

A Personalized System for Conversational Recommendations

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Abstract

Increased computing power and the Web have made information widely accessible. In turn, this has encouraged the development of recommendation systems that help users find items of interest, such as books or restaurants. Such systems are more useful when they personalize themselves to each user's preferences, thus making the recommendation process more efficient and effective. In this paper, we present a new type of recommendation system that carries out a personalized dialogue with the user. This system – the Adaptive Place Advisor – treats item selection as an interactive, conversational process, with the program inquiring about item attributes and the user responding. The system incorporates a user model that contains item, attribute, and value preferences, which it updates during each conversation and maintains across sessions. The Place Advisor uses both the conversational context and the user model to retrieve candidate items from a case base. The system then continues to ask questions, using personalized heuristics to select which attribute to ask about next, presenting complete items to the user only when a few remain. We report experimental results demonstrating the effectiveness of user modeling in reducing the time and number of interactions required to find a satisfactory item.

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Abstract

Increased computing power and the Web have made information widely accessible. In turn, this has encouraged the development of recommendation systems that help users find items of interest, such as books or restaurants. Such systems are more useful when they personalize themselves to each user's preferences, thus making the recommendation process more efficient and effective. In this paper, we present a new type of recommendation system that carries out a personalized dialogue with the user. This system – the Adaptive Place Advisor – treats item selection as an interactive, conversational process, with the program inquiring about item attributes and the user responding. The system incorporates a user model that contains item, attribute, and value preferences, which it updates during each conversation and maintains across sessions. The Place Advisor uses both the conversational context and the user model to retrieve candidate items from a case base. The system then continues to ask questions, using personalized heuristics to select which attribute to ask about next, presenting complete items to the user only when a few remain. We report experimental results demonstrating the effectiveness of user modeling in reducing the time and number of interactions required to find a satisfactory item.

1. Introduction and Motivation

Recommendation systems help users find and select items (e.g., books, movies, restaurants) from the huge number available on the web or in other information sources (Burke, Hammond, & Young, 1996; Resnick & Varian, 1997; Burke, 1999). Given a large set of items and a description of the user's needs, recommendation systems present to the user a small set of the items that are suited to the description. For example, recent work includes intelligent aides for filtering and choosing web sites (e.g., Pazzani, Muramatsu, and Billsus (1996)), news stories (e.g., Lang (1995)), TV listings (e.g., Cotter and Smyth (2000)), and other information sources.

The users of such systems often have diverse, conflicting needs. Differences in personal preferences, social and educational backgrounds, and private or professional interests are pervasive. As a result, it is more desirable to have intelligent systems that process, filter, and display available information in a manner that suits each individual using them. The 'one result fits all' approach to item selection delivered by standard recommendation systems does not satisfy this need. Research on personalization has led to the development of systems that adapt themselves to the preferences of their user: user adaptive, or personalized

systems (Rich, 1979; Langley, 1999; Ardissono & Goy, 2000; Ferrario, Waters, & Smyth, 2000; Fiechter & Rogers, 2000).

Research in practical dialogue systems, while still in its infancy, has matured tremendously in recent years (Dybkjær, Hasida, & Traum, 2000; Maier, Mast, & Luperfoy, 1996). The ability of computers to converse with users in natural language would arguably increase their usefulness and flexibility. Today’s dialogue systems typically focus on helping users complete a specific task, such as information search, planning, event management, or diagnosis.

In this paper, we describe an adaptive conversational recommendation system designed to help users choose an item from a large set of items of the same basic type. We expand on previous work on adaptive recommendation systems that were not conversational, and on dialogue systems that were not user adaptive. Our sample system, the Adaptive Place Advisor, aims to help users select a destination (here, restaurants) that meets their preferences. The system directs the conversation in a manner similar to slot-filling, retrieves and ranks items using a case-based reasoning paradigm (Aamodt & Plaza, 1994), and adapts its similarity calculation based on past conversations with a user, thereby personalizing the retrieval and the conversation. Our main contributions are twofold. First, we demonstrate the combination of user adaptation with a simple dialogue model for destination recommendation. Second, we show how this adaptation is effective in reducing the number of questions and conversation time needed to reach a satisfactory destination.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we introduce personalized and conversational recommendation systems, presenting our design decisions as we go. Section 3 describes our system, while Section 4 presents our system evaluation and Sections 5 and 6 discuss related and future work, respectively. Section 7 concludes and summarizes.

2. Personalized Conversational Recommendation Systems

Our goal for user modeling differs from the one commonly assumed in recommendation systems, that of improving accuracy or related measures like precision and recall. Our goal also differs from that of previous work in user modeling in dialogue systems (Kass, 1990; Carberry, 1990; Kobsa & Wahlster, 1998), which emphasizes the ability to track the user’s goals as a dialogue progresses, and which does not typically maintain models over multiple conversations. Instead, we seek to improve the interaction with recommendation systems, by making them conversational, and to improve the performance of dialogue systems, by making them self-adaptive. Our hypothesis is that improvements in efficiency and effectiveness can be achieved by using an unobtrusively obtained user model to help direct the system’s conversational search for items to recommend. Our approach was motivated in part by the assumption that there is a large database of items from which to choose, and a reasonably large number of item attributes, else simpler techniques might suffice.

2.1 Personalization

Personalized, user adaptive systems obtain preferences through interactions with users, keep summaries of these preferences in a user model, and utilize this model to adapt themselves to generate customized information or behavior. The goal of this customization is to increase

the quality and appropriateness, for that user, of both the interaction and the generated result(s).

The user models stored by personalized systems can represent stereotypical users (Chin, 1989) or individuals, they can be handcrafted or learned (from questionnaires, ratings, or usage traces), and they can contain information about behavior such as previously selected items, preferences regarding item characteristics (such as location or price), or properties of the users themselves (such as age or occupation) (Rich, 1979; Kobsa & Wahlster, 1998). Another distinction is whether the models exist only for the duration of one interaction with a user, or over the long term. Our approach is to learn probabilistic long term individual user models that contain information about preferences for items and their characteristics.

Once it has been decided to use learning to build user models, an important decision is the method by which the information to learn is collected. Here, we can distinguish between two basic approaches. The *direct-feedback* approach places the burden on the user by soliciting preference information directly. For example, a system might ask the user to complete a form that asks them to classify or weight their interests using a range of categories. The problem with this approach is that users are usually put off by the need to complete long questionnaires before they can even begin to enjoy a given service. In response, another form of direct-feedback encourages the user to provide feedback as they continue to use a particular service.

The second approach to acquiring user models, and the one taken in the Place Advisor, is to derive user preferences *unobtrusively*, by mining normal online behavior (Fiechter & Rogers, 2000; Rafter, Bradley, & Smyth, 2000). We feel that unobtrusive collection of preferences is advantageous, as it requires less effort from the user. Also, users often cannot articulate their preferences clearly before they learn more about the domain. A possible disadvantage to unobtrusive approaches is that users may not trust or understand the system's actions when they change from one interaction to the next. This could be addressed by allowing the user to also view and modify the user model.

Ultimately, personalization techniques are all about how one can utilize a learned user profile in order to search for, identify, and present (recommend) relevant information to the right user in the right way at the right time. User models have been used in recommendation systems for content processing and selection (information filtering), navigation support in web browsers, and choice of modality and style of presentation and interaction (Brusilovsky & Maybury, 2002). During information filtering, the results returned by a search or retrieval algorithm can be screened based on the preferences of the user, and subjectively irrelevant choices eliminated. Navigation can be aided by modifying a page to highlight information (Pazzani et al., 1996) or even by changing the link structure of a site. Finally, presentation modality can shift between a mostly textual description of information, a graphical presentation, and speech. Also, the algorithms for deciding what to do next in the interaction can be influenced by a user model. This can help streamline the interaction by eliminating behavior (e.g., popping up a help window) that has been unsatisfactory to the user in the past. The Adaptive Place Advisor adapts its behavior on the information filtering and interaction levels.

