Rhetorical and Thematic Patterns in Scheduling Dialogues:
A Generic Characterization*

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Abstract

This paper provides a corpus-based generic characterization of appointment-scheduling dialogues—a type of task-oriented conversation—by concentrating on the rhetorical and thematic choices made by the speakers that produce them. The analytical tools used for this study are Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST), the notion of Theme as defined in Systemic Functional Linguistics, and Thematic Progression (TP) patterns. The results of the corpus analysis revealed a generic structure consisting of three clear stages: Opening, Task Performance and Closing, realized by characteristic thematic and rhetorical patterns. These patterns are interpreted functionally as indicative of the genre under study, providing linguistic evidence of the generic structure that characterizes this type of conversations. The paper also shows the usefulness of analytical tools such as RST and TP patterns, typically applied to written monologue, for the characterization of dialogic genres.

1 Introduction

Most of the existing literature on conversation analysis has focused on its interactional character: the organization of turns and moves, the introduction and maintenance of topics and the linguistic devices available to interlocutors. This is the characteristic approach of work within Conversational Analysis (CA) by sociologists such as Schegloff, Sacks, (Schegloff and Sacks 1973; Schegloff 1980, 1996), Jefferson (1984) and their successors (e.g. Maynard 1980). Other approaches within sociolinguistics, such as the work of Tannen (1984) on interactive styles, or Schiffrin's (1987) study of discourse markers are also concerned with issues of interactional and sequential organization in conversation.

Within the structural-functional approach, one may distinguish two major research schools: the Birmingham School and Systemic Functional Linguistics. While the former has concentrated on the study of the structure of the conversational exchange (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975), the latter provides a functional-semantic interpretation of conversation based on an integrated and systematic model of language. In this model, conversation is approached as involving different linguistic patterns that enact and construct the social identities of the participants (Horvath and Eggins 1995, Slade 1995, Eggins and Slade 1997). These linguistic patterns operate at a different level of analysis: at the level of grammar, semantics, discourse and genre (see Eggins and Slade 1997:53).

At the level of genre, research within systemic-functional linguistics has provided interesting insights by establishing relationships between the social and communicative purposes of texts and their textual structuring (Hasan 1984, Ventola 1987, Martin 1993, Eggins and Martin 1997, Leckie-Tarry 1995, to mention a few). In this framework, genre theory suggests that "texts which are doing different jobs in the culture will unfold in different ways, working through different stages or steps" (Eggins and Martin 1997:236). Moreover, each stage of the generic structure can be characterized by its distinctive linguistic realizations (Martin 1993, Hasan 1985).

While generic analysis within this paradigm was originally applied to written genres (Martin and Rothery 1986), it soon extended to spoken genres (Ventola 1987, Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1997), including spontaneous, informal conversation (Horvath and Eggins 1995, Eggins and Martin 1997, Eggins and Slade 1997). The latter authors have outlined a methodology for generic analysis that, though initially applied to casual conversation, may prove useful for unravelling the generic structure of other types of conversation.

Using that methodology, this paper investigates the possibility of characterizing a specific type of conversations in generic terms. The type of conversation analyzed in this study consists of a dialogue between two participants with conflicting agendas who have to schedule an appointment. The sample selected consists of elicited conversations from a larger corpus compiled to train a speech recognition system (see Section 2 below), but we believe they could be considered as part of a larger conversational genre which can be provisionally termed as "task-oriented" conversation.

One of the characteristic steps involved in generic analysis is the identification of the linguistic features for each stage of the generic structure. The assumption behind this analysis is that the different stages of a given genre will reveal different configurations of linguistic patterns (Eggins and Slade 1997:235). In our study we will analyze the distribution of the rhetorical and thematic patterns in these conversations and their function in the generic structure.

These patterns have not received so much attention in the literature on conversation, probably because characteristic tools of analysis such as Rhetorical Structure Theory (Mann and Thompson 1988) or Thematic Progression (Daneš 1974) have been mainly applied to monologic texts[1]. Also, although there exist noteworthy studies on the relationship between genres/registers and thematic progression (Fries 1983, 1994, 1995; Francis 1989; Ghadessy 1993; Nwogu and Bloor 1991; Downing and Lavid 1998), and between thematic selection and discourse genres (Fries 1983, Ghadessy 1993, Francis 1989, Lavid 1999, to mention a few), none of these studies has focused specifically on how rhetorical and thematic patterns can provide linguistic evidence for the characteristic generic structure of a given genre.

In this paper, therefore, we will investigate the following questions: is it possible to characterize the sample conversations in generic terms? What type of generic structure characterizes these conversations? In what ways are rhetorical and thematic patterns distributed? What is the function of these rhetorical and thematic patterns in the generic characterization of the conversations? We believe that answers to these questions will reveal aspects of task-scheduling conversations, and, more specifically, of appointment-scheduling dialogues, not fully addressed in previous work.

The investigation of these issues in this paper will be presented as follows. First, a description of the corpus and the way it was collected and transcribed is presented in Section 2. Section 3 describes the analysis methodology. Section 4 provides the results of the empirical analysis divided in 3 subsections. Section 4.1 presents a rhetorical analysis of the corpus, following the rhetorical relations proposed in RST. Section 4.2 concentrates on the thematic patterning of the corpus, by analyzing the most typical types of Themes selected, and the preferred TP patterns used to develop information. Section 4.3 focuses on the different stages of the genre and their function in the dialogues. Section 5 discusses the research findings and provides some concluding remarks.

2 Materials

The sample used for this study is part of a large scheduling corpus from the Interactive Systems Laboratories, recorded mainly in Pittsburgh from the conversations of native speakers of either English or Spanish. The large corpus from which our sample was drawn was collected under laboratory conditions for the purpose of training a speech recognition system[2]. The dialogues involve dyads of two speakers who were brought to a recording laboratory, where they do not face each other, resulting in interactions similar to telephone conversations. Each of them is equipped with headsets and a microphone. The instructions

given to the participants explain that they have conflicting agendas that cover a two- to four-week period. They need to schedule an appointment lasting for at least two hours sometime within those two to four weeks.

The sample selected includes 30 conversations from the large English corpus (881 conversations in total). The sample is balanced in terms of speaker gender—ten conversations are male-male, ten are female-female and the other ten are mixed[3]. The speakers selected in our sample range in age from 18 to 49, and are from different places across the United States, primarily from Pennsylvania.

After the recordings, the conversations were transcribed, including linguistic and non-linguistic noises. For the examples used in this paper, we excluded some of the most detailed noises, such as microphone noise. The symbols most frequently used in the transcriptions are described below. In addition, each conversation, and each turn, is identified by the gender and initials of the speaker and an order number. For instance, the identifier fjsk_03_01 represents turn 1 of conversation number 3 recorded by the female speaker JSK.

- **Human noises** are delimited by slashes. These are grouped under different categories: *space fillers* (/mm/, /uh/, /hm/, /um/), *backchannel signals and interjections* (/m_hm/, /uh_uh/, /uh_huh/, /oh/, /oh_oh/, /oo/), *tag questions* (/m_hm/, /hm/, /mm/, /eh/, /huh/), and *non-linguistic noises* (/h#/ breath, inhaling or exhaling; /ls/ lip smack; /lg/ laugh; /cg/ cough)

- **Silence**. Periods of silence are marked with *silence,* or *pause* between two asterisks. *pause* is 0.5 seconds to 2 seconds with no sounds at all, whereas *silence* is more than 2 seconds.

- **False starts**. These are marked with angle brackets: *<I want to> can we meet on Thursday instead of Tuesday.* These correspond to self-repairs (Schegloff *et al.* 1977), which are not part of this study.

- **Transcriber comments**. Transcriber comments are enclosed in curly brackets and most frequently refer to intonation, marked with one of the following at the end of the corresponding section of speech: period (falling intonation), comma (slightly rising intonation, continuation of an idea), question mark (marked rising intonation). These comments do not reflect, or are influenced by, sentence structure. For that reason, we do not capitalize the word following a period or a question mark.

