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Utterance Reformulation in "Larry King Live," an American Talk Show: Suggestions for Enhancing English Language Learners' Speaking Skill

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate how reformulation is employed by native speakers of English in "Larry King Live," an American talk show, and to obtain suggestions for teaching reformulation in English class. For this purpose, a corpus of 2,400,000 English words was made and 508 reformulation samples were obtained. Next, an analysis was given to show the relationship between original utterances and reformulated ones. The result of the analysis shows that reformulation in the talk show falls into two categories: reformulation based on linguistic resources and reformulation based on inference. The former consists of two subcategories: concept level reformulation and predicate/argument structure level reformulation. It follows that there are three levels of reformulation: concept level reformulation, predicate/argument structure level reformulation, and inference level reformulation. It is finally argued that English teachers should be acquainted with these three levels of reformulation and that they should be presented systematically in class according to the learners' proficiency.

1. Introduction

In communication, speakers often reformulate their utterances. It often happens that they have to resort to the following techniques for the success of communication: 1) using different words or phrases when they cannot retrieve or don't know the optimum expressions while speaking, 2) putting their utterances in another way to prompt interlocutors to understand what they have said, and 3) putting interlocutors' utterances in another way to check whether they have understood the messages properly. It follows from what has been said that reformulating utterances flexibly is an indispensable capability to communicate ideas effectively. Learners of English, whose linguistic resources are limited, have to reformulate their utterances more often than native speakers of English. In order

to enhance their communication skills, it is necessary to clarify what manipulations reformulation involves and obtain pedagogical suggestions. Some empirical research tried to show the effect of teaching paraphrase in the classroom (Cohen, 1998; Kitajima, 1997). In these studies, however, only circumlocution and description were taught as paraphrase and the periods of teaching were not long enough to conclude whether teaching paraphrase explicitly was effective or not. Before claiming the effect of teaching it, it is indispensable to clarify the essence of paraphrase. Some attempts have so far been made from this standpoint. For example, Takatsuka (1999) analyzed illustrative sentences in a monolingual dictionary and learners' grammar book and demonstrated the patterns of form manipulation and meaning manipulation which reformulation involves. On the other hand, however, little attention has been given to the utterance reformulation employed in authentic communication. This is what we will focus on in the present study. Reformulation in a talk show will be inspected and the relationship between original utterances and reformulated ones will be analyzed closely.

2. Reformulation

2.1 Why is reformulation required?

Before turning to a closer examination of the reformulation samples, a few remarks should be made concerning why reformulation is employed. If an original utterance is an appropriate means of achieving communicative success, that is, it achieves optimal relevance, then reformulation is not required (Blakemore, 1993, 101). Speakers reformulate their utterances when optimal relevance is not achieved. When they cannot achieve the desired communicative success with an original utterance, speakers reformulate it to ensure a more accurate understanding. In doing so, they make use of linguistic knowledge, encyclopedic knowledge, and inference (Sperber & Wilson, 1995[2]).

2.2 How reformulation is achieved

In this part, theoretical remarks are going to be made concerning how reformulation is achieved. Three levels of reformulation are going to be discussed in this study: 1) concept level reformulation, 2) "predicate/argument structure" (Kozlowsky, McCoy, & Vijay-Shanker, 2003) level reformulation, and 3) inference level reformulation. Here a brief explanation is going to be offered concerning them.

When they cannot conceive the word *furniture*, speakers could say, "for example, a table, a chair, and a bed." If the word *stool* does not occur, they could say, "a kind of

chair." This is called concept level reformulation. When they reformulate their utterances at a concept level, speakers do not have to restructure the whole utterances. They are expected to substitute one constituent for another. Concept level reformulation is usually achieved by making use of the words belonging to "basic level category" (Taylor, 1989). As pointed out by Sweetser (1990), the words belonging to this level have the following traits: 1) they are closely related to our daily experiences, 2) their forms are simple, 3) they are used frequently, 4) they are easy to learn or memorize, and 5) they are inclined to combine with other words to represent new concepts. They can be effective linguistic resources for concept level reformulation.

Let us now turn to predicate/argument structure level reformulation, where a whole sentence is reformulated. Diverse resources are utilized for reformulating a whole sentence. Pragmatic reformulation such as an indirect speech act is not dealt with here. Changing the intended message itself for reformulation is also a question which is beyond the scope of the present discussion. We are primarily concerned with the question of how a predicate/argument structure is given different linguistic realizations.

Kozlowsky et al. (2003) explain sentence generation from a predicate/argument structure as follows: 1) decompose the input into the top predicate (to be realized by a (single) lexical item that serves as the syntactic head) and identify the arguments and modifiers, 2) recursively realize arguments, then modifiers, and 3) combine the realizations in step 2 with the head in step 1.

