

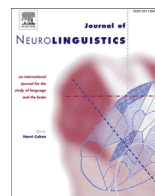


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# Verb use in aphasic and non-aphasic personal discourse: What is normal?



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### ABSTRACT

Sentence and discourse analysis research provides evidence of both impaired and intact ability in verb production in aphasia, based on comparisons made within aphasic subtypes, and between aphasic and control speakers. Comparisons are complicated due to variation in elicitation tasks and genre, participant sample size, and aphasia subtype, as well as methodological differences in determining fluency. In this study, we examined the impact of aphasia on speakers' capacity to talk about their quality of life, applying three analytical methods to 58 speakers' discourse (29 predominantly fluent aphasic speakers; 29 non-aphasic speakers). Both speaker groups produced similar quantity, weight, and type of verbs, with substantial overlap in verb tokens. Relational, material and mental verbs were prevalent. Aphasic speakers had significantly lower predicate argument structure scores, and produced significantly more 0 argument structures, more [Aux + 0] constructions, fewer 1 argument structures in general and fewer 1 argument structures with clausal embedding, compared to non-aphasic speakers. This study provides evidence for intact (semantic weight and type) and impaired (PAS) verb production in aphasia. The heterogeneity within both participant samples challenges assumptions of normality and typicality.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Novel connections in aphasia research

This study connects two distinct research fields in aphasia: linguistic analysis of discourse and quality of life. The former has traditionally focused on analysis of event descriptions, procedural narratives, and fairytale recounts, with a substantial body of evidence accumulated over a number of decades from behavioural studies, and increasingly from neuroimaging studies. By contrast, the latter has developed only more recently since the mid 1990s, with a primary quantitative focus on predictors, methodological concerns (e.g. reliability of informants), and intervention outcomes. In both fields, there is increasing use of personal narratives as data, and thus identifying the linguistic impact aphasia has on discussing one's quality of life motivated the analysis undertaken in this paper.

As verbs play an integral role in personal narratives, they were the focus of analysis, from both syntactic (verb argument structure) and semantic (heavy/light verbs; Halliday's categories) perspectives. The research literature is reviewed with respect to verb production ability and deficit at the sentence level. Although it could be argued sentence level analysis may not reflect a speaker's broader discourse ability, recent research has indicated strong associations between microlinguistic features, such as sentence production, and overall macrolinguistic features, such as relevance and cohesion (Sherratt, 2007).

### 1.2. Challenges in synthesizing the evidence base

A coherent understanding of verb production in aphasia is difficult to achieve, despite the extensive literature that exists. The collective knowledge about verb production ability and deficit is influenced by factors relating to genre, sample size, aphasia type, determinants of fluency, and points of comparison. Firstly genre exerts a significant influence over verb production (Armstrong, 2000), thus attention to the nature of the elicitation tasks is important. A variety of tasks has been used, including single word naming from picture and video (Berndt, Mitchum, Haendiges, & Sandson, 1997); sentence production elicited from short stories of three sentences in length (Barde, Schwartz, & Boronat, 2006; Breedin, Saffran, & Schwartz, 1998); procedural narratives (Ulatowska, Doyel, Freedman-Stern, Macaluso-Haynes, & North, 1983; Ulatowska, North, & Haynes, 1981); Cinderella narrative (Berndt, Haendiges et al., 1997; Saffran, Berndt & Schwartz, 1989; Webster, Franklin, & Howard, 2007); describing the experience of the stroke, job or last holiday (Armstrong, 2001, 2005; Armstrong, Ciccone, Godecke, & Kok, 2011; Bastiaanse, 2011); and describing a happy event (Armstrong, 2005). Whilst it is important to distinguish between tasks eliciting objective information (picture naming) versus personal information, it is equally important to discriminate further within the personal narrative genre, i.e. tasks eliciting *factual* language (describe what you do on a typical Sunday) versus tasks eliciting *evaluative* language (describe a happy event) (Armstrong, 2005). Secondly, findings are based on relatively small samples of aphasic speakers. These include studies with two participants (Armstrong et al., 2011), four and five participants respectively (Armstrong, 2001, 2005), eight participants (Breedin et al., 1998), 11 participants (Berndt, Mitchum, Haendiges, & Sandson, 1997), and 16 participants (Gordon, 2008), as well as small sub-groups within aphasic speaker samples (e.g. Berndt, Mitchum et al., 1997; Breedin et al., 1998). Whilst studies with larger samples do exist ( $N = 22$  participants, Webster et al., 2007;  $N = 23$  participants, Barde et al., 2006), more research with larger numbers of individuals with aphasia is still needed. Thirdly, aphasia type and fluency in relation to verb impairment is an important consideration. Whilst much of the verb impairment literature is based on distinctions between agrammatic and paragrammatic speakers, and differences have been noted (see subsequent paragraphs below), larger studies report no distinctive patterns of verb impairment for fluent and non-fluent aphasic speakers (Cameron, Wambaugh, & Mauszycki, 2010; Webster et al., 2007). Additionally, there are methodological challenges, as researchers use different methods for determining fluency in aphasia, e.g. using BDAE Melodic Line, Phrase Length and Articulatory agility (Armstrong, 2005), using clinician report (Edwards & Bastiaanse, 1998), or by making judgements about the relationship between rate of speech and sentence production (Webster et al., 2007). Finally, some studies report verb deficits by comparing within aphasia subtypes, and other studies compare

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