- **Semantic Markers**. The {seos} marker (Semantic End Of Segment) is a special instance of a transcriber comment. It is used to mark off utterances, or portions of utterances. It usually coincides with a clause or sentence boundary, but is also present after interjections, backchannel signals and discourse markers (*well, okay, let's see*, etc.), and in general at the end of a tone unit. The stretches of talk occurring between a SEOS and the next one are called SDUs (Semantic Dialogue Units). In most cases, SDUs are comparable to Chafe's information units (Chafe 1980), which, according to Halliday, are realized in tone groups (Halliday 1967:200, Crystal 1969).

3 Methodology

In order to provide a characterization of the genre of appointment-scheduling dialogues, we proceeded as follows:

First, we analyzed the distribution of the rhetorical patterns (rhetorical analysis) and the thematic selection and progression patterns (thematic analysis) in the sample. The selection of these two discourse phenomena, typically applied to written monologue, was justified by their descriptive power: it was expected that they would provide linguistic evidence for the generic unfolding of the texts, thus contributing to the segmentation of the conversations in different stages.

Second, a generic analysis was carried out following some of the steps proposed by Eggins and Slade (1997). These steps involved: a) defining the social purpose of the genre, b) identifying and defining the stages within a genre, c) specifying the obligatory and optional stages, d) devising a structural formula to describe the genre. The identification and definition of the stages involved assigning a functional role to different text segments and asking how it contributed towards achieving the overall social purpose of the genre. In this process, the characteristic distribution of the rhetorical relations and some of the thematic patterns were used as linguistic signal or evidence for the generic structure.

3.1 Rhetorical Analysis

The analysis of the rhetorical relations in our sample was based on the original formulation of Rhetorical Structure Theory, henceforth RST (Mann and Thompson 1988). RST is a theory of text organization that takes into account the intentions of the text creator, and the effects he or she wants to achieve in the text receiver. It has been mainly applied to written monologue, though work in computational linguistics has proved its suitability for analyzing extended turns in dialogue (Fawcett and Davies 1992).

Following this proposal, we carried out a turn-by-turn analysis of the sample dialogues, examining how speakers build individual contributions to the conversation. The turn-by-turn analysis looks at each turn as a text in itself that seeks some reaction—a reaction, unlike the ones in written discourse, immediate and usually clearly recognisable. This type of analysis ignores the undoubtedly important relations holding between turns, but approximates the original RST analyses in that it looks at text as the product of one mind that projects towards a recipient[4].

The basic unit of analysis used in this study was the SDU (see Section 2.1), which is roughly equivalent to the information unit of Chafe (1980). The problems in applying RST to these dialogues had to do with their very nature. In naturally occurring dialogue there are different elements pertaining to the specific genre, such as greetings and goodbyes, and there are also different degrees of spontaneity in the language, such as the presence of self-talk versus the more planned turns in which a speaker's utterance evolves in an easily

definable pattern. As a consequence, the *completedness* constraint in RST (that all units of the text enter in a relation) had to be relaxed, leaving some instances of self-talk outside the analysis. The results of the RST analysis are discussed in Section 4.1.

3.2 Thematic Analysis

In order to uncover the thematic patterning in our sample we carried out two types of analyses: first we identified those elements that are picked as Themes, that is, as departing points in each utterance (thematic selection); second, we analyzed how those Themes are linked in the discourse, that is, whether current Themes have been mentioned before and, if so, whether they were mentioned in the Theme or Rheme part of a previous utterance (thematic progression). For both types of analysis, the unit is the clause, whether independent or dependent (adverbial clauses), but not embedded (clausal subjects, relative clauses, etc.). For dependent clauses preceding the main clause, both were considered for the thematic analysis. This ensured that the units were the same as for the rhetorical analysis.

3.2.1 Thematic Selection

For the thematic selection analysis, we followed Halliday's characterization of this descriptive category as "the point of departure of the message" (1994:37) and identified Themes as those elements which come in first position in the clause up to and including the first element that has a function in transitivity. We classified Themes according to three parameters: a) their metafunctional type, b) their semantic type, and c) their degree of markedness within the structure of the clause.

According to the first parameter, Themes were annotated as *textual*, *interpersonal* and/or *ideational* in the sample corpus. We use the label *ideational,* not *topical,* to avoid equating Theme and topic of the sentence (a distinction made by Downing 1991). Examples (1) through (5), which are simplified versions of corpus examples, provide an illustration of the type of Theme selections found in the corpus. Textual Theme is *italicized*, interpersonal Theme is in **bold** face, and ideational Theme is <u>underlined</u>. All of those (textual, interpersonal and ideational) are the Theme of the sentence. Thus, in Example (4), the Theme is *what days*, which is interpersonal and ideational at the same time. In Example (5), the Theme of the sentence is *oh, unfortunately, I*, each word representing one Theme type.

(1) <u>I</u> have to get home by five p.m. every day the next two weeks.

(2) *...and* <u>Monday</u>'s pretty bad for me.

(3) **Are** <u>you</u> free on Wednesday the seventeenth?

(4) **<u>What days</u>** are you free?

(5) *Oh*, **unfortunately** <u>I</u> have a seminar all day on Friday the twelfth.

With respect to the second parameter, Themes were annotated according to their semantic function within the transitivity structure of the clause. Thus, Themes could represent Circumstances, Participants or Processes in the ideational structure of the clause. This applies only to ideational Themes. In Example (1), the Theme *I* is a Participant; in Example (4) *what days* is a Circumstance; and in Example (6) below, *gonna find* is a Process as Theme (this is the beginning of the sentence; there was no subject)[5].

(6) <u>Gonna find</u> whoever scheduled, me for that, and, shoot them.

In our treatment of Transitivity, we have separated semantic and grammatical function. We define first whether something is Participant, Circumstance, etc., based on its meaning in the situation. Then we establish its grammatical function. This means that we might encounter Circumstances as Subjects, and Participants as Adjuncts *(<u>Tuesday</u> is not good <u>for me</u>)*. We do not, however, rename *Tuesday* as a Carrier because it is in a relational process. We still consider it a Circumstance in the action, which has been rendered a Subject through a process of grammatical metaphor (Halliday 1994).

Finally, Themes can also be classified into *marked* and *unmarked* according to their probability of appearance within the structure of the clause. In English, this depends on the mood type (Halliday 1994:43). Thus, in declarative clauses the typical pattern is one in which Theme is conflated with Subject. There is a strong tendency in English to make Subject and Theme coincide, as Tomlin (1995) reports with results from experimental studies. This is true to the point that English allows passive sentences with indirect objects as subjects[6]. Sometimes, however, English speakers decide to front elements other than the Subject, thus making them thematic, as in Example (7), where a Circumstance with function of Adjunct has been fronted. This preposed Adjunct represents an instance of a marked Theme.

(7) <u>On the seventeenth</u> I have a seminar from nine to four-thirty.

The results of the thematic selection analysis are presented in Section 4.2.1 below.

3.2.2 Thematic Progression

Our attention now turns to the development of Theme throughout the conversation. We investigated what kind of elements the speakers choose as points of departure, but also how those points of departure are picked up, elaborated on or abandoned in the following discourse. The connections of thematic elements in a text are what constitutes its Thematic Progression (TP).

