

How Language Use is Affected in an Emergency Situation

Contents

<u>Introduction and Hypothesis</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>Methodology</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Features List</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>Analysis</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>Conclusion</u>	<u>11</u>
<u>Appendix</u>	<u>12</u>
<u>Bibliography</u>	<u>17</u>

Introduction

I chose this investigation topic after watching a documentary detailing the phone calls made from the World Trade Centre on September 11 2001. The importance of the phone calls was made clear in the programme, as for many of the relatives of the speakers they were the only mementos they had of their loved ones. I also discovered that one of the tapes was played by the prosecution in the trial of one of the terrorists behind the attacks to illustrate the human suffering caused.

I aim to discover how language changes according to the pressure on the speaker, and how the different backgrounds and circumstances of different speakers affect the language choices they make in this extraordinary situation.

There is some theory surrounding the use of language in answer phone messages, although it is generally domestic and/or business phone calls on which the analysis is focused. There is a suggestion that verb tenses will change according to the caller's idea of when the message will be received. For example, *"If you hear this when you're getting back from holiday then I hope you enjoyed it"*. Here the tenses are automatically changed, seemingly with little thought or planning, to adjust to the hypothetical time frames involved. I wonder whether the callers in my data will have the clarity of thought to make such complex language choices under the circumstances.

Hypothesis

Through the process of my investigation I expect to find that people's language changes significantly under the stress of an emergency situation. I expect that many of the subjects of my analysis will struggle to express themselves coherently. The subjects will probably be confused by their situation and if in a conversation may struggle to respond appropriately to the other speaker. For example, in conversations I expect Grice's maxims to be violated because of the subject prioritising their survival over their appropriate use of language.

Methodology

My data was collected from two separate sources, the main body being a Channel 4 documentary entitled "9/11: Phone Calls from the Towers", first broadcast on Friday 11th September 2009. I collected this data by watching the programme several times and transcribing the conversations and message played. The calls were subtitled by the programme makers, however, I chose to ignore these subtitles as they were designed to make the dialogue clearer for the viewer, and omitted some features of the language used, including repetitions and fillers. I transcribed the data in as much detail as possible including intonations when relevant.

The source from which I collected my data meant that there was a possibility for bias within the data. For example, as the data I collected had originally been selected for television it is less likely to be incoherent – the programme makers would have selected examples of speech in which the meaning was clearest.

Features List

Grammar

- Examining how the speakers open their messages

Pragmatics

- Examining the structures used and how they betray underlying meanings

Lexis

- Non fluency features
- Jargon

Discourse

- Examining factors affected the length of messages

GrammarAnswerphone messages: First 10 words:

1. Melissa Harrington-Hughes	Sean it's me I just wanted you to know that
2. Jim Gartenberg	Jill there's a fire on my floor, I love you,
3. Brad Fetchet	Hey mom it's Dad , ah just wanted to call and
4. Stephen Mulderry	Mom it's Stephen , um, my plane er my building got
5. Walter Hynes	Hi Ron it's me , just wanted to let you know
6. Brian Nunez	Neal it's Brian – a plane crashed into the Trade Centre

All of the speakers identify the recipient by name or the appropriate familial term (eg "Mom") within the first two words of the message. The convention for the speaker's identification of themselves is a little looser; they generally identify themselves within the first four words of the message. However this identification may only involve "it's me" (Messages 1 & 5), and in Jim Gartenberg's case there is a notable lack of self-identification. These three messages happen to be the ones between married couples. This suggests a level of intimacy that is stronger than the others, even taking precedent over the mother/son relationships in 3 & 4.

The verb "wanted" is used in 50% of the extracts, as if the speaker feels the need to qualify the reasons for their call. This also goes some way to softening the blow they are about to deliver, as the use of "wanted" in place of the alternative verb "needed" suggests that the speaker is simultaneously reassuring themselves and the recipient of the call that they are in control of the situation.

Pragmatics

Passive/active structures:

The sentences structures used to describe the situation to the recipient in almost all of my data, answer phone messages and conversations, are active.

Brad Fetchet	<i>a plane crashed into World Trade Centre one</i>
Walter Hynes	<i>the second plane they just crashed into that building</i>
Brian Nunez	<i>a plane crashed into the Trade Centre and it's on fire</i>
New York 911 operator recordings	<i>a plane has crashed into the <?> World Trade Centre</i>
Jim Gartenberg	<i>I have no idea where the plane hit</i>
News Anchor	<i>Um, there are two planes, one went into one (.) tower one went into the other tower</i>

Only Stephen Mulderry breaks this convention:

"My building got hit by a plane".

