

# ACHIEVING COHERENCE: TOPICALITY, CONCEPTUALIZATIONS AND ACTION SEQUENCES IN NEGOTIATING CONFLICTING GOALS

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## ABSTRACT

In this study I explore the means by which similar but conflicting conceptualisations of a complex speech event achieve coherence and reach an outcome satisfactory to both participants involved. Action strategies and topical talk (Schegloff's "talk-that-does" and "talk about," respectively) are seen to dovetail with each other in the negotiation of a macro request that is never explicitly formulated. Topicality is found to be achieved on different levels. While the action strategies devised by the more forceful interlocutor scaffold the collaborative global action-topic throughout the episode, the intermediate and local topics provide the verbalised knowledge that make inferencing and joint negotiation possible.

KEY WORDS: Action strategy, coherence, negotiation, request, talk, topicality.

## RESUMEN

Este trabajo ofrece una propuesta sobre la función de la topicalidad en la negociación de una situación potencialmente conflictiva. La realización de un acto de ruego complejo, que no llega a ser formulado explícitamente, se encaja en el desarrollo de los tópicos compartidos por los interlocutores a lo largo del episodio analizado. Mientras que el acto-tópico global es estructurado mediante las estrategias ideadas por el interlocutor más fuerte, los tópicos locales hacen posible la inferencia, la coherencia y la negociación en común.

PALABRAS CLAVE: estrategia, coherencia, negociación, ruego, diálogo, topicalidad.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In some present-day discourse studies topic is no longer viewed exclusively as "aboutness." Both "talk-that-does" and "talk about" (Schegloff) must be analysed together: topicality cannot be analysed independently of sequential structure and activities in discourse (Linell & Korolija). Furthermore, both the introduction and sustaining of topics and the structuring of the ongoing activities are cognitively based, ideally collaborative and conducive to coherence. But exactly how do the content and actional strands of topicality interact? Do they fuse, converge or intertwine?

My aim is to explore the ways in which coherence and topicality are achieved in conjunction with the sequence of action strategies adopted by one of the participants involved in a macro-speech act of request, which is carried out over a considerable number of turns. In the transcription analysed in the following sections the act of requesting is never made explicitly.

The research questions specifically addressed are the following:

- What kind of structuring scaffolds the sequential development of the episode?
- What role do the macro- and micro- topicality structures play in relation to the action strategies adopted by one of the participants?

## 2. DATA AND CONTEXTUALISATION

The transcript to be analysed consists of one bounded episode, slightly adapted, from a larger conversation surreptitiously recorded and transcribed as Survey 1.1. in *A Corpus of English Conversation* (Svartvik & Quirk). Numbered segments correspond to intonation units (IUs). The conversation can be seen to comprise three sub-episodes, separated by topic shifts and discourse markers. These sub-episodes will be seen to correspond to the structuring of the macro-request.<sup>1</sup>

The institutional setting of this excerpt is a study in London University some time during the 1960s. The speakers are two male academics on first-name terms, which are replaced by pseudonyms in the transcript. Sam (speaker B), the older man, is the external examiner for the department of which Reynard (speaker A) is resident. We learn through the conversation that Sam has “dropped in” on Reynard for a visit. Prior and subsequent episodes in the conversation show that it is primarily Reynard who steers the conversation, as he does in this episode, towards problems or questions in which he seeks Sam’s collaboration and advice. Reynard has topics “on hold” waiting to be brought up. It is speaker A, then, who controls the discourse topic in this episode, withholding information in order to secure step-by-step compliance with the request on the part of speaker B.

Knowledge shared by the two participants includes knowledge of each other’s biographies, of departmental procedure and specific needs. Speakers’ goals and needs which become evident in this episode include the following:

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A's (Reynard's) goal as departmental representative is to get his external examiner Sam to mark dissertations within the current academic year, even if they arrive late.

B's (Sam's) need is not to have his long vacation and contractual commitments jeopardised, while at the same time complying with A's request.