2.2 Recommendation

As recommendation system help users search for items of interest, they must eliminate some choices from consideration while keeping others. Systems typically take one of two approaches to solve this information filtering task. The *content-based* approach recommends items similar to the items that a user has liked in the past (Pazzani et al., 1996; Lang, 1995; Shardanand & Maes, 1995; Segal & Kephart, 1999). In contrast, the *collaborative* approach selects items for a given user that similar users have also liked (Konstan et al., 1997; Billsus & Pazzani, 1998; Smyth & Cotter, 1999). We chose the content-based approach in the Adaptive Place Advisor.

The most widely used framework for presentation in recommendation systems is the *ranked list* approach. In this scheme, the user specifies their needs in a form and the system presents a usually long list of results, ordered by their predicted relevance to the user. This technique originated in information retrieval, where it was designed to help find documents or reports during library research. The basic method is sufficiently general, however, and it underlies many of the simpler search engines for the World Wide Web, which are used regularly for many different selection tasks.

Despite its current popularity, the ranked list scheme is not the only approach to making recommendations. In contrast, the Adaptive Place Advisor supports situations in which one person, that we call the Inquirer, asks a second person, that we call the Advisor, for assistance in deciding on a restaurant at which to have dinner:

1. Inquirer: Where do you think I should eat tonight?
2. Advisor: What type of food would you like?
3. Inquirer: What types are there?
4. Advisor: You can say things like Chinese, Indian, and Mediterranean.
5. Inquirer: Oh, maybe a French place with free parking.
6. Advisor: What quality rating would you like?
7. Inquirer: I don't care, as long as it's cheap.
8. Advisor: I'm sorry, I don't know of any restaurants like that, would you like to search for any price?
9. Inquirer: No, I think I'd like Chinese instead.
10. Advisor: In what city would you like to eat?
11. Inquirer: How about Berkeley?
12. Advisor: How does the Long Life Vegi House on 2129 University Avenue sound?¹
13. Inquirer: Sure, that sounds fine.

We will refer to systems that mimic this approach to recommendation as conversational recommendation systems (Aha, Breslow & Muñoz-Avila, 2001).

The interaction supported by conversational systems seems quite different from that found in the ranked list approach. The most important distinction is that the interaction takes the form of a sequence of questions, most designed to eliminate some items from consideration. Answering these questions plays a similar role to giving keywords with the ranked list scheme, but the aim is to remove alternatives rather than to only order them. This conversational process can also help the inquirer better understand his own desires,

1. At this point in a conversation, our system actually brings up a text box to display information about the restaurant, since all the prompts are pre-recorded.

since thinking about possible questions and answers may clarify goals in ways that keyword entry in a form does not encourage. In addition, the inquirer never hears about a complete item until only one, or at most a few, choices remain. Rather than being overwhelmed with items that compete for his attention, the user interacts with the advisor to narrow down the choices in an iterative, manageable fashion.

Such dialogues seem better for recommendations that must be delivered by speech rather than visually, for example those engaged in while the inquirer is driving. They also seem ideal, independent of modality, for tasks like destination selection or help-desk support (Aha & Breslow, 1997; Göker & Roth-Berghofer, 1999), in which the user needs to converge on at most a few items. On the other hand, form-based keyword entry and ranked list methods seem more appropriate in situations where information can be presented visually and situations where the user may well want to examine many options.

The type of conversation supported by conversational recommendation systems will ultimately direct the participants to a suitable solution. However, such a conversation can become tiring and the quality of the returned result may not be acceptable for each user. Just as interactions with a friend who knows your concerns can be more directed and produce better results than those with a stranger, dialogues with the Adaptive Place Advisor become more efficient and effective over time. Our goal for user modeling is to improve the subjective quality of both the results (found items) and the conversation that leads to these results. For example, after several conversations with the Inquirer above, a new interaction may proceed as follows, where the question about quality rating has been eliminated:

1. Inquirer: Where do you think I should eat tonight?
2. Advisor: What type of food would you like?
3. Inquirer: Cheap Chinese.
4. Advisor: What city do you prefer?
5. Inquirer: How about Palo Alto?
6. Advisor: How does Jing-Jing Szechuan Gourmet on 443 Emerson sound?
7. Inquirer: Sure, that sounds fine.

2.3 Conversation

Dialogue systems carry out conversations with users in natural language, whether spoken or typed. These systems vary in the complexity of conversations supported and in the types of dialogue models used to support conversations. First, the simplest conversations, *fixed initiative*, are those primarily guided by only one of the participants, whether it be the system helping the user or the user asking questions of the system. *Mixed-initiative* conversations, in which both participants play important roles, require more sophisticated systems. As illustrated in the conversations above, the Adaptive Place Advisor attempts to keep the initiative during spoken conversations while allowing the user to change the direction when needed.

Other dimensions of complexity include topic breadth and task complexity. Broader topics admit more ambiguity and therefore require more complex dialogue management techniques. With respect to task complexity, Allen, Ferguson, and Stent (2001) illustrate the robustness and flexibility required of a dialogue system that supports complex planning

tasks. Since personalization in dialogue systems has not been well studied, we start with a simple dialogue model, keeping the number of allowable conversational moves (or speech acts (Searle, 1969)) to a minimum. However, the model supports destination recommendation conversations of the type illustrated above.

The underlying dialogue management algorithm also plays a key role, and several frameworks have been proposed and implemented. The simplest are based on finite-state automata or dialogue grammars (Winograd & Flores, 1986; Stent, Dowding, Gawron, Bratt, & Moore, 1999). Frame-based approaches (Bobrow et al., 1977; Pieraccini, Levin, & Eckert, 1997), in which the user is prompted to enter information about items of interest, allow more flexibility. Plan-based systems (Cohen & Perrault, 1979; Allen et al., 1995) and those that use models of rational interaction (Sadek, Bretier, & Panaget, 1997) support even more complex and robust dialogues. We take a frame-based approach to dialogue management.

3. The Adaptive Place Advisor

In this section, we first present an overview of the Adaptive Place Advisor’s functioning, then follow with details about its components.² To recommend a personalized destination based on a conversation, the Adaptive Place Advisor must:

- generate context-appropriate utterances,
- understand the user’s responses,
- generate a probabilistic partial item specification, called a *query*, based on the conversation so far,
- complement the query with a model of the user’s preferences,
- retrieve items matching the query from a database and calculate their similarity to the user’s request,
- select the next attribute to be constrained or relaxed during a conversation when the number of retrieved items is not acceptable,
- present suitable items when the number of items is acceptable, and
- acquire and update the user model based on these interactions.

The responsibilities for these tasks are distributed among various modules of the system, as shown in Figure 1. The Dialogue Manager generates, interprets, and processes conversations. It also updates the query after each system-user interaction. The Retrieval Engine is a case-based system that uses the query to retrieve items from the database and measure their similarity to the user’s preferences. The User Modeling System generates the initial (default) query from the user model and updates the user model based on the conversation history. The Speech Recognizer and the Speech Generator handle the user’s input and control the system’s output, respectively.

During a conversation, the Place Advisor asks questions and incorporates responses until the attribute-values agreed upon (such as *cuisine = Chinese*) by the conversational participants match only a small number of items in the database. It then presents those items one at a time. This avoids presenting a long list of items, a tedious process in a

2. Our approach to destination advice draws on an earlier analysis of the task by Elio and Haddadi (1998, 1999). The main distinctions from that work are that their approach does not include personalization, they distinguish between two levels of search: that through a task space and that through a discourse space, while we combine the two, and they place a greater emphasis on user intentions.

