

# Speech Acts or Communicative Action ?

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## Abstract

Systems for supporting communication in organizations should be founded on a theory of language and communication. A well-known theory for this purpose is speech act theory, developed by Austin and Searle. Flores e.a. used this theory for the design of THE COORDINATOR. Speech act theory however has some serious shortcomings which are brought to the fore by Habermas. His examination of Searle's theory leads to the development of an alternative theory: the theory of communicative action.

In this paper both theories are described to the extent considered necessary to discuss the shortcomings of the speech act theory and to show the superiority of the theory of communicative action. In addition the consequences of the latter for the design of communication supporting systems are revealed by a critical discussion of the fundamental assumptions and the practical design of THE COORDINATOR.

## 1. Introduction

There is a growing awareness that linguistic theories are relevant for the design of information systems, particularly for communication supporting systems. Pioneer work in this area has been done by Lyytinen and by Winograd and Flores. Lyytinen

has developed an 'action-based model' of information systems (Lehtinen & Lyytinen, 1986), (Auramäki, Lehtinen & Lyytinen, 1988). This model is based on speech act theory. Winograd and Flores also refer to speech act theory (Winograd & Flores, 1986). Flores e.a. used this theory for the design of a communication supporting system, called THE COORDINATOR (Flores, Graves, Hartfield & Winograd, 1988).

Speech act theory has been developed mainly by Austin and Searle (Austin, 1962), (Searle, 1969, 1979). The theory of speech acts starts from the assumption that the minimal unit of human communication is not a sentence or other expression, but rather the performance of certain kinds of language acts, such as requests and promises. E.g. the communication of a request by a speaker (S) to a hearer (H) is an attempt by S to get H to do something. This communication is called successful if H does perform the requested act.

Speech act theory has been commented upon by many linguistic philosophers. One of them is Habermas (Habermas, 1981, 1988). He sees the importance of Searle's approach in that he considers language as a means for coordinating action. He criticizes Searle however for overlooking the orientation of the participants. In the example given, Searle does not distinguish between the situation in which H performs the requested act because he wants to evade sanctions, and the situation in which he does so because he accepts the validity of S's claims in a rational way. According to Habermas, communication succeeds only when H does what is requested because he considers the request to be valid. When he does not accept the validity claim of S, the communication has not eo ipso failed but can be continued by negotiating about the validity claims.

In this paper we will discuss Habermas' critique of Searle, and show its relevance for the design of communication supporting systems. We focus on Habermas' recent work, contrary to e.g. Lyytinen and Klein (Lyytinen & Klein, 1985) who, in discussing the relevance of critical theory for the design of information systems, primarily use the earlier work and therefore do not make explicit the divergences between Habermas and Searle.

In section 2 we summarize Searle's speech act theory. Section 3 gives an outline of Habermas' theory of communicative action. The critique of Habermas on Searle is discussed in section 4.

In section 5 we elaborate on this critique in discussing the characteristics of THE COORDINATOR, meanwhile drawing the major consequences of Habermas' theory for the design of communication supporting systems. We show that a change from speech act theory to the theory of communicative action has practical implications, since it calls for alterations of the conversation structure of THE COORDINATOR. Section 6 summarizes the main conclusions of the study.

## 2. Searle's speech act theory

This section contains a summary of Searle's speech act theory. It is based primarily on the analysis developed in (Searle, 1979), which is a major improvement of the earlier work as described in (Searle, 1969). Starting from the seminal essays of Austin (Austin, 1962), Searle develops a well founded theory of speech acts. One of his contributions is the sharp distinction between a particular speech act and the words used in some language to express it. It appears that every speech act can be expressed in many ways. By doing this Searle transcends the level of particular languages and places speech act theory at the level of language in general.

In order to classify speech acts, Searle applies three primary dimensions. These are the illocutionary point, the direction of fit, and the sincerity condition.

What is meant by the *illocutionary point* of a speech act can best be explained by defining the point of some types of acts. The point of a request, for example, can be specified by saying that it is an attempt to get the hearer to do something. The point of an assertion is that it is a representation of an actual state of affairs. The point of a promise is that it is an undertaking of an obligation by the speaker to do something.