The input in step 1 is the semantics which a speaker wants to convey and Kozlowski et al. (2003) assume that the input is a hierarchical predicate/argument structure as shown in Figure 1.
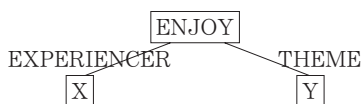

Figure 1: *The semantics underlying (1a-1b)*

Following the above-mentioned process, a sentence can be generated from here. The output of the process usually has some variations. Now let us look at how different realizations are given to the same meaning using different lexical and syntactic means. Sentence generation typically starts with a syntactic head and it is generally realized by a verb. The selected verb sets up a syntactic context into which other components are fit. In order to generate a sentence from a predicate/argument structure, it is necessary to determine what verb to use to realize the predicate. If the verb *enjoy* is chosen to realize

the predicate ENJOY, the resulting sentence is (1a). Suppose that the verb *please* is chosen. As a result, (1b) is given.

(1a) X enjoy(s) Y.

(1b) Y please(s) X.

(1a) and (1b) are the synonymous sentences generated from the same predicate/argument structure.

Another reformulation which should be considered is inference level reformulation, where inference is made use of for reformulating utterances. As Sperber and Wilson (1995[2]) acutely pointed out, verbal communication involves not only encoding and decoding but also drawing inferences. In communication, it is quite usual to reach an opinion or decide that something is true based on the information that is available. The following dialogue illustrates this point.

Peter: Would you drive a Mercedes?

Mary: I wouldn't drive ANY expensive car. (Sperber & Wilson, 1995[2], 194)

Though Mary does not directly answer Peter's question, Peter is likely to decide by inference that Mary would not drive a Mercedes. If inference is frequently employed to interpret utterances like this, then it is reasonable to think that it also plays a crucial role in reformulating utterances.

2.3   Method of compiling reformulation samples

2.3.1   Register selection

When conducting a corpus based language study, the first step is to choose a register which meets the research purpose. The purpose of this research is to show how reformulation is used by native speakers in formal spoken English. The register should fulfill the following conditions:

(1)   It is a spoken language.

(2)   It is interactive, that is, both addressor(s) and addressee(s) exist.

(3)   It is an improvised discourse.

(4)   It consists of speeches of more than one person.

Taking the above conditions and Biber's(1988) analysis of textual variation into consideration, it was concluded that a talk show is suitable for the present research. The corpus which was made for this research consists of approximately 2,400,000 words.[1]

2.3.2 Data collection

In an unplanned discourse, speakers sometimes reformulate their utterances more than once for communicative success. In quite a few samples which were compiled for this research, the speaker reformulated the original utterance more than once. Though it may be important to examine them closely, this paper does not deal with them. Here we would like to limit the discussion to the samples where optimal relevance is achieved by reformulating the original utterance only once.

When optimal relevance is not achieved, speakers often use the following expressions: "what... mean...," "are you saying...?," "are you telling...?," "that is," "that means," "which means," "in other words," "Pardon?," "or," "So?" and so on. They were used as key expressions to search for reformulation samples. With this method, 508 samples were obtained, where optimal relevance is achieved by reformulating the original utterance once.

2.4 Patterns of reformulation

In reformulating utterances, it often happens that the original utterance and the reformulated one do not share the same grammatical unit. In some cases, the reformulated utterance elaborates on the original one. In other cases, the reformulated one summarizes the original one. Each sample basically has its own specific characteristics and it is difficult to generalize and put all the samples into categories. In this research, we set up two criteria for categorization.

(1)   The relationship between the original utterance and the reformulated one can be explained from the perspective of "form manipulation" (Takatsuka, 1999, Manipulation of form section, para 2).

(2)   The relationship between the original utterance and the reformulated one can be explained from the perspective of inference.

Those meeting the first criterion belong to the group called "Linguistic Paraphrase," and those meeting the second criterion constitute "Inferential Paraphrase (inference level

reformulation)." Reformulation samples were found which did not belong to either of them. They are named either "Elaboration" or "Summary." When the reformulated utterances elaborate on the original ones, they belong to "Elaboration." When the reformulated utterances summarize the original ones, they belong to "Summary." The following table shows the frequency of the samples belonging to the four categories.

Linguistic Paraphrase	171	33.7%
Inferential Paraphrase	179	35.2%
Elaboration	134	26.4%
Summary	24	4.7%

In this research, Linguistic Paraphrase and Inferential Paraphrase will be analyzed and the mechanics of reformulation in these two categories will be shown. Though they deserve a careful analysis, Elaboration and Summary will not be discussed here because analyzing them is too involved to be looked at here in detail.