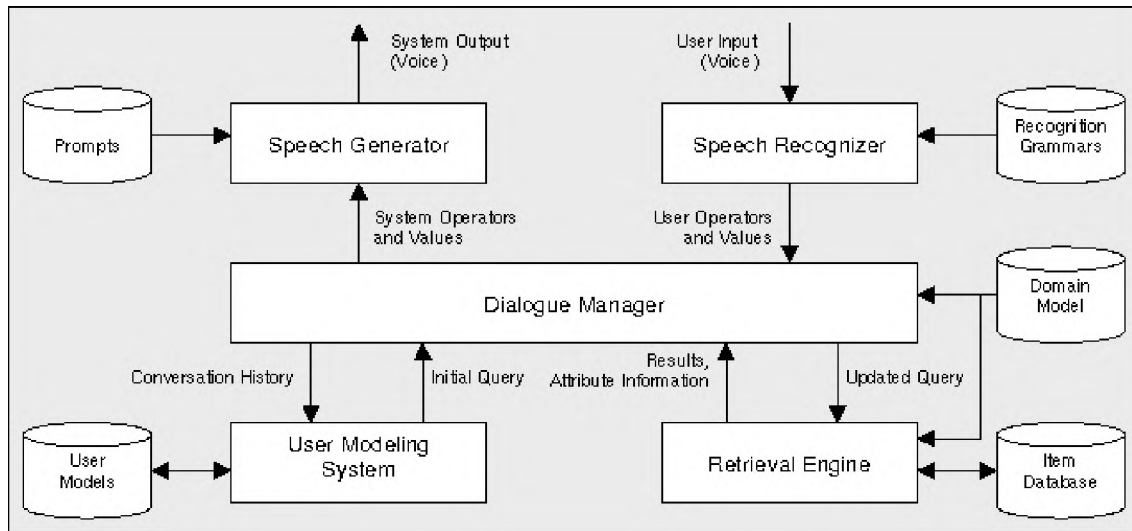


Figure 1: Components of the Adaptive Place Advisor and their interactions

spoken interface. We can view this process as one of constraining and relaxing attributes in an attempt to find a satisfactory combination of attribute-value pairs that are reflected in a particular item. *Constraints*, or attribute-value specifications, are obtained while the number of matching items is too large. On the other hand, if there are no matching items, a constraint must be relaxed, thus allowing items to contain any value for the relaxed attribute. The query is a probabilistic, user-influenced representation of the constraints, and is used by the Retrieval Engine to estimate how desirable a given item is to the user.

Further, the order of the questions asked and items presented can be influenced by a user model. As stated previously, the goal of user modeling is to make conversations more efficient and effective over time. The Adaptive Place Advisor collects the information needed to build the user model unobtrusively, while asking questions and recommending items.

The process of carrying out such a conversation can be described as an interactive search, with both the system and user having the goal of arriving at an acceptable item. The system uses a frame containing a simple list of constraints to support this search (see Jurafsky et al. (1994) or Dowding et al. (1993) for a similar formulation). As is usual in this type of system, the user can respond to a system request to fill a constraint by ignoring that attribute and specifying the value for different one(s) instead (Ward & Issar, 1996; Goddeau et al., 1996).

We further distinguish between *control states* and *dialogue states* within the search space. Control states are equivalent to the states in a heuristic search, while the dialogue state maintains context and determines the operator to apply in a given control state. In each control state, the Adaptive Place Advisor first invokes a function based on both the control state and the dialogue state, and then updates the dialogue state accordingly. Then, it determines the next control state conditioned on parameters of the updated dialogue state.

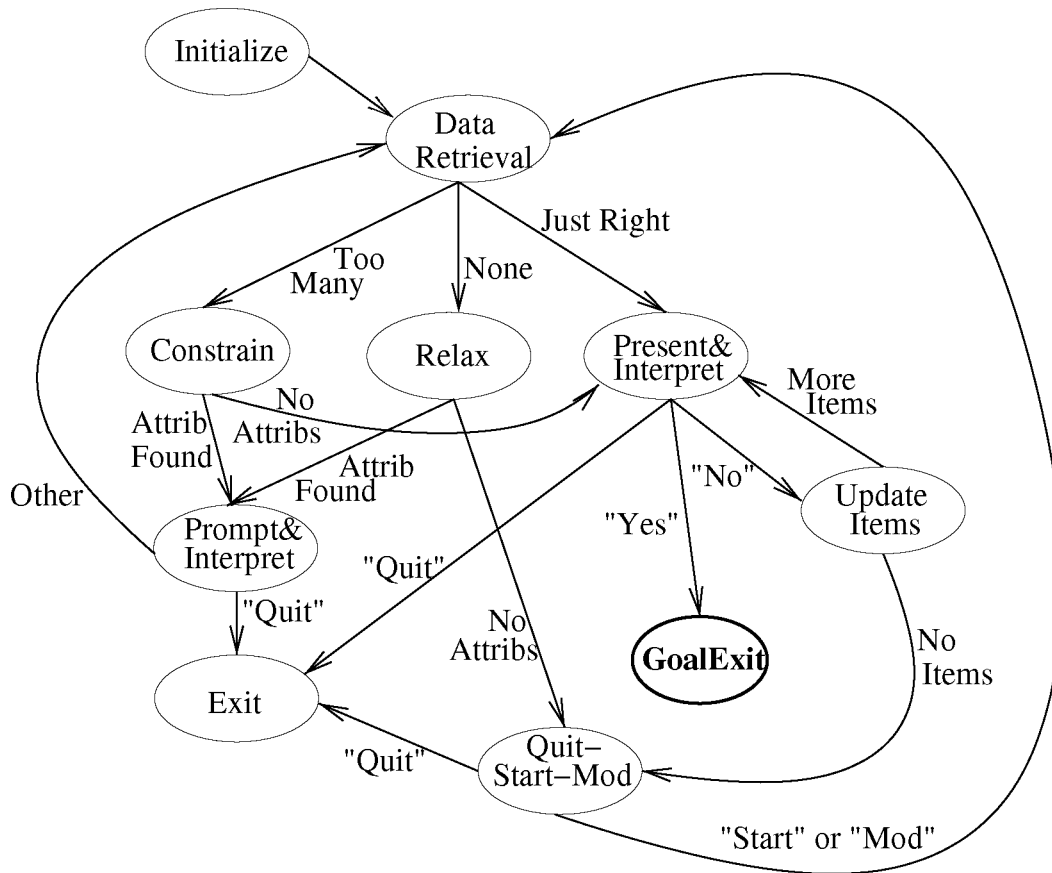


Figure 2: Control states and transitions of the Adaptive Place Advisor

The control states and transitions between them are illustrated in Figure 2, with the goal state in bold.

3.1 The User Model

The user model plays a key role in the rest of the system, so we describe it first here. Because we wish to personalize the functions carried out in many control states, the dialogue state includes a user model, which is updated as the conversation progresses. Our focus on personalized conversation suggests modeling user preferences at a finer-grained level than in typical adaptive interfaces, focusing on the questions a user prefers to answer and the responses he tends to give, rather than (or in addition to) preferences about entire items.

With respect to the task at hand, that of destination selection, the Adaptive Place Advisor models preferences that the user may have about:

- the relative importance of attributes,
- values for an attribute, and
- specific items.

Table 1: Example of a user model

User Name	Homer						
Attributes	w_i	Values and probabilities					
Cuisine	0.4	Italian	French	Turkish	Chinese	German	English
		0.3	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.0
Price Range	0.2	one	two	three	four	five	
		0.2	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1	
...					
Parking	0.1	Valet		Street		Lot	
		0.5		0.4		0.1	
Item No.	0815	5372	7638	6399	
Accept/Present	3 / 3	3 / 7	9 / 12	14 / 20	

The preferences regarding an attribute represent the relative importance a user places on the attribute while selecting an item (e.g., how important is cuisine vs. price). Preferred values show the user’s bias towards certain item characteristics (e.g., Italian restaurants vs. French restaurants). Item preferences manifest themselves in the user having a bias for or against a certain item, independent of its characteristics. While item preferences are related to single items, attribute and value preferences are applicable to the search for those items.

