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## Language resource management — Semantic annotation framework (SemAF) —

### Part 2: Dialogue acts

*Gestion des ressources langagières — Cadre d'annotation sémantique  
(SemAF) —*

*Partie 2: Actes de dialogue*

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# Contents

Page

<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>1 Scope</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Normative references</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>3 Terms and definitions</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>4 Use cases</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>5 Basic concepts and metamodel</b> .....	<b>6</b>
5.1 Dialogue acts.....	6
5.2 Dependence relations.....	8
5.3 Rhetorical relations.....	9
5.4 Qualifiers.....	11
5.5 Metamodel.....	11
<b>6 Multifunctionality, segmentation and multidimensionality</b> .....	<b>11</b>
6.1 Multifunctionality.....	11
6.2 Multidimensionality and dimensions.....	13
6.3 Segmentation.....	14
<b>7 Specification of the annotation scheme</b> .....	<b>15</b>
7.1 Overview.....	15
7.2 Dimensions.....	15
7.2.1 Overview.....	15
7.2.2 Task and Task Management.....	16
7.2.3 Auto-Feedback and Allo-Feedback.....	16
7.2.4 Turn Management.....	16
7.2.5 Time Management.....	16
7.2.6 Discourse Structuring.....	17
7.2.7 Social Obligations Management.....	17
7.2.8 Own- and Partner Communication Management.....	17
7.2.9 Contact Management.....	17
7.3 Communicative functions.....	17
7.3.1 Overview.....	17
7.3.2 General-purpose functions.....	19
7.3.3 Dimension-specific functions.....	20
7.3.4 Responsive communicative functions.....	21
7.4 Functional and feedback dependences.....	22
7.5 Qualifiers.....	22
<b>8 The Dialogue Act Markup Language (DiAML)</b> .....	<b>23</b>
8.1 Overview.....	23
8.2 Abstract syntax.....	24
8.3 Concrete syntax.....	24
8.4 Semantics.....	26
<b>9 Extension and customization</b> .....	<b>27</b>
9.1 Overview.....	27
9.2 Simplifying the annotation scheme: options and selections.....	27
9.3 Extending the annotation scheme: triple-layered plug-ins and interfaces.....	28
<b>Annex A (normative) Formal specification of DiAML</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>Annex B (normative) DiAML-XML technical schema</b> .....	<b>36</b>
<b>Annex C (normative) Data categories for DiAML concepts</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>Annex D (informative) Plug-ins for semantic content and other enrichments</b> .....	<b>62</b>

**Annex E (informative) Annotation guidelines and examples** ..... 73  
**Bibliography** ..... 92

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## Foreword

ISO (the International Organization for Standardization) is a worldwide federation of national standards bodies (ISO member bodies). The work of preparing International Standards is normally carried out through ISO technical committees. Each member body interested in a subject for which a technical committee has been established has the right to be represented on that committee. International organizations, governmental and non-governmental, in liaison with ISO, also take part in the work. ISO collaborates closely with the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) on all matters of electrotechnical standardization.

The procedures used to develop this document and those intended for its further maintenance are described in the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 1. In particular, the different approval criteria needed for the different types of ISO documents should be noted. This document was drafted in accordance with the editorial rules of the ISO/IEC Directives, Part 2 (see [www.iso.org/directives](http://www.iso.org/directives)).

Attention is drawn to the possibility that some of the elements of this document may be the subject of patent rights. ISO shall not be held responsible for identifying any or all such patent rights. Details of any patent rights identified during the development of the document will be in the Introduction and/or on the ISO list of patent declarations received (see [www.iso.org/patents](http://www.iso.org/patents)).

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This document was prepared by Technical Committee ISO/TC 37, *Language and terminology*, Subcommittee SC 4, *Language resource management*.

This second edition cancels and replaces the first edition (ISO 24617-2:2012), which has been technically revised.