The first formalization of Thematic Progression was detailed by Daneš (1974). He described three major patterns of TP: simple linear, constant and derived hyperthematic progression. A *simple linear* TP involves Themes that are picked up from previous Rhemes. In the *constant* pattern, the same (or similar) Theme is repeated throughout the text. Finally, in the *derived hyperthematic* progression, Themes are derived from a *hypertheme*—a title, or a high-level topic[7]. Dubois (1987) performed an extensive analysis of a corpus of biomedical slide talks and integrated Daneš' typology into two main types:

a) *constant* progression, when a Theme that is not new derives from a previous Theme or Themes (also known as themic); b) *linear* progression: when the Theme derives from a previous Rheme (also known as rhemic). She also added a few new types, which reflect the fact that some progressions are not *contiguous*, as the ones implied in Daneš' account, but *gapped*, that is, the Theme is picked up from an utterance that is not immediately preceding. In addition, she included *multiple* realizations of all the contiguous and gapped types, where the origin of the Theme under consideration can be traced back to different links in the text. Multiple Themes can be composed of two or more previous elements (*integration)*, or one element in a previous group (*separation).*

Dubois considers the hypertheme to be poorly defined. In fact, it is difficult to decide what could be a Theme derived from a hypertheme. In our sample corpus, there is no such a thing as a title or headline; therefore we decided that all Themes that the speakers had not mentioned earlier were new, that is, not derived from a hypertheme. Some of those new Themes are "newer" than others, in the sense that they refer to objects or concepts present in the speakers' context. However, since our aim was not to establish a hierarchy of givenness or saliency outside the text proper, we disregarded the category of progression derived from a hypertheme. Figure 1 graphically illustrates the TP patterns used in this study.

As shown in Figure 1, multiple TP patterns can be the result of *integration* or *separation*. Those could also be either contiguous or gapped. The integration could happen immediately after the mentioning of the elements to be integrated, or there could be intervening material. The same applies for separation. In addition, integration and separation can be themic or rhemic, according to whether they originate in previous Themes or Rhemes. In Example (8), an invented example, the separation has as an origin the previous Rheme, which contains two elements (ideational Themes underlined). This separation is rhemic and contiguous, since it occurred after the immediately preceding Rheme. This case is the one illustrated in Figure 1 ("multiple, separation, rhemic, contiguous").

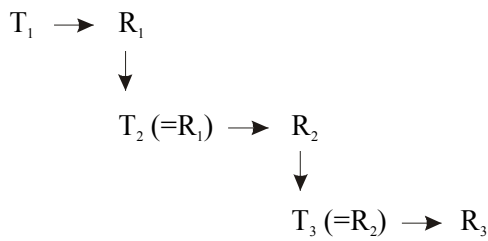(8) A: I'm available anytime Thursday or Friday.

B: Well, <u>Thursday</u> is no good. But <u>on Friday</u> I could see you after lunch.

Finally, integration could also be complex, the sum of previous Themes and Rhemes. The following example shows the Theme *the eighteenth* conjoined with the Rheme *on the nineteenth*, to form the Theme of B's utterance. This is an example of complex gapped integration. The gap occurs because there is another utterance before the integration, *What do you think?* All multiple are derived in some sense, because they do not repeat a previous Theme or Rheme exactly, but elaborate on them.
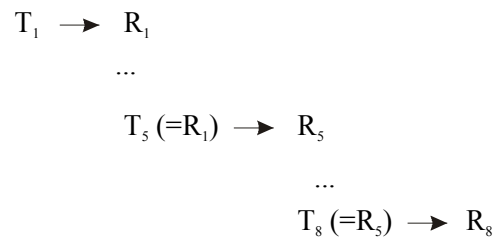
(9) A: <u>The eighteenth</u> I'm booked all day. <u>I</u> could try to see you on the nineteenth. <u>What</u> do you think?

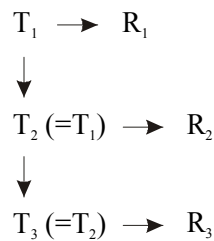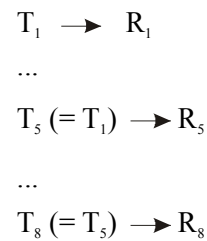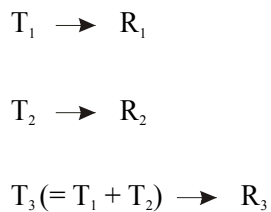B: <u>The eighteenth and the nineteenth</u> are completely out for me.

$T_1 \rightarrow R_1$
  $\downarrow$
  $T_2 (=R_1) \rightarrow R_2$
    $\downarrow$
    $T_3 (=R_2) \rightarrow R_3$

Simple contiguous linear

$T_1 \rightarrow R_1$
  ...
  $T_5 (=R_1) \rightarrow R_5$
    ...
    $T_8 (=R_5) \rightarrow R_8$

Simple gapped linear

$T_1 \rightarrow R_1$
  $\downarrow$
  $T_2 (=T_1) \rightarrow R_2$
  $\downarrow$
  $T_3 (=T_2) \rightarrow R_3$

Simple contiguous constant

$T_1 \rightarrow R_1$
  ...
  $T_5 (= T_1) \rightarrow R_5$
  ...
  $T_8 (= T_5) \rightarrow R_8$

Simple gapped constant

$T_1 \rightarrow R_1$

$T_2 \rightarrow R_2$

$T_3 (= T_1 + T_2) \rightarrow R_3$

Multiple: Integration
(themic, contiguous)

$T_1 \rightarrow R_1 \ (= R_{1'} + R_{1''})$
  $\downarrow$
  $T_2 (=R_{1'}) \rightarrow R_2$
  $\downarrow$
  $T_3 (=R_{1''}) \rightarrow R_3$
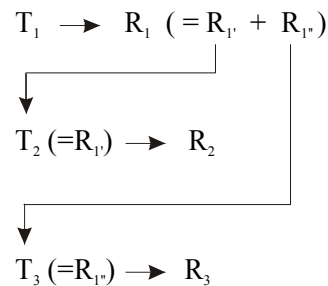
Multiple: Separation
(rhemic, contiguous)

Figure 1. Thematic Progression patterns used in this study

The analysis of the corpus proceeded as follows: we considered only ideational Themes, marked and unmarked, and, for each one of them, examined whether it was related to other elements in the previous stretch of dialogue. If the Theme was not related to any *linguistic* material preceding it, then it was considered to be new[8]. As we saw in the discussion of Themes derived from a hypertheme, those new Themes are usually related to the context of situation. However, since we do not consider extralinguistic material, the category "new" includes many different types. If the Theme under consideration is related, either through total identification or through some semantic relationship (e.g., synonymy, hypernymy,

etc.), to an element mentioned earlier in the conversation, then we can classify it according to the categories displayed in Figure 1. The other type not represented in the figure, apart from New, is the Syntactic type. This refers to expletive pronouns, such as *it, there*, when they act as the grammatical Subject, but have no referent. The results of the thematic progression analysis are presented in Section 4.2.2 below.

3.3 Generic analysis

For the generic analysis of the sample, we followed some of the steps proposed by Eggins and Slade (1997:230ff). More specifically, we proceeded as follows:

Firstly, we tried to find a definition of the social purpose of the genre. This step involved describing and labelling the primary function of the genre studied. For example, whether the primary function was to tell a story, to perform a task, to gossip about someone, etc. In Section 4.3, we will comment on the functional label assigned to the conversations of our sample corpus.

Secondly, we identified and differentiated the generic stages of these conversations. This was achieved by analyzing the functions that different text chunks fulfilled with respect to the whole. Thus, in the example conversation below (10), there is no greeting or opening phase; the speaker proceeds directly to the body of the conversation (the task performance) by making a proposal for a meeting. Her interlocutor accepts the first date proposal and offers details about the time, also specifying a place to meet. Speakers then move to the Closing stage. In any case, the conversations did not finish until speakers had agreed on a time to meet. Each of these chunks or stages of the conversation can receive a functional label that describes what the stage is doing relative to the whole. The conversation transcript can be segmented into the following functional labels: Opening, Task Performance and Closing as global-level labels, and further detail within the Task-Performance stage. As will be explained in section 4 below, the rhetorical and thematic patterns were used as linguistic evidence for the generic structure proposed.

(10) facr_fjyk_au

Opening

(empty)

Task Performance

    Date Proposal

    facr_au_01: in the month of August <would> /uh/ would you like to meet possibly, /ls/ /h#/ between the seventh to the tenth? {seos} anytime during those days would be fine.

