ANALYSIS INTO A FORMAL TASK-ORIENTED WITHOUT CLEAR ABSTRACT SEMANTICS IS BEST HANDLED AS "USUAL" TRANSLATION

Christian BOITET
GETA, CLIPS, IMAG
385, av. de la bibliothèque, BP 53
F-38041 Grenoble cedex 9, France
Christian.Boitet@imag.fr

Jean-Philippe GUILBAUD
GETA, CLIPS, IMAG
385, av. de la bibliothèque, BP 53
F-38041 Grenoble cedex 9, France
Jean-Philippe.Guilbaud@imag.fr

ABSTRACT

During the development of a multilingual international demo implemented by the CSTAR consortium, five of the six partners have adopted a task-oriented (task and domain specific) pivot architecture. To add French to the system, we have developed, among other components, an analyzer which converts written utterances, coming from a speech recognition system, into the pivot language known as IF (Interchange Format). Perhaps paradoxically, the natural character of the relevant utterances and the lack of formal semantics in the resulting IF structures has led us to construct this analyzer as if we were translating between two poorly defined natural languages. We will describe how we have used the Ariane-G5 environment while adopting a technique inspired both by the example-based machine translation paradigm and by older, "semantic" machine translation approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Ariane-G5 (Boitet 1997) is a development environment for machine translation systems, originally intended for the creation of high-quality translators for written texts. It is based upon five rule-based languages, or LSPL (specialized languages for linguistic programming) well adapted for heuristic programming, where the heuristics are derived from the observation of a particular typology (lexicon & grammatical style). The numerous applications already implemented in this spirit have made use of the "multi-level transfer" linguistic architecture of B. Vauquois (Vauquois et al. 1985), and, at the programming level, a grammatical and heuristic approach: through successive approximations, we seek a "static" formal description of utterances and their descriptors; and then implement this description using a heuristically controlled rule system.

The same environment (replacing the heuristic programming with combinatorial programming), was employed in the creation of a dialogue-based machine translation prototype (Blanchon 1994), in which the analyzer furnishes several multilevel structures, which are then disambiguated via a dialogue with the user. (This dialogue itself is constructed dynamically using a system of rules.) From September 1997, until the end of 1999, we participated, within the CLIPS+1 group of the C-STARII consortium, in a project involving speech translation in the domain of hotel reservations and tourism (Blanchon et al. 1997, Boitet et al. 1998). Our task was to transform the results of speech recognition into an IF (interface format) structure representing the meaning of the utterance to be translated.

For this purpose, we used Ariane-G5 in a new way: rather than use formal grammars and heuristics as in the past, we employed a linguistic architecture based upon a "task-oriented semantic pivot", and a computational approach using "semantic schemas".

The interest of this work is threefold. First, it has once again demonstrated the power of this environment, first created in 1978, whose underlying concept has allowed it to evolve and grow considerably in power and flexibility using minimal human-resources. Secondly, we were able to reuse without modification the morphological components initially intended for the treatment of written text. Finally, the current structural analysis is of a completely new type: rather than produce an abstract linguistic tree as in all of our previous projects, we produce directly the semantic structure, which is in fact an abstract tree of the IF expression ultimately produced by the transfer and generation stages.

After discussing the problem of translation from French into the IF format, we will briefly present our development methodology, and will then describe in detail the various modules now in operation.

1. THE PROBLEM

The IF format is a pivot language specialized for the representation of intended utterances in the intended domain. Certain limitations naturally arise from this specialization. It is incapable, for example, of representing modal nuances: I would like to reserve. I could reserve. I don't want to reserve, etc. would all be represented by the same expression. Of course, some inverse meanings are possible, but they are very rare in real dialogues.

1.1 General Definition of the IF Format

Intuitive Syntax and Semantics:

\[
<\text{IF utterance}> ::= (A | C) : \text{<speech act>} (+<\text{concept}>)^* \quad \left(\{ <\text{attr}>=<\text{val}>, <\text{attr}>=<\text{val}>^* \right) \\
<\text{val}> ::= \text{idf} (\text{((& | ; | :) idf)})* \\
\text{val}^* \quad \text{<s-attr>}=<\text{val}>
\]

Examples

\[
\text{request-information+price+room (room-type=(single & double))}
\]
The resources for handling IF structures have been made available by CMU:

```
agive-information+price+room (((room-type=single, price=(currency=franc, quantity=200)) & (room-type=double, price=(currency=franc, quantity=300))))
c:accept
c:request-action+reservation+features+room (room-type=(single, quantity=2), duration=(time-unit=night, quantity=10))
```

### 1.2 The Lack of True Coherence

Unfortunately, the IF formalism has not been supplied with a clear formal semantics. No precise rules are available for interpreting correctly the meanings or the nuances of most of the IF structures found in the reference data base of legal IF structures. For example, it was not possible to guess which fact in the reservations domain would be described using the following IF fragment: accept + confirmation + location + airport + transportation + restaurant. We were often uncertain about the influence of a given concept on other concepts, and about the exact nature of this influence (e.g., determiner vs. determined, thematic vs. rhematic, phematic negation vs. functional negation, and so on).

