Communication tasks to study interaction: knowledge and responsibility

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It is estimated that there are over half a million of people in the UK with a severe communication disorder (Enderby and Phillip, 1986), such as those with cerebral palsy, people after a stroke or those with motor neurone disease. In the past, such people could only communicate non verbally and by means of communication boards or books. Today, computer-based augmentative and alternative communication systems are available which enhance the non-speaker's verbal capacities. The non-speaker sits in front of the computer, which may be on a desk or attached to a wheelchair. He or she can type by hand, by using a head-pointing or gaze-orienting device, or by operating a switch. The user can type text directly or select pre-programmed words or phrases. The words, phrases or text are produced either as synthesised or digitised speech and/or as printed text. However, many non-speakers prefer using their voice if at all possible, and thus their communication is usually based on a combination of the AAC system, vocal, verbal and non-verbal modes of communication.

One of the most important issues in communication involving people with impaired speech is to identify *referents*, i.e. objects or entities people want to talk about, point or refer to. In fact, dialogical situations involving people with communication disabilities often result in failure because of referential problems. People who cannot talk because of some physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy are practically always in highly disadvantaged situations with respect to what they say, how others respond to them and with respect to who controls the communication situations. Evidence of the fact that it is the natural speaker who controls the communication situation is considerable. Communication asymmetries are usually explained by the established institutional relationships which are difficult to break.

The study I am going to report is concerned with the joint construction of referent in a communication task. One of the purposes of our study was to encourage people with impaired speech to become directly involved in controlling the communication situation. Mrs. Sarah Collins, who works as a research fellow on this project, has designed 2 communication guessing games. The person with impaired speech had an object hidden from the unimpaired speaker's view. The impaired speaker had to describe the object to the unimpaired speaker in such a way that they could reconstruct the object. The unimpaired speaker was allowed to ask questions about that object. The first game used as the referent a little plastic *dinosaurs* and the unimpaired speaker was supposed to guess this referent. The second object was *the picture of a kitchen*. In asking appropriate questions the unimpaired speaker was to reconstruct the picture in a drawing. It was our assumption that such games allow the person with impaired speech to take a lead in interaction. They put them in the unusual position of having access to information that the unimpaired speaker did not have and could not readily assume.

I shall talk here about the joint construction of the picture of the kitchen. This picture contained things that one would expect to find in a kitchen: a sink, units with drawers and cupboards, a table, etc. However, it also had some surprising elements: there was a dog, and this dog was standing on a stool and making a cup of coffee. It also had some other things one

might not be able to predict, although they were not out of place. There was the cuckoo clock on the wall, and the chequered tablecloth (see figure 1).
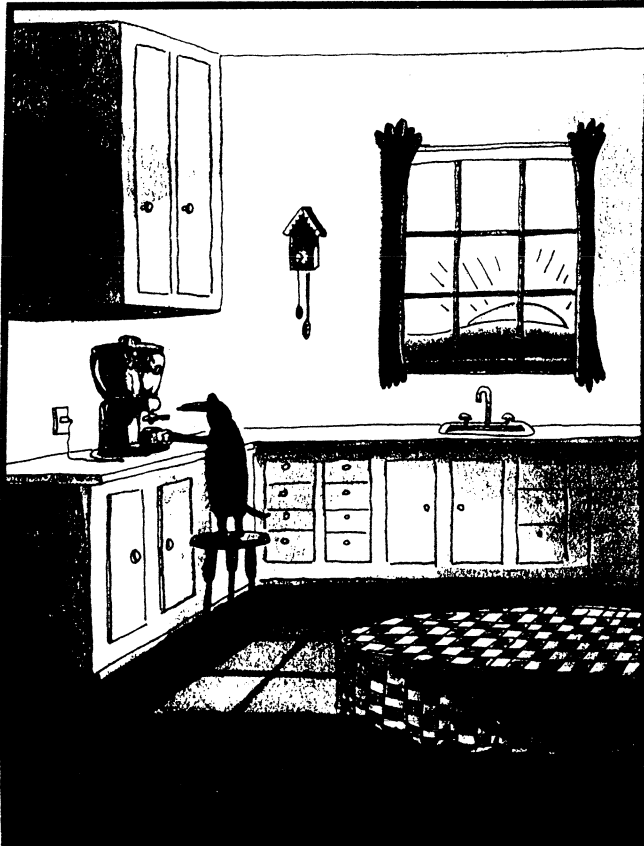
While their owners sleep, nervous little dogs prepare for their day.

The task provides insight into how the activity, that was presented as a guessing game, would be enacted. In particular, we were interested how is responsibility and knowledge distributed between them the communication partners. For example, what do the partners presuppose about knowledge and responsibility? In what ways do they underlie interaction? Moreover, what genre or activity actually takes place? For example, is the communication activity more like a game or more like a teaching episode?

In the analysis we aimed to preserve a relatively holistic view of each task interaction by focusing on the following: the opening, editing work on the drawing, the closing. The opening provided an opportunity for determining the level of collaboration between the participants in establishing a starting point and a way of proceeding with the task. The analysis of the process of drawing provided an opportunity for studying repairs through spoken, gesture and drawing actions. Finally, the closings enabled us to find out the extent to which the task was collaboratively accomplished.

We have identified two extreme kinds of interaction. In one kind, the unimpaired speaker relied mainly on his or her social representation of the kitchen rather trying to discover, through

interaction, particular characteristics of the kitchen on the picture. Moreover, as is typical in institutional interactions, he or she felt unilaterally responsible for the outcome of the interaction. These characteristics were apparent in all three stages in the activity we explored, i.e. in openings, in editing the drawing and in closing the task.

Concerning the opening, the first kind of interaction was defined by the participants by mutual negotiation of roles; the participants expected that the activity in which they would be involved would be 'fun'. The other kind of interaction was defined by the participants as 'work'. The roles were assumed rather than negotiated. It was the unimpaired speaker who opened the task and took a unidimensional responsibility for its accomplishment.

Concerning the editing of drawing, the first kind of interaction was characterised by the unimpaired speaker's corrections of the picture. As a result, the drawing was a close replica of the original picture. In contrast, the second kind of interaction proceeded either without corrections or with corrections based on a representation of a 'typical' kitchen but in which all the surprising elements (e.g. the dog making coffee, the cuckoo clock) were missing.

Concerning the closing, the first kind of interaction maintained the roles established at the outset. In the first case, the closing was mutually negotiated while in the second, responsibility was taken up unilaterally by the unimpaired speaker.

In general, the first strategy, but not the second, was characterised by the attribution of epistemic responsibility, i.e. 'responsibility for making sense of the talked-about state of affairs and bringing it into language and control of intersubjectively endorsed perspectives on things and states of affairs (Rommetveit, 1990; 1991), to both participants.

By looking at task-based interaction, involving people with impaired speech, one can explore the ways in which participants are active agents, who do rely on their own inferences as guides to interactive conduct. Clearly, conversational co-operation does not just depend on overtly stateable shared knowledge and beliefs, much depends on implicit shared common knowledge and unstated beliefs.

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