An exploratory study of a Map Task dialogue indicates that dialogue participants coordinate on an ad-hoc vocabulary and associated concepts to enable information exchange, and that ad-hoc vocabularies can be cobbled together from a heterogeneous mix of “micro-vocabularies” borrowed from various other (a priori unrelated) domains.

On a fundamental level, we believe that a language can be regarded as consisting of a multitude of activity-specific language games involving activity-specific registers. A register is an activity-specific semantic system (a "micro-language"), consisting minimally of a set of linguistic signs, i.e., linguistic expressions and associated concepts (meanings). In dialogue, registers may be used as resources which can be borrowed or appropriated into a new activity and adapted to the domain at hand. Putting it differently, an ad-hoc register is assembled to be able to talk about some subject matter from one or more perspectives. In the map-task dialogue, several different resource registers are introduced and accepted; often, both introduction and acceptance are implicit, but sometimes verbal signals (including feedback) are used to manage semantic coordination.

In the Map Task dialogue we find some resource registers that can be regarded as "standard" or "default" ways of talking about maps, whereas others are more unexpected. The non-standard parts of the ad-hoc register include a clock register ("two o'clock") to talk about directions, a sheet-of-paper register perspective (e.g. "the opposing page") and a letter shape register perspective ("a 'u' shape"). To describe the dynamics of registers in our example dialogue, we can say that the clock, sheet-of-paper and letter-shape registers are appropriated into the map task activity, where it is interleaved with landmark, compass direction, and metric distance registers to form an ad-hoc register. This involves adapting the meanings associated with resource register vocabularies to the current situation.

To describe how linguistic expressions can be interactively (in dialogue) appropriated into a new activity, we need an account of semantics which (1) allows several activity-specific meanings for a single expression, and (2) allows open and dynamic meanings which can be modified as a consequence of language use. We believe that the idea of “meaning potentials” may be useful here. On this view, linguistic expressions have meaning potentials, which are not a fixed and static set of semantic features, but a dynamic potential which can give rise to different situated interpretations. Different contexts exploit different parts of the meaning potential of a word.

I will take some initial steps towards a formal description of these processes by sketching a basic formal framework for coordination of semantic systems in dialogue. This framework will relate the dynamics of semantic systems to interactional processes of semantic coordination in dialogue, such as feedback, negotiation and accommodation. I will present a fairly detailed formal analysis of some short dialogue excerpts which I take to be sites of semantic coordination.