The main changes compared to the previous edition are as follows:

- in [6.2](#), 'reference segments' are introduced to allow more accurate annotations of feedback dependence relations;
- in [6.3](#), a more detailed way of annotating rhetorical relations between dialogue acts is made possible by importing concepts from ISO 24617-8:2016 (DR-core);
- in [7.2](#), the Contact Management dimension, known from the DIT++ annotation scheme, and the Task Management dimension, known from the DAMSL annotation scheme, have been added, along with a few communicative functions specific for contact management;
- in [7.5](#) and [Annex D](#), a possibility is introduced for importing elements from the W3C recommendation EmotionML in order to add affective information to dialogue acts;
- in [Clause 9](#) and [Annex D](#), the mechanism of 'triple-layered annotation scheme plug-in' with 'plug-in interface' is introduced; this mechanism allows the dialogue act annotation to be customized, using application-specific concepts, and to be enriched with semantic content information.

A list of all parts in the ISO 24617 series can be found on the ISO website.

Any feedback or questions on this document should be directed to the user's national standards body. A complete listing of these bodies can be found at [www.iso.org/members.html](http://www.iso.org/members.html).

## Introduction

Since its publication in 2012, ISO 24617-2 has been used in a number of annotation efforts as well as in the development of language-based interactive systems. These experiences have brought to light

- that the standard allowed dialogue act annotations that are slightly inaccurate in some respects,
- that some applications would benefit from the availability of mechanisms for customizing the set of concepts defined in the standard, and
- that certain use cases require the representation of functional dialogue act information to be extended with semantic content information.

This second edition seeks to remedy the noted inaccuracies, and to provide mechanisms

- a) for customizing the set of defined concepts, and
- b) for extending the information types in dialogue act annotations.

The improved accuracy of this second edition concerns the annotation of semantic dependence relations of dialogue acts and their scopes, and of rhetorical relations between dialogue acts. The mechanisms for extending and customizing the standard for a specific application concern most notably the annotation of information about the (domain-specific) semantic content of dialogue acts, the introduction of application-specific dialogue act types, the addition of communicative functions for fine-grained specification of feedback, and the annotation of speaker emotions.

This second edition is downward compatible with the original ISO 24617-2:2012 in the sense that every annotation made with the original version is a valid annotation according to the second edition. Existing annotations do not need to be revised in order to be compliant with this second edition.

# Language resource management — Semantic annotation framework (SemAF) —

## Part 2: Dialogue acts

### 1 Scope

This document provides a set of empirically and theoretically well-motivated concepts for dialogue annotation, a formal language for expressing dialogue annotations (the Dialogue Act Markup Language, DiAML), and a method for segmenting a dialogue into semantic units. This allows the manual or automatic annotation of dialogue segments with information about the communicative actions which the participants perform by their contributions to the dialogue. The annotation scheme specified in this document supports multidimensional annotation of spoken, written, and multimodal dialogues involving two or more participants. Dialogue units are viewed as having multiple communicative functions in different dimensions. The markup language DiAML has an XML-based representation format and a formal semantics which makes it possible to perform inferences with DiAML representations. This document also specifies data categories for dimensions of dialogue analysis, for communicative functions, for dialogue act qualifiers, and for relations between dialogue acts. Additionally, it provides mechanisms for customizing these sets of concepts, extending them with application-specific or domain-specific concepts and descriptions of semantic content, or selecting relevant coherent subsets of them. These mechanisms make the dialogue act concepts specified in this document useful not only for annotation but also for the recognition and generation of dialogue acts in interactive systems.

### 2 Normative references

There are no normative references in this document.

### 3 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this document, the following terms and definitions apply

ISO and IEC maintain terminological databases for use in standardization at the following addresses:

- ISO Online browsing platform: available at <https://www.iso.org/obp>
- IEC Electropedia: available at <http://www.electropedia.org/>

#### 3.1

##### addressee

*dialogue (3.5) participant (3.13) oriented to by the sender (3.20) in a manner to suggest that his/her utterances (3.25) are particularly intended for this participant, and that some response is therefore anticipated from this participant, more so than from the other participants*

Note 1 to entry: This definition is a *de facto* standard in the linguistics literature.

[SOURCE: Reference [34], modified - 'speaker' replaced by 'sender', and use of ambiguous pronouns avoided.]

