

Narrative frame in therapeutic setting. Thematic structures in conversation and enunciative content analysis

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Abstract

The present research intends to analyze the specific conversational frame of therapeutic setting. A.A.I. grid (Adult Attachment Interview) was used to explore relational context in a family system. A multiple approach was adopted to analyze the speech production: a content analysis approach in order to defining the thematic structures of discourse (the topic semantic areas) and to qualifying conversational and behavioral moves (“glosses”) used by the speaker to manage the narrative (the self-biographical memories) and locutory (the present therapeutic setting) contexts; a conversational analysis approach, to individuate the linguistic strategy and the conversational styles adopted in different emotive and cognitive context. In this second phase we consider two discursive dimension, micro- (i.e. predicative and subject forms, disfluency indexes, etc.) and macro-components of discourse (turn-taking regulation, the statement complexity, etc.). Conversational and content analysis allow defining the prototypical discursive style of the patient in therapeutic setting, related to the functional or dysfunctional operative working models stored during his/her evolutive development. Finally a comparison between the couple convergence or divergence respect to the conversational choices is considered.

Keywords: textual analysis; linguistic style; clinical conversational setting; attachment relationship; Adult attachment Interview;

1. Introduction

Our research's field is clinical interview of A.A.I (Adult Attachment Interview) which is used to analyze typical attachment styles in adult relationships (Main & Goldwyn, 1994; Fava Vizziello & Simonelli, 1997). In this perspective we consider discourse as the principal context to survey the nature of the close relationships, analyzing linguistic strategies adopted and thematic structures of discourse.

Frame analysis (Goffman, 1981), conversational approach of thematic structures analysis and discursive semantic (van, Dijk 1997; Ghiglione, Matalon & Bacri, 1985) as well as content enunciative analysis of discourse (Losito, 1993) are the direct reference of the present paper, with particular attention to the cognitive structures involved in the speech production of therapeutic setting, as memories reworking and cognitive planning of interpersonal discourse.

First of all, we consider therapeutic setting as a typical *conversational narrative frame* (from Goffman's point of view), characterized by a narrative structure. This frame is defined as an autobiographical tale, in which speaker exposes his life's story, defining actors and actions that are the focus of the speech.

From a linguistic perspective clinical frame is defined as prototypical text production, characterized by two specific characteristics: recourse of explicative discourse and definition of a relation of cause-effect link between events. It differs from the argumentative text because it's more than a persuasive argument to convince someone and, at the same time, it's different from the historic discourse, because it isn't an impersonal narration of facts but instead a personal point of view about events. The speaker not only narrates his story to a hearer, but his goal coincides with the construction of a plot or, from a psychological perspective, a global

discursive schema. The ability to formulate a coherent speech, choosing thematic, semantic and pragmatic appropriate components of discourse, reflects the competence of subject respect to his narration, and his equilibrate affects with the events told. Therefore, plot construction involves a cognitive planning, defined by thematic choose, global organization of contents and their articulation in narrative scenes.

Our interest is focalized on the speaker and hearer figures too, with their many roles. In fact the speaker is characterized by his *narrative* role, as the subject that tells his story to a hearer, who has the goal to explain the events that characterized his life's experiences. At the same time he becomes a *character* of his own autobiographical story that, with the other characters, acts a specific plot on the stage. Moreover in the hic et nunc of therapeutic frame he is a *locutor*, that has to manage his speaker's role with the co-author represented by therapist. This one has a role of *co-narrator*, who works with the patients to make meaningful the narrative text. But he is an *addressee* and a target for the speaker too, since he's the object to which the persuasive strategy (about the content and the plausibility of the speech) is direct. At the end he has the therapeutic role of "*expert*", defying a specific relation with his patient with a top-down direction, in which the second is in a low position in comparison of the high condition of the "expert".