The *direction of fit* of a speech act regards the relationship between the propositional contents and the referred world. Some illocutionary points are directed at getting the contents (the words) to match the world, others at getting the world to match the words. Assertions are in the former category, promises and requests are in the latter. Searle cites an excellent illustration of this distinction which refers to the situation of a shopper in a supermarket who selects items according to his shopping list. This shopper is followed by a detective who writes down everything the shopper takes. When the shopper leaves the shop, both have identical 'shopping' lists, but the function of the two lists is different. The detective's list has a word-to-world direction of fit (as do statements, descriptions and assertions); the shopper's list has a world-to-word direction of fit (as do requests, commands and promises).

Lastly, the *sincerity condition* of a speech act is defined as the psychological attitude of the speaker to the propositional contents. In case of an assertion e.g., he expresses the belief that the contents is true. In case of a request for an action, the speaker expresses a want that the hearer performs the action, and if a person promises to perform an action, he expresses the intention to do it.

On the basis of these three dimensions, Searle then proposes the next classes of speech acts (as usual the speaker is denoted by S, the hearer by H, and the propositional content by p):

### *Assertives.*

Examples of assertives are 'It is raining' and 'There is a horse in the hall'.

The illocutionary point of the members of this class is to commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. The direction of fit is word-to-world, and the sincerity condition expressed is 'belief that p'.

### *Directives.*

Examples of directives are 'Can you give me the salt' and 'Close the window'.

The illocutionary point of these acts consists in the fact that they are attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something, expressed by the propositional content. The direction of fit is world-to-word, and the sincerity condition is 'want that H takes a course of action establishing the truth of p'.

Searle considers questions to be a subclass of directives, since they are attempts by S to get H to answer, i.e. to perform a speech act.

### *Commissives.*

Examples of commissives are 'I promise you to take the horse away' and 'I will be there'.

Commissives are those speech acts whose illocutionary point is to commit the speaker to some future course of action. The direction of fit is world-to-word, and the sincerity condition is 'intend to act such that p becomes true'.

### *Expressives.*

Examples of expressives are 'I apologize for stepping on your toe' and 'I congratulate you on winning the race'.

The illocutionary point of this class is to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content. In expressives there is no direction of fit. In performing an expressive, the speaker is neither trying to get the world to match the words nor the words to match the world. The case is rather that the truth of the expressed proposition is presupposed. There are several possible sincerity conditions expressed in the performance of the speech acts in this class. The propositional content ascribes some property to either S or H. This property is not necessarily an action: next to 'I congratulate you on winning the race' one can also say 'I congratulate you on your good looks'.

### *Declaratives.*

Examples of declaratives are 'I appoint you umpire' and 'The ball is out'.

The illocutionary point of a declarative is that its successful performance guarantees the correspondence between the proposition p and the world. The state of affairs

expressed by p is brought into existence by merely declaring it to exist. Because of this peculiar character of declaratives the direction of fit is both word-to-world and world-to-word. There is no sincerity condition.

Searle distinguishes a particular subclass of declaratives, which he calls assertive declaratives. The speaker of an assertive declarative may logically lie because he makes a factual claim. The second example above is a member of this class.

### 3. Habermas' theory of communicative action

Searle's theory, as summarized in the previous section, is a source of inspiration for many linguistic theorists. One of them is Habermas, who has taken Searle's theory as the starting point for the development of his so-called 'Theory of communicative action' ('Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns') (Habermas, 1981).

Central to Habermas' philosophy is the distinction between strategic and communicative action. When involved in *strategic action*, the participants strive after their own private goals. In doing so they may either compete or cooperate, depending on whether their goals oppose each other or rather coincide. When they cooperate, they only are motivated *empirically* to do so: they try to maximize their own profit or minimize their own losses.

When involved in *communicative action*, the participants are oriented towards mutual agreement. The motivation for cooperation therefore is not empirical but *rational*: people respond e.g. to requests because they presuppose that these requests can be justified. The basic condition for communicative action is that the participants achieve a common definition of the situation in which they find themselves. This consensus is reached by negotiations about the validity claims raised (Habermas, 1981, I, p.25 ff).

In any speech act the speaker S raises three claims: a claim to truth, a claim to justice and a claim to sincerity. The claim to *truth* entails that S contends to represent the factual contents of the speech act as they are. The claim to *justice* regards the adequacy of the projected interpersonal relation between S and H. The claim to *sincerity* entails that S is genuine in the performance of the speech act. With regard to the propositional content of a speech act, Habermas distinguishes between three worlds of reference: the objective world, the social world and the subjective world. The claim to truth refers to the objective world, the claim to justice refers to the social world of the participants, and the claim to sincerity refers to the subjective world of the speaker.