### 3.2

#### **allo-feedback act**

*feedback act* (3.8) where the *sender* (3.20) elicits information about the *addressee's* (3.1) processing of an *utterance* (3.25) that the sender contributed to the *dialogue* (3.5), or where the sender provides information about his perceived processing by the addressee of an utterance that the sender contributed to the dialogue

- EXAMPLE
1. A: Now move up.
  2. B: Slightly northeast you mean?
  3. A: Slightly yeah

With utterance 3, A performs an allo-feedback act signalling that he/she thinks B understood utterance 1 correctly.

### 3.3

#### **auto-feedback act**

*feedback act* (3.8) where the *sender* (3.20) provides information about his/her own processing of an *utterance* (3.25) contributed to the *dialogue* (3.5) by another *participant* (3.13)

EXAMPLE B's utterance in the example dialogue fragment in (3.2) signals that he/she is uncertain whether he/she understood the previous utterance correctly.

### 3.4

#### **communicative function**

property of certain stretches of communicative behaviour, describing how the behaviour changes the *information state* (3.12) of an understander of the behaviour

### 3.5

#### **dialogue**

exchange of *utterances* (3.25) between two or more persons or artificial agents

### 3.6

#### **dialogue act**

communicative activity of a *dialogue* (3.5) *participant* (3.13), interpreted as having a certain *communicative function* (3.4) and *semantic content* (3.18)

Note 1 to entry: A dialogue act can additionally also have certain *functional dependence relations* (3.10), *rhetorical relations* (3.17) and *feedback dependence relations* (3.9) with other units in a *dialogue* (3.5).

### 3.7

#### **dimension**

class of *dialogue acts* (3.6) that are concerned with a particular aspect of communication, corresponding to a particular category of *semantic content* (3.18)

EXAMPLE (1) Dialogue acts advancing the task or activity that motivates the dialogue (the 'Task' dimension); (2) dialogue acts providing and eliciting feedback (the Auto- and Allo-Feedback dimensions); (3) dialogue acts for allocating the speaker role (the Turn Management dimension).

### 3.8

#### **feedback act**

*dialogue act* (3.6) that provides or elicits information about the *sender's* (3.20) or the *addressee's* (3.1) processing of something that was uttered in the *dialogue* (3.5)

Note 1 to entry: Two classes of feedback are distinguished: *allo-feedback acts* (3.2) and *auto-feedback acts* (3.3).



### 3.9 feedback dependence relation

relation between a *feedback act* (3.8) and the stretch of communicative behaviour the processing of which the act provides or elicits information about

EXAMPLE In the example in 3.2, both the allo-feedback act expressed by utterance 3 and the auto-feedback act expressed by utterance 2 have a feedback dependence relation to utterance 1.

Note 1 to entry: Feedback dependence relations are also used to relate self-corrections, partner corrections, and other speech editing acts, which strictly speaking are not feedback acts, to the segments that they apply to.

### 3.10 functional dependence relation

relation between a *dialogue act* (3.6) with a *responsive communicative function* (3.16) and one or more previous dialogue acts that it responds to

EXAMPLE The relation between an answer and the corresponding question, such as between utterance 3 and utterance 2 in the example in 3.2; or the relation between the acceptance of an offer and the corresponding offer.

### 3.11 functional segment

minimal stretch of communicative behaviour that has one or more *communicative functions* (3.4)

Note 1 to entry: The condition of being 'minimal' ensures that functional segments do not include material that does not contribute to the expression of a communicative function that identifies the segment.

EXAMPLE The functional segment corresponding to the answer given by S in the following dialogue fragment does not include the parts "Just a moment please" and "... let me see..." but only the parts "the first train to the airport on Sunday morning is" and "at 5:45".

1. U: What time is the first train to the airport on Sunday morning please?
2. S: Just a moment please... the first train to the airport on Sunday morning is .... let me see... at 5:45.

Note 2 to entry: A consequence of this definition is that functional segments can be discontinuous, can overlap or be embedded, and can contain parts from more than one turn.