Moreover, the use of semi-structured grid of A.A.I. allows to analyze the process of memories' reconstruction and the function of three principal memory structures, procedural, semantic and episodic. From cognitive prospective this ability requires not only a coherent formulation of thoughts and their translation into a linguistic production but also the regulation of the pragmatic relations with one's own interlocutor. The *cognitive pragmatic approach* of communication (Grice, 1993; Bara, 1999) allows to integrate the conversational analysis, considering the speaker's speech as a tool to manage relationships. First of all, using his strategic planning the subject controls the relation with the therapist, with specific *conversational* and *behavioral moves*. From this perspective the speaker has the possibility to define a cooperative relation with his interlocutor or to refuse the cooperation, adopting moves like to agree to refuse, to denigrate, etc. These pragmatic chooses concern as conversational as behavioral dimension. In fact the subject is allowed to cooperate on the conversational plane but at the same time to refuse the cooperation from behavioral perspective, or, at the contrary, to appear cooperative behaviorally but to break the conversational alliance with his listener. The conversational analysis has the purpose to discover the specific points of the discourse in which the speakers explicate his cooperative/non cooperative intentions, specifically with *behavioral* and *conversational glosses*.

The final intent of our analysis is directed to find specific speaker's discursive styles (Anolli & Balconi, in press). This concept is defined by linguistic and psychological meanings. In fact, we can consider stylistic component as a whole of linguistic verbal and non-verbal indexes. From psychological perspective, the stylistic production reflects a preceding cognitive and emotive plane acted by the speaker to co-regulate his conversational exchange. In this second meaning, the linguistic production should allow to define the cognitive engagement of the speaker and his communicative intentions (Anolli & Balconi, 1998a).

2. Objectives and hypothesis

The first purpose of the research consists in the analysis of thematic structures of the discourse. Particularly we consider the topical components of the discourse. Specifically, the topic/theme of speech is considered as: 1) *discursive aboutness*; 2) *the starting points of the discourse*; 3) *the attentional center of the speech*. Consequently, the structure of adult attachment interview (A.A.I.) will be reduced to semantic areas that represent a coherent independent topic.

The second goal of our research coincides with the analysis of the conversational organization of discursive production. We intend to show the global structure of discursive planning from a cognitive pragmatic perspective and for this reason the speech will be considered as composed

by conversational and behavioral moves used by the speakers to regulate his relationship with therapist. Moreover, we want to analyze the cooperative/non cooperative intent of the speaker from conversational and behavioral points of view.

In this research we will analyze too the presence of a different configuration of communicative linguistic styles in the thematic areas previously characterized. The quantitative content analysis is the direct reference for the enunciative analysis of content (Losito, 1993).

Our hypothesis is that the communicative styles of different subjects will allow highlighting the connection between communicative strategies and the representation of critical experiences. So our first purpose coincides with exploring communication-relation link in some specific thematic areas, considered as relevant for the family development.

We also want to verify the frequency of specific linguistic indices, both verbal and non-verbal, to test their value as markers of experience. Particularly, we will analyze the presence of homogeneous configurations of linguistic markers which show the speaker's emotional arousal in such thematic areas as the relationship with one's own mother and father as well as the re-elaboration of personal loss. Particularly, we will explore these styles from a cognitive and an emotive point of view, considering both micro- (as number of words, number of predicative forms, etc.) and macro-analytical components of discourse (as number of turn-taking, etc.) (Anolli & Balconi, 2001; Crittenden, 1997). Moreover, we want to explore disfluency indices (pauses, interruptions of words, etc.), that represent the difficulty of integration between thoughts and feelings in speakers' discourse, and exclusive lexicon as specific words and expressions with high frequency in textual corpus (explicative and adversative expressions, etc.).