The hearer H may agree or disagree on each of the three validity claims. When H agrees on all claims, the speech act succeeds. In principle, each of the claims can be

questioned. When H disagrees on a claim, S is bound to provide an account for the claim. They now go into a negotiation about the validity of the claim, resulting in a definite agreement or a definite disagreement, or a decision to enter into a discussion about the presuppositions. Habermas distinguishes between a theoretical discussion of claims to truth (the objective world) and a practical discussion of claims to justice (the social world). With respect to the subjective world Habermas posits that the participants must be able to demonstrate the sincerity of their expressions, i.e. the authenticity of their feelings.

The distinction between strategic and communicative action is related to the distinction between perlocutionary and illocutionary acts. Perlocutionary effects definitely belong to the realm of strategic action, whereas communicative action requires that the participants only have illocutionary goals. The relation between the two pairs of concepts is however not completely parallel, as will be shown hereafter.

Perlocutionary effects can only be produced if one of the participants deceives the other. These effects are said to belong to the area of *latent* strategic action. Strategic action which does not produce perlocutionary effects is called *overt*. When a speaker S acts strategically in an overt way, he tells H precisely what he expects H to do. If H acts accordingly, he does so because he understands what has been said. The coordination in this case is brought about by illocutionary means. It follows that the use of illocutionary means does not discriminate between strategic and communicative action. An additional condition is needed for communicative action, viz. the use of criticizable validity claims.

Habermas illustrates the distinction between overt strategic action and communicative action by comparing imperatives and commands (Habermas, 1981, p. 400 ff). An imperative is based on a claim to power. Let us take the expression 'I want you to stop smoking' as an example. The speaker expresses by means of this sentence a personal will. If the person to whom this message is addressed stops smoking, he does so because of fear for sanctions. Contrary to this, a command refers to a normative background. An example of a command would be 'I ask you to stop smoking'. Such an act can only be successful if it is based on a validity claim. In the case of the example there might be regulations which do not allow for smoking in the particular situation ( a classroom, a non-smoking compartment of a train, etc.). A command does not need additional sanctions in order to be accepted; it will be accepted because the claims are considered valid. The conclusion is clear: only those speech acts to which the speaker assigns criticizable validity claims do motivate the hearer on their own to accept the speech act offer, and only because of this foundation do they become the mechanism for effective coordination of action (Habermas, 1981, p.409 ff).

Habermas' comparative analysis of strategic and communicative action on the one hand, and of perlocutionary and illocutionary acts on the other hand, leads to a classification of speech acts which differs from Searle's (Habermas, 1981, p. 435 ff). His taxonomy is based on one dimension only, namely the dominant claim put forward by the speaker (we use latin words in order to avoid confusion with the class names of Searle's taxonomy):

*Imperativa.*

Examples of imperativa are 'Shut up' and 'I want you to stop smoking'.

S aims at a change of state in the objective world and attempts to let H act in such a way that this change is brought about. The dominant claim is the power claim. The denial of an imperativum thus normally means the rejection of the power claim.

*Constativa.*

Examples of constativa are 'It is raining' and 'There is a horse in the hall'.

S asserts something about the state of affairs in the objective world. The dominant claim is the claim to truth. Denying a constativum thus normally means that H contests the claim to truth.

*Regulativa.*

Examples of regulativa are 'Close the window, please' and 'I promise you to take the horse away'.

S refers to a common social world, in such a way that he tries to establish an interpersonal relation which is considered to be legitimate. The dominant claim is the claim to justice. The denial of a regulativum therefore normally means that H contests the normative justice of the claim.

*Expressiva.*

Examples of expressiva are 'I apologize for stepping on your toes' and 'I congratulate you on winning the race'.

S refers to his subjective world in such a way that he discloses publicly a lived experience. The dominant claim is the claim to sincerity. Denying an expressivum thus normally means that H doubts the sincerity of S in expressing himself.

