Commentary on *The Analysis of Conversational Skills of Older Adults: A Review of Approaches* by Garcia and Orange

Commentaire sur Analyse des aptitudes de conversation des personnes âgées : recherche actuelle et approches cliniques par Garcia et Orange

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"Les vieux ne parlent plus ou alors simplement, parfois, du bout des yeux." Jacques Brel

Garcia and Orange's article extensively reviews over sixty references dealing with conversational discourse in older adults in search of a (hopefully) coherent set of features defining conversational skills in normal-speaking participants that could be used as a reference by speech-language pathologists when asked to interpret their elderly patients' functional abilities in everyday conversation. It beautifully summarizes the major - and often contradictory - results of different analyses - whether focusing upon linguistic, cognitive, and/or sociolinguistic/psycho-social aspects - and ends up by clearly stating that none of these analyses alone can yield a satisfactory characterization of these participants' specific conversational profile.

Such an article first deserves a general (and obvious) comment: it must be clear from the outset that pragmatic assessments of verbal behaviour - whether in conversations or in any other types of verbal intercourse - will probably never get to the same level of accuracy as can be obtained in "formal", strictly linguistic, assessments. One has to cope with such a fact if one is to pursue any type of functional analysis of interindividual communication. Pragmatics is not phonology; Speech Act Theory is not formal syntax; Grice's maxims of conversation have nothing in common with the precision of the notions used by linguists in morphology. When dealing with the so-called "functional analysis" of everyday conversation, one thus has to start with an obviously general definition of conversation and communication and one has to stay with it until the end of the enterprise. Obviously, such a definition cannot be restricted to structural, strictly linguistic parameters and includes such vague notions as intentionality, motivation, situation, or, in more generic terms, function.

Indeed, in the study of verbal behaviour as in many other fields, structure is not function. Linguistic structures do not often reveal their pragmatic function in a direct,

straightforward way. Hence, how could a strictly structural approach tell us something stable and unquestionable about the function of a given piece of discourse? The same structure may fulfil different functions; the same function may be fulfilled by different structures. Nevertheless, if it is indeed possible (and thus frequent among linguists) to study linguistic structures without "bothering about" their function in, say, a speech act, it would indeed seem bizarre to say anything about functions without specifying in parallel the structural characteristics of the message under study. It derives from the above that a functional approach, such as the one Garcia and Orange recommend, should include a structural analysis. Thus, I do not see how a single-level analysis - be it linguistic, cognitive, or sociolinguistic/psychosocial - could satisfy their requirements. I do think that a comprehensive account of a participant's verbal behaviour -whether normal or pathological - requires all three approaches mentioned in their article. It may look unsatisfactory to resort to three distinct approaches instead of only one, but these three approaches being mutually irreducible, there is no alternative.

There are several other issues I would like to raise about conversational skills of older adults that have not been adequately addressed either in the literature on language in the elderly or in Garcia and Orange's article. The first issue has to do with the independent variable of age used in many, if not all, of the studies under review in Garcia and Orange's article. My question is the following: Is age really a crucial factor in the variability of verbal behaviour, or should we look carefully instead at other variables such as motivation, situation, and/or social environment? Such variables should normally be taken into account within the context of either sociolinguistic or psychosocial approaches, but they obviously have not been looked at with sufficient care. Such studies should be carried out in the future because we now know how much a person's verbal behaviour may vary from one situation to another. Hence, some important changes observed in elderly people's verbal behaviour may be the consequence of environmental factors, rather than the

ineluctable effect of age per se. After all, we all know older adults who have kept the entirety of their conversational skills until a well-advanced age! If so, one might be led to consider that if there indeed exists some conversational changes (sometimes even observable at the structural level) in older adults' discourse, they might indicate a *functional shift* more than a *structural alteration.*

The second issue I would like to raise has to do with the necessity to study *also* those aspects of verbal behaviour that indicate the participant's own appraisal of her/his abilities and/or difficulties in everyday conversation. Most of the studies that have been conducted with older adults tend to focus on the efficiency and accuracy of language production and comprehension in such a population at the referential, propositional level. If such an analysis indeed tells us something about the capacity of the participants to encode objective meanings in their messages, it does not tell us anything about how they feel about what they say. Now, there are often clues to self-appraisals in the verbal output itself (Nespoulous, 1980, 1981). Why would we not take advantage of these comments, that we called "modalizations"[1] a few years ago, to get an idea of the difficulties that a given participant may have in such-and-such a situation? That should give us relevant information about the functional and/or structural problems a given participant may have, whether related to age or to the specific situation she or he is in when we collect our data.

"Nobody talks to me" does not convey the same meaning as "I have word-finding problems" or "I do not remember". The first modalization or comment apparently refers to the functional level, the second one to the structural (strictly linguistic) level, and the third seems to advocate a memory problem. Why would we set such pieces of information aside? Of course, some of them can be gathered through questionnaires or by analysing some language errors (Shewan & Henderson, 1988), but the participant her/himself is in a better position than ourselves to assess the difficulties she/he is having, if any (apart from the cases of patients with anosognosia, or course).

Finally, we would like to mention intraparticipant variability in verbal behaviour as another parameter deserving interest in future research on older adults' conversational skills. The same participant - depending on the situation (or task) she/he is involved in - does substantially and (most of the time) unconsciously modify her/his verbal behaviour. It follows that, parallel to group studies resorting to age as an independent variable, there is certainly room and interest for case studies (such as the ones that are now frequently used in modern cogntive neuropsychology). The aim of case studies would be to assess the stability versus variability of older adults' verbal behaviour at both the structural and functional levels. Also, through in-depth case studies, we would be in an ideal position to assess interindividual variability, a variability which might most likely happen to be infinite when one deals with open, non-stereotypical conversations!

Endnote

[1] Through referential discourse, a speaking participant sets up one particular piece of information or proposition, the latter word being defined in logic as the expression of a relation applied to one or several arguments. Modalizing discourse reveals, at least partially, the emitter's personal attitude to what she or he is saying or about what her/his interlocutor is saying.

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