Assumptions of unquestioning acquiescence on B's part cannot be entertained by A since the goals and needs of both participants are incompatible. The invasion of B's privacy that the request involves renders the speech act inherently face-threatening (Brown & Levinson 65) in that it impedes B's freedom of action and imposes pragmatic constraints on A's handling of the situation.

### 3. PRELIMINARY CONCERNS

The research questions posed in 1 above presuppose an integrated approach to the concepts of both coherence and topicality:

#### 3.1. COHERENCE IN SPOKEN DISCOURSE: INTEGRATING TWO DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

According to one view, coherence is a property of what emerges in two collaborating minds during speech production and comprehension. What emerges are two similar mental representations (Gernsbacher & Givón; Linell & Korolija; Bublitz). Within this perspective, shared topicality is judged to be an essential feature of discourse coherence (Downing "Talking", "Topicality", "Negotiating").

From a different perspective, coherence is seen as deriving from the notion of discourse as a social event, as action in its own right (Schegloff; Edwards). In this view the search for coherence is the search for goals and needs. The contextual and interactive constraints involved in such a search condition the action strategies adopted by the participants in the discourse. Such strategies will condition not only what participants say, but how they say it and when they say it, responding to the basic question "Why that now?" (Schegloff & Sacks 299). This is especially clear in transactional or semi-transactional dialogues which are action-performative (Edwards 20), as is the dialogue under consideration.

Integration of these two types of coherence is based on the cognitive abilities of participants in discourse to process ongoing discourse according to what van Dijk and Kintsch call macro-structures and superstructures. On the one hand, from the very first words spoken in a conversation, language users seek to establish a global meaning or "macroproposition" (van Dijk & Kintsch 204) of the probable import of the upcoming discourse. Their initial hypothesis will be modified, confirmed or rejected by the incorporation of further incoming information, together with the general and specific knowledge which forms part of the interlocutors' discourse context. According to this view, the incoming information is reduced to a manageable size by processes of selection, deletion, generalisation and construction.

On the other hand, language users' awareness of the organisational patterns of different types of discourse, together with awareness of other contextual resources, enables them to make predictions, on a minimum of input, as to what direction the discourse is taking and consequently to gear their own participation accordingly.

Both the achievement of shared topicality and the coordination of talk-in-action can then be claimed to be the result of collaborative cognitive processes. Both have to be worked at and constructed by the actors in the dialogue if the outcome is to be "an island of temporarily shared understanding" in Linell's and Korolija's apt metaphor (168), or the progress from an initial state, through complication and crisis to the achievement of a new final state, in Chafe's adaptation of Labov and Waletzky's narrative structure (Chafe, *Consciousness* 128).

### 3.2. THE TOPIC HIERARCHY IN DISCOURSE

It is becoming standard practice in discourse studies to consider topicality as a dynamic discourse phenomenon which operates on several discourse levels (cf. Tomlin et al.):

*Global or macro topic:* using the top-down and bottom-up processes described in the previous section, interlocutors in a conversation (and analysts using a transcription), are by the end of the dialogue able to summarise as a proposition what the conversation is about holistically. Since speakers' participation in a discourse is subjective, and no individual's knowledge base is identical to that of another, the "mental pictures" of what constitutes a global discourse topic formed by the participants are inevitably not identical. However, in collaborative and coordinated discourse, they may be similar and are unlikely to be disparate.

*The intermediate topics of episodes (in this case sub-episodes),* represent a segment of the whole topic episode and have a gist of their own, while being subsumed under the umbrella of the global topic. As described below, the intermediate topics of the episode under analysis cluster around and lead to a three-tiered request on Reynard's part.

*Local or micro topics* pertain to the substantive intonation unit (IU) and centre on smaller chunks of information such as entities in the discourse expressed by a noun phrase.

