

Chapter nine:

Communication strategies

In discussing fluency we pointed out that people do not always succeed in converting their communicative intentions into speech without running into problems. We also described a number of ways in which speakers may *cover up* for these problems without their fluency being affected. In this chapter we address ourselves to the related question of what possibilities speakers have for *solving* problems in communication. Although our focus will be on learners, much of the description will be valid for native speakers as well, especially when involved in asymmetric communicative events (either among themselves or with IL speakers).

Foreign language learners often experience a discrepancy between what they would like to say, their communicative intention, and what they know how to say in the foreign language, their IL knowledge. A similar discrepancy occurs in speech reception whenever learners are incapable of securing total comprehension (cf. chapter 8). In order to bridge the gap between communicative needs and limited communicative resources, learners may make use of COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES. This term covers problem-solving devices that learners resort to in order to solve what they experience as problems in speech production and reception.

9.1 Strategies in production

When learners cannot find the word or expression needed, the choices open to them are to give up completely, to reduce the original communicative intention, or to try to solve the problem by making creative use of the communicative resources available. Accordingly a distinction can be made between *reduction strategies*, the most extreme form of which is giving up, and *achievement strategies*, by which learners try to achieve what they actually intend to say. In the following extract from a PIF conversation the learner makes extensive use of achievement strategies:¹

Text 20

NS	do you erm how do you go to school -- erm do you er go to school by bus
L	
NS	yes sometimes er sometimes I take my er -- er -- what's it called -- er
L	
NS	er your oh what does it look like --
L	-- er -- my -- cykel -- er (laugh) "knallert" -- ["knæle"] -- er (laugh)
NS	(laugh)
L	you know er Puch -- kn Puch -- (laugh) you know so -- er some people --
NS	mm -- (laugh)
L	er have er a cykel (laugh) er -- -- no I can't explain it -- you know
NS	aha and some people have a bicycle --
L	aha ycr
NS	and some people have a er -- erm -- a cykel there is a m motor --
L	oh a
NS	bicycle -- with a motor --
L	motor -- is that a bicycle --
NS	no no it's -- a
L	oh
NS	motorcycle -- yer -- so you have a bi-cycle I mean or a bicycle and a
L	bicycle yer er
NS	motorcycle -- (laugh) aha -- and you you have a motorcycle --
L	oh yer -- ycr ...

9.1.1 Achievement strategies

The learner in text 20 has the problem that she does not know the English word *motor* for Danish *knallert*. Instead of giving up and thus abandoning the topic she makes a series of attempts at conveying to the native speaker what she wants to say. We can list her attempts:

1. cykel
2. knallert
3. ['knæle]
4. Puch
5. some people have a ...

What we see illustrated here is two main types of ACHIEVEMENT STRATEGIES: strategies which make use of the learner's L1 (1, 2, 3, 4) and strategies that try to reach a solution by making creative use of the learner's IL knowledge (5). We shall discuss each of these in some detail, as well as two other types of achievement strategies, interactional and non-linguistic strategies.

L1 based strategies

It is convenient to distinguish between three types of L1 based strategies, two of which are represented in text 20.

Category	Description	Example	Comment
code-switching	learner borrows one or more words from L1, aware that it/they are not English	my "knallert"	Danish word for moped
anglicizing	learner tries to make a Danish word sound English, thinking it may now be English	[knele]	modification of Danish word "knallert" to English pronunciation
literal translation	learner makes a word-for-word translation from the mother tongue	I take myself in the neck	Danish: "Jeg tager mig selv i nakken" = I pull myself together

Fig. 11: L1 based strategies

There is a considerable risk of such L1 based strategies not being comprehensible. In the case of the three quoted examples, none of them was understood by the native speaker in the contexts in which they were used. L1 based strategies may be a safer bet when the vocabulary has entered both Danish and English from the same foreign source (eg *spaghetti*, *restaurant*, and a lot of the technical or specialised vocabulary based on Latin and Greek).² For the same reason the learner's attempt to use *Puch*, an assumedly international brand name, was no bad idea. Had the native speaker known something about mopeds (which she apparently did not), she would pro-

bably have been able to understand what the learner was trying to say at this point.