#### 4. Habermas' critique of Searle's theory

According to Habermas Searle's most important contribution to speech act theory lies in the fact that he considers language as a means for coordinating non-strategic action. Searle points out rightly that this coordination is not brought about by perlocutionary effects, but only by illocutionary effects. He criticizes Searle however for failing to see the principle which underlies this kind of coordination, and which explains successful communication. This principle is the orientation of the participants towards mutual agreement.

Because Searle overlooks the orientation towards mutual agreement, he is incapable to distinguish between power claims and validity claims (Habermas, 1981, p. 430 ff; 1988, p. 136 ff). He considers communication primarily as an interaction between persons who try to let one another perform actions. A speech act thus succeeds if the course of action aimed at is taken. In this ontology it is impossible to distinguish a situation in which H acts because he wants to evade sanctions from one in which he responds according to the demand of S because he accepts the validity of S's claims in a rational way. Otherwise said, Searle's theory is incapable to distinguish between empirical and rational coordination of action.

The central point of Habermas' critique however is that Searle fails to reveal what really makes a speech act work. This mechanism is the criticizability of the validity claims, stemming from the orientation of the communication towards mutual agreement, and giving rise to negotiations about the claims made. It is particularly because of this weakness in Searle's theory that his taxonomy is not rigid enough.

On the one hand it misses several important distinctions. One of these is the distinction between speech acts which are based on power claims and speech acts which are based on validity claims (or speech acts proper). Another one is the distinction between speech acts which express a claim to justice (such as promises) and those which express a claim to sincerity (such as intentions).

On the other hand, Searle overlooks that both requests and promises express claims to justice, since they both regulate interpersonal relations. In consequence, Searle's taxonomy is less theoretically founded and therefore more arbitrary than that of Habermas. Figure 1 illustrates the differences between the two taxonomies.

The columns in the matrix represent the classes of Searle's taxonomy. The rows represent those of Habermas' taxonomy; the dominant claim of each class is added at the end. The hatched rectangles represent the similarities between the two taxonomies. So, the constatives of Searle conform to the constativa of Habermas. Searle's directives conform partly to imperativa and partly to regulativa, dependent on the dominant claim. An expression of will is a typical 'imperative' directive;



typical 'regulative' directives are requests and commands. Likewise, the commissives of Searle conform partly to regulativa and partly to expressiva; a typical 'regulative' commissive is the promise, whereas the intention is a typical 'expressive' commissive. Habermas' regulativa thus encompass partly Searle's directives and commissives, and entirely Searle's declaratives.

The first row (imperativa) is separated from the other rows by a bold line in order to illustrate that the imperativa are not genuine communicative acts.

Searle Habermas	<i>Assertives</i>	<i>Directives</i>	<i>Commissives</i>	<i>Expressives</i>	<i>Declaratives</i>	
<i>Imperativa</i>		will				claim to power
<i>Constativa</i>						claim to truth
<i>Regulativa</i>		request command	promise			claim to justice
<i>Expressiva</i>			intention			claim to sincerity

Figure 1. Comparison of Searle's and Habermas' taxonomy of speech acts.

## 5. Consequences for design

Habermas' critique of Searle and his alternative taxonomy of speech acts has consequences for the design of systems which are meant to support human interactions in organizations. Habermas' ontology differs from Searle's, stressing the fundamental importance of orientation towards mutual agreement, and the primary role of regulative speech acts in the coordination of action. Consequently, a design based on Habermas' theory will differ from one which is based on Searle's theory. THE COORDINATOR, described in (Flores e.a., 1988), is an example of the latter, and we suggest that this system is in need for revision on several points.

In the approach of Flores e.a., communication is defined as an exchange of speech acts. The authors consider conversation to be a 'social dance of bringing forth

conditions of fulfillment, commitment to fulfill them, and completion' (Flores e.a., 1988, p. 160). They do not specify which kind of orientation of the participants is required in order to make such a dance succeed. No distinction is made between an orientation towards profit and an orientation towards mutual agreement. Therefore, it is not possible to distinguish between empirical and rational coordination of action *on theoretical grounds*.

From the examples given it is clear that THE COORDINATOR is meant to support conversations in which the participants are not empirically but rationally motivated. However, since their theoretical apparatus is not fit to specify the conditions of rational coordination of action, they run into two problems.

Firstly, they are not able to tell exactly what makes a speech act succeed, and consequently what kind of mechanism THE COORDINATOR does support.