Alternatively, episode topics are seen as nesting within a supertopic (Chafe, *Consciousness*, "Analysis"). In this view each topic is "an aggregate of coherently related events, states and referents that are held together [...] in the speaker's semi-active consciousness" (Chafe, *Consciousness* 137), thus precluding the need to specify local topics.

The two "mental pictures" built up and coordinated throughout the episode by A and B converge to provide the global topic expressible as the macro-



request by A and compliance by B to admit and mark two late dissertations by mid-July (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Convergence of the interlocutors' conceptualizations of the speech event, yielding the global Discourse Topic

#### 4. FROM THOUGHT TO ACTION: HOW TO MAKE A REQUEST WITHOUT STATING IT AS SUCH

A's (Reynard's) request is a delicate one both because of the magnitude of the imposition inherent in the request itself and also because of B's (Sam's) seniority. Consequently, in order to avoid an outright refusal, A makes use of an overall device, indirectness, with three strategic sequential devices. These are translated into strategic actions carried out verbally at particular places in the discourse. Reynard's overall superstrategy may be conceptualised as "How to get Sam to comply with the macro-request without ever stating the request as such" (cf. Sacks 267, "How to do X without doing Y"). As Sacks notes such a strategy involves an achieved absence: the request is never made overtly. Nevertheless, the fact that there is a macro speech act which is in effect a three-tiered request is proved, first, by B's

evident inferencing of the crucial questions; second, and explicitly, by A's effusive thanks at three points in the discourse: ("I'm I'm I'm it's very kind of you Sam" 202), "@I must say this this is awfully kind" (217-218) and "@:m you're very kind old Sam" (234), followed by Reynard's obvious relief "bless you" (235) and closure "well that finishes that" (236), which brings the episode to an end.

Three sub-strategies are used by A throughout the discourse. They provide the sequential action structure of the episode which derives from the conceptual structure.

#### 4.1. CONCEPTUALISING THE SUBSTRATEGIES

##### 4.1.1. *Substrategy 1: The Problem-Solution Pattern*

Substrategy 1 involves presenting the requests in terms of three related problems, with the potential resolution of each conditioning the potential success of the next. In this way, the older man's compliance is gained little by little, making it increasingly difficult for him to refuse eventual total compliance. The three problems are posed as follows:

*Problem 1:* Delaney's dissertation will arrive late. (Sub-episode 1a)

*Problem 2:* Chomley's dissertation will likewise arrive late. The implied solution in both cases depends on A's willingness to accept and mark the dissertations in vacation time. (Sub-episode 1b)

*Problem 3:* Both dissertations must be marked before mid-July; that is, by implication, before Sam is through his contracted commitments. (Sub-episode 1c)

Actionwise, the problem-solution pattern is translated into a sequential placement strategy which consists in presenting the request in three stages. The three-tiered request is formulated in terms of Reynard's rhetorical goals and is gradually revealed as such to Sam. It is this that provides the layered topic structure of the episodes:

- Sub-episode 1a: Getting B to accept late submission of Delaney's dissertation (65-120) and by implication to mark it in vacation time.
- Sub-episode 1b: Getting B to accept late submission of Chomley's dissertation (121-164) and by implication to also mark it in vacation time.
- Sub-episode 1c: Getting B to agree to mark both dissertations even earlier —by mid-July (165-236).

The macro topics of the whole episode on the one hand and the sub-episodes on the other are thus seen to converge with the discourse goals of the whole episode and the sub-episodes, respectively, so that one cannot be analysed without the other.



#### 4.1.2. *Substrategy 2: Pre-Request as Request*

Substrategy 2 has to do with preference organisation and consists in A's using a pre-request to stand for the request itself. Expressed in a truncated form: "How are you going to be placed for having [...]" (88), this utterance addresses one of the pre-conditions for compliance with a request: the recipient's ability to carry it out, in this case formulated in terms of freedom from contextual constraints such as location and prior commitments.

With similar indirectness, an announcement of bad news by A "Now it looks as if they both arrive" (131) introduces the problem of Chomley's paper.