    Acceptance of general proposal + Details

fjyk_au_02: okay. {seos} on the seventh, eighth, and the tenth. I can meet you, /h#/ /h#/ /ls/ in the morning. {seos} /ls/ anytime after nine, o'clock in the morning would be good for me.

Acceptance of detailed proposal + Condition

facr_au_03: /uh/ August eighth at nine thirty would be, fine. {seos} if, that's okay with you as well.

Confirmation of acceptance + Additional proposal

fjyk_au_04: okay nine thirty in the morning, /h#/ /ls/ /h#/ until, eleven thirty. {seos} /h#/ /ls/ /h#/ and then perhaps we can <grab some> /um/ get some lunch afterwards. {seos}

Place proposal

how 'bout, you come over to my office. and then, /ls/ /h#/ perhaps we can go over to the conference room that's right next to my office.

Acceptance of additional proposal

facr_au_05: /ls/ /h#/ that would be fine on August eighth at nine thirty, {seos} /h#/ /um/ /ls/ I would love to get some lunch as well afterwards,

Closing

fjyk_au_06: /ls/ /h#/ okay, I'm looking forward to see you then. {seos} bye bye.

facr_au_07: /ls/ oops. /lg/ /h#/ /ls/ /h#/ /ls/ /h#/ <I screwed>

Thirdly, we specified the obligatory and optional stages and devised a structural formula to describe this type of conversations. The obligatory elements are defining of a given genre, and are key elements in recognizing it, while the optional elements do not define a particular genre, and can, therefore, occur across genres. The results of the generic analysis are presented in Section 4.3 below.

4 Results

4.1 Rhetorical Structure

Table 1 shows the results of the rhetorical analysis. The most frequently occurring relations, apart from Elaboration, are the ones of Concession, Condition, Cause and Result. This is determined by the nature of the dialogues: the kinds of relationships that need to be expressed are those of availability or non-availability to meet, and their causes and results, whether volitional or not.

	Frequency	%
Antithesis	1	0.17
Background	13	2.24
Circumstance	5	0.86
Concession	71	12.24
Contrast	9	1.55
Condition	66	11.38
Elaboration	166	28.62
Enablement	10	1.72
Evaluation	8	1.38
Evidence	0	0.00
Interpretation	1	0.17
Joint	29	5.00
Justify	34	5.86
Motivation	3	0.52
Non-Volitional Cause	37	6.38
Non-Volitional Result	43	7.41
Otherwise	4	0.69
Purpose	10	1.72
Restatement	28	4.83
Sequence	7	1.21
Solutionhood	7	1.21
Summary	4	0.69
Volitional Cause	7	1.21
Volitional Result	17	2.93
n	580	

Table 1. Rhetorical relations in the corpus

Example (11) presents some of those relations, as illustrated in Figure 2. After repeating the dates on which the other speaker is available (which was part of the previous turn), speaker FCKA expresses her availability and the reason for it (span 3, signalled by *because*), and then a Volitional Result, the desire to meet on that date, submitted to the evaluation of the other speaker in span 4.

(11) fcka_ffmw_10

fcka_10_03: /h#/ [1] well, /uh/ <you,> you're available, after, /um/ the seventeenth? /h#/ in the week, <seventeenth,> /eh/ seventeenth, the eighteenth, the nineteenth, the twentieth, the twenty first? {seos} /h#/ [2] well, the seventeenth and the twentieth would be the most convenient for me {seos} [3] because I have, nothing planned for these two days. {seos} /h#/ [4] so, what do you think.
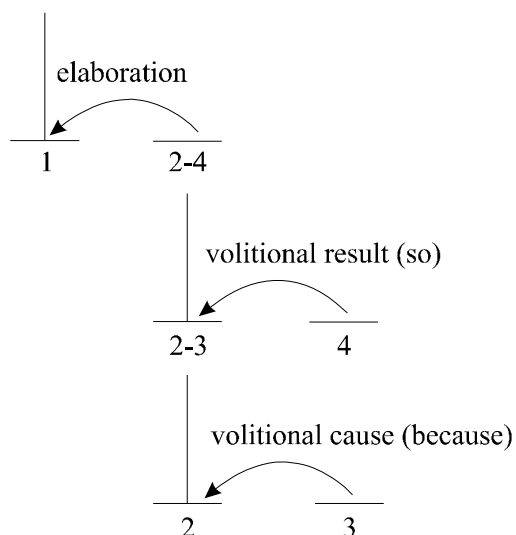
Figure 2. Relations in Example (11)

Example (12) below shows one of the typical instances of a Concession relation. Speaker FAMS rejects a date that the other participant proposed, but immediately suggests a new date. The Concession is a step towards the completion of the task, but it is also a politeness strategy, which prevents the other speaker from losing face by having her proposal rejected.

(12) fams_fcld_au

fams_au_09: /ls/ /h#/ /um/ no, the eighth doesn't look good at all, {seos} but the ninth, that sounds perfect. {seos} /uh/ /h#/ before two, that'd be good.

Most instances of Condition, another frequent relation, revolve around the notion of proposing a date and submitting it to the judgment of the other speaker. Other relations are used as politeness strategies. A speaker often presents the unavailability to meet as a Non-Volitional Result, whereas the finding of a date that is suitable for both speakers is typically expressed as a Volitional Result. In the same fashion, the reasons why they can or cannot meet are conveyed through either Volitional or Non-Volitional Causes.

Concession is employed to express a desire to meet despite the unavailability for the date proposed earlier. The use of this relationship can be often paraphrased as "*although I can't meet on the date you proposed, I'm available some other time*". Example (13) illustrates two Non-Volitional Causes, explaining why the first date is not appropriate, followed by a proposal for a new date. The RST representation of (13) can be found in Figure 3.

(13) fams_fcls_au

fcld_au_02: [1] /ls/ /h#/ the seven probably won't work out for me, [2] because I have a meeting, from three to five, with, Sebastian, {seos} /h#/ [3] and then, that Friday, I have an all day, manager's seminar. {seos} /h#/ [4] how about, later on in the month?
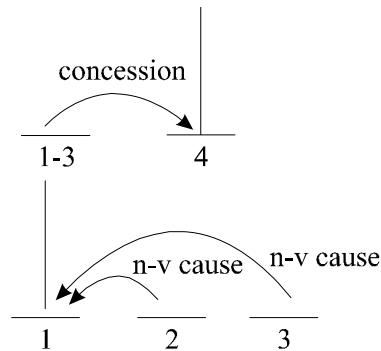
Figure 3. Relations in Example (13)

However, what is more revealing for a generic characterization of these dialogues is the distribution of the rhetorical relations throughout the texts. More specifically, certain RST relations appear at specific points in the dialogues, which can be interpreted as fulfilling the semantic function of signalling different stages in the dialogues.

For example, Non-Volitional Causes or Results appear when the proposal for meeting is not accepted by one of the interlocutors, as in Example (14) below, which presents a Non-Volitional Cause for not meeting on the proposed date.

(14) fams_fcld_au

fams_au_09: … does that sound good?

fcld_au_10: no, {seos} it <d> doesn't actually, {seos} because the ninth is the day I have the all day conference planning.

By contrast, when an Acceptance takes place, the relations are often Volitional Cause and Result, depending on where the optional Reason is placed. In Example (15), speaker FCAE presents the date proposed as desirable, because, given her schedule, she'll then have time to have lunch.

(15) fcae_fpam_3

fpam_3_06: ...how 'bout February the third, at two. {seos} we could do, two to four.

fcae_3_07: /ls/ /h#/ /uh/ that sounds pretty good. {seos} /um/ I have a meeting from nine thirty to noon, and, that'll give me some time to catch some lunch, ...

If no agreement can be reached on a date, a new proposal for meeting has to be made. This is typically expressed as a Result (Volitional or Non-Volitional) of the speaker's agenda, followed by a Condition ("*we can meet on this other date, if that's okay with you*"). In Example (16), speaker FFMW presents a problem with the date proposed. As a result of that problem, the meeting will have to be later. This result relation is additionally signalled by the discourse marker *so*.