The prevalence of this active structure suggests that the speakers are already suspicious that the crash was not an accident. This readiness to apportion blame for the attacks within minutes of their occurrence may say something about the American psyche in 2001. Although the mindset that preceded 9/11 was nothing in comparison to the paranoia afterwards, George Bush was elected on the basis that he understood the terrorist threat and therefore would keep America safe. This goes some way to explain the way in which New Yorkers saw the world outside of America even before 9/11. It is possible that this subconsciously affected the way in which those involved spoke about the disaster in the minutes and hours immediately afterwards. For example, Walter Hynes, a member of FDNY even uses the pronoun "they" to refer to the attackers, although there has been no specific message or even indication from the authorities to suggest that organized terrorism was behind the incident.

- Hi Ron it's me, just wanted to let you know I love you and the girls, tell my mom too or we're going down to that Trade Centre thing – the second plane they just crashed into that building so we're on our way down there

The pragmatics of Hynes' language choice suggests that there is some level of fear already present within the minds of New Yorkers that they have been deliberately attacked.

Lexis

Non fluency features

Non-fluency features are the common pauses and fillers such as “er” and “um” used in language. They can include repetition, pauses as hesitation, stuttering perhaps. This may confirm that the speech is spontaneous and not pre-planned. There may be evidence of self-monitoring, which may show itself as incomplete syntax for example. In the 9/11 transcripts the patterns of non fluency features are fascinating, the speech is about as spontaneous as possible. Speakers may for example have expected a live conversation with turn-taking and taking into account the responses of the recipient. For many this was not the reality. The unexpected need to leave a message is something that throws many people, and the effects can often be seen in the language they subsequently use. In these transcripts however, the speech tends to be surprisingly articulate. Perhaps the urgency of the situation means that the opposite effect is to be observed. Below is the transcript of Melissa Harrington-Hughes’ answer phone message to her husband.

- Sean it's me I just wanted you to know that I love you and I'm stuck in this building in New York (1) There's lots of smoke and I just wanted you to know that I love you always.

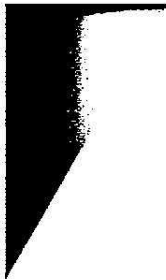
Melissa's speech shows the urgency of her situation. The message is concise, conveying only the information that she deems to be important. Most interesting is the fact that she uses no fillers or non fluency features throughout the message. Contrast this with an answer phone message left under far less urgent circumstances

- (.) er is that Mrs Banks (1) who does talks (1) it's David Marsh er (.) I'm speaker finder for Sheffield Probus and (.) er talk on (1) er (.) the Minsk Journey Minsk (.) journey (1) I'm looking for dates in autumn(.) we meet on the third Thursday of the month (.) I'll

David Marsh's message is punctuated by non-fluency features and pauses. This may reflect the non urgent nature of the situation. He has as much time as he likes (within reason) to leave the message and there is little emotional content. Given the differences between this and Melissa's message, it seems that fillers are a kind of luxury. In an emergency, language becomes more formal than in your run-of-the-mill, daily answer phone message. There simply isn't time for the caller to flounder, picking the right words, or conveying a complex message.

Jargon

The language used by Fire Department Chief Orio Palmer displays distinct evidence of experience of using radio systems for essential communication. He understands the



importance of making his meaning as clear as possible to avoid confusion. For example, he uses the complete words for each number. So fifty five becomes "five five", and "one hundred and four becomes "ten four":

"I'm up to five five"

"ten four, six more to go"

Similarly, Palmer uses jargon to mask the severity of the situation in order to prevent the distress of any civilians within earshot:

"numerous 10-45 code ones"

The term "10-45 code ones" means fatalities. The speaker chooses to use the professional term, which reduces the drama from the situation and makes it seem more like work, and consequently more easy to deal with from a professional point of view.

However, it can be seen that this kind of clarity comes only with the training Palmer has undertaken and high level of experience of such emergency incidents.

Discourse

Length of Messages

There are some accepted patterns regarding the quantities of speech that can be expected from different people. In 2006 a study by Louann Brizendine, clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of California, found that women speak an average of 20,000 words a day, compared to an average of just 7,000 for men. A study on answer phone messages from e-magazine found that messages left by men contained between 11 and 55 words, whereas women's contained between 15 and 166. I therefore expected this pattern to be evident in my data. There was only one message left by a female speaker (Melissa Harrington-Hughes), but I expected to find that her message contained more words than the average of the other, male, messages.

Below is a table aligning the word count of each answer phone message with the speaker, in descending order of words.

1. Brad Fetchet	90
2. Walter Hynes	53
3. Stephen Mulderry	46
4. Melissa Harrington-Hughes	38
5. Brian Nunez	36
6. Jim Gartenberg	29

We can see from the table that the hypothesis about women does not hold up in this situation. Melissa's message comes fourth, in the bottom half of all of the messages. Instead of supporting the expected gender pattern however, the data shows another, unexpected one. The number of words used appears to correspond directly with the relative danger in which the speaker is at the time of leaving the message.