Attribute, value, and item preferences are easily captured by either probability distributions or counts, as illustrated in Table 1. Some simple defaults are used initialize these preferences. The Place Advisor represents both attribute and value preferences as probability distributions, though the latter is distributed independently over the values for each attribute. For attribute preferences, domain knowledge is used to initialize the weights; for example price is usually more important than parking. In the absence of such information, the system could begin with a uniform distribution, which is used for value preferences. The system represents item preferences as a ratio of the number of times an item was accepted to the number of times it was presented; this is initialized by assuming that all items have been presented and then accepted a large percentage of the time. Item preferences thus represent the probability of the user accepting a particular item after it is presented, rather than a probability distribution over all items.

Once in place, the user preferences affect the behavior of the system. For example, if an item has been presented many times but not accepted, the system would tend not to present it again. We next describe how the user model is exploited by the Retrieval Engine.

3.2 The Retrieval Engine

The Retrieval Engine interacts with a database to retrieve the items, if any, that satisfy the currently agreed upon constraints. It also interacts with the user model to determine how similar those items are to the user’s preferences and to determine the best ordering of the attributes for constraining and relaxing, as appropriate.

Similar to the way a human advisor bases assumptions regarding the inquirer on their interactions, our system uses its cumulative experience from the user model to build a probabilistic representation of the values of unconstrained attributes. This is instantiated in a query, a probabilistic partial item specification determined by both the conversation and the user model. The query is initialized from the user model, and thus reflects preference-based probabilities for the values the user has not yet explicitly specified. In the course of the conversation, the query is updated to reflect the values the user specifies for each attribute. The probabilities for all values agreed upon for a particular attribute are normalized while all other value’s probabilities are set to zero. For example, if the user says “Chinese or Italian,” the value probabilities for Chinese and Italian are each set to 0.5, and all other cuisine probabilities are set to zero.

Unlike a typical case-based reasoning similarity metric, which retrieves items beyond those that match a query exactly, our metric can restrict the retrieved items to those most desirable to the user. The metric is also used to decide which items to present first, but more importantly the Place Advisor uses it to keep in the case base only those items that are most similar to the user’s preferences. This is done with the goal of more quickly narrowing down the search for a satisfactory item. Thus, the Engine first queries the database to retrieve all items matching the current constraints. Then, the probability distributions in the query are used to compute how likely the user is to choose an item. The similarity between the current query, Q , and an item, I , is calculated as:

$$Sim(Q, I) = R_I \times \sum_{j=1}^n w_j \times P(V_j) ,$$

where R_I is the user’s item preference ratio from Q for I , n is the number of attributes, w_j is the weight of attribute j in Q , V_j is the value of attribute j in I , and $P(V_j)$ is the value preference (probability in Q) for this value. Then, a similarity threshold is used to only consider items that match adequately enough.

The two other functions of the Retrieval Engine are to rank attributes in the “Constrain” and “Relax” states. For both situations, one option is to order them randomly, which is a model used in some simple dialogue systems. Again, though, we wish to incorporate the user model into the choice of which questions to ask next. Thus, the system ranks attributes in order by their desirability to the user, as reflected in the attribute weights in the query. In the “Constrain” state we rank from highest to lowest, and use the reverse order in the “Relax” state.

3.3 Conversing with the User

As it converses with the user, the Dialogue Manager uses the results of the Retrieval Engine’s functions. The system-user interactions are carried out in the “Prompt&Interpret,” “Present&Interpret,” and “Quit-Start-Mod” states, and the speech acts supported are listed in Table 2. The “Prompt&Interpret” state is entered when the number of matching items is still unacceptably constrained: either there are too many to begin item presentation, or there are none. The “Present&Interpret” state is entered when only a few items match the mutually agreed-upon constraints. From both “Interpret” states, the user can choose to quit the interaction, in which case the system exits without having reached the goal

Table 2: Speech acts supported in the Adaptive Place Advisor

System Speech Acts	
ATTEMPT-CONSTRAIN	Asks a question to obtain a value for an attribute.
SUGGEST-RELAX	Asks a question to remove a value for an attribute.
RECOMMEND-ITEM	Recommends an item that satisfies the constraints.
QUIT-START-MOD	States that no matching items remain and asks whether to modify the search, start over, or quit.
PROVIDE-VALUES	Lists a small set of values for an attribute.
CLARIFY	Asks a clarifying question if uncertain about the user’s most recent utterance.
User Speech Acts	
PROVIDE-CONSTRAIN	Provide a value for an attribute.
REJECT-CONSTRAIN	Rejects the proposed attribute.
ACCEPT-RELAX	Accepts the proposed removal of an attribute value.
REJECT-RELAX	Rejects the proposed removal of an attribute value.
PROVIDE-RELAX	Provides an attribute value for removal.
ACCEPT-ITEM	Accepts the proposed item.
REJECT-ITEM	Rejects the proposed item.
START-OVER	Indicates a desire to reinitialize the constraints and begin again.
QUIT	Indicates a desire to stop the conversation.
QUERY-VALUES	Asks for information about possible values of an attribute.

Table 3: Dialogue State

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Description</i>
Constrained	Attributes whose values have been specified
Rejected	Attributes whose value the user has refused to provide
Fixed	Constrained attributes that should not be relaxed
Constrain	The next attribute to constrain, if any
Relax	The next attribute to relax, if any
Query	Probability model of desired item constraints
Num-Items	Number of database items matching the query
Ranked-Items	The matching items ranked in similarity order
Rejected-Items	Items that the user has not accepted
User-Move	The user’s most recently uttered speech act

state. The dialogue state (Table 3) determines the exact prompt uttered and the range of responses expected, and its variables are updated throughout the conversation.

In more detail, the system’s speech act (or *move*) in the “Prompt&Interpret” state is determined by the **Num-Items** dialogue state variable. The most common situation is when

many items (more than some small threshold, here three) match the current constraints. In this situation, the system makes an **ATTEMPT-CONSTRAIN** move, in which it asks the user to fill in the value for an attribute. This move, if responded to appropriately by the user, would reduce the number of items considered to be satisfactory to the user. The attribute to **Constrain** is the one ranked highest by the Retrieval Engine that has not already been **Constrained** or **Rejected**. In our first sample conversation, utterances 2, 6, and 10 illustrate **ATTEMPT-CONSTRAIN**'s by the system. Thus, one user response to an **ATTEMPT-CONSTRAIN** is a **PROVIDE-CONSTRAIN**, in which he provides a value for the specified attribute, as in utterance 11, or for additional attributes, as in 5, 7, and 9. A second possible response is a **REJECT-CONSTRAIN**, in which the user indicates disinterest or dislike in an attribute, as in the first part of utterance 7. As illustrated by several of these examples, the user can combine more than one move in a single utterance.

A second situation, an *over-constrained* query, is that in which no items satisfy the agreed upon constraints (**Num-Items** = 0). In this case, the system performs a **SUGGEST-RELAX** move informing the user of the situation and asking if he would like to relax a given constraint. The attribute to **Relax** is chosen from the Retrieval Engine's highest ranked attribute that has not already been **Fixed**. This is illustrated in utterance 8 of our first sample conversation. As in utterance 9 of that conversation, the user can respond by rejecting (**REJECT-RELAX**) the system's suggestion, or he can accept it (**ACCEPT-RELAX**). In the former case, the attribute is **Fixed** so that the system will not try to relax it again. In combination with either of these speech acts, the user can specify other attributes to relax in addition to or instead of the system suggested attribute (**PROVIDE-RELAX**).

In the "Present&Interpret" state, the Place Advisor handles the situation in which only a few items satisfy the constraints, whereupon the system begins to suggest them to the user (**RECOMMEND-ITEM**), as in utterance 12 above. The user can either accept or reject an item. If the user accepts an item (**ACCEPT-ITEM**), the system ends the conversation, having reached the goal state. If the user rejects an item (**REJECT-ITEM**), the system presents an alternative, if any remain.