### 3.12 information state

context

totality of a *dialogue* (3.5) *participant's* (3.13) beliefs, assumptions, expectations, goals, preferences, hopes, and other attitudes that may influence the participant's interpretation and generation of communicative behaviour

### 3.13 participant

person or artificial agent involved in the exchange of *utterances* (3.25)

### 3.14 qualifier

predicate that can be associated with a *communicative function* (3.4)

EXAMPLE A: Would you like to have some coffee?

B: Only if you have it ready.

B's utterance accepts A's offer under a certain condition; this can be described by qualifying the communicative function Accept Offer with the predicate 'conditional'.

### 3.15 reference segment

stretch of communicative behaviour that a *feedback dependence relation* (3.9) refers to and that is not a *functional segment* (3.11)

### 3.16

#### **responsive communicative function**

*communicative function* (3.4) of a *dialogue act* (3.6) that depends for its *semantic content* (3.18) on one or more *dialogue acts* (3.6) that it responds to

Note 1 to entry: See 5.2.

Note 2 to entry: In 7.3.4, the set of responsive communicative functions is listed of the annotation scheme defined in this document.

### 3.17

#### **rhetorical relation**

discourse relation

semantic or pragmatic relation between two *dialogue acts* (3.6) or their *semantic contents* (3.18)

Note 1 to entry: Relations such as *elaboration*, *explanation*, *justification*, *cause*, and *concession* have been studied extensively in the analysis of (monologue) text, where they are often called 'rhetorical relations' or 'discourse relations', and are mostly viewed either as relations between text segments or as relations between events or propositions, described in text segments. Many of these relations also occur in dialogue.

EXAMPLE 1 In the following example, the statement in the second utterance provides a *motivation* for the question in the first utterance:

A: Can you tell me what flights there are to Sydney on Saturday? I'd like to attend my mother's 80th birthday.

EXAMPLE 2 A rhetorical relation between the semantic contents of two dialogue act occurs in the following, where the content of B's statement mentions a *cause* for the content of A's statement:

A: I can never find these stupid remote controls.

B: That's because they don't have a fixed location.

### 3.18

#### **semantic content**

information, situation, action, event, or objects that a stretch of communicative behaviour refers to

### 3.19

#### **semantic content category**

semantic content type

type of the *semantic content* (3.18) of a *dialogue act* (3.6)

EXAMPLE The various *dimensions* (3.7) defined in this document correspond to categories of semantic content. In particular, the Task dimension corresponds to the category of task-specific actions and information; the Allo- and Auto-Feedback dimensions correspond to the categories of information about the processing by the current speaker or by the addressee, respectively, of something that was said before; the Turn Management dimension corresponds to the category of information about the allocation of the speaker role, and so forth.

### 3.20

#### **sender**

*dialogue* (3.5) *participant* (3.13) who performs a *dialogue act* (3.6)

### 3.21

#### **speaker**

*sender* (3.20) of a *dialogue act* (3.6) in spoken form, possibly combining speech with nonverbal communicative behaviour

Note 1 to entry: A dialogue participant can contribute to a dialogue without having the speaker role, for example by nodding in agreement to what the other participant says. Therefore, the term 'speaker' is not synonymous with 'participant who occupies speaker role'.

**3.22****speaker role**

role occupied by a *participant* (3.13) who has temporary control of a *dialogue* (3.5) and speaks for some period of time

[SOURCE: DAMSL annotation scheme (see Reference [3]).]

**3.23****speech act**

act that a *speaker* (3.21) performs when producing an *utterance* (3.25)

Note 1 to entry: The notion ‘utterance’ in this definition is commonly interpreted as mentioned in Note 1 to entry of 3.25.

[SOURCE: SIL Glossary of linguistic terms (<https://glossary.sil.org/term/speech-act>), modified - Added Note 1 to entry.]

**3.24****turn unit**

stretch of communicative activity produced by one *participant* (3.13) who occupies the *speaker role* (3.22), bounded by periods of inactivity of that sender or by periods where another participant occupies the speaker role

Note 1 to entry: The term ‘turn unit’ corresponds to one of the meanings of the often used term ‘turn’, which is ambiguous between ‘turn unit’ and ‘right to speak’, as in “to have the turn” and “turn-taking”. The term ‘turn’ is only used in this document when the context makes it clear in what sense the term is meant.