Because of this difficulty, we used the generator of our partner CMU to verify the validity of the IF structures produced by our system from French utterances.

### 1.3 Methodology

Thus we were led to consider IF structures almost as if they had been those of a natural language whose syntax and semantics were necessarily unknown at the outset: we attempted to gradually approach the structures, starting from examples.

However, the spontaneous character of French spoken examples prevents their description in classical grammatical terms, because of hesitations, repetitions, false starts, various noises, breaks, fragments, and so on. These effects could be modeled as transformations $T$ of more “correct” utterances describable by a normative grammar $GN$, even if we are unable to construct an operational grammar $GO$ such that $GO = T \circ GN$.

On the other hand, the syntax of IF structures is very simple and perfectly defined: it is only the semantics which is not clear. An additional obstacle does arise from obvious limitations in the expressiveness of this formalism: many natural utterances seen in the dialogues in question cannot be faithfully represented by IF structures. This is the case wherever modality is at issue, or where circumstances bear upon the speech act itself. For example, it would not be possible to represent "Perhaps I'll reserve a room for you tomorrow" (without specifying the date of the reservation itself).

However, in their example lists, the creators of IF structures had associated these structures with very distant or even totally distinct meanings. For the example above, the most natural IF structure -- the structure produced by an analyzer seeking the most usual schemas -- would have the meaning "I'd like a room for tomorrow".

### 2. RESOURCES, TOOLS, METHOD

#### 2.1 Resources

The following resources for handling IF structures have been made available by CMU:

- the general definition shown above
- very general comments concerning usage restrictions
- a file of examples (English to IF)
- nearly instantaneous access to the English-IF generator developed since 1995.

In addition, we had at our disposal from the beginning of the project a list of French utterances drawn from (a) dialogues concerning tourist reservations compiled by an AUPELF-funded project, and (b) imaginary dialogues by some 40 people. By the end of the project, we also had transcriptions of the actual dialogues produced during experiments carried out in preparation for demonstrations.

Finally, the list of proper nouns associated with the tasks in question (names of cities, hotels, monuments, people, shows, etc.) was gradually built up and regularly incorporated into the component dictionaries. Unfortunately, we did not have access to the French speech recognizer or the French generator during the project, since they were also under development.

#### 2.2 Ariane-G5

During most of the project, it was possible to use the complete Ariane-G5 environment on a local machine without much power, and to use the subset for executing translation chains on a more powerful remote machine of Université Saint-Jérôme in Marseille.

![Diagram of the Ariane-G5 system](diagram.png)

We will not describe this environment in detail here (see Boitet 1997 for more details). Below, however, is a diagram showing the possible phases of a translation lingware and the specialized languages in which they are written. The entire French-to-IF analyzer was written in this environment, which made possible the reuse of several modules developed for other projects. Thus we used almost all of the possible phases -- the obligatory phases AM, AS, TL, GS, and GM, and the optional lexical expansion phases AX, AY, TX, TY, and GY.

#### 2.3 Development Cycle

In order to develop our specific application for the translation of French utterances into IF structures, we principally used...
three exterior resources. In the first place, an English-to-IF example base, sufficiently large, allowed us to infer a certain number of French-to-IF correspondences so as to stock our dictionaries and thus to bootstrap the application. Secondly, the database containing, in extension, the legal combinations of speech acts with concepts helped us to figure out cases missing from the example base. Finally, the CMU IF-to-

English generator allowed us to judge the validity of the results that we obtained.

3. IMPLEMENTATION

3.1 AM

The French morphological analysis module was developed in the framework of the LIDIA project. We simplified it and adapted it to the terminology of our new application domain. The role of this AM module is to lemmatise, to handle the very numerous idiomatic expressions, to produce a more coherent results. In the following example, the dictionary entry supports the replacement of the concepts 'features+hotel' with the value "hotel" when the lefthand context is either "destination" or "origin".

3.2 AX and AY

The two EXPANS modules contain French-to-IF dictionaries which support the initial replacement of French lexical elements with IF fragments. These dictionaries concentrate upon nouns and nominal locutions. In figure (b), we show that the node labeled hôtel de l'institut' is replaced in the tree in due course by the sub-tree "argument 'hotel-name';" dominating "value 'hotel_de_l_institut'".