We believe that the speaker will use an elliptic and impersonal communicative strategy (reduction of the number of words, fewer personal pronouns, fewer and shorter utterances) when he experiences an emotive detachment and with clear intentions to move away from his discourse. Moreover, we expect that subject shows more disfluency indexes, with more frequent pauses and interrupted words, in high arousal condition and when he is unable to control his emotive behavior. Cognitive strategies and mental engagement will be emphasized by presence of mental predicates and explicative expressions, with longer turn taking (Balconi, 2000).

3. Method and Procedure

3.1. Subject

We analyzed eight couple of subjects of families with one member symptomatic (young son, aged 18-25, affected by drug dependence) as a typical context of relational disturb. In particular, we considered the parents of the young patient as relationally imprinted toward the transmission of lack of affection, themselves victims of premature separation from their parents (the grandparents). In this phase of our research we analyze the father's interview. So, our subjects coincide with eight fathers (with age range from 45 to 55), all coming from Milan and outer city.

3.2. Instruments

A.A.I. grid. In the first phase of analysis subjects are provided with A.A.I. grid. Adult Attachment Interview consists of a half-structured grid of items (25 questions) that explores principal relational dimensions of attachment between more than one generation (at least two). The sequence of questions is pre-ordered, and it is composed of invariant elements (Main & Goldwin, 1994; Main, 1995; Fava Vizziello & Stocco, 1997). It's oriented on two principal axes, the cognitive and emotive ones. For examples, the item about the "relation with mother" is formulated like that: "Would you like to describe the relation you had with your mother during your childhood?". In the area "losses and mournful events" we find, for example, the

following question: “Was there any mournful event in your family when you where a child and what was your reaction to it? In your opinion, did this mournful has any emotive effect on your development?”.

Coding procedure - Textual corpus. From the conversational plot of the half-structured interview, a conversational map was produced, coded according to the criteria proposed by the approach of conversational analysis and standard pragmatic coding system (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984; Levinson, 1987). We were particularly careful to notice paralinguistic elements, as the interruptions of discourse, vowel lengthening and pitch profile.

3.3. Procedure

3.3.1. Conversational analysis and thematic structures analysis

Definition of thematic areas of discourse. From the item of the interview we made a first analysis using ADP (prepositional analysis of discourse) proposed by Ghiglione e coll. (1985). We apply the thematic segmentation of discourse to the global textual corpus as context unit, using two distinct criterions to define thematic areas. First of all we apply a *semantic criterion*, that allows to find the background element (i.e. the *topic* or *theme of discourse*) in contrast with the foreground information (the rheumatic component). The second criterion to segment the discourse is specifically conversational, defined by conversational moves (for example the conversational switch: “At about this argument, what could you tell me...”). Therefore, we define the thematic area as a relevant semantic context, based on a thematic focus and co-managed by speaker-hearer during the conversation.

Qualification of thematic areas. In the second phase, we have the intent to underlie the presence of micro text of the narrative frame that characterize each specific semantic area. Specifically, we want to define the *cooperative* or *non-cooperative intent* of the speaker referring to the conversational and behavioral moves. Our intent consists in a discourse analysis focused on the *conversational* and *behavioral chooses* used to regulate speech and relations. Moreover, we want to explore the coherence/incoherence of global structure. The hypothesis is that the presence of congruent procedural models (Crittenden, 1997) of their experiences allows the subject to organize a coherent discourse, or, from the content perspective, an articulated plot, a coherent explicative discursive structure and, from relational point of view, a cooperative speech linked to specific conversational and behavioral moves. We considered the two plains of conversational and behavioral glosses crossed with the *narrative* and *locutory axes*. Therefore, we considered the conversational moves acted by the locutor and the conversational moves described by the narrator as two distinct type of acts. Similarly, we had two dimension of behavioral dates: the glosses used to regulate the relation between the characters of the story and the behavioral moves used by the locutor to manage his relations in the hic et nunc with the therapist. The cooperativity/non cooperativity integrated the last two dimensions. More specifically we distinguish some typology of these glosses in terms of cooperativity/non-cooperativity characteristics, as you can see in the next schema:

Conversational moves		Behavioral moves	
locutory	narrative	locutory	narrative
Cooperativity			
Non cooperativity			

An integrative component is the capacity to regulate cognitively the relation with his own narration and the present condition of conversational exchange with the therapist. For example the conversational index of *metacognitive recursivity* shows the impact of cognitive dimension on the speech.