Secondly, they are not able to exclude empirical coordination on principal grounds. Since they evidently do not want to include strategic action, they have to exclude this kind of action in a rather arbitrary way. By relying on Searle, Flores e.a. are not able to exclude imperatives right away. In order to guarantee that the system is not used in strategic ways, they have to build in safeguards. So they say that THE COORDINATOR only works well in situations in which overall interests are shared and in which the parties recognize that honest dealings with one another will be the best for their common benefit (Flores e.a., 1988, p. 168). In this way the shortcomings of Searle's theory are repaired, but the result is neither very elegant nor totally satisfying: the assumption of shared interests is not principal but ad hoc. Also, this restriction is neither necessary nor sufficient for communicative action and rational coordination. According to Habermas it is very well possible to act communicatively without shared interests, and to act strategically with shared interests. Not the sharing of interests but the orientation towards mutual agreement is the basis for communicative action and thus for the design of communication supporting systems.

On the basis of Habermas' theory these problems can be solved in an elegant theoretical way. According to this theory a communicative act succeeds because the validity claims which it entails, are accepted. A communication supporting system thus must provide facilities to negotiate these validity claims. In particular, it must be possible to distinguish between a claim to power and a claim to justice with regard to directives (cf. figure 1). We suggest therefore that this possibility is added to the conversation menu of THE COORDINATOR. It is very important that the hearer has the possibility to find out whether he is involved in an imperative act or in a regulative act, since the course of the conversation in these cases may differ largely.

Flores e.a. concentrate on the speech act types request and promise. They admit that there are other relevant types, but these are not taken into consideration. From Searle's theory it is not clear why the emphasis should be put on directives (such as requests) and commissives (such as promises). In Habermas' theory this is evident: both are subtypes of the type regulativa, which is the type that deals with all interpersonal relations. It is thus nothing more than natural that the other speech act types do not have a central position in the design. However, this is not on principal grounds, whereas Habermas' theory provides the right arguments to justify this exclusion.

Little attention is given to possible disagreements about the propositional contents of requests and promises, and to the sincerity of the participants. We propose to replace the notion of 'dance of request and promise' by the more fundamental notion of 'dance of regulativa'. In a *dance of regulativa* the claim to justice plays a dominant role. However, it is always possible that a regulativum is denied for its propositional contents or its sincerity. In that case the cognitive and expressive elements become prominent. Thus, a dance of regulativa does not exclude arguments about cognitive and expressive matters. Therefore, there should be room for these topics also in communication supporting systems. We suggest that the possibilities to raise the question of truth and the question of sincerity are added to the menu structure of THE COORDINATOR.

As a practical implementation of the remarks made above, we propose a structure for the conversation in response to a request as exhibited in figure 3. For the sake of comparison, the structure of this type of conversation in the THE COORDINATOR is shown in figure 2. This structure is reconstructed from figure 2 in (Flores e.a., 1988, p.161) and the explaining text. For the sake of brevity we have left out the trivial paths of 'Acknowledge', 'Free-Form', and 'Interim-report'.

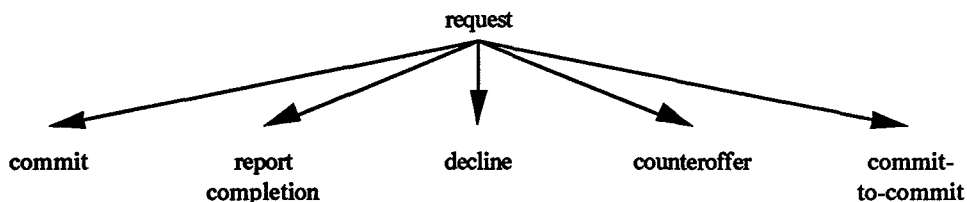


Figure 2. Request conversation structure in THE COORDINATOR.

The paths of 'counteroffer' and 'report completion' from figure 2 seem to be missing in figure 3. However, they are only dealt with in a different manner. The 'counteroffer' is considered to be just a way of declining, while 'report completion' is covered by 'disagreement on possibilities and priorities': if something is already done, it is no more possible to do it.

In case of a decline, the parties may enter into a negotiation on the claim to justice or the claim to truth (or on both) in stead of just ending the conversation. A decline is an illustrative example of a situation of break-down, as discussed in (Winograd & Flores, 1986).