There are three special situations not covered by the above. The first is when the query is over-constrained, but the user has fixed all attributes that could be relaxed. The second is when the user has rejected all items that match the constraints. In these two situations, the system informs the user of the situation, asks him whether he would like to quit, start over, or modify the search (**QUIT-START-MOD**), and reacts accordingly. The third special situation is when **Num-Items** exceeds the presentation threshold, but all attributes have been **Constrained** or **Rejected**. In that case, the Place Advisor enters the "Present&Interpret" state (described above).

To support the spoken natural language input and output, we use a speech recognition package from Nuance Communications, Inc. This allows us to write a different recognition grammar for each of the control states involving user interaction,³ and to generate prompts from a pre-recorded set. Language understanding is handled by semantic tags in the recognition grammars, to fill in each slot. Besides slots for each attribute the grammars contain slots for rejection or acceptance of the system's suggestions. The Nuance modules also handle user requests for help (**QUERY-VALUES**) with a **PROVIDE-VALUES** speech act,

3. Actually, there are two grammars for the "Prompt&Interpret" state, depending on whether the dialogue state indicates a constrain or relax action.

Table 4: The effects of speech acts on the query

<i>Speech Act</i>	<i>Effect on Query</i>
PROVIDE-CONSTRAIN	Normalize probabilities of all provided values so they add to one. Set probability of other values for constrained attributes to zero. If attribute has been rejected, reset its preference from user model.
REJECT-CONSTRAIN	Drop attribute by setting its preference to zero.
ACCEPT-RELAX	Reset value preferences for the attribute from user model.
REJECT-RELAX	No effect; Dialogue Manager selects next attribute.
PROVIDE-RELAX	Reset value preferences for the attribute from user model.
ACCEPT-ITEM	None.
REJECT-ITEM	None.
START-OVER	Initialize from user model.

and enters clarification dialogues when the confidence in a recognized utterance is below a given level (CLARIFY). In more complex domains, more sophisticated parsing methods may be required, but this simple scheme allows the user a reasonably diverse set of utterances.

Finally, the dialogue influences subsequent rounds of retrieval and similarity calculation. Table 4 shows the effects of relevant speech acts on the query, which is in turn used in the similarity calculation as described in Section 3.2.

3.4 Updating the User Model

Our main goal and contribution is to add personalization to the above conversational recommendation model. The user model (Section 3.1) represents that personalization, but the Adaptive Place Advisor must update it appropriately. While some adaptive recommendation systems (Pazzani et al., 1996; Lang, 1995; Linden, Hanks, & Lesh, 1997; Smyth & Cotter, 1999) require the user to provide direct feedback to generate the user model, our basic approach is to unobtrusively derive the user preferences. Thus, the system does not introduce unnecessary interactions, but learns from the interactions needed to support the task of item recommendation. We describe here how the system gathers item, attribute, and value preferences. For the latter two, feature and value weights are modified (Fiechter & Rogers, 2000; Zhang & Yang, 1998; Bonzano, Cunningham, & Smyth, 1997; Wettschereck & Aha, 1995), and for items, we increase the counts in the ratio of accepted to presented items.

The three circumstances that we chose for user model update were after the user’s ACCEPT-ITEM, REJECT-ITEM, and ACCEPT-RELAX speech acts. First, we assume that when a user accepts an item, he is indicating: (1) a preference for the item itself, (2) preferences for the attributes he constrained to find this item, and (3) preferences for the values he provided for those attributes. Thus, when a user accepts an item presented by the system, the probabilities for the appropriate item, attributes, and values are increased: for the item preference, the system simply adds one to the presentation and acceptance counts, and for attribute and value preferences the probability of the appropriate weight is increased by a small amount and all weights are renormalized.

On the other hand, when a user rejects an item presented by the system, we only assume that he has a dislike for the particular item, without assuming anything about the particular characteristics of that item, since the user has specified some of those characteristics. Therefore, for rejected items the system adds one to only the presentation count.

The third situation in which the system updates the user model is when the query has become over-constrained, the system presents an attribute for relaxation, and the user accepts that relaxation. In this situation, we assume that had there been a matching item, the user would have been satisfied with it, since the characteristics specified in the conversation so far were satisfactory. Therefore, the attribute preferences for attributes constrained by the user thus far, and the value preferences for user-specified values are increased, in a manner similar to an ACCEPT-ITEM situation. This enables the Adaptive Place Advisor to more quickly make inferences about the user’s preferences.

4. System Evaluation

As stated earlier, we believe that user modeling will increase the effectiveness and efficiency of conversations with the system over time. To test this hypothesis, we carried out an experiment with a version of the Adaptive Place Advisor that recommends restaurants in the San Francisco Bay Area. The system describes items in terms of seven attributes: cuisine, rating, price, location, reservations, parking options, and payment options. Most attributes have few values, but some, such as cuisine and location, have dozens. There are approximately 1900 items in the database. We asked several users, all from the Bay Area, to interact with the system to help them decide where to eat lunch. An experimenter was present during all these interactions, which were filmed, but his help was not needed except on rare occasions when a subject repeatedly tried words that were not included in the speech recognition grammar.

4.1 Experimental Variables

To test our hypothesis about the benefits of personalization in the Adaptive Place Advisor, we controlled two independent variables: the presence of user modeling and the number of times a user interacted with the system. We predicted the system’s interactions would improve over time, as it gained experience with each user, so we observed its behavior at different points along this learning curve. In particular, each subject interacted with the system in 15 successive sessions. We tried to separate each subject’s sessions by several hours, but this was not always possible. Because we anticipated that users might also improve their interactions with the Place Advisor over time, we divided subjects into an experimental or modeling group and a control group. The 13 subjects in the modeling group interacted with a version of the system that updated its user model after each utterance; the 11 subjects in the control group interaction with a version that did not update the model, and thus selected attributes and items from the default distribution described in Section 3.1.

To determine each version’s efficiency at recommending items, we measured several conversational variables. One involved the average number of *interactions* needed to find a restaurant accepted by the user. We defined an interaction as a cycle that started with the system providing a prompt and ending with the system’s recognition of the user’s

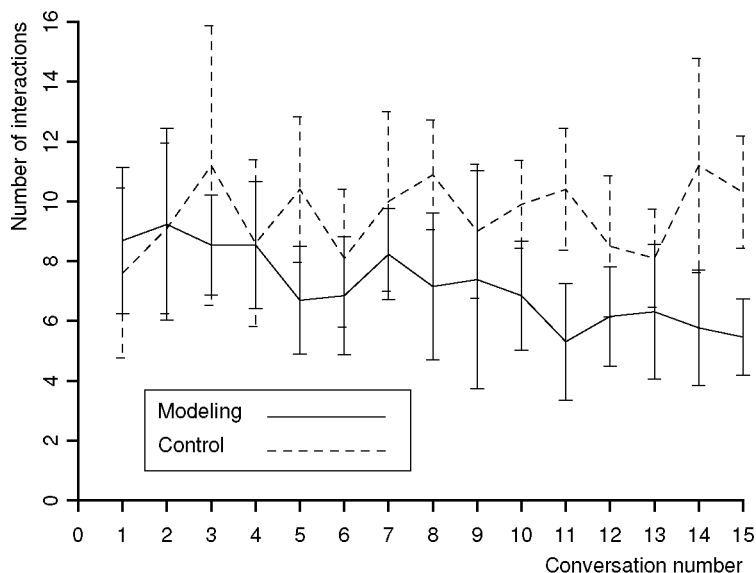


Figure 3: Number of interactions per conversation for modeling and control groups

utterance. We also measured the *time* taken for each conversation. This began when a “start transaction” button was pushed and ended when the system printed “Done” (after the user accepted an item or quit).