3.3 AS

The ROBRA grammar of this module recognizes such important structures as those of number, dates, times of day, prices, and so on. It also handles verbal groups containing conjugation auxiliaries or modals. In the example, we see that the sequence "à cent cinquante dollars la nuit" is recognized as the expression of a price whose structure is given by 9 (10 (11, 12 (13, 14), 15 (16))).

3.4 TL

The TL module includes one dictionary containing speech act candidates and a second dictionary which handles the conversion of named numbers into numerals.

3.5 TX

The TX module is a dictionary for correcting partially incoherent results. In the following example, the dictionary entry supports the replacement of the concepts 'features+hotel' with the value "hotel" when the lefthand context is either "destination" or "origin".

3.6 TS

The TS module is a ROBRA grammar phase. TS erases useless nodes such as duplicates, creates default speech act for utterances which still don’t have one, creates a top-level 'ulfra' for each speech act when there are several speech acts in the current utterance (a single IF structure can contain only less nodes such as duplicates, creates default speech act for utterances which still don’t have one, creates a top-level 'ulfra' for each speech act when there are several speech acts in the current utterance (a single IF structure can contain only

(c) Analysis result:
1: 'ultxt' 2: 'ulfra' 3: 'ulsol'
4: '<agent>', 5: 'suggest', 6: 'hotel-name' (7: 'hotel_de_l_institut'), 8: 'a!2_pp', 9: [ul('price'), dapart(argument), rang(+20)]
10: [ul('currency'), locutor(agent), dapart(argument), rang(+20)],
11: [ul('dollar'), dapart(value)],
12: [ul('quantity'), dapart(argument), rang(+20)]
13: [ul('cinquante_card'), locutor(agent), nombre(c), cat(crd)],
14: [ul('per-unit'), locutor(agent), temps(timunit), semn(timem),
dapart(argument), rang(+20)]
(16: [ul('night'), dapart(value), rang(-1)])

(d) Result of TL:
1: 'ultxt' 2: 'ulfra' 3: 'ulsol'
4: '<a>': 5: 'suggest',
6: 'hotel-name' (7: 'hotel_de_l_institut'), 8: 'a!2_pp',
9: 'price' (10: 'currency' (11: 'dollar'),
12: 'quantity' (13: '1', 14: '50'),
15: 'per-unit' (16: 'night'))

(e) Dictionary entry:
'features+hotel' \ul(@g)-e-'origin'-ou-
\ul(@g)-e-'destination'
// 'hotel', $value
// 'features+hotel'.

//
Two IF for a single input:
\texttt{<agent> d'accord il me faudrait la date d'expiration}
a:accept a:request-information+expiration-date

3.7 TY
The role of the TY module is to reevaluate inadequate choices, based upon the immediate lefthand and righthand contexts. In the example, features+flight is replaced by "flight" whenever this configuration is preceded by either "availability" or "price".

(g) Dictionary entry:
\texttt{features+flight' == ul(àg)-e-'availability'-ou-}
\texttt{ul(àg)-e-'price'-ou-}
\texttt{ul(àg)-e-'temporal'
// 'flight' /
//features+flight').

3.8 GS
The GS module contains two grammars which fix the form of the IF structure by flattening the tree and by integrating such syntactic "sugar" as opening and closing parentheses, plus signs, commas, etc.

(h) Flat output tree:
13: 'price', 14: '&eq=pg', 15: '&pg'
29: '&pd', 30: '&pd')))}

3.9 GY
The GY dictionary puts on final touches before the final phase of morphological generation.

3.10 GM
The morphological generation module GM, departing from the leaves of its input tree, produces the text of the IF -- the translation of the text submitted to the AM module.

(i) French to IF translation:
\begin{verbatim}
(11/01/00) - Traduction du 11 janvier 2000
Langues de traitement: FIF-IF1
-- Texte origine --
\texttt{<agent> je vous propose l'hôtel de l'institut à cent cinquante dollars la nuit}
-- Texte traduit --
a:suggest+features+hotel
(hotel-name= hotel_de_l_institut,
price= ((currency=dollar, quantity=150),
per-unit=night))
\end{verbatim}

CONCLUSION
Our contribution to the speech translation experiment of the CSTAR consortium allows us to state that the "utopian" interlingual approach becomes practical and viable when it is carried out using a task-oriented semantic pivot. The approach no longer aims for an unreachable universal description of the world. Rather, it sets its sights lower, on a world which is artificial, very limited, and governed by simple laws, such as those concerning quite standardized commercial tourist offerings. Even so, the approach will have to refine its focus and gain in power if it is not to excessively exclude the inherent complexity of worlds -- even worlds constructed from scratch -- in which human beings intervene, e.g. as customers with nonstandard requirements.

We believe that the next decisive step would be a more rigorous definition of IF structures taking greater account of the linguistic and logical structure of spoken utterances.

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