

Conversation partner responses to problematic talk produced by people with aphasia: Some alternatives to repair

INTRODUCTION

A salient feature of conversations involving people with aphasia is the prevalence and persistence of threats to intersubjectivity (i.e. mutual understanding). Being unable to understand what is being said and its import can be a frustrating and distressing experience for people with aphasia and their conversation partners (cf. Laakso, 2003; Lock, Wilkinson, & Bryan, 2001; Wilkinson, 2007). One reason for the confronting nature of severe problems with intersubjectivity is that they arise infrequently during interactions involving people without communication disorders. That is, for the most part, people have few issues establishing what others are attempting to achieve through talking, be it greeting, arguing, inviting, complaining, or otherwise. When problems do emerge—when a speaker says “cup” when they intended to say “plate”; when an innocent question is heard as a complaint, and so on—social actors have various techniques for revising their conduct, and righting interactional business. Researchers using Conversation Analysis (CA) have described the practices that people employ to “repair” such difficulties with speaking, hearing, and understanding talk in conversation (e.g. Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). This work has provided a solid foundation for examining fractures to intersubjectivity during conversations involving people with aphasia (e.g. Aaltonen & Laakso, 2010; Ferguson, 1994; Laakso & Klippi, 1999; Oelschlaeger & Damico, 2003). Studies of conversation repair and aphasia have contributed new knowledge about aphasia’s impact on everyday life, and led to the development of assessment and intervention procedures focused on repair (e.g. Lock et al., 2001; Whitworth, Perkins, & Turner, 1997). In particular, studies of conversation repair and aphasia have highlighted the key role of conversation partners in collaboratively resolving problems with intersubjectivity. However, an important feature of repair as an interactional practice is that it is optional. That is, when a listener is confronted with problematic talk from a speaker, they are not compelled to engage in repair, and may choose to elide the trouble altogether, or address it in some other way. For instance, Jefferson (2007) found that listeners occasionally responded to obvious speaker errors with minimal, receipting responses (e.g. *mm, yeah*) in place of repair. If the conversation partners of people with aphasia resist repair in this fashion, it has the potential to severely curtail the participation of people with aphasia. That is, without the benefit of collaborative repair efforts, the conversational contributions of people with aphasia may be more effortful and less successful, thereby restricting their ability to implement social action efficiently, or at all (see, e.g., Perkins, 2003, and Laakso, 2003, for some preliminary observations).

AIMS

This paper describes three ways of responding that the conversation partners of people with aphasia use in place of repair when intersubjectivity has been compromised. Better understanding the nature, motivations, and consequences of alternatives to repair will spur the development of more comprehensive clinical resources for improving how people with aphasia and their conversation partners manage problems with intersubjectivity in conversation. In doing so, it will highlight practical, concrete strategies for promoting the social participation and inclusion of people with aphasia in everyday life.

METHOD

Three people with aphasia (“Valerie”, “Russell”, and “Ben”; see Table 1) and nine of their familiar conversation partners were recruited to participate in a project examining acquired communication disorders and everyday conversation. Conversation samples were collected in

the homes of people with aphasia. They were provided with a video camera for a period of one month, and they recorded their everyday conversations in the absence of the researcher. Approximately 6.5 hours of interaction was recorded by the participants. Recordings were transcribed by the first author according to conversation-analytic conventions. Ninety-seven candidate instances of the targeted practice were identified and analysed using the collection-based analytic practices of CA (cf. Schegloff, 1996).