IL based strategies

Both 'anglicizing' and 'literal translation' make use of the learner's IL knowledge. They have, however, been classified as L1 based because the point of departure in each case is a form in the learner's L1. With the four types of strategies listed below, there are few traces of the learner's L1 in the strategy.

Category	Description	Example	Comment
paraphrase	learner explains by means of other English words, often focussing on characteristic properties or functions of intended referent	some people have a car – and some people have a bicycle – and and some people have a cykel there is a motor ...	she tries to explain moped as a category of transport between bicycle and car
generalisation	learner assumes that her original goal can be reached by using a generalised IL term	people from all country	original goal: young people from all parts of the world
restructuring	learner is unable to complete initial sentence pattern, breaks off and starts in a different way	I have four – I have er three sisters and one brother	learner realizes that she does not know the English for Danish <i>søskende</i> ('sisters and brothers')
word-coinage	learner constructs a new IL word	funny-dress ball	fancy-dress ball

Fig. 12: IL based strategies

IL based strategies have a better chance of being understood than L1 based strategies. The main risks with IL based strategies are that extensive use of paraphrasing and restructuring strategies may make considerable demands on the addressee's patience. Generali-

zation strategies may create an impression of vagueness. However IL based strategies offer the greatest scope for making creative use of one's communicative resources in a way which is maximally efficient, short of knowing the appropriate word or expression. The fact that the native speaker in text 20 drew the erroneous conclusion that the learner was talking about a motor-cycle is more a consequence of her lack of relevant knowledge of the world (mopeds are not significant in British culture) than of the learner failing to paraphrase exactly what she had in mind.

Interactional strategies

One choice open to the learner in situations in which there is direct contact with the addressee is to appeal for help.

Category	Description	Example	Comment
appeal	learner invites addressee to help her out directly or indirectly	my sweater is - er what colour is this	points to her sweater

It is easy to see that the strategy of appealing is closely related to what we termed self-initiated, interactional repair in chapter 4. The difference is that with repair work as we described it, the speaker first tries to express her intention in one way and then realizes that there is a problem, whereas the above example of an appeal contains no 'first attempt' which then needs repairing. This slight difference between repairs and at least some appeals should not, however, obscure the fact that there are strong similarities between interactional repairs and the use of interactional communication strategies.³

Non-linguistic strategies

In the example of an appeal above, the learner supports her verbal request by pointing to her sweater. This combination of linguistic and non-linguistic strategies such as gesture and facial expression is common in situations in which there is visual contact between the in-

teractants. Occasionally, non-linguistic strategies are used instead of linguistic attempts, especially by beginners.

9.1.2 Sequences of achievement strategies

In the following extract from an intermediate learner,⁴ we see gesture supplementing linguistic strategies. The text is chosen to illustrate how learners at this level often make use of L1 based, IL based, and non-linguistic communication strategies, and that a sequence of strategies is needed to reach the goal. The topic is why people move out of Copenhagen. The learner has a Danish concept in mind (>parcelhus<), and does not know an English equivalent for it.

Text 21

transcript	comment	communication strategy
NS why do you think they do that?		
L mm they want a "parcelhuset"		
NS uhuh what's that?		
L erm it's a house erm it's not an apartment	gesture indicates plot of land	code-switching
NS mm		
L but it's a big house where just THEY live	gesture shapes house	paraphrase + non-linguistic
NS oh I see a sort of totally detached house		
L yeah		paraphrase + non-linguistic

The first paraphrase the learner uses is a negative definition, »it is not an apartment«, which puts the native speaker on the right track. With the additional linguistic information in the second paraphrase, plus the gestures, she is able to supply what she believes is the words the learner was needing. It is impossible to decide whether the learner actually recognizes the words »a totally detached house«, ie has it in his vocabulary, or whether he takes a bit of a gamble,