of communication in (multi-)agent systems borrow their inspiration from *speech act theory*.
- Speech act theories are *pragmatic* theories of language, i.e., theories of language use: they attempt to account for how language is used by people every day to achieve their goals and intentions.
- The origin of speech act theories are usually traced to Austin's 1962 book, *How to Do Things with Words*.

1 Agent Communication

- In this lecture, we cover *macro*-aspects of intelligent agent technology: those issues relating to the agent *society*, rather than the individual:
 - *communication* : speech acts; KQML & KIF; FIPA ACL.
 - *cooperation*: what is cooperation; prisoner's dilemma; cooperative *versus* non-cooperative encounters; the contract net.

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- Austin noticed that some utterances are rather like 'physical actions' that appear to *change the state of the world*.
- Paradigm examples would be:
 - declaring war;
 - christening;
 - 'I now pronounce you man and wife' :-)
- But more generally, *everything* we utter is uttered with the intention of satisfying some goal or intention.
- A theory of how utterances are used to achieve intentions is a speech act theory.

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- Searle (1969) identified various different types of speech act:
 - *representatives*:
such as *informing*, e.g., 'It is raining'
 - *directives*:
attempts to get the hearer to do something e.g., 'please make the tea'
 - *commissives*:
which commit the speaker to doing something, e.g., 'I promise to...'
 - *expressives*:
whereby a speaker expresses a mental state, e.g., 'thank you!'
 - *declarations*:
such as declaring war or christening.

- Consider:
 - performative = request
content = "the door is closed"
 - speech act = "please close the door"
 - performative = inform
content = "the door is closed"
 - speech act = "the door is closed!"
 - performative = inquire
content = "the door is closed"
 - speech act = "is the door closed?"

- There is some debate about whether this (or any!) typology of speech acts is appropriate.
- In general, a speech act can be seen to have two components:
 - a *performative verb*:
(e.g., request, inform, ...)
 - *propositional content*:
(e.g., "the door is closed")

3 Plan Based Semantics

- How does one define the semantics of speech acts? When can one say someone has uttered, e.g., a request or an inform?
- Cohen & Perrault (1979) defined semantics of speech acts using the *precondition-delete-add* list formalism of planning research.
- Note that a speaker cannot (generally) *force* a hearer to accept some desired mental state.

- Here is their semantics for *request*:

request(s, h, ϕ)

pre:

– *s* believes *h* can do ϕ

(you don't ask someone to do something unless you think they can do it)

– *s* believe *h* believe *h* can do ϕ

(you don't ask someone unless *they* believe they can do it)

– *s* believe *s* want ϕ

(you don't ask someone unless you want it!)

post:

– *h* believe *s* believe *s* want ϕ

(the effect is to make them aware of your desire)

4 KQML and KIF

- We now consider *agent communication languages* (ACLs) — standard formats for the exchange of messages.

- The best known ACL is KQML, developed by the ARPA knowledge sharing initiative.

KQML is comprised of two parts:

- the knowledge query and manipulation language (KQML); and
- the knowledge interchange format (KIF).

- KQML is an 'outer' language, that defines various acceptable 'communicative verbs', or *performatives*.

Example performatives:

– ask-if ('is it true that...')

– perform ('please perform the following action...')

– tell ('it is true that...')

– reply ('the answer is...')

- KIF is a language for expressing message *content*.

- In order to be able to communicate, agents must have agreed a common set of terms.
- A formal specification of a set of terms is known as a *ontology*.
- The knowledge sharing effort has associated with it a large effort at defining common ontologies — software tools like *ontolingua* for this purpose.

- Example KQML/KIF dialogue...

```
A to B: (ask-if
  (> (size chip1) (size chip2)))
B to A: (reply true)
B to A: (inform (= (size chip1) 20))
B to A: (inform (= (size chip2) 18))
```

FIPA

- More recently, the Foundation for Intelligent Physical Agents (FIPA) started work on a program of agent standards — the centrepiece is an ACL.
 - Basic structure is quite similar to KQML:
 - *performative*;
 - 20 performative in FIPA.
 - *housekeeping*;
 - e.g., sender etc.
 - *content*
- the actual content of the message.

```
(inform
  :sender      agent1
  :receiver    agent5
  :content     (price good200 150)
  :language    sl
  :ontology    hpl-auction
)
```

performative	passing info	requesting info	negotiation	performing actions	error handling
accept-proposal		x	x	x	
agree				x	
cancel		x		x	
confirm	x		x		
disconfirm	x				x
failure	x				
inform	x				
inform-if	x				
inform-ref	x				
not-understood	x				x
propose		x	x		
query-if		x			
query-ref		x			
refuse				x	
reject-proposal			x		
request				x	
request-when				x	
request-when-ever				x	
subscribe	x				

- “Inform” and “Request” are the two basic performatives in FIPA. All others are *macro* definitions, defined in terms of these.
- The meaning of inform and request is defined in two parts:
 - pre-condition
 - what must be true in order for the speech act to succeed.
 - “rational effect”
 - what the sender of the message hopes to bring about.

5 “Inform” and “Request”

- For the “inform” performative...
The content is a *statement*.
Pre-condition is that sender:
 - holds that the content is true;
 - intends that the recipient believe the content;
 - does not already believe that the recipient is aware of whether content is true or not.

- For the “request” performative...
The content is an *action*.
Pre-condition is that sender:
 - intends action content to be performed;
 - believes recipient is capable of performing this action;
 - does not believe that sender already intends to perform action.