

While completing a barrier task, Mary (a woman with aphasia) and Rob (her son) had to label a photograph of an unfamiliar dog. The first time it came up, Rob simply referred to it as “a dog, but not our dog.” When it was Mary’s turn to label it, guessing it was the researcher’s dog, Mary decided to have some fun. She first identified it as “the other dog,” but then as “that mean dog” while pretending to hide her criticism from the researcher by looking at the observation window, holding her finger to her lips and saying conspiratorially to Rob “shhh.” Mary continued her good-natured teasing throughout the session, describing the researcher’s dog as “a very good dog” between trials (when the researcher was in the room) and as “That mean dog” during the trials (when the researcher was behind the window).

Well-depicted in this vignette is the observation that individuals with aphasia have relatively well-preserved pragmatic abilities, often allowing them to successfully manage complex communicative encounters despite restricted linguistic resources. Recent research has begun to build a detailed portrait of the diverse resources individuals with aphasia and their communication partners draw on as they co-construct successful interactions, including using reported speech and other voices to contextualize utterances (Hengst, in press), getting others to speak for them (Simmons-Mackie, 2004), and using personal histories (Hengst 2003) or interactional routines such as “20-guesses” (Goodwin, 1995) to support referencing. This paper extends that growing portrait by describing examples of humor (verbal play and nonverbal performance) in a set of interactions among individuals with aphasia and their routine communication partners (e.g., children, spouses); presenting a framework developed for analyzing types, functions and resources of such play; and providing an initial analysis using that framework on a small corpus of data (approx. 10 hours of recorded interactions for 4 communication pairs). Overall, the paper suggests that verbal play is critical to pragmatic functioning and that individuals managing aphasia draw on diverse verbal and nonverbal resources to engage in such play.

Background. Linguists have pointed to diverse ways people routinely play with the sounds and meanings of words through rhyming, punning, teasing, taunting, and telling jokes (see Crystal, 1998; Sherzer, 2002) as well as through acting out or performing stories and impersonations (see Basso 1979). Such verbal play is evident in the earliest babbling of childhood and continues throughout adulthood both in mundane encounters among friends and strangers as well as in carefully crafted performances of professional comedians. Anthropologists and developmental psychologists (e.g., Bateson, Piaget, Vygotsky) have argued that verbal play serves important social and developmental functions. For example, researchers have found that teasing is routinely used as a form of language socialization between adults and children (e.g., Miller, 1986; Schieffelin, 1986) and a form of rapport building among peers (e.g., Straehle, 1993). Critically for this paper, Bateson (1972) noted that participants in playful interactions must display metacommunicative awareness to achieve complex social and communicative effects. Observing animal behavior, he argued that “the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (p. 180). Distinguishing the playful nip from the actual bite, like Geertz’s (1973) example of distinguishing the blink from the wink, requires subtle and situated communicative resources. Although humor has been viewed as clinically beneficial, examination of its occurrence in aphasic discourse, its impact on successful communication, and the complex resources used to engage in verbal and nonverbal play have yet to be explored.

Methods. Data for this paper was gathered as part of a broader ethnographic study of the discourse practices of 7 individuals with aphasia and their routine communication partners

(Hengst, 2003, in press). Each participant pair included one partner with chronic aphasia (6 months to 4.5 years *s/p* CVA) and a routine communication partner (usually a spouse or child) without a history of brain damage. Pairs were videotaped on 12 occasions, four times each in *community observations* (e.g., cooking, shopping); *research sessions* completing a barrier-task referencing game; and *semi-structured interviews* about their communicative practices. Using the constant comparative method of grounded theory (see Strauss, 1987) and rigorous ethnographic procedures (see Miller et al. 2003; Hengst 2003, in press) the analysis of verbal play presented here was accomplished in three phases. First, during data collection and transcription, the researchers identified the participants' use of humor and verbal play as a meaningful category for further study, in this case, because playful displays were so prevalent and striking. In the second phase, the entire data set was reviewed to identify and describe the range of humor and verbal play evident in the discourse, comparing them to existing descriptions in the literature, in order to develop an initial classification framework. In the third phase, the framework developed in the second phase was used to classify all occurrences of verbal and nonverbal play in a portion of the data (i.e., the barrier game sessions of 4 pairs).

Results. Verbal play and humorous exchanges were pervasive in these data, involving all participants at some point. Diverse forms of play were evident, including rhyming and playing with sounds; use of slang and impolite expressions; speaking with accents or in foreign languages; speaking for others; teasing and taunting; and, acting out words or expressions. Verbal play sometimes occurred outside of the task at hand (e.g., interrupting an interview to tease someone), but it also occurred within tasks (as when "mean dog" was used to label a target card during the barrier task). Play was collaborative, displayed through shared smiling, laughing, and cooperative responses (supportive reactions to verbal play as well as mock contrary responses). These pairs also savored (Tannen, 1989) play, for example, repeating each other's playful words both immediately and in later sessions.

To describe play more systematically, a framework including formal and functional dimensions of verbal and nonverbal play was developed. The formal dimension attends to resources being manipulated such as sounds (e.g., rhyming), words (e.g., punning), paralinguistic features (e.g., speaking in accents; exaggerated displays of emotion), social roles (e.g., teasing/taunting, using impolite words/phrases), and nonverbal features (e.g., gesturing; sound effects). The functional dimension attends to play frames relative to the foregrounded task (e.g., a break in frame from the current task; integrated with current task; and/or at a natural break or transition moment within the task). Currently this framework is being used for analysis of the barrier task sessions for four pairs. Results of this analysis will also be included in the presentation.

Discussion. This research contributes to the emerging portrait of aphasia by recognizing the pervasiveness of verbal play in the discourse of individuals managing aphasia and beginning to document the characteristics of such play and its role in successful interactions. Verbal play contributes to both social and referential functions and to the naturalness of communicative interactions. Close analysis of verbal and nonverbal resources begins to reveal the diversity and complexity of tools used to achieve humorous effects and functional analysis shows that this play occurs within foregrounded tasks as well as in breaks or informal interactions. This research suggests further study of the role of play in clinical interventions as well as in the overall life course of individuals with aphasia and their interlocutors.