We also collected two statistics that should not depend on whether user modeling is in effect or not. First is the number of *system rejections*, that is, the number of times either no recognition result was obtained or the system’s confidence was too low. In either case the system asks the user to repeat himself. We omitted these from the count of interactions, since including this would make the differences between the two groups less clear. A second, more serious problem is a *misrecognition* error in which the system assigns an utterance a different meaning than the user intended.

Effectiveness was somewhat more difficult to quantify. We wanted to know each user’s degree of satisfaction with the system’s behavior. One such indication is the *rejection rate*: the proportion of attributes about which the system asked but the subject did not care. A second measure is the *hit rate*: the percentage of conversations in which the first item presented is acceptable to the user. Finally, we also administered a questionnaire to users after the study to get more subjective evaluations.

4.2 Experimental Results

The results of this experiment generally supported our hypothesis with respect to efficiency. For example, Figure 3 shows that, for the modeling group, the number of interactions required to find an acceptable restaurant decreased from 8.7 to 5.5, whereas for the control group this quantity actually increased slightly from 7.6 to 10.3. We used linear regression to characterize the trend for each group and compared the resulting lines. The slope for the modeling line differed significantly ($p = 0.017$) from that for the control line, with the former lower than the latter, as expected.

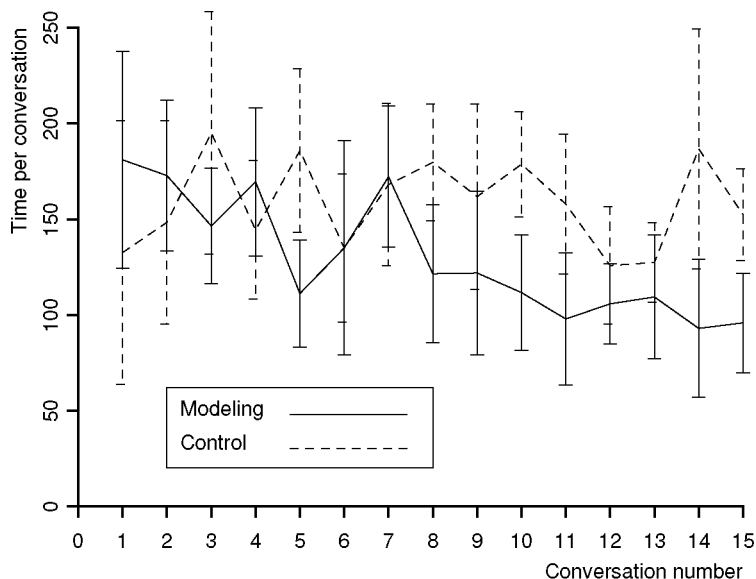


Figure 4: Time per conversation for modeling and control groups

The difference in interaction times (Figure 4) was even more dramatic. For the modeling group, this quantity started at 181 seconds and ended at 96 seconds, whereas for the control group, started at 132 seconds and ended at 152 seconds. We again used linear regression to characterize the trends for each group over time and again found a significant difference ($p = 0.011$) for the two curves, with the slope for the modeling subjects being lower than that for the control subjects. We should also note that these interaction times include some time for system initialization. If we had instead used as the start time the first system utterance of each dialogue, the difference between the two conditions would be even clearer.

The speech recognizer rejected 28 percent of the interactions in our study. Rejections slow down the conversation but do not introduce errors. The misrecognition rate was much lower – it occurred in only seven percent of the interactions in our experiment. We feel both these rates are acceptable, but expanding the number of supported utterances could reduce the first number further, though while potentially increasing the second. In the most common recognition error, the Adaptive Place Advisor inserted extra constraints that the user did not intend.

The results for effectiveness were more ambiguous. Figure 5 plots the rejection rate as a function of the number of sessions. A decrease in rejection rate over time would mean that, as the system gains experience with the user, it asks about fewer features irrelevant to that user. However, for this dependent variable we found no significant difference ($p = 0.515$) between the regression slopes for the two conditions and, indeed, the rejection rate for neither group appears to decrease with experience. These negative results may be due to the rarity of rejected speech acts in the experiment. Six people never rejected a constraint and, on average, each person used only 0.53 REJECT-CONSTRAIN speech acts per conversation (standard deviation = 0.61).

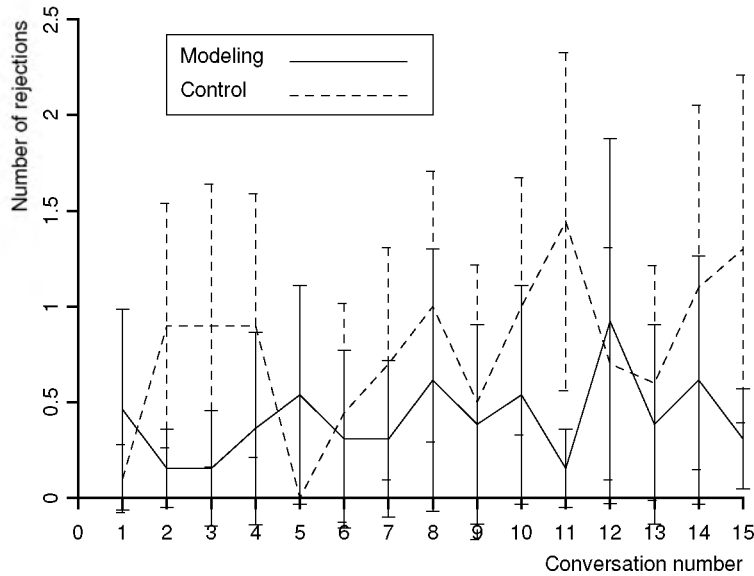


Figure 5: Rejection rate for modeling and control groups

Figure 6 shows the results for hit rate, which indicate that suggestion accuracy stayed stable over time for the modeling group but decreased considerably for the control group. One explanation for the latter, which we did not expect, is that control users became less satisfied with the Place Advisor’s suggestions over time and thus carried out more exploration at item presentation time. However, we are more concerned here with the difference between the two groups. Unfortunately, the slopes for the two regression lines were not significantly different ($p = 0.1354$) in this case.

We also analyzed the questionnaire presented to subjects after the experiment. The first six questions had check boxes to which we assigned numerical values, none of which revealed a significant difference between the two groups. The second part of the questionnaire contained more open-ended questions about the user’s experience with the Adaptive Place Advisor. In general, most subjects in both groups liked the system and said they would use it fairly often if given the opportunity.

In summary, our experiment showed that the Adaptive Place Advisor improved the efficiency of conversations with subjects as it gained experience with them over time, and that this improvement was due to the system’s update of user models rather than subjects learning how to interact with the system. The results for effectiveness were more ambiguous, with trends in the right direction but no significant differences between the modeling and control groups. Subjects in both conditions generally liked the system, but again we found no significant differences along this dimension.

5. Related Research

Previous research on related topics can be roughly broken up into three areas, the first focusing on personalized recommendation systems, the second on conversational interfaces,

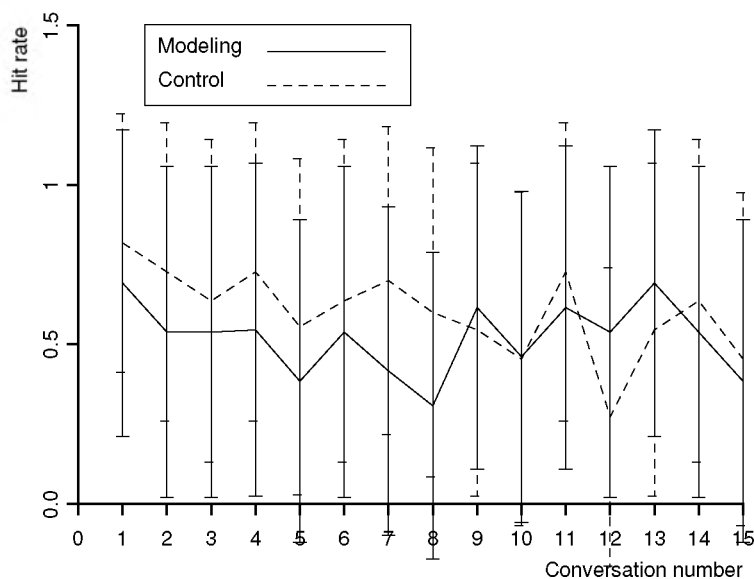


Figure 6: Hit rate for modeling and control groups

and the third on adaptive dialogue systems. We will restrict our discussion here to the most strongly related work.