#### 4.1.3. *Substrategy 3: Mock Attempts to Abort the Request Sequence*

Substrategy 3 is an ostensible, presumably mock attempt to abort the request sequence altogether. This risky action is carried out twice: In terms of coherence relations modelled on Mann & Thompson (250), the first occasion uses ARGUMENTS and JUSTIFICATIONS: "I think that we mustn't worry too much about this" (133), and "we make it perfectly clear that papers must be in by the first of May" (134).

The second mock abort attempt (135) is presented as a conditioned result of Sam's potential inability to comply in time "If you haven't got time to mark the paper, any paper, by about the middle of July, then it's not worth worrying about it' followed by EVIDENCE 'because the last meeting of the Council is about the middle of July" (172) and CONSEQUENCES "the candidates wouldn't be able to receive their certificates until November" (173).

These two mock attempts to abort the request are successful. The first achieves compliance from Sam in the form of REJECTION of the abort proposals, followed by ASSURANCE "\*no (I) no\* it'll be perfectly all right" (142). On the second occasion, Sam again rejects the abort proposal, and continues with an OFFER "\*well (no). Let's have a look at" (176) followed by JUSTIFICATION "I can spend the whole of that time on those two papers' (195-196). The complex act of compliance is accompanied by Sam's lengthy re-examination of his summer plans, until closure of topic negotiation by Reynard's rounding off 'well that finishes that" (236) and profuse thanks brings the episode to an end.

The conceptualisation of the problem by Reynard (speaker A), together with the corresponding action strategies adopted by him for carrying out the requests, provides the sequential action structure of the episode. Figure 2 integrates the three problems, the three requests and the three strategies, providing the structure of the whole episode.

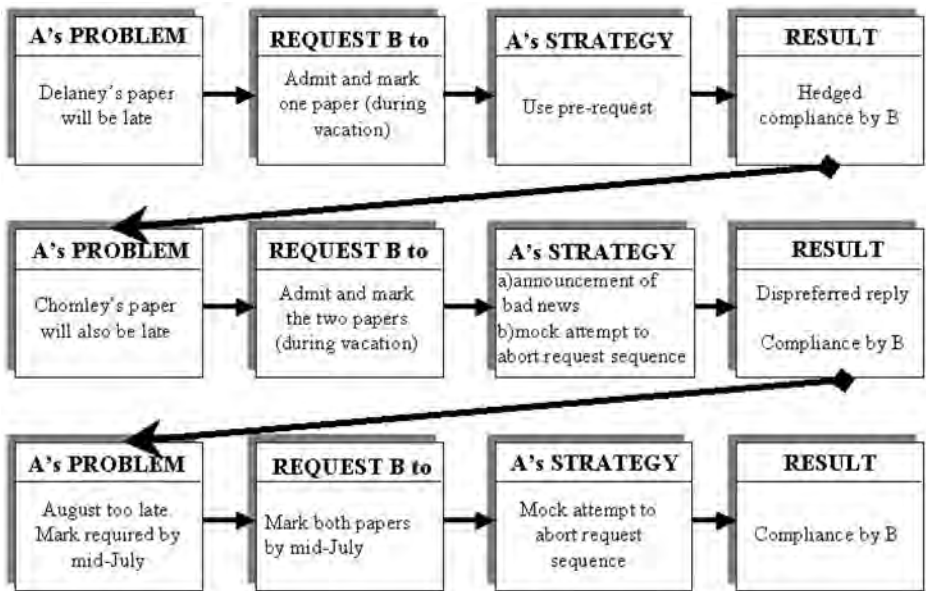


Figure 2. Recursive conceptual and sequential action structure of the episode.