Note 2 to entry: The term ‘turn unit’ is also closely related to the term ‘turn construction unit’ (TCU), introduced by Reference [51]. The TCU seems a rather intuitive and holistic notion, of which the usefulness has been the subject of debate (see e.g. Reference [52]). The term is therefore avoided in this document.

Note 3 to entry: The term ‘turn unit’ is useful in the description of dialogue behaviour, but is not of central importance in this document, since dialogue acts are not assumed to correspond to turn units.

**3.25****utterance**

anything said, written, keyed, signed, or otherwise expressed, possibly in multimodal form

Note 1 to entry: An utterance is part of a turn unit. In the literature, the term is commonly used in the sense of ‘everything contributed by a sender within a turn unit’.

Note 2 to entry: The term ‘utterance’ is useful in the description of dialogue behaviour, but is not of central importance in this standard, since dialogue acts are not assumed to correspond to utterances, but rather to the communicative behaviour in functional segments.

**4 Use cases**

The notion of a dialogue act plays a key role in the analysis of spoken and multimodal dialogue, as well as in the design of spoken dialogue systems and embodied conversational agents. These applications all depend on the availability of dialogue corpora, annotated with dialogue act information. The main purpose of this document is to define a reference set of domain-independent basic concepts for dialogue act annotation, and their use for representing such annotations, in the Dialogue Act Markup Language (DiAML). The set of concepts defined in ISO 24617-2:2012 was based on the DIT++ taxonomy, which was originally developed to serve a double purpose: the articulate functional description of communicative activity in natural human dialogue, and a basis for the design of modules in dialogue systems. As part of the ISO 24617 series, a focus came to lie on annotation. Still, like DIT++, this document has multiple use cases, which can be grouped into four types:

- UC1: manual annotation of spoken, written, or multimodal human-human or human-computer dialogue;

- UC2: automatic annotation of spoken, written, or multimodal human-human or human-computer dialogue starting from transcriptions or recordings of communicative behaviour;
- UC3: recognition of dialogue acts in (multimodal) communicative user behaviour;
- UC4: generation of dialogue acts by the dialogue manager component of a dialogue system.

The different use cases bring different requirements and desiderata, as follows.

- UC1: manual annotation is costly and only feasible for limited amounts of data, but has the advantage of producing annotations of the highest quality since expert annotators have a wealth of context information, general world knowledge, and common-sense reasoning abilities to infer speaker beliefs and intentions. Expert annotators are therefore able to make fine-grained annotations. In order to support this use case, the annotation scheme should include fine-grained concepts.
- UC2: automatic annotation systems typically cannot characterize dialogue behaviour with the same level of detail as expert human annotators, since they lack common world knowledge, and usually have access to context information only as far as represented in the dialogue history. Automatic annotation is therefore in general less fine-grained. To effectively support this use case, the annotation scheme should contain more coarse-grained concepts than those needed for use case UC1.
- UC3: recognition of dialogue acts by an interactive system is almost the same as automatic dialogue act annotation, except that in an interactive system the semantic contents of dialogue acts play a prominent role. For a given application, it may be beneficial to define application-specific functions for specific types of content. For effectively supporting this use case, it may be useful to extend the annotation scheme with application-specific concepts.
- UC4: generation of dialogue acts in an interactive system concerns the decision how to continue a dialogue, and this is the main task of a dialogue manager component. This task is typically organized as a two-stage process: (1) decide on the communicative functions and semantic contents of one or more possible dialogue acts; (2) decide on a realization in an appropriate form. In contrast with human dialogue participants, who may be somewhat vague or unspecific about their beliefs and intentions, a system's dialogue manager typically works with precise beliefs and goals, and generates, in stage (1), dialogue acts with fine-grained communicative functions, for example for feedback acts, since the system may report a processing problem with great accuracy. This calls for the annotation scheme to include very fine-grained functions.

The new elements in this second edition of this document were introduced for providing more effective support for each of these use cases, in particular for the cases UC3 and UC4.