2.4.1 Linguistic Paraphrase

The characteristic which is shared by the samples belonging to this group is a linguistic link between an original utterance and a reformulated one. It is possible to explain how a certain part of an original utterance is put in a reformulated one from the perspective of form manipulation. The following are a few examples. The figures in parentheses indicate when each talk was broadcasted (e.g. 20000131 means the part was aired on January 31, 2000.).

(1) A : Well, you have a number of things. Right off the bat here is the availability of *the right assets.* And what I mean by that is *the ships.* (20000131)

(2) A : What was living like *there*; I mean, *during the war*, when you were? That's where the war was. (20001228)

In (1), the original expression *the right assets* is changed into a more concrete one, *the ships.* In (2), the reformulated part is given a more concrete description. Samples like (1) and (2) are abundant throughout the corpus. In these samples, the reformulated utterances function as eliminating the ambiguity which the original utterances have. In an unplanned discourse, speakers do not have enough time to plan a speech. It often happens

that speakers cannot think of a certain expression to convey the intended message and resort to a less precise one. This process can be seen in the above samples.

Although the number was not large, there were several samples where the whole utterances were reformulated. The following are a few examples.

(3)　A: *Nothing's been said about the relatives or the grandparents on the mother's side of the kid* and what — I mean, *all you hear is from the dad.* (20000110)

(4)　A: Totally, because I think that *Walter is one of those people that is basically in some way a writer.* Do you know what I mean?
　　B: Yes.
　　A: I mean, *he has a way with words.* (20000210)

(5)　A: ⋯ and afterwards he asked me, *where did I train*? I said, what do you mean where did I train? He said, *which college did you go to*? (20000315)

In (3), the reformulated utterance formulates what the original utterance entails. In (4) and (5), the reformulated utterances are synonymous with the original ones.

Let us now turn to what has been made clear after carefully examining the samples belonging to this group. One major finding is that linguistic resources required for reformulating a concept are different from those required for reformulating a whole utterance. While associated words or expressions are employed for reformulating a whole utterance, reformulating a concept tends to require superordinate words, subordinate words, synonyms, and antonyms.

2.4.2　Inferential Paraphrase

The characteristic which is shared by the samples belonging to this group is that inference plays an important role in reformulation. According to Relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995[2]), utterances convey "explicature" and "implicature." When addressees interpret what addressors say, they not only decode their utterances but also draw inferences. It sometimes happens that they can decode their utterances but cannot understand what they really mean. This happens when explicature is conveyed but implicature is not conveyed properly. The following serves as an example.

(1) A: Are you Christian? Are you born again?

   B: I am — born again? Sure, sure, I'm born again.

   C: *Don't answer*, Duke.

   A: What do you mean "don't answer."...

   C: *That is not a question a candidate should be answering.* (20000313)

The original utterance and the reformulated utterance are not generated from the same predicate/argument structure. The next sentence serves to explain the relationship between them.

(2) Don't answer <u>because</u> that is not a question a candidate should be answering.

The original utterance serves as a conclusion and the reformulated utterance serves as a premise. The speaker realized only the conclusion, that is, the original utterance linguistically, which did not achieve relevance. To achieve communicative success, the speaker needed to realize the premise, that is, the reformulated utterance.

Sperber and Wilson (1995[2]) claim that all the implicatures fall into either implicated conclusions or implicated premises. As for the samples analyzed in this study, their argument was to the point. Reformulated utterances functioned as either conclusions or premises of the original utterances. Though it is necessary to show all the other samples to support our argument, there is space here only for one more sample.

(3) A: Barry or Dexter, do either of you think *this is going to end Saturday*?

   B: What do you mean "end"?

   A: End — *we will know the next president Saturday night.* (20001116)

(4) <u>If</u> this is going to end Saturday, <u>then</u> we will know the next president Saturday night.

Let us now look at (2) and (4). The original utterances and the reformulated ones can be regarded as components of a complex sentence. This is the characteristic that all the samples of this group have in common. Each utterance is a component of a complex sentence (e.g., 'if..., then...,' 'though..., ...,' and '... because...'). The use of these three patterns was confirmed in this study and the last one was employed more frequently than

the other two.

3. Suggestions for teaching reformulation in class

That reformulation samples are abundant throughout the corpus means that reformulating utterances is a common linguistic phenomenon in authentic communication. Now that we are sure that reformulating utterances flexibly is indispensable for successful communication, the next step is to consider how they could be taught in class.

For learners to be able to reformulate their utterances at a concept level, they should be familiar with the words belonging to basic level category. In class, teachers could give them chances to explain new words with the words belonging to basic level category. What is important here is that such an activity should be done not as a special one but as an ordinary exercise. To do so does not require any laborious preparation on the part of teachers. It could be safe to assume that this activity is worth trying and would be effective in raising learners' awareness that there are several ways to realize a certain concept linguistically.