5.1 Personalized Recommendation Systems

Although research in personalized recommendation systems has become widespread only in recent years, the basic idea can be traced back to Rich (1979), discussed below with other work on conversational interfaces. Langley (1999) gives a more thorough review of recent research on the topic of adaptive interfaces and personalization.

Several other adaptive interfaces attempt to collect user information unobtrusively. An interesting example is the CASPER project (Rafter et al., 2000), an online recruitment service. The project investigates methods to translate raw click and read-time data into accurate relevancy information, given that the raw data is inherently noisy. This work shows that such raw data can be automatically translated into useful relevancy information. Another example is the Adaptive Route Advisor (Rogers & Fiechter, 1999), which recommends driving routes to a specified destination. The system collects preferences on attributes such as number of turns and driving time through the user’s selections and modifications of the system’s proposed routes. Finally, Goecks and Shavlik (2000) describe a technique for learning web preferences by observing a user’s browsing behavior.

The constraint-based interaction style used by the Adaptive Place Advisor to search for items is not the only option. An alternative is taken by the candidate/critique, or tweaking approach. Tweaking systems, such as the Find Me suite (Burke, 1999) typically require the user to fill in values for a few predetermined attributes. They then present an item, at which point the user has the opportunity to change some parameters of the search to try to find a more desirable item. Eaton, Freuder, and Wallace (1997) take a similar approach in their Matchmaking system. In addition, they exploit constraint satisfaction to manage

the search. Neither the Find Me systems nor the Matchmaking system, however, learn user models. A related system that does include a learning component is that of Shearin and Lieberman (2001), which learns attribute preferences unobtrusively. While tweaking is a valid method, it is not appropriate, we feel, as the primary method in an environment in which speech is the only mode of interaction, since presenting the user with his options would be somewhat cumbersome.

5.2 Conversational Interfaces

There is considerable ongoing work in the area of conversational systems, as evidenced in the general surveys by Dybkjær et al. (2000) and Maier et al. (1996). Zukerman and Litman (2001) give a more thorough overview of user modeling in dialogue systems, but here we discuss research most closely related to our own. Rich (1979) reported one of the earliest (typewritten) conversational interfaces, which focused on book recommendation. At the beginning of an interaction the system asked several questions in order to place the user in a stereotype group, thereby initializing the user model. As each conversation progressed, this model was adjusted, with the system using ratings to represent uncertainty. However, the language understanding capabilities of the system were limited, mostly allowing only yes/no user answers. More recently, work within the dialogue community (Kobsa & Wahlster, 1998) models user's beliefs and intentions to aid in dialogue management and understanding, though typically these models are maintained only over the course of a single conversation.

As noted in Section 2.3, an important distinction is whether only one conversational participant keeps the initiative, or whether the initiative can switch between participants. An ambitious mixed-initiative system for planning tasks is TRAINS (Allen et al., 1995). Like the Place Advisor, the program interacts with the user to progressively construct a solution, though the knowledge structures are partial plans rather than constraints, and the search involves operators for plan modification rather than for database contraction and expansion. TRAINS lacks any mechanism for user modeling, but the overall system is considerably more mature and has been evaluated extensively.

Smith and Hipp (1994) describe another related mixed-initiative system with limited user modeling, in this case a conversational interface for circuit diagnosis. Their system aims to construct not a plan or a set of constraints, but rather a proof tree. The central speech act, which requests knowledge from the user that would aid the proof process, is invoked when the program detects a 'missing axiom' that it needs for its reasoning. This heuristic plays the same role in their system as does the Place Advisor's heuristic for selecting attributes to constrain during item selection. The interface only infers user knowledge during the course of one conversation, not over the long term, as in our approach.

With respect to dialogue management, several previous systems have used a method similar to our slot-filling search. In particular, Dowding et al. (1993) and Seneff et al. (1998) developed conversational interfaces that give advice about air travel. Like the Place Advisor, their systems ask the user questions in order to reduce candidates, treating the choice of selecting airline flights as the interactive construction of database queries. However, the order of the questions is typically fixed in advance, despite the clear differences among individuals in this domain. Also, these systems typically require that all constraints be specified before item presentation begins.

Another approach to dialogue management is “conversational case-based reasoning” (Aha et al., 2001), which relies on interactions with the user to retrieve cases (items) from memory that will recommend actions to correct some problem. The speech acts and basic flow of control have much in common with the Adaptive Place Advisor, in that answering questions increasingly constrains available answers. One significant difference is that in their approach the system generates several questions or items, respectively, at a time, and the user selects which question to answer next or which item is closest to his or her needs, respectively.

5.3 Adaptation in Dialogue Systems

Finally, another body of recent work describes the use of machine learning or other forms of adaptation to improve dialogue systems.⁴ Researchers in this area have goals such as learning user preferences, improving task completion, and adapting dialogue strategy to an individual during a conversation.

The closest work is that also pursuing our goal of learning user preferences. Carberry, Chu-Carroll, and Elzer (1999) report one such example for consultation dialogues, but take a different approach. Their system acquires value preferences during consultation dialogues by analyzing both user’s explicit statements of preferences and their acceptance or rejection of the system’s proposals. Their system uses discrete levels of preference instead of our more fine-grained probability model. Also, their system does not use preferences during item search, but only at item presentation time to help evaluate whether better alternatives exist. Finally, their evaluation is based on subject’s judgements of the quality of the system’s hypotheses and recommendations, not on characteristics of actual user interactions. We could, however, incorporate some of their ideas to allow partial matches between user-specified constraints and actual items.

Another system that focuses on user preferences is the interactive travel assistant described by Linden et al. (1997), that carries out conversations through a graphical interface. Their system asks questions in an effort to narrow down the available candidates, using similar speech acts to ours, and they additionally aim to satisfy the user with as few interactions as possible. Their response to this challenge relies on a candidate/critique approach. From user’s responses, the system infers a model represented as weights on attributes such as price and travel time. Unlike the Adaptive Place Advisor, it does not carry these profiles over to future conversations, but one can envision a version that stores longer-term models.

User preferences are also the focus in Elzer, Chu-Carroll, and Carberry (1994), who discuss the acquisition and use of short-term item preferences in planning dialogues. Also, Jameson et al. (1994) use Bayesian networks in a system that can take the role of either the buyer or seller in a transaction, and change their inquiry or sales strategy based on beliefs inferred from the other participant’s utterances.

Several authors use reinforcement learning techniques to improve the probability or process of task completion in a conversation. Singh et al. (2002) use reinforcement learning to determine the system’s level of initiative and amount of confirmation of user utterances. Their goal is to optimize, over all users, the percentage of dialogues for which a given task is

4. The work on adaptation of speech recognition grammars (e.g., Stolcke et al. (2000)), while related, addresses a different problem and uses different learning techniques, so we do not discuss it here.

successfully completed. This system applies the learned information across all users, rather than personalizing the information. Also, Levin, Pieraccini, and Eckert (1997) use reinforcement learning to determine which question to ask at each point during an information seeking search, but do not demonstrate the utility of their approach.