## 5 Basic concepts and metamodel

### 5.1 Dialogue acts

The term 'dialogue act' is often used rather loosely in the sense of speech act used in dialogue. Indeed, the idea of interpreting communicative behaviour in terms of actions, such as questions, promises, and requests goes back to speech act theory [9], [50]. But where speech act theory is primarily an action-based approach to meaning within the philosophy of language, dialogue act theory is an empirically-based approach to the computational modelling of linguistic and nonverbal communicative behaviour in dialogue.

Dialogue acts offer a way of characterizing the meaning of communicative behaviour in terms of update operations, to be applied to the information states of participants in the dialogue; this approach is commonly known as the 'information-state update' or 'context-change' approach; see e.g. References [12] and [56]. For instance, when an addressee understands the utterance "*Do you know what time it is?*" as a question about the time, then the addressee's information state is updated to contain (among other things) the information that the speaker does not know what time it is and would like to know that. If, by contrast, it is understood that the speaker is reproaching the addressee for being late, then the addressee's information state is updated to include (among other things) the information that the

speaker *does* know what time it is. Distinctions such as that between a question and a reproach concern the *communicative function* of a dialogue act, which is one of its two main components. The other main component is its *semantic content*, which describes the objects, properties, relations, situations, actions or events that the dialogue act is about. The communicative function of a dialogue act specifies how an addressee updates his information state with the information expressed in the semantic content when he/she understands the dialogue act.

This approach to the definition of communicative functions is strictly semantic, in contrast to approaches based on linguistic form. For example, the behaviour of a speaker who repeats something that was said by someone else may be characterized as a ‘repetition’ (which is a communicative function in some annotation schemes); however, this only says something about the *form* of the behaviour compared to the repeated behaviour, not about its function. A repetition often has a feedback function, as in (1.2), but it can also have other functions, as in (1.4), where it is used as a confirmation in response to a check question.

- (1)
1. S: There are evening flights at seven-fifteen and eight-thirty.
  2. C: Seven-fifteen and eight-thirty.
  3. C: And that’s on Sunday too.
  4. S: And that’s on Sunday too.

A form-related requirement for introducing a communicative function is however that there are observable features of communicative (linguistic and/or nonverbal) behaviour which are indicative for that function in the context in which the behaviour occurs. This requirement puts all communicative functions on an empirical basis.

Dialogue act annotation is the marking up of stretches of dialogue with information about the dialogue acts they contain. Spoken dialogues are traditionally segmented into *turns*, in the sense of ‘turn units’ as defined in 3.24. Such turns can be quite long and complex, and are therefore not the most useful units of behaviour to assign communicative functions to. Communicative functions can be assigned more accurately to smaller units that are functionally relevant. Such units are called *functional segments*, and are defined as the minimal stretches of communicative behaviour that have one or more communicative functions. [Subclause 6.3](#) discusses dialogue segmentation.

Inherent to the notion of a dialogue act is that there is an agent who produces the dialogue act, called the ‘sender’, and one or more agents who are addressed, called the ‘addressee(s)’. Dialogue studies often focus on two-person dialogues, in which case the dialogue acts have only one addressee. Besides sender and addressee(s), there may be various types of side-participants who are present but do not or only marginally participate<sup>[29]</sup>.

Dialogue act annotation is often limited to assigning communicative functions to dialogue segments, which corresponds intuitively to indicating the type of communicative action that is performed. A semantically more complete characterization additionally provides information about the category of semantic content. The DAMSL annotation scheme distinguishes three categories of semantic content: Task, Task Management, and Communication, which indicate whether the semantic content of the dialogue act advances the task which underlies the dialogue, or discusses how to perform the task, or concerns the communication process. The DIT++ scheme distinguishes a number of subcategories of communication-related information, such as feedback information, turn allocation information, and speech management information. The scheme in this document inherits the DIT++ categories of semantic content, also called ‘dimensions’; see [Clause 7](#).

Example (2) illustrates the use of the key attributes of a dialogue act in the DiAML-XML annotation of a task-related yes-no question addressed by speaker ‘a’ to addressee ‘b’, expressed by the functional segment ‘m1’.

- (2) `<dialogueAct xml:id="da1" target="#m1" sender="#a" addressee="#b" dimension="task" communicativeFunction="propositionalQuestion"/>`