Verbal Play as a Communicative Resource in Aphasia Treatment

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Introduction
Aphasia is an impairment in language use due to brain damage. There are 80,000 new cases of aphasia each year in the United States (NSA, 2008). Speech language pathologists (SLPs) design treatments that help patients recover their language abilities.

Sherratt & Simmons-Mackie (2015) argue that, "humor has a substantial role to play in engaging clients by developing rapport, enhancing motivation, and facilitating more equal participation in interaction." (p. 16) This study investigates the role of verbal play in a 15-session barrier treatment study (Devanga, 2014) in which no specific attempt was made to elicit humor or verbal play. The participant with aphasia (Mr. Lee) and a communication partner worked together to identify, label, and place familiar photographs on their playing boards.

The current study analyzed video data from 10 of Mr. Lee’s treatment sessions (5 with clinician-partner, 5 with spouse-partner). Drawing on Hengst (2006), all episodes of verbal play were identified and coded for speaker, interactional forms, resources, and functions.

Research Questions
1. How do the measured resources and functions differ amongst the two target pairs of people?
2. Does the number of people in the room affect the number of verbal play episodes?
3. Who (clinician, participant with aphasia, moderator) is responsible for initiating each episode of verbal play?

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Method

Description of Data Set Analyzed (Devanga, 2014)

Participants
• Mr. Lee, a 75-year-old monolingual English speaker; 8-months post MCA infarct, with diagnosis of Moderate to Severe Conduction Aphasia
• Suma Devanga, Clinician Partner
• Mrs. Lee, a 75-year-old monolingual English speaker, wife

Barrier Treatment Protocol (BTP):
• 6 barrier task trials with alternating roles of director and matcher
• 15th session: Suma and Mr. Lee
• 11th-15th session: Mr. and Mrs. Lee

Participants work to arrange the target cards in the same manner as the director

The current study analyzed all playful episodes:
• The first 5 sessions between Suma and Mr. Lee, and the 5 sessions between Mrs. Lee and Mrs. Lee
• Throughout the full session (not just during barrier task trials)

Operationally Defining Verbal Play (Hengst, 2006)

• Verbal play episodes are single or multiple utterances that share a common theme
• Resources are categorized as either verbal, prosodic, gestural, or other
• Functions are categorized as either narrative, teasing, referencing, or other

Data Analysis Procedures
• All coding was completed by watching the videotapes and transcripts used to assist documenting identified episodes
• All episodes were identified, coded, and analyzed
• Any discrepancies in the coding were sorted out through consensus

Results
Across sessions and partners, a total of 385 episodes of verbal play were identified for further analysis. Suma and Mr. Lee: 60% of episodes; Mr. and Mrs. Lee: 40% of episodes

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Discussion
Use of humor can positively impact a relationship: Saroglou, Lascio, & Demmert, (2010) argue that self-enhancing humor can support marital stability.
• Self-enhancing humor displays the ability to find amusement in life’s stresses and can function as a coping mechanism against life’s adversities.
• Given Mr. and Mrs. Lee’s long-term marriage we would expect to see use of self-enhancing humor, such as their frequent friendly teasing, in their interactions.

Fraley & Aron (2004) argue that “sharing humorous experiences during a first encounter between strangers leads to greater feelings of closeness.”...