

Laughter when words are missing – a study of interactions involving persons with aphasia

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Most persons with acquired language disorders after brain damage experience word finding difficulties. Anomia, semantic and/or phonological substitutions, that is not finding the words one wants to use or producing unintended words that have some relation of meaning or sound to the intended target word, is a cardinal feature of aphasia. Anomia is sometimes combined with other symptoms, sometimes the only symptom and it can be more or less severe.

In communicative interaction, there are different ways of handling word finding problems. For example, the person not having word finding problems can take the role of providing suggestions that the person with anomia can confirm or reject. The person with anomia can sometimes produce circumlocutions, which are paraphrases, descriptions, hints etc. and can also ask his/her interlocutor to guess. Another strategy of some persons with anomia is to use gestures, facial expressions or even perform pantomime to convey the intended meaning and facilitate guessing. Drawing and providing written letters are also strategies used by person with anomia. Hint and guess sequences are, thus, common in this type of interaction.

Handling word finding difficulties in interaction involves some strain and tension. There is always a risk of not being able to solve the problem, of not understanding or misunderstanding and of not being able to express something. It is therefore very important to ensure that both parties feel reasonably comfortable and that a good interpersonal relationship is kept up. This entails another feature, be it a strategy or a more automatic adaptation to the situation – an enhanced use of emotion related communication and communication showing closeness and mutual understanding of the situation, i.e. creating and maintaining rapport.

This study describes the use of laughter in a sample of videorecorded interactions involving persons with anomia. Sequences involving word finding problems have been selected and all instances of laughter in these sequences have been analyzed with respect to where laughter occurs, in relation to the preceding and the ongoing utterance, how it is produced by one or both parties, what other means of expression it is combined with and what its main function seems to be in each of the contexts. The results are discussed in relation to how laughter is used in other conversations, of other similar context, such as interacting in a language that one does not know very well, to individual variation and to the outcome of word finding sequences. Features of the use of laughter that seem to be general and features that seem more specific to interactions involving persons with anomia or other communication problems are suggested. The implications for interfaces to communication aids and other services to persons with communication disorders involving embodied communicative agents are also discussed.