(16) fcka_ffmw_10

ffmw_10_02: /h#/ I forgot to tell you, /uh/ Christina, that, /h#/ I have, /um/ a vacation planned, {seos} /h#/ I'm leaving this Sunday, the second, {seos} and, I'm not coming back until, /h#/ May the sixteenth. {seos} /h#/ so, /um/ /h#/ it'll have to be some time, /h#/ during that week, either, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday. {seos} /h#/ /uh/ do you have time, any of those days?

Other relations such as Elaboration, Solutionhood, Restatements or Evaluations, also appear at strategic points in the dialogues. Thus, for example, the relation of Solutionhood is typically found at the beginning of the dialogue, establishing the question that needs to be solved. Elaboration is found when the speaker has to expand or provide more detail on the reasons why a meeting is or is not possible. The relation of Evaluation appears most often at the end of the dialogue when both interlocutors have already arranged a date and a place for the meeting, as in example (16) below:

(17) fjmb_fmlz_6

fjmb_6_11: /h#/ /ls/ /h#/ /uh/, okay, I guess we'll do it one o'clock on the second. one to three. {seos} it sounds good. {seos} alright?

Section 4.3 below will discuss these results in relationship to the generic structure of the conversations. In the next section we present the results of the thematic patterning of our sample corpus.

4.2 Thematic Structure

As explained in Section 3 above, the thematic analysis concentrated on two aspects of the thematic patterning in our sample. First, it considered the thematic selection patterns according to three parameters: a) the metafunctional type they represent; b) the semantic type they represented within the transitivity structure of the clause; and c) their degree of markedness within the structure of the clause. Second, it concentrated on the thematic progression patterns found in the sample. We consider each of these aspects in turn.

4.2.1 Thematic selection patterns

A total of 799 clauses were considered for the analysis. All of those had at least an ideational Theme. As shown in Table 3, there were 328 (41%) clauses with an additional textual Theme, and 244 (30.5%) with an interpersonal Theme. Some of the clauses contained all three types, which yielded a total of 478 (59.82%) clauses with multiple Themes. This finding is similar to Bäcklund's (1992), who reports 57% multiple Themes in telephone conversations in English[9].

	Frequency	%
Textual Themes	328	41.05
Interpersonal Themes	244	30.53
Ideational Themes	799	
Total, simple Themes	321	40.17
Total, multiple Themes	478	59.82
Total number of Themes	799	

Table 3. Theme Selection and Metafunction

Within ideational themes, the distribution of the different semantic types also varies in our sample: the most frequent semantic type is Participant Themes, followed by Circumstance Themes and by Process Themes. Table 4 displays the presence of Themes as related to Transitivity.

Participants are typically unmarked Themes (*I am free*), although sometimes marked, as an Adjunct (*For me that's no good*). (In this paper, we are restricting the label Participant to one of the interlocutors in the conversation.) Circumstances are dates and places, and they can be unmarked, reflecting the realization of a date or a time as the Subject of a relational Process, attributive or Circumstantial (*Tuesday is good for me*). Circumstances can also be marked, as an Adjunct (*On Tuesdays I'm busy all day*). Most of the elements in the Transitivity structure are Participants (44.94% of ideational Themes). The fact that a good number are also Circumstances reflects, most likely, the genre of the corpus: the presentation and discussion of dates, times and places for a meeting. The next most common realization of Theme is a Process, as in Example (18). This happens quite a few times in the corpus (4.13% of the total number of ideational Themes)[10].

(18) fcad_fjab_12

fjab_12_08: /h#/ <u>could</u>n't be better. {seos} and then you know maybe <if we,> if we're, over a little bit ...

	Frequency	%
Participant	359	44.94
Circumstance	293	36.67
Process	33	4.13
Total table	685	85.73
***n* (Ideational Themes)**	799	

Table 4. Theme Selection and Transitivity

With respect to the distribution of semantic types, there are a few patterns we can observe. There is a slightly high presence of Process Themes at the end of the dialogues, in what we have named the Closing stage (20% of all Process Themes), a very small number at the beginning, and a higher number of Participants and Circumstances in the body of the conversation—the Task-Performance stage—(see Table 5). This higher presence of Participants and Circumstances could be interpreted functionally as reflecting the subject matter of that part or stage of the conversation where dates, places and personal preferences are discussed.

	Participant	Circumstance	Process
Opening	0%	0.68%	3.03%
Task Performance	89.97%	91.13%	78.79%
Closing	10.03%	8.19%	18.18%
***n* (Semantic type)**	359	293	33

Table 5. Semantic type of Themes according to stage

One last feature we analyzed was the *marked* or *unmarked* character of the Themes and their distribution in the conversations. Of the total number of ideational Themes, 8.76% were marked, and 91.24% unmarked. Our discussion of markedness links to the semantic realization of Themes. A number of the ideational Themes are Circumstances in the Transitivity structure of the sentence. The common syntactic encoding of a Circumstance is as an Adjunct, thus resulting in a marked Theme in English (Halliday 1994). However, in our sample, most Circumstances are not encoded as Adjuncts, but as Participant Subjects— and, therefore, unmarked—in a Carrier-Attribute relationship, thus resulting in a grammatical metaphor (Halliday 1994), as in example (19) below (ideational Themes underlined):

(19) flcm_fkas_08

fcka_10_03: /h#/ well, /uh/ <you,> you're available, after, /um/ the seventeenth? /h#/ in the week, <seventeenth,> /eh/ seventeenth, the eighteenth, the nineteenth, the twentieth, the twenty first? {seos} /h#/ well, the seventeenth and the twentieth would be the most convenient for me {seos} because I have, nothing planned for these two days. {seos} /h#/ so, what do you think.

The Theme in the second clause, *the seventeenth and the twentieth* is a Circumstance, encoded here as a Subject of the clause, rather than as Adjunct (*on the seventeenth I'm free*, for example). This is a common realization in the corpus, which explains the high occurrence of unmarked Themes.

The distribution of marked Themes is interesting. We classified marked Themes according to whether they occur at the beginning (first clause), middle or end (last clause) of a turn, and according to their function, i.e., what type of speech act the clause was

performing: propose a date, accept or reject a date, or other act. We considered position in the turn because it might indicate whether a speaker continues the Theme from the previous turn, and whether they use markedness to indicate a new speech act. The classification is presented in Table 6.

	Propose	Accept	Reject	Other	% (of marked Themes, $n=70$)
Beginning of turn	8	6	10	0	34.28
Middle of turn	14	4	8	6	45.71
End of turn	10	3	1	0	20

Table 6. Marked Themes within turns, with their function

Although the numbers are small, it seems that marked Themes occur mostly in the middle of a turn, and mostly to propose a new date. The use of a marked Theme in these cases could serve as a signal for a new date proposal. For example, in (20) there are two clauses with marked Themes that occur in the middle of the turn. The marked Themes indicate the beginning of a new proposal, after a previous proposal has been rejected. In most cases, the use of a marked Theme seems to bring dates to focus, as a reminder of the date being discussed.

(20) fcre_fjsl_1

fjsl_1_02: /ls/ /h#/ well I'd like to make it as soon as possible, {seos} but I'm not free for two hours, /um/, on, Monday the eighth. {seos} /h#/ however <u>on the ninth</u> I'm free after twelve o'clock, {seos} and <u>on the tenth</u> I'm free before four o'clock because I have a doctor's appointment then. {seos} do any of those times fit your schedule?

4.2.2 Thematic progression patterns

The results of the TP analysis are summarized in Table 7. The table presents the results in three large groups: constant, linear, and other. The latter refers to Themes that could not be linked to previous information, and therefore exhibited no progression. Those, in turn, fall into two categories: new Themes, those that were introduced in the conversation for the first time; and syntactic Themes, expletives such as *it* and *there*, which have no semantic content.