## 5. TOPICALITY AS MEANS OF NEGOTIATION

It is here that the intermediate and local topic structures play a part. While the action strategies scaffold the development of the collaborative action-topic throughout the episode, the intermediate and local topics provide the bricks and mortar for the interlocutors' joint negotiation. The intermediate topics work in tandem with the sequential structure of the talk-in-action, providing the verbalised knowledge that makes so much inferencing possible. The fact that the global request is never explicitly formulated carries with it as action strategies the "announcements", "pre-announcements" and "expansions" which characterise this conversation. They occur at important transition points in the discourse which raise special topical alertness, evoking in the hearer anticipatory assumptions (Duszak 107) about topic development. A few instances must suffice to illustrate their importance:

### 5.1. TOPIC ANNOUNCEMENTS AND EXPANSIONS

A's first topic expansion precedes his first request, running from 64 to 87. Thus:

- in 64 a pre-announcement "*@:m. one other thing Sam*" intimates that some sensitive topic is upcoming.



- in 65-72 speaker A introduces Delaney, the topic Representor and Agent in the topical domain (van Oosten) of this stretch of discourse.
- 74 introduces one of the key topical entities in the discourse, Delaney’s dissertation.
- The remaining IUs give background information which add up to the implication that Delaney’s dissertation will arrive late, which alerts Sam to the request indirectly posed in the upcoming question in 87 “but how are you going to be placed for having [...]”

B’s first topic expansion begins with his hedged response in 90 and details his summer schedule. This soon leads to a hedged compliance and an offer to attend to the papers “any time in July and August” (104-105). This offer is repeated in 118-119. A’s overlapping hiss-whistle in 106 may be signalling Reynard’s realisation that Sam’s present offer is not good enough as August will be too late.

Further similar announcements occur in sub-episodes b and c (121 and 165, respectively). They are followed by the three types of expansions identified by Schegloff, clustering round the core utterances which transmit the tentative requests and their responses (see Figure 3).

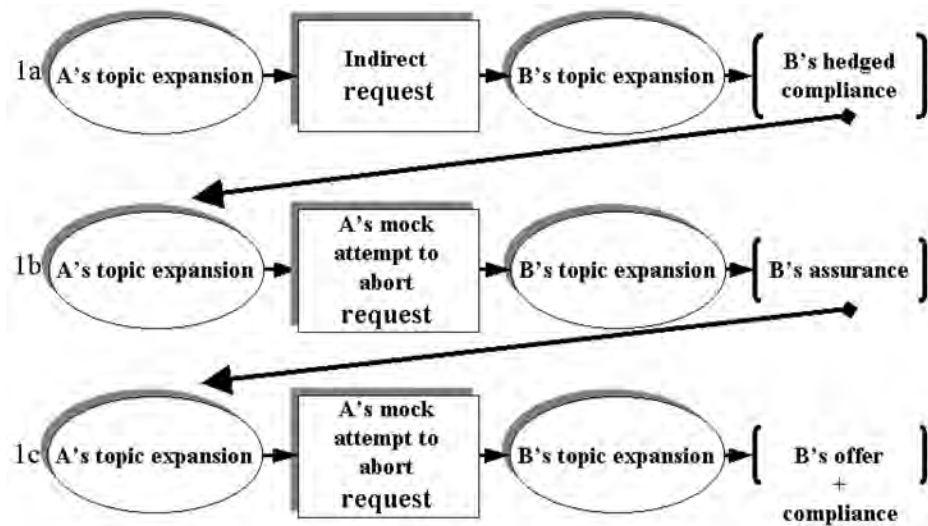


Figure 3. Topic expansion sequences clustering around the speech acts of request and compliance.

Expansions throughout the episode comprise one extended turn or sequence in which the current speaker (either A or B) develops his own topic. Each speaker’s expansions are that speaker’s own topics.

Sam's own topic centres on his repeated verbalised reviewings of his summer schedule as he works out and justifies his replies. In these sequences he himself is Representor and Agent of the topical domain.