As we mentioned previously, associated words are employed for predicate/argument structure level reformulation. Teaching them in class, however, does not seem to guarantee that learners will be able to perform sentence level reformulation automatically. It usually involves various syntactic processing. When they introduce a sentence in class, teachers should make an effort to raise the learners' awareness that the same meaning is realized linguistically in more than one way by showing synonymous sentences. How can teachers get synonymous reformulated sentences, then? The first step for sentence reformulation is to extract the semantic head conveyed by the predicate of the original sentence. As we mentioned above, the semantic head is usually realized by the syntactic head, that is, a verb. While reformulating sentences, it is quite effective to think of another verb to realize the predicate. As Kozlowsky et al. (2003) acutely pointed out, however, the semantic head is not always realized by the syntactic head. It is probable that a predicate can be realized by an adverb, or an adjective. The following examples illustrate this point.

(1a)   Barbara excels at teaching.
(1b)   Barbara teaches well.
(1c)   Barbara is a good teacher.

In the above examples, the same content of excelling at something is realized in three different ways. The predicate/argument structure of (1a-1c) is shown in Figure 2.
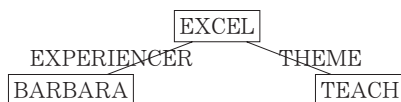

Figure 2: *The semantics underlying (1a-1c)*

It is possible to get (1a) if the verb *excel* is chosen to realize the predicate, (1b) the adverb *well*, (1c) the adjective *good*. While teaching reformulation, it is vital that teachers can trace the predicate of the original sentence properly and are well-informed in various expressions to realize it linguistically. We believe that learners of English will be able to write or speak more flexibly if they are given chances to work on a reformulation exercise regularly in class. One important thing here is that teachers should not offer reformulated sentences which are made haphazardly. For learners to be aware of the reformulation process, the reformulated sentences should follow a certain principle. This is what we would like to assert strongly. We suggested a controlled way to get synonymous reformulated sentences.

Now let us turn to inference level reformulation. Though it may be difficult to teach it in class, Inferential Paraphrase is effective for learners to be more successful communicators. The analysis shows that it is a powerful tactic for the success of communication. It is clear that it should be taught in class. However, is it possible to teach it to elementary level learners? If they are told to state premises when they cannot state conclusions, for example, that does not make sense because they do not have the linguistic resources to realize them. It is necessary to clarify the prerequisites for making use of Inferential Paraphrase. The process of Inferential Paraphrase can be explained as follows: 1) realize a predicate/argument structure linguistically, and 2) realize another predicate/argument structure which functions as either a conclusion or a premise of the realization in step 1. For learners to employ this paraphrase, they must fulfill the following requirements: 1) they can realize a predicate/argument structure linguistically,[2] and 2) they have already learned complex sentences.

In class, a complex sentence (e.g., 'if..., then...,' 'though..., ...,' and '... because...') is usually taught as a linguistic device for combining two clauses. The analysis of reformulation samples in a talk show, however, implies that it could be taught as a device for paraphrase. The possibility of teaching complex sentences for paraphrase needs to be tested.

4. Conclusion

The ability to put one's ideas in more than one way is indispensable for successful communication. The argument that comprehensive studies on paraphrase are necessary to raise learners' communication skills cannot be refuted. However, researchers should refrain from pursuing hasty results from teaching it. The present study started with the incentive to clarify how native speakers reformulate their utterances in authentic communication and to obtain pedagogical clues. Any attempt to teach reformulation should be designed systematically. In planning to teach reformulation in class, teachers should know that there are three levels of reformulation available. The first is concept level reformulation, where learners are supposed to explain concepts with basic level words. The second is predicate/argument structure level reformulation, where learners are expected to practice realizing the predicate of a sentence linguistically in more than one way. The last one is called inference level reformulation, which was treated in 2.4.2 in this paper. The analysis shows that stating either a premise or a conclusion is efficient for successful communication and suggests that a complex sentence could be taught as a means of paraphrase. When teachers teach reformulation in class, these three levels should be presented properly according to learners' proficiency.

Though this research shows three kinds of reformulation which are frequently employed by native speakers in a talk show, they do not cover all the reformulation patterns. Those which do not belong to any of the three remain to be analyzed. Further research remains to be done to clarify how Japanese learners of English make use of reformulation in an unplanned discourse. It is also necessary to test the feasibility of teaching the three kinds of reformulation in class.

Notes

1. We obtained the transcript of "Larry King Live," broadcasted in 2000 on the web at http://www.cnn.com. The corpus consists of 289 files.
2. This means that learners should be familiar with predicate/argument structure level reformulation.

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