

The Communicative Style of the Physically Disabled – a Corpus Study

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Abstract

The research presented here focuses on the evaluation of communicative abilities and communicative style of the disabled. The study is a part of a national project devoted to the situation and needs of disabled people in Poland. As a part of the project the Corpus of Dialogs of Disabled Speakers has been compiled and annotated. The corpus analysis focused on differences in language use between disabled speakers and controls as well as within the group of disabled speakers contrasting 6 groups of subjects with various disabilities. Dialogs were analyzed with regard to syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features and their relation to demographic factors. The corpus analysis shows that there are significant differences as far as communicative style of the disabled people is concerned, expressed by excessive use of non-standard forms, specific conceptual metaphors, over-passivisation, and other features. The results will be presented in detail on the poster.

1 Introduction

The present study is a part of a national project devoted to the situation and needs of disabled people in Poland¹. The goal of the research presented here has been the evaluation of communicative abilities and communicative style of the disabled. The language of the disabled is still poorly understood. The literature dedicated to the subject is scarce not only as far as corpus studies are concerned but also when it comes to research on the adult disabled speech in general with the exception of the analysis of the language of mentally and psychologically disturbed (cf. Happé 1993, Langdon et al. 2002, Woźniak 2000). At the same time there is a growing social recognition of the problems specific to this group of speakers.

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2 Method

In the course of the present project realization the Corpus of Dialogs of Disabled Speakers (CDDS) has been compiled and annotated. The corpus consists of transcribed and annotated group conversations of 113 subjects. The CDDS language is Polish. The video recordings of the conversations have been transcribed and annotated according to a tagset designed for the purpose of this study. The Corpus has 402 146 tokens, including 225 299 words of raw text. The Corpus is fully tagged with nearly 100 types of tags coding various parameters of language structure and both verbal and nonverbal communication, including pragmatic annotation.

The corpus analysis focused on differences in language use between disabled speakers and comparatively controls as well as within the group of disabled speakers contrasting 6 groups of subjects with various disabilities pertaining to: motion, sight, voice, psyche, mind, and other. The utterances were analyzed with regard to syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features and their relation to a number of demographic factors, onset of disability, etc. Over 60 parameters have been examined of which here we mention just a few. Additionally, on the basis of the Corpus the Affective Lexicon Index has been prepared and the question of language negativisation in the speech of the disabled has been examined.

3 Discussion of the results

Typically, disabled speakers live in small and closed linguistic communities around social care centers offering support. This practical solution is undoubtedly advantageous for numerous reasons but may affect their language development. Despite social isolation related to disability linguistic and communicative competence of the

disabled subjects in our study shows no signs of pathology.

Nevertheless, there are significant differences as far as communicative profile of the disabled people is concerned. The corpus analysis shows that this diversity is not limited to few features but affects the whole series of linguistic elements on every level of language structure, so that we can speak of communicative profile of the disabled.

One of the most alarming features is the excessive use of original forms deviating from the socially accepted standard variation such as language errors, slang, regional forms, egocentrically oriented neologisms. The remaining tendencies specific to the the disabled people have a character of a communicative style and are less disturbing as far as language as such is concerned. However, they signal very clearly the problems of psychological nature. The most significant of this group are: firstly, the passive attitude expressed by syntactic and semantic structures, and secondly extensive use of figurative language, a particular preference for non-explicit expressions for the description of plain situations. The pragmatic level of language is not impoverished despite social isolation resulting from disability but even dominates through overwhelming use of non-literal utterances such as implicatures, and especially numerous represented conceptual orientational metaphors. It is worth noting that subjects with motion and sight disability tend to use metaphors related to the experiential basis they are deprived of, namely to walking and seeing.

It was hypothesized that disabled people may be at risk of perceiving themselves not in terms of agents but rather as objects of other people actions. Indeed, the analysis of syntactic and semantic markers of the phenomenon of passiveness such as increased use of passive voice and gerund clause indicates that disabled speakers tend to depict situation from the perspective of an object of action. On the level of utterance semantics, the same topics are differently correlated in the speech of disabled speakers and in the speech of controls. For instance, the topic of problems and obstacles - belonging to the most significantly represented in the speech of disabled speakers from 40 topics tagged and examined in the corpus – is associated in the speech of the disabled with acquiring help, while in the speech of healthy subjects with active problem solving. This clearly reveals problems signaled in language but having roots both in lin-

guistics and psychology. As the communicative competence of the disabled speakers is not deviating from the norm there is a chance for improving the present state. The studies like the one presented here may contribute to a better understanding of the language development under specific conditions of disability and help improve the situation of the disabled by greater integration of this group of speakers within the society as well as supporting their motivation for self-sufficient life, which is a prerequisite for a sense of having control of their lives.

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