Reynard's "own topics" are more varied, consisting as they do in presenting, on the one hand, preliminary background information about first Delaney, then Chomley, and on the other, metatopical comments and pseudo-reasonings to support his mock attempt to abort the request. Neither speaker addresses the other's topic in so many words. Rather than converging, each speaker's intermediate and local topics cluster round his own key utterances. The apparent tangentiality of B's expansions to the developing topic of request lies in the fact that Sam responds throughout to the literal meaning of Reynard's first question "how are you going to be placed [...]" rather than to the illocutionary force of request. That is, he does not respond to the issue (cf. Reichman; Tracy); nevertheless, the issue is clearly inferrable.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The dovetailing or intertwining of intermediate topical development with the action structures which provide the global topic appears to provide proof that talk in action (talk-that-does) and topical talk (talk-about), are not to be dissociated, at least in complex speech events of a semi-transactional nature.

The recognition of problems and the devising of strategies to cope with them are essentially conceptual operations based on experience. They give rise to the resulting sequential structure which scaffolds the action and maintains coherence of action. Speakers' cognitive abilities also enable them to conceptualise unshared experience by a mutual process of knowledge alignment. This might be impossible, however, without the topical coherence achieved through negotiated mental representations of what the talk is about and what the talk is achieving—in this case the successful negotiation of illocutionary force which leads to a satisfactory outcome or end-state.



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## APPENDIX<sup>2</sup>

A Corpus of English Conversation<sup>3</sup> Survey 1.1.

Sub-episode 1a

64 A @:m . one other thing Sam	pre-announcement
65 A @:m -Delaney	announcement
66 A a Canadian	topic action opening
67 A *(who) graduated	topic Representor intro- duced
.....	
71 A @:m - - Delaney's the Canadian . student remember	announcement
72 A last year	} A's topic expansion
73 B mhm	
74 A @:he should have had his . dissertation	
75 A (at the) beginning of May.	
76 A (but) the damn thing (hasn't) come -	
77 A @: I did get a postcard from him - -	
78 A saying that @:m the thing is now :ready	
79 A and that he will send it by the end . of June	
80 A that's what he says .	
81 A now . A he may not . send it . quite as soon as . that	
82 and =B	
83 A it may take a hell of a long time to come	
84 A if he puts it into the diplomatic bag	
85 A as @:m - what's his name	
86 A Mickey Cohn did	
87 A then (it's) not so bad	
88 A <b>but @: how are you going to be placed</b> 89 A <b>for *((having))*</b>	(pre)-request
90 B *@: -* <u>I wouldn't want it before the end of June anyhow Reynard</u>	hedged response

<sup>2</sup> Symbols used: @ = schwa; \* \* = overlap; ( ) = indistinct words; . - - = pauses.

<sup>3</sup> The bracketing and labelling have been added by the author of this article.



91 B because I'm going to Madrid  
 92 B on the tenth.  
 93 B and coming back on the twenty-ninth-  
 .....  
 103 B so \*any time in July 104 B and\* August 105 B but @: +.+  
 106 A \*( - - a hiss-whistle)\* +yes+  
 105(B not too far into August if \*possible\* -  
 107 B otherwise  
 108 B I'll be stuck until about [dh=i:]  
 109 A \*no\*  
 108(B twentieth . @ I'm hoping  
 110 B to get into Spain  
 111 B from about the -twenty- . -:eighth of August  
 112 B (to) until about the twentieth or :something of  
 112 B that kind of September \*.\* 113 B but  
 114 A \*yeah\*  
 113(B [adh@w]part from :that  
 115 B I'll be at home  
 116 B and although I'll be doing CSC stuff  
 117 B and that kind of thing  
 118 B I can always put it on one \*side\*  
 119 B and get on with the paper  
 120 A \*yeah\*  
 .....

B's offer Jul.-Aug.