In general, speakers in our sample tend to use constant (themic) more often than linear (rhemic) thematic progression patterns. Constant Themes are 43.56% of the total Themes, whereas linear represent 18.53%.

Constant (Themic)				Linear (Rhemic)					Other	
Simple		Multiple		Simple		Multiple				
Cont.	Gap.	Int.	Sep.	Cont.	Gap.	Int.	Sep.	Complex	New	Synt.
128	208	5	7	97	44	0	3	4	287	16
16.02%	26.03%	0.63%	0.88%	12.14%	5.51%	-	0.38%	0.5%	35.92%	2%
Total = 43.56 %				Total = 18.53 %					Total = 37.92 %	

Table 7. Thematic Progression in the corpus

(cont.: contiguous; gap.: gapped; int.: integration; sep.: separation; synt.: syntactic)

As for constant patterns, gapped are more frequent than contiguous patterns. In both cases, the higher percentages are a result of the repetition of Subject pronouns throughout the conversation, as in Example (21). Speaker FRJP uses *I* in her first turn, which she repeats again when she holds the floor[11]. Subject pronouns are not, however the only category in this pattern. In (22), speaker FAMS uses *the seven* as the Theme of her first utterance, a Theme that she has picked up from the previous speaker's Theme.

(21) frjp_mpmm_1

frjp_1_01: /ls/ /h#/ /ah/ Peter. this is Renee. {seos} I need, to schedule a two hour meeting with you, between March, eighth, and March nineteenth?

mpmm_1_02: okay, I'm completely free, on the seventeenth of March. /h#/ so, let's try that date, first.

frjp_1_03: /ls/ /h#/ /um/ that day, I have a seminar, from nine to four thirty, {seos} and I'm free after that, but not until, /h#/ then.

(22) fams_fcld_au

fams_au_01: /h#/ /h#/ /uh/ when would you like to go in front of the board, {seos} I have a pretty hectic schedule in August? {seos} /h#/ but /um/, the seventh, I'm, pretty much free, if you wanna meet then.

fcld_au_02: /ls/ /h#/ the seven probably won't work out for me, because I have a meeting, from three to five, with, Sebastian, …

The differences among themic and rhemic and within contiguous or gapped can also be categorized in terms of whether they are derived or not. With the exception of multiple types, which are always derived, a total of 22.9% of the Themes are derived, versus 36.79% of non-derived Themes. There is, then, a slight preference for repeating the previous Theme

verbatim. This could be due to the fact that most of the Themes are very simple (*I, Tuesday, afternoon*), and do not lend themselves to rephrasing.

As to the distribution of TP patterns within the dialogues, Table 8 presents a specification of the segments where TP patterns appear. These segments have been labelled according to the function they fulfill with respect to the whole, which, as will be explained in section 4.3 below, may be considered as generic substages within what we have labelled as the Task-Performance stage. Openings are not present, since they were too short to show consistent TP patterns. Closings, however, were long enough to allow for analysis of their TP patterns. Some patterns were excluded from Table 8, since they did not clearly belong in any of those categories (a total of 86 were excluded).

	Propose		Reject		Accept		Details		Closing	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Simple constant	65	25.79	47	48.96	42	48.84	95	46.80	40	52.63
Simple linear	30	11.90	29	30.21	27	31.40	33	16.26	11	14.47
Multiple	7	2.78	2	2.08	2	2.33	4	1.97	2	2.64
New	145	57.54	13	13.54	12	13.95	55	27.09	16	21.05
Syntactic	5	1.98	5	5.21	3	3.49	16	7.88	7	9.21
Total	252		96		86		203		76	

Table 8. TP patterns according to functional segments or substages. The first column represents raw frequencies and the second column, percentage for that stage

We can see that the general tendency towards themic or constant TP is common in all the analysed segments or substages. However, there are some differences in this distribution: first of all, higher numbers of New Themes appear when the speaker wants to propose a new date (57.54%), and when details are being given (27.09%). By contrast, TP patterns do not help the listener establish whether an acceptance or a rejection has taken place as the TP patterns show a similar distribution. Finally, the Closing stage is similar in distribution to the others, with one difference: the new Themes are not dates, as in the Propose substage, but often subjectless finite verbs (*couldn't be better; sounds good,* etc.).

4.3 Generic structure

The results of the different steps of the generic analysis can be summarized as follows:

1. Social purpose of the genre

The sample used for this study are instances of talk produced for a very specific purpose, that of setting up an appointment. Anyone listening or reading a transcript of these conversations would agree that the two people involved are arranging to meet. We believe that they could be considered as a subtype of a more general conversational genre that can

be labelled as "task-oriented conversation". This is based on the fact that, for example, by contrast to other types of conversation such as casual conversation, gossip, or storytelling, in these conversations interlocutors have to perform a task of some kind, more specifically, scheduling an appointment. Other types of task-oriented conversations include service encounters, whether face-to-face (in a store, for instance), or via telephone (calling a travel agent).

2. Identification of generic stages

In most dialogues we identified three clear generic stages: an Opening stage, followed by what in the literature is called the body or message of the conversation (Stenström 1994:135), and which we will call the Task-Performance stage, and a Closing stage. This identification was based on the social or practical purpose fulfilled by each text chunk or stage. Thus, the social purpose of the Opening stage is to establish rapport between the speakers; the practical purpose of the Task-Performance stage is to arrange a meeting, which also has the social purpose of maintaining face for both speakers; the social purpose of the Closing stage is to close off the proceedings in good terms, with also a practical purpose of making sure that the meeting has been arranged successfully. The tripartite division is commonly found in descriptions of telephone conversation (Schegloff and Sacks 1973) and task-oriented conversation, including service encounters (Ventola 1987) and business meetings (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1997), and in general, in most speech events (Polanyi and Scha 1983).

The Opening stage varies in length and content. It goes from a simple *hello*, or just a throat-clearing noise, to a lengthy exchange involving questions about the other person's health, work, family, etc. We considered an Opening, or initialization, to be any segment of talk from the beginning of the conversation until the need to establish a meeting is stated by one of the speakers. For an example, let us look at (23). It is a typical example, where the first speaker starts with a mere *oh*. Other words, or sounds, include *okay*, *let's see*, and *um*.

(23)fbnt_mjfg_01

fbnt_1_01: /ls/ /oh/, would you like to meet, /uh/, /h#/ for a two hour appointment, *pause* on, *pause* Monday? at, five P M

Now we turn to the Closing stage, where the speakers usually confirm the date agreed upon, say good-bye and close the conversation. Closings were considered to begin at the point where one of the speakers' proposal has been accepted by the other speaker. The Closing stages were, on average, 3.4 SDUs (units) long. Example (24) is an instance of a Closing. Provided, in italics, is some context that is not part of the Closing stage. We believe that the Closing stage has the function of establishing a clear agreement that the date discussed is the final one. For that reason, Closings were deemed to start at the point where summarizations or restatements begin. In Example (24), the restatement and request for confirmation (it has rising intonation) occurs right after the *okay* by speaker FEAS. From a different point of view, the first part of this turn could be interpreted as one unit (*okay, that's, Friday the eleventh, at two, from two to four?*), as a response + elaboration on

the previous turn. Our classification is different because it focuses on a confirmation function for the Closing stage.

(24) feas_mtmr_11

mtmr_11_06: */ls/ /h#/ /eh/ let's call it two, {seos} and I'll take a long lunch after my seminar.*

feas_11_07: *okay,* /h#/ that's, Friday the eleventh, /h#/ at two, from two to four? {seos} /ls/ /h#/ I'll see you then. /h#/

mtmr_11_08: /h#/ /ls/ /h#/ you got it,

While the Opening and Closing stages are shared with other types of conversation, such as telephone calls (Schegloff and Sacks 1973, Stenström 1994), the Task-Performance stage is characteristic of this type of conversations whose main purpose is to schedule an appointment. As explained in Section 2 above, speakers with two conflicting agendas covering a two- to four-week period were asked to schedule an appointment lasting for at least two hours sometime within those two to four weeks. The conversations in the corpus never finished before the speakers had arranged a time to meet. This fact determines the generic structure of these conversations: while the Opening stage is optional, the Task-Performance stage is an obligatory element. The Closing stage, however, was always present in the conversations analyzed. We believe it fulfills both a social and a practical function, i.e., the speakers take leave, which is socially necessary (but not obligatory), but they also use this stage to make sure the appointment is settled, and there are no further changes.

