Chapter 9

A Phatic Approach to Assistive and Augmentative Communications Vocabularies

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ABSTRACT

Users of Assistive and Augmentative Communications (AAC) systems sometimes have difficulty: (a) participating in conversation outside of a script they already know, (b) repairing a derailed conversation, or (c) engaging in the quick and varied banter demanded of many social situations. This chapter presents tools being developed to remedy these challenges, and the “phatic” approach on which they are based. In contrast to most AAC vocabularies, phatic vocabularies are characterized by providing a variety of expressions for the same meme. In addition, vocabularies developed via a phatic approach may use language to convey gesture, affirmation, or emotive support as much as or more than to convey wants, needs, or narrative. The intent of this chapter is not to argue for the replacement of standard AAC vocabularies, but instead to show how phatic vocabularies, through the use of tools, can be successfully used to enhance a user’s language development, particularly social language and social development, by creating vocabularies that encourage a user to engage in social settings.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter is an extension of (and motivated by) the work conducted by this author on developing a computer interface through which non-literate users of assistive and augmentative communications (AAC) devices and software would be able to use instant messaging over the Internet (Slotznick, 2010). In 2008-2009, a small collaborative research grant, from the National Center for Technology Innovation, funded a pilot study which investigated the efficacy of AAC interfaces (see Slotznick, Hershberger, & Higginbotham, 2009). Specifically, the study involved observing how people who require AAC devices were able to use the Point-and-Chat™ software: a custom developed instant messaging (IM) application developed for users of AAC devices.

Findings of the study revealed that instant messaging conversations using the software degraded, could not be salvaged, and ended abruptly. This was in contrast to scripted, face-to-face conversations conducted during the same study. The reasons for why the instant messaging conversations fared poorly (in comparison to the scripted face-to-face conversations) were out of the scope of the pilot study. However, the most obvious conclusion was that the software lacked the needed vocabularies or interfaces for successful online interaction. These findings sparked a line of questioning (e.g., “What vocabularies or interfaces are needed?” and “How do these differ from regular vocabularies?”) that lead to the “phatic” approach described in this chapter and the subsequent evolution of the Point-and-Chat™ software.

The phatic approach discussed in this chapter is significant because it takes into consideration gaps in narrative content (including scripted content) that are filled with small talk, chit-chat, chatter, and other phatic elements. It accepts that people engage in conversations even when they don’t have anything to say (e.g., sometimes for only entertainment purposes because humans like to listen to language). It recognizes that in many cases traditional AAC vocabularies and interfaces are not good at engaging in free-form chatter in part because of their strengths. It acknowledges that many conversations are not scripted. It realizes that continuing an unscripted conversation has much in common with finding a way to get a derailed conversation back on track. Finally, it even concedes that much of social conversation is in fact, phatic.

More importantly, however, for the reason that the words used in chit-chat may not be the crux of the social content being conveyed, this approach helps identify social interactions which have similar phatic components, even if the vocabularies and emotions are different. This enables one interface to be developed for a class of interactions. In taking this approach, users of AAC devices and software (referred to as “AAC users” or “users” throughout the remainder of this chapter) can learn one interface that provides channeled improvisation rather than many scripts. The primary benefit of such an approach is that it facilitates developing phatic vocabularies and interfaces which allow users to engage in a wider range of social interactions and ultimately in the development of increased social skills.

BACKGROUND

Phatic Communication

In 1923, Bronislaw Malinowski coined the term, “phatic” communication, to refer to speech that is used to express or create an atmosphere of shared feeling, goodwill, or sociability rather than to impart information. Many have equated the term with small talk, but this chapter takes a broader view. In this chapter, the term “phatic” communication is extended to include not only speech, but also facial expressions and body gestures, along with non-speech vocalizations and utterances. From this perspective, phatic communication is so instinctual and pervasive that it underpins all conversation. In fact, people seldom consciously notice it, unless it is absent.