B's topic expansion

Offer repeated

Sub-episode 1b

121 A @: you see the other man  
Chomley  
 123 A ought . ought . ought also  
 124 A to have . got his in on time  
 125 A and I suspected 126 A always  
 127 A that Delaney would be late  
 128 A that Chomley would be on time  
 129 A and that this would . produce a nice staggering  
 130 A of . of their arrival on your desk  
 131 A @:m **now it looks as if they they both**  
 132 B \*m hm\*  
 131 A **arrive**  
 133 A @ I think that we mustn't worry too much  
 133 A about this  
 134 A we we make it perfectly clear that papers must  
 134 A be in on the first of May-.\*  
 135 A @:m  
 136 B \*m hm\*  
 135(A .@ @: and @ I don't want to @:you know  
 137 A run ourselves out of an external examiner  
 138 A by your saying  
 139 A @ oh to hell with this

pre-announcement 122 A

A's topic expansion

announcement

(implied request)  
 mock attempt to abort  
 request

A's topic expansion

- 140 A for a game  
 141 A I'm not going to have my summers . bugged up in  
 141 A \*this kind of way\*  
 142 B \*no (I) no\* it'll be perfectly all right Reynard  
 143 B I've got a . I've got about a week  
 144 B of fairly hard work  
 145 B @after the fourth of July  
 146 B this CSC stuff  
 147 B you see .  
 148 B and after that  
 149 B I shall I shall have another week  
 150 B pretty hard  
 151 B about [dhi:] say the seventh to the fourteenth of August-  
 152 B I'll be doing [dhi] Burgos award  
 153 B from [dhi:] twentieth  
 154 B to the twenty-fifth  
 155 B but @ really I've got about . three week  
 156 B less than that  
 157 B of hardish work  
 158 B spread over those two months  
 159 B you \*see\*  
 160 B the rest of the time  
 161 B I'll have plenty of time to (deal with them)  
 162 A \*yeah\*  
 163 A I see -  
 164 A well .

reject abort, assurance

B's topic expansion

Sub-episode 1c

- 165 A @:m ... the other thing is you see  
 166 A that . if . you haven't got \_time  
 167 A to mark ((a)) paper by about . [dhi] . any paper  
 168 A by about the middle of July - -  
 169 A then it's not worth worrying about it.  
 170 A until . the end of [dhi] summer . vacation  
 171 A because .  
 172 A @:m . the last meeting of (the) Council  
 172 A Commission is about the middle of July-  
 173 A and - @ therefore the candidates wouldn't be  
 173 A able to receive their certificates  
 174 A until November -  
 175 A \*. (so it's)\* up to them  
 176 B \*well (no). let's have a look (at [dail])  
 176 B I'm . I'm back on the twenty-ninth Reynard -  
 177 B now if if these papers come . by the :twenty-ninth of June  
 178 B and you send them through to me  
 179 B in Loughton#-  
 180 B then . between @ the twenty-ninth  
 181 B and @ let me see-

pre-announcement

attempt abort request

A's topic expansion

reject abort, offer

B's topic expansion



- 182 B we're having this meeting of CSC assistants  
 182 B on the fourth of July  
 ....  
 192 B so . I shall have . roughly  
 193 B from the twenty-ninth of June  
 194 B to the eighth of July  
 195 B on which I can. @ I can spend the whole of that time  
 196 B on those two papers  
 197 B if they happen to \*come -  
 ....  
 202 A (I'm I'm I'm it's) very kind of you :Sam\*  
 203(B whatever time your council meeting is \*.\*  
 204 A \*m\*  
 205(B again  
 206 B I can spend the whole time :on \*them\*  
 207 A \*m\*  
 ....  
 214 B and @ and then I can get straight on to the \*papers\* again  
 215 A \*yeah\* -  
 216 A well  
 217 A @: I must say  
 218 A this this is awfully kind  
 219 A. because  
 220 B (well) I'll get them through quickly  
 ....  
 234 A @:m you're very kind old Sam- -  
 acknowledgement  
 235 A bless you  
 236 A well that finishes that.

compliance

acknowledgement

compliance

acknowledgement

thanks

topic action closure