Finally, a number of systems adapt their dialogue management strategy over the course of a conversation based on user responses or other dialogue characteristics. For example, Litman and Pan (2002) use a set of learned rules to predict whether a user is having difficulty achieving their task, and adapt the level of system initiative and confirmation accordingly. Maloor and Chai (2000) present a help-desk application that first classifies the user as a novice, moderate, or expert based on responses to prompts. It then adapts the complexity of system utterances, the level of jargon, and the complexity of the path taken to achieve goals. Horvitz and Paek (2001) apply user modeling to dialogue systems, using evidence from the current context and conversation to update a Bayesian network that helps refine a spoken language recognition hypothesis and adapt the level of initiative accordingly. Chu-Carroll (2000) adapts both language generation and initiative strategies for an individual user within a single dialogue.

6. Directions for Future Work

Our results to date with the Adaptive Place Advisor are promising but much remains to be done. In this section, we discuss ways to make the search model more flexible, expand the conversational model, and enrich the user model and learning technique. We also consider more extensive evaluations of the system.

6.1 Search Model

With respect to the search mechanism, we first plan to investigate alternative techniques for using item similarity values to determine which to include, for example by cutting off items at the point at which similarity drops off most steeply, instead of our current use of a threshold. We also note that work such as that of Cohen, Schapire, and Singer (1999) on learning to rank instances could apply nicely to this work, as an alternative method to determine item presentation order. Additionally, we plan to allow the system to generate alternatives in an over-constrained situation (Qu & Beale, 1999), for example by using the user model to estimate the strength of a stated constraint, or by merging our preference-based similarity metric with a more traditional domain specific similarity metric (Pieraccini et al., 1997). We also plan to evaluate the effect of making even stronger assumptions about user preferences. For example, if the system is certain enough about value preferences, a question about the associated attribute may not have to even be asked.

A final improvement of the search mechanism concerns the techniques for ranking attributes for constraining and relaxing. For the former, we have implemented but not yet evaluated a conditional entropy measure. The attribute to constrain is selected by determining the attribute with the lowest entropy among the unconstrained attributes. As a first approximation, we assume that all items have equal probability, and thus the entropy

of attribute A_j conditioned on the set of items I is:

$$H(A_j|I) = \sum_{V_k \in A_j} \frac{|A_j = V_k|_I}{|I|} \times \log |A_j = V_k|_I ,$$

where $|A_j = V_k|_I$ is the number of items in I for which A_j has the value V_k . This evaluation metric is similar to one often used in constructing decision trees from training data, except that it does not use class labels and it recalculates the expression during each conversation, rather than creating a permanent tree structure. This scheme would not be useful for ranking attributes to relax. Therefore, the system simply determines the size of the case base that would result if each attribute were relaxed, ranks these case bases from smallest to largest, and orders the attributes accordingly, excluding those attributes that if relaxed would still result in an empty case base. We also plan to investigate the combination of the user model with information gain, as well as with alternative ranking techniques such as that used by Abella, Brown, and Buntschuh (1996).

6.2 Conversational Model

Our plans for the conversational model are less immediate. First, we plan to increase the number of speech acts available to the user. For example, we will add confirmation and better clarification dialogues, thus allowing other types of adaptation strategies, as in Singh et al. (2002). Moreover, the presence of a user model should aid speech recognition by providing probability distributions over the user’s answers. In a longer term investigation, we plan to extend our adaptation techniques to more complex travel planning dialogues (Senneff, Lau, & Polifroni, 1999; Walker & Hirschman, 2000).

6.3 User Model

To improve the user model, we first plan to add more types of preferences. First, preferences for certain constraint combinations represent interactions among item characteristics (e.g., accepts Mexican restaurants only if they are cheap, or cares about parking only if going to San Francisco). Second, diversity preferences capture the desirability for specific different time intervals between the suggestion of a particular item or value. We plan to incorporate both combination and diversity preferences into the next version of our system.

Combination preferences can be used to predict either values or acceptable attributes, based on previously provided constraints. The first can be modeled by learning association rules (Agrawal, Imielinski, & Swami, 1993), which we would then use to influence the query, in turn influencing the similarity calculation, case base, and information gain calculation. For combination preferences about acceptable attributes, we can learn conditional probabilities based on past interactions, and use this to influence the ranking of attributes to constrain or relax.

Diversity preferences can be calculated for items and values by determining the mean time between explicit user selection or rejection of a value (value diversity preferences) or item (item diversity preferences). We will incorporate these into the similarity calculation from Section 3.2 by extending R_I and $P(V_j)$ in that equation to incorporate time effects.

We define $R_D(I)$ and $P_D(V_j)$ as:

$$R_D(I) = R_I \times \frac{1}{1 + e^{-k_I(t-t_I-t_{ID})}}$$

$$P_D(V_j) = P(V_j) \times \frac{1}{1 + e^{-k_V(t-t_V-t_{VD})}} ,$$

where t is the current time, t_I and t_V are the time when the item or value was last selected, and t_{ID} and t_{VD} are the time differences the user wants to have between having the item or value suggested again. R_D and P_D are in form of a sigmoid function where k_I and k_V determine the slope of the curve. One empirical question is whether users also have attribute diversity preferences. We hypothesize that diversity preferences change on a value-by-value basis, and that this implicitly overrides attribute diversity. For example, a user may have strong preferences about the frequency with which expensive restaurants are suggested, but may not care about how often the price range of the suggested restaurants varies in general. We plan to investigate this hypothesis.

There are other improvements we might add to our user modeling technique. For example, the system may learn more quickly if it updates the user model from speech acts other than the current three of ACCEPT-ITEM, REJECT-ITEM, and ACCEPT-RELAX. Also, using collaborative user models (Konstan et al., 1997; Billsus & Pazzani, 1998; Smyth & Cotter, 1999) to initialize individual models could speed up the learning process. A more explicit combination of collaborative and individual user models is also a viable direction (Jameson & Wittig, 2001). Finally, the preferences of a user may vary according to the context in which the system interaction is occurring. While some preferences may stay the same over various contexts, some will be overridden by specific requirements. We are planning to extend our user model to incorporate a hierarchical structure where context dependent requirements are derived from a basic user model.

6.4 Evaluation

Finally, we are planning to carry out a larger user study. In the current study, we did not control for the difficulty of finding a particular item, in terms of the number of constraints required to reduce the matching items enough to begin presentation, so we must verify that differences were not due to task difficulty differences. To support this expanded evaluation we have implemented a version of the system that recommends movies, thus allowing a broader user base for our studies. This should help us measure user satisfaction more easily, as it has been noted (Walker et al. (1998)) that efficiency is not the only important consideration and that users might tend to prefer a more predictable interfaces.

7. Conclusions

Overall, we have made significant inroads into methods for unobtrusively acquiring an individual, long term user model during recommendation conversations. Our long-term goal is to develop even more powerful methods, capable of adapting to the needs, goals, and preferences of a user over multiple conversations.

In this paper, we described an intelligent adaptive conversational assistant designed to help people select an item. The two key problems addressed by our research are the

design of adaptive recommendation systems when conversations are the interaction mode, and the addition of personalization to dialogue systems, starting here with dialogues for recommendation. Thus, unlike many recommendation systems that accept keywords and produce a ranked list, this one carries out a conversation with the user to progressively narrow his options. And, unlike other adaptive interfaces, it constructs user models at levels of detail beyond that of complete items to help better support personalization in conversations. We have started with a relatively simple model of dialogue in order to focus on the issues involved in personalization.

We also described experimental results showing the promise of our technique, demonstrating a reduction in both the number of interactions and conversation time for users interacting with our system when compared to a control group. Of course, there are still several open questions and opportunities for improvement. The user model, conversational model, and search models are functional but we plan to improve them further. We are also starting to extend our conversational approach to items other than destinations, such as books and movies, and we plan to link the system to other assistants like the Adaptive Route Advisor (Rogers & Fiechter, 1999). Our goal for such additions is to provide new functionality that will make the Adaptive Place Advisor more attractive to users, but also to test the generality of our framework for adaptive recommendation. In turn, these should bring us closer to truly flexible computational aides that carry out natural dialogues with humans.

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