The Task-Performance stage itself is composed of different substages. These fulfil different communicative functions which contribute towards achieving the overall social purpose of the genre: scheduling an appointment. The sequence of these substages is as follows (Figure 4): first, one of the interlocutors (speaker A) makes a proposal for a meeting. His/her interlocutor will then follow one of the following paths: to reject or to accept the date proposed. In either case, optional reasons are offered for rejecting or accepting the proposed meeting. If the proposal is accepted, details about the meeting place or other particulars may follow. Speakers would then move to the Closing stage.

If, on the contrary, the proposal is rejected, the same speaker makes a new proposal. This can be now accepted or rejected by speaker A. If an acceptance takes place, the conversation proceeds to the Closing stage. If there is a rejection, speaker A will propose yet another date, starting again a recursive sequence of rejection/acceptance, plus the accompanying details. In any case, the conversations were never finished until speakers had agreed on a time to meet.

3. Specification of optional and obligatory stages

Figure 4 below illustrates the proposed generic structure of our sample corpus. Conversations may start at the Opening stage, and optionally directly at the Task-Performance stage. This is represented by parentheses around the stage name in the figure.

We believe that the Opening stage was optional in some cases because the conversations sometimes started after an introduction to the task and the equipment. The speakers then went on to perform the task directly. This might be a result of the situation in which the conversations were recorded, and therefore not the case with more spontaneous conversations. The Closing stage is not optional, because it helps bring closure to the task itself. The Task-Performance stage consists of one or more Date-Proposal stages, and an optional Place-Proposal stage. When Place Proposal was present, it only appeared once: speakers agreed promptly on where to meet. The recursiveness of Date-Proposal stages varied in the conversations from one to seven, i.e., up to seven possible dates were proposed before an agreement was reached.

(Opening)

Task Performance

Date Proposal

A- Proposal

B - (Reason)
Rejection
(Reason/Elaboration)
New Proposal

B - (Reason)
Acceptance
(Reason/Elaboration/Details)
End of Stage

A - (Reason)
Rejection
(Reason/Elaboration)
New Proposal

A - (Reason)
Acceptance
(Reason/Elaboration/Details)
End of Stage

B - (Reason)
Acceptance
(Reason/Elaboration/Details)
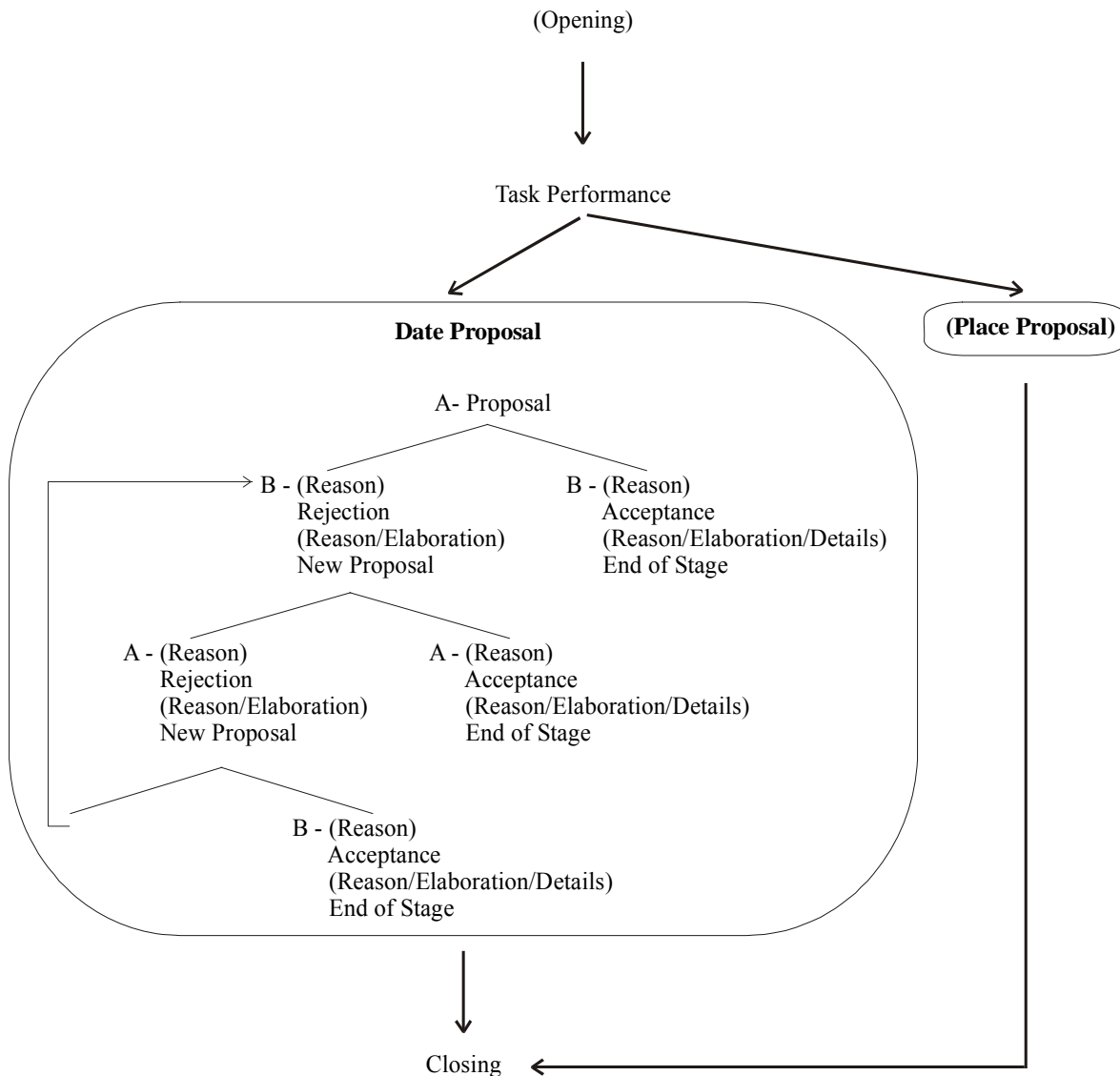End of Stage

(Place Proposal)

Closing

Figure 4. Generic structure of the conversations

Schematically, this could be represented as follows. The caret sign indicates linear ordering. Parentheses represent optional stages, and recursion is marked with a superscript number. The repetition of proposals and rejections is represented by a superscript n to indicate any number of repetitions (seven is the observed maximum). The scope of the repetition is enclosed in square brackets.

(OPENING) ^ PROPOSAL ^ [(REJECTION ^ NEW PROPOSAL)]^n ^ ACCEPTANCE ^ (PLACE PROPOSAL) ^ CLOSING

Linguistic evidence for the proposed structure is provided by the rhetoric and thematic analyses. As explained above (Section 4.1), the results of the rhetorical analysis show a different distribution of the rhetorical relations coinciding with different text stages, including different rhetorical relations for each of the components of the Task-Performance stage. For example, Non-Volitional Causes or Results typically appear in the Rejection stage, while Volitional Cause and Result appear in the Acceptance substage. The New Proposal substage is typically signalled by the appearance of the relation of Result (Volitional or Non-Volitional), as a consequence of the speaker's agenda, followed by a Condition.