We report in the following sequences some examples of the analysis realized.

- Behavioral glosses of the locutor: non cooperativity condition

Narrative getting out:

T(211): However, we'll see the next week all together, no?

P(211): Ah, the next week

T(212): It seems that we decided

P(212): Ah, I don't know, I don't know. I didn't know that I had to come here

T(213): You don't remember...?

- Behavioral glosses of the locutor: cooperativity condition

Acceptance of interlocutor propose:

T(46): Could you describe any episode of this relationship?

T(46): Yes, I remembered the event and I try to describe it

- Behavioral glosses of the narrator: non cooperativity condition

Devaluation of the relation:

T(134): Could you be clearer?

P(134): With my mother the relation was inexistent

T(135): So you could describe your relation...

T(135): Yes, when there was a problem in the family we couldn't address her

3.3.2. *Enunciative content analysis*

In the third phase we realize a quantitative content analysis considering the utterance as the object-unit. The textual corpus previously coded was analyzed with software support of *Sphinx Survey Lexica Edition 2.0*, to consider the topology and frequency of single units of analysis. Specifically we consider two linguistic plains of analysis, the micro- and macro-components of speech (van Dijk, 1985; 1997). In the first case utterance were segmented in the principal components of *subjective* and *predicative component*. Each of these elements was successively classified into the three categories of *grammatical*, *lexical* and *semantic indexes* (Ghiglione & Blanchet, 1991). In the second case, the macro-components of discourse coincide with the complexity of speech (for example the total number of turn taking, the averaged length of the utterances, etc.). At the other hand, we considered the principal linguistic elements that characterized speaker discourse using a frequency criterion (10% of total frequency of units in the lexicon). These units were divided into *linguistic functional categories*, each of these categories considered for their semantic proprieties. (Losito, 1993). For example we defined the adversativity category, constituted by adverbial forms ("but", "on the contrary"), predicative locution of oppositivity ("I don't believe..."), etc. On the whole, the specific lexicon defines a typical linguistic style used by the speaker as invariant.

4. Analysis

4.1. *Analysis of thematic structures and discursive semantic*

We found nine different thematic areas in the A.A.I., they own inwardly consistent from the content and the conversational points of view. Specifically we indicate these areas as: the *relation with his own mother*, the *relation with his own father*, the *relations with preferred people*, the *family history*, *losses and mournful events*, the *negative life's episodes*, *self rielaboration* and *rielaboration of intimate relationships*, and the *self-report of parental role*.

From thematic perspective we consider each of these areas a specific topic of the speech that characterize the background of the discursive frame.

Successively, for each of the areas we could define qualitatively the typology of narrative text as cooperative/non-cooperative discourse. In fact, conversational and behavioral glosses allow to distinguish some prototypical way to formulate one's own speech. We find areas characterized by low collaborative frame, as the area of relation with the mother, and areas with high conversational and behavioral cooperation, like family history and the rielaboration of the self. From cognitive perspective we found different subjective ability to construct a coherent discourse linked to the thematic topic. In some areas in fact, the speaker hasn't a sufficient ability to organize coherently his speech (for example with broken metacognitive recursivity) showing a dysfunctional cognitive impact with his narration.

For example in the area "relation with own mother", from conversational and behavioral point of view we can distinguish some episode of opposition, like in:

T (231): You couldn't...

P(231): I don't remember this situation, no I don't

On the contrary, in the area "family history" we found a high cognitive competence in describing the events and the characters of the narration, as in:

T(56): And when did you realize that the situation was changed?

