Movie Dialogues as Discourse Data in the Study of Forecasting mechanism in Medical Bad News Delivery

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news that drastically and negatively changes a recipient’s view of their future (Buckman 1984:1597)
Motivation

- Delivering a bad news
- Common but challenging
- Emotional impact on the news recipient
Motivation

• Highly emotionally-charged nature of bad news delivery

• Methodological difficulties in carrying out such a study
  – access to data collection
  – informed consent
  – patient confidentiality
Movie dialogue

Micro mechanisms in conversational interaction

- artificially designed discourse
- generally not considered as credible samples of naturally occurring conversation.
- lack of ‘dysfluency’ (Biber et al. 1999:1048 and Chafe 1985:113)
- pauses, hesitations, false starts, afterthoughts, word searches, repetition, or fillers.
Macro mechanisms

Discourse patterns at a more general or higher level

they are composed of a set of speech acts and discourse features.

they more in communicating propositional content and achieving certain interactional goals.

forecasting in bad news delivery
Forecasting mechanism

- Instead of announcing the bad news directly, the news deliverer tends to give off some verbal or non-verbal clues which then lead the recipient to guess what the coming news is.
Non-verbal form of forecasting

Schegloff:

- Temporal and spatial arrangement: not telling the news over phone; arranging the talk in private space
- Signaling identity: policemen or priest
- Showing demeanor
Verbal form of forecasting

1. Apologizing
2. Formulating the news in equivocal expressions
3. Steering the recipient’s incorrect guesses
   - Upward revision when the actual news is better
   - Downward revision when the actual news is worse;
     e.g., a dispreferred response, (delaying the news with silence, repair, hesitation, accounts, mitigations, or formulated in long turns)
4. Pre-announcement: have you heard?
5. Elaborating on reports: all efforts doctors have made on the dying patient.
A sense of un-usuality

- Tsai 2012: feeling of empathy and sense of un-usuality are key elements in forecasting mechanism
- Understanding of the impact of bad news on the receivers, news deliverers hesitate to tell the news;
- However, being aware that withholding the news is not right, consciously or unconsciously, the deliverers start to behave un-usually, which then creates a sense of un-usuality on the recipient’s part and thus achieves the effect of orienting the recipient to figure out the bad news
Methodology

• Discourse analysis of three scenes of bad news delivery observed in films
  – Saving Private Ryan
  – Fatal Attraction
Main arguments

• ‘Macro’ mechanisms, i.e., forecasting in bad news delivery, are shared in both spontaneous and artificial dialogues.

• In movie dialogues, pauses and silence (longer than 2 seconds) are extensively used to forecast the bad news.

• Movie dialogues can be used as a supplement for spontaneous dialogues, especially in the study of difficult communication.
Forecasting observed in movie dialogue

• Non-vocal forms of forecasting lead to the sense of un-usuality
  - in-person visit
  - the black vehicle with a star sign,
  - the man in military uniform,
  - the man dressed as a priest
Dan has to tell Beth regarding:

- Dan has an affair with Alex
- Alex is pregnant
Fatal attraction 01:28:40-01:31:20

1. (Dan is standing at the front door in deep thought during the rain.)

2. **W:** Did you call the police?

3. **H:** Not yet, no.

4. **W:** Why not?

5. (4-second pause, then Dan closes the front door.)

6. **H:** Honey, we got to talk.

7. (10-second pause, then Dan looks depressed and upset)

8. **W:** What is it?

9. (3-second pause, Dan looks depressed and upset)

10. **H:** I know who did this.

11. **W:** You do? … who?
12. H: (Walking back and forward, not facing the wife) Remember the girl who umm .. umm . came to see the apartment … the one I met in a Japanese restaurant … the one with blonde hair?

13. W: (With a surprise) What is it? Did you have an affair with her?

14. H: (Dan nods) The husband’s extensive use of silence creates a strong sense of un-usuality.

15. (4-second pause)

16. W: You’re scaring me.

17. (Dan looked at Beth, 7-second pause)

18. W: What is it? Did you have an affair with her?

19. H: (Dan looks at Beth) Yes.

20. H: I am so sorry. The last thing I ever wanted to do was to hurt you.
Forecasting observed in movie dialogue

• Non-verbal forms
  – The husband’s not reporting the incident to the police
  – Extensive use of silence (longer than 2 seconds)

• Verbal forms
  – an ambiguous pre-announcement (‘Honey, we got to talk’),
  – delaying the bad news by introducing Alex first
Immediate denial of the incorrect guess (Schegloff 1988: 447)
Preferred sequence
Upward revision of the incorrect guess

22. W: Are you in love with her?
23. H: No, it was one night. It didn’t mean anything.
24. (Dan looks at Beth, 11-second pause, then he turns away)
25. W: What has it got to do with what’s happened?
26. (5-second pause)
27. H: She’s pregnant.
Forecasting observed in movie dialogue

- preferred response: immediate denial
- dis-preferred response: silence
- Steer Beth toward a closer picture to the actual bad news
Pauses and silence

• As a micro mechanism: inevitably produced to facilitate the cognitive efforts involved in spontaneous speech production

• By definition of ‘planned discourse’, such cognitive dysfluency is mostly resolved in movie dialogoue.

• As a macro mechanism: strategically used to dramatize the tension in most conflict talks, the fundamental ingredient in movie-making (Culpeper 2005:46)
Conclusion

Forecasting as a macro mechanism in bad news delivery is observed both in spontaneous and planned dialogues.

Pauses and silence (longer than 2 seconds) are extensively used to dramatize the emotional tension in bad news in movie dialogues.

Movies dialogues are possible candidates for discourse data, especially in the study of difficult communication.