

Contextualisation, formulaicity, and situation-bound routines in Alzheimer Talk

As we listen to stories emerging in conversation (Norrick 2000; 2005), particularly from speakers whose cognitive impairment needs our collaboration to initiate and sustain the interaction (Davis 2005), we track people, places, and events. We tug at situations, themes and metaphors (Maclagan, Davis & Lunsford 2005). We notice intersections, interconnections, and overlays. We follow the main thread and spot the ‘small stories’ (Bamberg 2004). We use every clue, such as

- Intonation and other prosodic cues (Carlson et al 2005; Yaeger-Dror 2003) whether used for emphasis or for referentiality;
- Discourse markers and other contextualization cues: “signs that invoke the context that gives each utterance a specific meaning” (Roberts and Sarangi 2005: 667);
- Repetition of themes, motifs, and other story elements (Tannen 1989; Schiffrin 1996; 2000)
- Formulaic phrases (Wray 2002), including situation-bound utterances (SBU) and routines (Kecskes 2000; 2006)

This discussion analyzes the interaction among formulaic sequences and SBU, pauses, and other contextualization cues in two conversational narratives in two successive years, from each of two 90-year-old women, one from NZ and one from NC. Each woman has moderate impairment from Alzheimer’s Disease (DAT). Though both are cognitively impaired, Helen’s memory impairment is advancing quickly; Glory’s hearing loss is already profound.

Formulaic language benefits the speaker in ways that ‘can aid both the speaker’s production and the hearer’s comprehension’ (Wray 2002: 97). Formulaic sequences, also called *prefabricated routines*, *lexicalized phrases* or *unanalyzed chunks*, are sequences of words that are stored and retrieved as a unit from memory at the time of use, rather than generated online using syntactical rules (Wray and Perkins 2000; Wray 2002). Situation-bound utterances are defined by Kecskes as “highly conventionalized and prefabricated units whose production is linked to standardized communicative situations. For instance, ‘I’ll talk to you later!’, ‘Enjoy your meal!’, and ‘You bet!’ are pragmatic units that typically correspond to specific interactional situations” (Cooren 2004: 117)

Carlomagno et al (2005) note “that difficulty in pragmatic/conceptual elaboration of discourse information content plays a substantial role in the development of reduced information content and lack of reference of DAT ‘empty speech’”(p 520). Our emphasis has been to identify the extent to which formulaic sequences and SBU are associated with short (less than 1 sec) and long pauses (2+ sec), and are collocated with discourse markers and similar contextualization cues. Our focus is on identifying when and how the production of such sequences are keyed to functions within a conversation, or to location in the interaction, or to functions in narration, such as replacing or augmenting a defective narrative component.

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