Negotiation on the claim to justice may result in exposing that the speaker in fact made a claim to power, and thus only issued an imperativum. Next, negotiation on the claim to truth may result into re-ordering the priorities of pending requests.

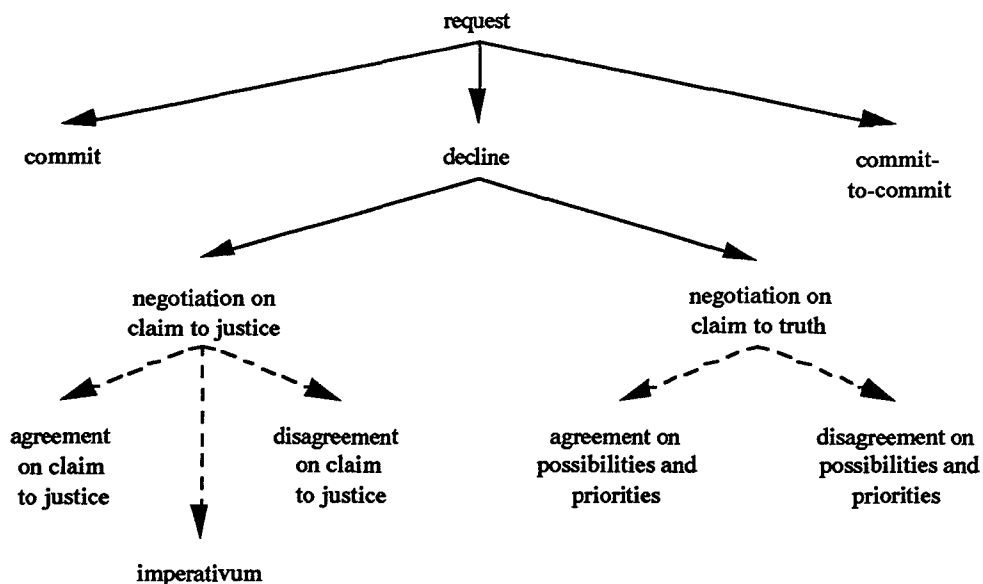


Figure 3. Suggested request conversation structure.

Lastly, Flores e.a. remark that THE COORDINATOR is only suited for organizations in which the role structure is stable, and not a matter of ongoing negotiation. Some negotiation can be allowed, but it should not be the primary concern of the bulk of the interactions (Flores e.a., 1988. p. 168). In our view this requirement is too restrictive. Successful communication is not dependent on stable roles, but on the possibility to ask for justifications of anything, including the existing role structure. This means that the role structure can be questioned whenever thought necessary.

According to Habermas, communication always requires a common background or 'life world' of the participants, which consists of common knowledge, shared institutions and mutually known competences. Part of this 'life world' can always be negotiated in the course of a communication. Furthermore, since the 'life world' is at the same time the basis for and the outcome of communicative action, none of its parts is principally excluded from negotiation and debate.

If communication is conceptualized as a process of negotiation about the situation, based on the exchange of validity claims, coordination is ensured by the orientation towards mutual agreement. In this case there is no need for stable role structures; the communication process itself makes sure that interpersonal relations become clear and that people are engaged and motivated to cooperate.

## 6. Conclusions

From the discussion in the previous sections it follows that Habermas' theory of communicative action has consequences for the design of communication supporting systems at three different levels.

Firstly, it provides us with an ontology which may serve as a foundation for design, specifying the fundamental mechanisms which have to be supported. On this level we propose to replace the notion of exchange of speech acts by that of rational coordination of action through the exchange of validity claims.

Secondly, it specifies under what conditions communication supporting systems are successful. On this level we suggest that one does not need the requirements of shared interests and stable role structures, but only an orientation towards mutual understanding.

Thirdly, Habermas' theory has consequences for the design itself. On this level we suggest that the focus should be on the regulativa, thus on directives, commissives and declaratives. The design should be such that it allows for detection of expressions of will (imperativa) in distinction from requests and commands (regulativa). From the point of view of Habermas it is evident that negotiation also entails cognitive and expressive elements; therefore these elements must also be taken into account. As regards the design of THE COORDINATOR, we suggest that the menu be adapted in order to include the possibility to detect imperatives and the possibility to introduce cognitive and expressive topics of communication.

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