Thematic selection patterns also provide evidence for the difference substages of the Task-Performance stage. Thus, we noted that new date proposals usually start with a Circumstance. Theme markedness is also relevant as a signal of the generic stages: Circumstances are usually marked (realized as Adjuncts) when they begin a new date proposal stage within the Task-Performance stage.

Finally, specific thematic progression patterns were also found to correlate with certain substages. For example, the Rejection and Acceptance substages typically follow a constant theme progression pattern, whereas the Proposal introduces new Themes more frequently, as does the Closing stage.

Table 9 below outlines the rhetorical and thematic patterns typical of the different stages of appointment-scheduling dialogues. As illustrated below, their distribution is not random but is functionally motivated to signal the different stages in the dialogues.

	Rhetorical patterns	Thematic patterns	
		Markedness	Thematic progression
Opening	Solutionhood		
Task Performance			
Proposal	Solutionhood, Motivation, Background	Marked	New
Rejection	Non-Volitional Cause or Result, Concession	Marked	Constant
Acceptance	Volitional Cause or Result		Constant
New Proposal	Result (Vol. or Non-Vol.)		New
Details	Elaboration		Constant, New
Closing	Evaluation, Restatement, Summary		Constant, New

Table 9. Correlations between generic stages and rhetorical and thematic patterns

5 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have tried to show how it is possible to characterize appointment-scheduling dialogues—a type of task-oriented conversation—in generic terms, using their rhetorical and thematic patterns as linguistic evidence. We have also shown the usefulness of tools such as RST and TP patterns, typically applied to written monologue, for the characterization of this type of conversational genre.

Our analysis methodology was carried out in two steps. First, we analyzed the distribution of the rhetorical patterns (rhetorical analysis) and the thematic selection and progression patterns (thematic analysis) in our sample. Second, we carried out a generic analysis of the sample following some of the steps proposed by Eggins and Slade (1997). The identification and definition of the generic stages involved assigning a functional role to different text segments and asking how it contributed towards achieving the overall social purpose of the genre. In this process, the characteristic distribution of the rhetorical relations and some of the thematic patterns were used as linguistic signal or evidence for the generic structure.

The rhetorical structure analysis was conducted turn-internally, showing a preference for relations of the Elaboration type. The next four preferred relations—Concession, Condition, Cause and Result—relate to the subject matter, where availability or non-availability to meet are being discussed. The relations correlate with stages in the conversation: Solutionhood is present typically in the Opening stage. Within the Task-Performance stage Concession and Non-Volitional Cause or Result are used to reject a

proposal; Volitional Cause or Result to accept a proposal. Finally, Evaluation often appears in the Closing stage, as do Restatement and Summary.

The thematic analysis was divided into thematic selection and thematic progression. Firstly, the analysis of thematic choices made by interlocutors showed a preference for selecting a Participant Subject as the Theme of the clause. Participant Subjects are mostly realized by pronouns, referring to the participants in the situation. The second most frequent realization was the choice of a Circumstance also functioning as the Subject of the clause, thus encoding a grammatical metaphor. These two highly frequent realizations were followed at a distance by other elements functioning as Adjuncts, such as Circumstances and other Participants, and by Process Themes. This characteristic distribution of Themes in the corpus seems to be indicative of the genre under study: the high frequency of Participant Subjects realized as pronouns reflects the interactivity of the spoken medium, while the frequency of Circumstances encoded as Subjects might be a reflection of the topic of the conversations, where dates, places and times are the items under discussion. The presence of Processes as Themes may also be explained by the negotiating characteristics of this unplanned spoken genre. The distribution of semantic types across stages pointed to a slightly higher preference for Process Themes in the Closing stage, over Participant or Circumstance, and a clear preference for Participant and Circumstance in the Task-Performance stage. The presence of Participant and Circumstance is determined by the subject matter of the conversation in its main part, the discussion of times to meet and the participants' availability.

As for the distribution of marked or unmarked Themes in our sample, we found a relatively low number of marked Themes (8.76% of all ideational Themes). More importantly, we found that those marked Themes appeared most often in the middle of the turn, to indicate a change in stage, typically to signal that the speaker is introducing a new proposal for a date.

In the second place, the analysis of the TP patterns revealed a high frequency of simple constant progression, where the Theme of a clause is derived from the Theme of a previous clause. New Themes are, however, the most frequent pattern. The genre (task-oriented) and the mode (spoken) are, we think, accountable by those two phenomena. The speakers introduce new Themes very often, discuss them by keeping them as Themes, and then move on to new Themes that are again discussed in thematic position. Such is the case with the dates and times that the speakers propose.

With regard to TP and stages, there were no clear differences in the three main stages, showing in all cases a preference for constant TP. However, there were some differences within the Task-Performance stage, divided into Proposal, Rejection, Acceptance, and Details. The Proposal substage contains higher numbers of new Themes, because it introduces a new date for consideration, whereas both Rejection and Acceptance use a constant pattern.

In sum, the results of the rhetorical and the thematic analysis of our sample can be interpreted functionally as indicative of the genre under study, providing linguistic evidence of the generic structure that characterizes this type of conversations.

The present study opens up a number of avenues of research. One of these would be to investigate whether the rhetorical and thematic patterns studied in this paper are specific of this type of task-oriented conversation, or whether similar patterns can be found in other types of task-oriented conversation, such as, for example, service encounters or business meetings. Another issue worth investigating is the similarities and differences in the distribution of rhetorical patterns across languages, as initially explored in Taboada (in press). These and other issues, however, remain a matter for future research.

Notes

1.   Some exceptions are the study of Maynard (1986) which applies the notion of thematic progression to English causal conversation, and the study of Fawcett and Davies (1992), where RST is applied to dialogue.

2.   We would like to thank the Interactive Systems Laboratory of Carnegie Mellon University and its director, Alex Waibel, for permission to access the corpus used in this study. The work reported in this paper is part of a larger project, involving a contrastive analysis of English and Spanish data (Taboada 2001). It is possible that the laboratory setting may have affected some aspects of the conversations. However, we believe that any patterns found in such a large body of data will point to characteristics of task-oriented dialogue in general.

3.   Gender was not a variable in the study. However, to avoid possible differences because of gender, the selection included equal numbers of male only, female only, and male-female conversations.

4.   The relations between turns can also be analyzed from an RST point of view. A study of the conversations as whole texts is to be published elsewhere (Taboada in press).

5.   Elliptical subjects are usually analyzed as elliptical Themes (Halliday 1994). For instance, the subject is elliptical in the second part of the coordinated sentence *He came home and _ collapsed on the couch*. Under this analysis, the sentence in (6) would have no ideational Theme. We propose to analyze *gonna find* as Theme, because it is what the speaker chose to start the sentence with. It is an instance of contextual, not textual ellipsis. Another reason for such analysis is that, when comparing these conversations to similar conversations in Spanish (Taboada 2001), sentences such as (6) were close to sentences with *pro-drop* subjects, which were also considered to have the Process as Theme.

6.   See also the volume edited by Hasan and Fries on the relationship of Theme and Subject (Hasan and Fries 1995).

7.   There have been some changes to Daneš' classification of TP patterns, including Maynard's (1986) analysis of spontaneous conversation. We decided to follow Daneš more closely, including some changes introduced by Dubois (1987). Both Daneš' and Dubois' analyses are based on the clause, unlike that of Maynard, which is based on the turn. Since the clause is the unit of analysis for the rhetorical relations too, we preferred an analysis based on the clause.

8.   Although Bäcklund (1992) and Romero Trillo (1994) point out that extralinguistic elements, such as pauses, can be thematic.

9. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing this work to our attention.

10. The other Themes not included in the table are syntactic Themes, with no Transitivity role (*there, it*), and Themes in other processes, such as Carrier, Senser and Sayer.

11. Thematic *I* in successive utterances by different speakers is not treated as contiguous, since the reference is different. The second turn of Example (21) contains another *I* in thematic position. That, however, refers to speaker MPMM, and is not part of the TP pattern initiated in the first turn by speaker FRJP.

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