RESULTS

Three types of response were identified in this data set: 1) minimal receipting responses; 2) accounting responses, and; 3) “other” responses. Brief examples of each are provided below in Extracts 1-3 (see Figure 1). Receipting responses act to register that the person with aphasia had produced a turn, but provide little commitment to the action implemented by the prior turn. In Extract 1, V seemingly asks K a question about a story she has been telling. K shows little appreciation for the import of V’s turn, produces a receipting response (*mm*), and simply resumes telling her story. Accounting responses index problems with intersubjectivity, but do not work towards resolving them. Instead, they deal with why an appropriate response to the prior turn cannot be delivered, and which party is responsible for its absence. In Extract 2, R constructs a problematic turn, and C responds with an account for her inability to deliver a related response. C’s account attributes this failure to R’s turn “not making sense”. In doing so, she largely absolves herself of responsibility for the problems with intersubjectivity. “Other” responses are a more eclectic category. An example of one type found—a “joking response”—is provided in Extract 3. Here, B produces an elaborate series of gestures. F responds by deliberately misreading them, and jokingly suggesting that B is saying he will “go to bed”.

DISCUSSION

The three response types identified in this data set can have negative consequences for the participation of people with aphasia in conversation, and act as mundane mechanisms of social exclusion. Receipting responses tend to resist the action implemented by the person with aphasia’s turn, and can lead to it being abandoned. Accounting responses can make acutely visible the linguistic incompetence of a person with aphasia (cf. Wilkinson, 2007), bringing it to the surface of the interaction. Other, “joking” responses postpone, and can disrupt, efforts at repair. At the same time, however, these responses can be useful for managing problems with intersubjectivity, and its implications. Receipting responses can be used to sensitively negotiate prolonged periods of trouble, and facilitate a move onto less problematic talk. Accounting responses explicitly index the state of the talk, and can be used to distribute some of the responsibility for the trouble to parties other than the person with aphasia. Other, “joking” responses provide an opportunity for affiliation in the midst of a challenging and potentially confronting time in the interaction. Hence, none of these practices can be characterised as wholly positive or negative. Conversation partner training programs should explicitly address what is involved with choosing not to repair, possible alternative practices, and their (positive and negative) consequences. Increasing conversation partner awareness of alternatives to repair will help ensure that the agency of people with aphasia is respected when problems with intersubjectivity arise and repair either cannot be, or is not, undertaken. Future studies should use CA to search for and describe other alternatives to repair, and explore—with CA and other qualitative research methods—how conversation partners decide that they will not use repair.

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TABLE 1
 Characteristics of participants with aphasia

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Aetiology</i>	<i>Months post-onset</i>	<i>WAB-RAQ</i>	<i>Previous occupation</i>
“Valerie”	83	Unknown	144	78.2 (Anomic)	Accountant
“Russell”	72	Left MCA infarct	13	59.2 (Broca’s)	Solicitor
“Ben”	74	Left MCA infarct	33	19.1 (Broca’s)	Factory manager

Figure 1. Data extracts

Extract 1

001 K <en (i'd)> (.) really h'd grown tired of it?=so: .hh i
002 thought i'd put it on ebay.
003 (0.4)
004 V †ohw yes,
005 K .hh an:d (0.7) i: hoped t' get abo:ut (1.0)
-> 006 V >(do you go on i-< it let you return,)
-> 007 (1.8)
-> 008 K n- (0.2)
-> 009 V answer fr'm e°b(h)ay.°
010 (0.3)
=> 011 K mm:. .hh and uh (0.4) i- i'd h↑oped t' get about (0.2)
012 seventy or eighty dollars for it.=that's what- .hh

Extract 2

-> 001 R .hhhhhh () (0.6) i-i(h)f (0.2) (w- w-) eh(h) (0.4) ewe-
-> 002 w- (when uh-) (1.0) going to s:earch (will/we'll) (1.2)
-> 003 come again.
004 (0.5)
=> 005 C nuh_ none e' that made sense; did it,
006 (.)
007 R no_ i know;;

Extract 3

-> 001 B (.tk) [(yop-) [(0.3) (oyup°) (1.3)
[(points)) [(brings hands close, then points
over shoulder with thumb))
002 D i don't know what're we saying.=
=> 003 F =y' goin'e bed,
004 B (ye-ah)=
005 F =>see ya,< [hh huh huh] ha- .HHH KGHH HGHH