For example, Brad Fetchet's message is considerably longer than the others, at 90 words:

- Hey mom it's Brad, ah just wanted to call and let you know, I'm sure that you've heard, a plane crashed into World Trade Centre one, we're fine, we're in World Trade Centre two, I'm not uh, I'm obviously well over here, but uh, obviously a pretty scary experience I saw a guy (.) fall out of probably the ninety first storey, all the way down, ok, you're welcome to give a call here, I think er, we'll be here all day but uh gi'me a call back, love you

At the time of leaving the message, Brad was in his office on the 89th floor of the South Tower. Only the North Tower had been hit at this point, and even the authorities were working to convince the workers that they were not in danger. It was reported that a tannoy message was deployed announcing: "This building is secure, there is no need to evacuate".

Brad's situation therefore, was conducive to his at least feeling, if not actually being, safe.

A large part of the substantial word count in this message is owing to the number of adverbials, a word form that is lacking in the shortest messages: "Obviously" is repeated and words such as "probably" and "pretty" (in its adverbial form) suggest a level of evaluation of the situation that is more complex than Jim Gartenberg and Brian Nunez, for example, can afford.

Walter Hynes' situation is again considerably safer than that of the speakers in the shorter messages. The defining factor of Hynes' situation is that at the time of leaving the message, Hynes was crucially outside of the building. Although Hynes' message contains some of the intimate family messages common to those inside of the building, Hynes also is able to elaborate on the situation to some extent:

- Hi Ron it's me, just wanted to let you know I love you and the girls, tell my mom too er we're going down to that Trade Centre thing – the second plane they just crashed into that building so we're on our way down there – I love you, I'll talk to you later

The message does however miss out the adverbials and elaboration present in Brad Fetchet's message. This could be based on the work related environment where Hynes is at the time of leaving the message – he chooses to leave a purely functional message, almost complying with the conventions of work related lexis, rather than choosing to entertain or otherwise.

Brian Nunez' message is the most concise:

Neal it's Brian – a plane crashed into the Trade Centre and it's on fire, and I'm in it, and I can't breathe, tell everyone I love them, and if I don't get out of here, Goodbye

There is not a single filler used. The structure shows clear evidence of a lack of planning: "a plane crashed into the Trade Centre and it's on fire, and I'm in it". In normal conversation, the words would be more likely to follow a pattern such as: "I'm inside the World Trade Centre, which is on fire because it was hit by a plane". However, despite such limitations, the quality of information is unaffected; Nunez succeeds in conveying his message clearly, giving only the salient points. When compared with the floundering message left by David Marsh (see page 7) the contrast is a stark one. Nunez faces his mortality and is able to convey his final thoughts to his brother with considerably more eloquence than the speaker finder for a Sheffield retired men's club is able to employ when doing nothing more than his day job.

Conclusion

My analysis of this data has showed me that extreme stress and danger can have the opposite effect on language that one might expect. Rather than failing to express themselves clearly, using an abundance of fillers, or speaking incoherently, the subjects I studied displayed a surprisingly strong grasp of language under their circumstances. There was evidence of quick decision making and an extremely economical use of time and energy. Speakers knew exactly what they wished to articulate, and did so with as much clarity as their environment allowed. This pattern was so apparent and accurate that these features could be observed to increase relative to the level of safety of the speaker.

Evidence of ideas rooted in their own knowledge and opinions was observed through the pragmatics of some messages, for example Walter Hynes' instinctive use of "they" to refer to the attackers, but in many cases, the language inferred little, instead everything of importance was efficiently articulated out loud. The speakers were never incoherent, and in conversations, surprisingly able to hold their own and speak as if the situation were much more mundane.

We might assume that, especially in a situation such as this, the language used might be a direct product of the environment. Instead it appears that the speaker chooses to use language to fight against such external factors, rather than to surrender to them.

Given a wider selection of data I would be able to conduct a more extensive investigation, and exclude the data bias. I would be interested to compare my data with other messages perhaps from comparable situations to see whether my findings were isolated to the 9/11 attacks or consistent throughout other emergency situations.

Bibliography

9/11 Phone calls from the towers

www.emagazine.org.uk

<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/11/chronology.attack/>

<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/911-phone-calls-from-the-towers>

http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=gyUFyr4sifoC&pg=PA129&lpg=PA129&dq=alison+ross+language+of+answer+phone&source=bl&ots=N0yXYc59Br&sig=UhoZF54YUgokNGufnng2t6VrL54&hl=en&ei=ndNqS_DuClKUjAfpY2MBg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CAcQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=&f=false