P(56): I was very young, at the time I attended the secondary school. I remember a particular episode...

Particularly, we hypothesized that the loss of cognitive control and the consequent low structured or opposite speech reflect the inability of the speaker to remember critical life's events and to manage the relation in the *hic et nunc* of the therapeutic setting.

4.2. Enunciative content analysis

In the second analysis we consider the enunciative content of utterance from a quantitative point of view. For each of the micro- and macro-indexes we introduced a statistical procedure to verify the effect of the thematic context (the nine semantic areas) on the linguistic dimension. The areas were considered as quantitatively balanced respect to the number of items (three items).

Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance was used to analyse data of continuous variables (linguistic indexes). We report the principal consideration for only any of the areas considered. In particular, the main effect "type of area" is significant for the *disfluency index* variable (number of interruptions) ($F_{2,7}=3.56$, $p=.054$) considered as indicative of each subject's emotional involvement. Above all, this index is present in the area *relation with mother*. Disfluent communication shows the difficulty of integrating thoughts and feelings, in competition with each other. Besides, the use of *fewer action predicates* instead of in the area *relation with father* ($F_{2,7}=5.78$, $p=.015$) and, definitely, more *mental predicates* than action ones, indicates a high investment in the elaboration of contents by the speaker. In fact he expresses *his own point of view* and his thinking about the situation instead of describing contents in an impersonal way. Nevertheless, the main effect is significant for the emotive predicates ($F_{2,7}=3.59$, $p=.054$), with more emotive type in area relation with father instead of relation with mother, underlies a general inability to talk about his own feelings and to show them publicly. On the whole, the strategy used by speaker describing his relation with mother's figure shows high participation and high value from cognitive and emotive points of view.

On the other hand, in the area *relation with father* we find an increase of conversational *impersonal indices* (more impersonal pronouns) ($F_{2,7}=4.56$, $p=.051$). The subject uses this

strategy to keep a distance from his utterances. Besides, this communicative style is characterized by *reticence*: the speaker's speech is often lacking in predicative forms ($F_{2,7}=4.90$, $p=.024$), although it shows more frequent turn-taking (an increase in the number of total utterances) ($F_{2,7}=7.21$, $p=.007$). Moreover, the presence of fluent and uninterrupted communication indicates a higher emotional detachment (Anolli & Balconi, 1998b). As for syntactic markers on the macro- level the speaker uses a *descriptive* and *explanatory style* (with an increase of words like "because", "so", etc. and decrease of words like "if", "maybe", etc.) ($F_{2,7}=6.87$, $p=.008$). Also, the frequent use of *action predicates* makes conversation narrative and linked to reality, instead of expressing a subjective point of view.

The area *losses and negative events* shows a likeness with the areas concerning both father and mother relationships. First of all, subjects use an *impersonal style*, with definitely fewer pronoun forms; on the other hand there is an increase of the *disfluency index* (interrupted words). So, also in this case we note the speaker's high emotional involvement in his discourse, with higher arousal (Anolli & Balconi, 1998a). Moreover, this area is characterized by *fewer emotive and mental predicative forms*: the subject seems to refuse his own involvement in the semantic domain explored, with less personal presence.

5. General Discussion

The two distinct plains of analysis allow to consider the clinical frame as an articulated conversational context, defined by specific content, conversational and relational co-ordinates. Particularly we find that in relation to the thematic areas subject uses different narrative strategies of discourse, characterised by specific conversational and behavioral moves. Some of these areas results more coherently organised from semantic and structural points of view than other where subject shows a reduced ability to articulate the speech (Anolli & Balconi, in press). About content enunciative analysis, the speaker points out specific linguistic strategies to manage conversation and he differentiates his chooses from the cognitive and emotive perspective. At the whole, stylistic approach shows it heuristic value in order to defining relational and conversational intent of the patient respect to his narration and the present context of therapeutic setting.

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