Research on Spoken Dialogue Systems

Human verbal interaction with complex information sources.

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Research in the field of spoken dialogue systems has been performed with the goal of making such systems more robust and easier to use in demanding situations. The term “spoken dialogue systems” signifies unified software systems containing speech-recognition, speech-synthesis, dialogue management, and ancillary components that enable human users to communicate, using natural spoken language or nearly natural prescribed spoken language, with other software systems that provide information and/or services. The research is proceeding on several fronts: recognition of speech signals, syntactic and semantic parsing, language modeling, discourse analysis, and contact modeling.

Many of the advances made thus far in this research have been incorporated into a voice-enabled procedure-browser and reader, called Clarissa, that has been tested aboard the International Space Station. [A procedure-browser and reader is essentially a software version of an instruction manual that may describe one or more possibly complex procedures.] Major problems that have been addressed in developing Clarissa include creating voice-navigable versions of formal procedure documents, grammar-based speech recognition, methods for accurate detection of user’s speech directed toward a listener other than Clarissa based on grammar filtering or support vector machines, and robust, side-effect-free dialogue management for enabling undoing, correction, and/or confirmation of steps of a procedure.

Clarissa enables the user to navigate a complex procedure using only spoken input and output, making it unnecessary for the user to shift visual attention from the task at hand to a paper instruction manual or to an equivalent document displayed on a computer screen. Clarissa also provides a graphical user interface (GUI) for optional visual display of information. Clarissa has a vocabulary of about 260 words and supports about 75 different commands, including commands for reading steps of the procedure, scrolling forward or backward in the procedure, moving to an arbitrary new step, reviewing non-current steps, adding and removing voice notes, displaying pictures, setting and canceling alarms and timers, requiring challenges to verify critical commands, and querying the system as to status of the procedure.

Clarissa includes the following main software modules:

• Speech Processor — Performs low-level speech-recognition (input) and speech-synthesis (output) functions.

• Semantic Analyzer — Converts output from the speech processor into an abstract dialogue move.

• Response Filter — Decides whether to accept or reject the spoken input from the user.

• Dialogue Manager — Converts abstract dialogue moves into abstract dialogue actions, and maintains knowledge of both the context of the discourse and the progress through the procedure.

• Output Manager — Accepts abstract dialogue actions from the Dialogue Manager and converts them into lists of procedure calls that result in concrete system responses, which can include spoken output, requests for display of visual output on the GUI, or sending dialogue moves back to the Dialogue Manager.

• GUI Module — Mediates conventional keyboard and screen-based interaction with the user and accepts display requests from the Output Manager. This module can also convert keyboard input from the user into dialogue moves, which are sent to the Dialogue Manager.

Another accomplishment of this research has been the development of a targeted-help module that is highly portable in that it can be added to a spoken dialogue system, with minimal application-specific modifications, to make the spoken dialogue system more robust. The targeted-help module is intended, more specifically, for incorporation into a spoken dialogue system in which, as in Clarissa, there is a prescribed spoken language containing a limited number of words. The purpose served by the targeted-help module is to assist an untrained user to learn the prescribed language by providing help messages in response to out-of-coverage users’ utterances (that is, users’ utterances outside the prescribed language). These messages can be much more informative than “Sorry, I didn’t understand” and variants thereof generated by older, less-capable spoken dialogue systems.

The targeted-help module includes two submodules that run simultaneously: a grammar-based recognizer and a statistical language model (SLM). When the grammar-based recognizer succeeds, the ordinarily-inefficient hypothesis generated by the SLM recog-
Injecting Errors for Testing Built-in Test Software

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Two algorithms have been conceived to enable automated, thorough testing of Built-in test (BIT) software. The first algorithm applies to BIT routines that define pass/fail criteria based on values of data read from such hardware devices as memories, input ports, or registers. This algorithm simulates effects of errors in a device under test by (1) intercepting data from the device and (2) performing AND operations between the data and the data mask specific to the device. This operation yields values not expected by the BIT routine. This algorithm entails very small, permanent instrumentation of the software under test (SUT) for performing the AND operations.

The second algorithm applies to BIT programs that provide services to users' application programs via commands or callable interfaces and requires a capability for test-driver software to read and write the memory used in execution of the SUT. This algorithm identifies all SUT code execution addresses where errors are to be injected, then temporarily replaces the code at those addresses with small test code sequences to inject latent severe errors, then determines whether, as desired, the SUT detects the errors and recovers.

Guidance and Control System for a Satellite Constellation

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A distributed guidance and control algorithm was developed for a constellation of satellites. The system repositions satellites as required, regulates satellites to desired orbits, and prevents collisions.

1. Optimal methods are used to compute nominal transfers from orbit to orbit.
2. Satellites are regulated to maintain the desired orbits once the transfers are complete.
3. A simulator is used to predict potential collisions or near-misses.
4. Each satellite computes perturbations to its controls so as to increase any unacceptable distances of nearest approach to other objects.
   a. The avoidance problem is recast in a distributed and locally-linear form to arrive at a tractable solution.
   b. Plant matrix values are approximated via simulation at each time step.
   c. The Linear Quadratic Gaussian (LQG) method is used to compute perturbations to the controls that will result in increased miss distances.
5. Once all danger is passed, the satellites return to their original orbits, all the while avoiding each other as above.
6. The delta-Vs are reasonable. The controller begins maneuvers as soon as practical to minimize delta-V.
7. Despite the inclusion of trajectory simulations within the control loop, the algorithm is sufficiently fast for available satellite computer hardware.
8. The required measurement accuracies are within the capabilities of modern inertial measurement devices and modern positioning devices.

This work was done by Jonathan Lamar Bryson, Chadwick James Cox, Paul Richard Mays, James Christian Neidhoefer, and Richard Ephraim Sacks of Accurate Automation Corp. for Goddard Space Flight Center.

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