

LINGUISTICS

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DISCOURSE STRUCTURE OF ‘SPEED DATING’ AS A SPEECH GENRE

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Abstract

The present article is devoted to the study of ‘speed dating’ as a speech genre phenomenon. The research is focused on its topic frame, communication strategies and communication tactics. Being an “artificial” genre as compared to casual dating, speed dating creates some psychological stress during interaction. This accounts for the discussion of the communication strategies that help remove this psychological stress, as well as those leading to communication failures.

Keywords: topic frame, communication strategies, psychological stress

1. Introduction

Dating as a speech genre relates to the field of interpersonal gender-marked communication and its research inspires great

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interest as a psychological, social, and linguistic phenomenon. Nowadays, finding a partner and establishing good relationships between men and women becomes a real problem. Limited number of natural settings for romantic encounters generates new forms of this genre which are supposed to fit in the rhythm and values of modern society.

We analyze speed dating (hereinafter - SD) by attributing it to such a range of speech genres that can be called 'organized' dating, where the intention to establish a romantic relationship with the opposite sex is formed not at the time of the meeting with a partner but long before that. The desire to convey a positive image to a potential partner is realized by the *deliberate* use of various communication skills as opposed to casual dating when people's natural desire to attract a partner makes an *unconscious* choice of communicative strategies. 'Organized' nature of SD is supported by the abundance of practical guidelines of effective skills for communication with the opposite sex. SD normally occurs within a particular social event and implies a certain scenario of communication.

2. Related research

Some other speech genre types of 'organized' dating have already been widely studied by linguists, for example, *personal ads* in lonely hearts columns [1-3]. SD phenomenon, too, has repeatedly been the target of research [4]. So, American psychologists and P. Eastwick and E. Finkel study this phenomenon in terms of its socio-psychological features, such as the degree of "romantic interest" of partners to each other ("passion" - "romantic desire" - "chemistry" - "date enjoyment ") [5].

According to P. Eastwick and E. Finkel, SD as a whole has much in common with the casual dating, but has a number of specific advantages: 1) the purpose of communication – establishing a romantic relationship – is known to all participants in advance, so the parties are "available" as potential romantic partners; 2) the opportunity to meet a lot of people of the opposite sex at a time; 3) the guarantee that the wrong acquaintance will end quickly and without explanation [6].

3. Methodology

We base our research on the achievements of the Russian school of the theory of speech genres, where a

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speech genre is defined as "*verbalization of a social interaction*". Genre characteristics are the following: first, the subject/topic of verbal interaction, which creates a certain topic frame in a communication situation, second, communicative intention which is realized through communication strategies and tactics, and third, a certain verbal or stylistic representation of a particular genre [7].

Thus, a speech genre has cognitive, pragmatic and stylistic features. Larger genre forms that comprise several interrelated genres are called hypergenre, while microformations inside a speech genre are called subgenres, which coincide with communication tactics [8]. In this article, we focus our attention mainly on cognitive and pragmatic features of SD. In addition, we briefly analyze the vocabulary definitions of the term "speed dating", as well as its extralinguistic features.

4. Background

According to Wikipedia, the term "speed dating" refers to a small social event, a party, organized with the aim to introduce people to each other. The party is usually arranged in a bar or cafe at a specified time and with pre-registration. Visitors pay an entrance fee of about \$ 40-50. During a classical speed dating party, each person enters into a dialogue with 10-15 other participants of the opposite sex.

Girls are placed at tables with numbers. Every three-seven minutes men move from one girl to another. Typically, each participant has a badge with the name attached to the clothes so that during the conversation the partners could address each other by the first name. After each speed date, the participants note their impressions of the potential partner in the "personal match folder". Next, the organizers examine all the "personal match folders" and, in the case of a "match", send contact information to those "matches". The format of speed dating was invented in 1998 by a rabbi Jacob Deveaux from Los Angeles to help people who want to marry to find each other. The first small party was held in Beverly Hills at the end of 1998, Pete's Café. Soon speed dating had spread in the United States and Great Britain and then around the world as an innovative way of dating for successful, but overworked single people [9].

SD has its own electronic version - *on-line speed dating*, which works roughly by the same principle as the "live" SD event: participants are registered on a special website (indicating their gender, age, country and city of residence, e-mail address); the program selects up to fifteen members from the same region, and the participants can communicate on-line for three minutes in an hour with each other, using a webcam (that is the members can see and

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hear each other). After three minutes or earlier a participant presses the ‘yes / no’ button, thereby informing, whether he or she liked the interlocutor; in the case of a “match” the site administration sends the members each other’s contact information [10].

Various lexical interpretations reveal the following semantic components in the semantic structure of the term “speed dating”:

- an organized public event in the bar / cafe;
- all participants are willing to start a romantic relationship;
- multiplicity of dates;
- a time-limited private conversation;
- an opportunity to choose a partner and contact with him / her in the future.

So the electronic version of McMillan English Dictionary provides the following interpretation of the term: “an event at which single people looking for a partner divide into pairs and have short conversations with each other and decide who among those they have met they would like to meet again”[11].

The term “speed dating” has been borrowed by other languages possibly due to its compact nature.

5. Data

We have analyzed 80 video records of dialogues from SD parties organized in American and British cities, as well as SD records in the framework of on-line SD. These videos are available on the Internet through the websites www.youtube.com, www.speeddate.com, <http://speediedate.com>, where they are demonstrated, on the one hand, as advertising samples to attract more customers to such parties, on the other hand, as a teaching tool for future participants who could observe effective and non-effective communication strategies. In addition, we used some episodes from the film “Sex and the City” and some extracts from the novel of contemporary English writer Jane Moore “Dot.Homme”.

6. Discussion

There are two regularly repeated topic frames in the structure of the SD speech genre: *social identification* and *personal identification*.

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These frames are verbalized in the speech of the participants through question-answer unities and utterances, i.e. the SD participants ask each other questions or exchange certain personal information. Several typical topics can be found within the *social presentation* frame: ‘occupation’, ‘job/career’, ‘origin/residence’, ‘marital status (children, marriage)’, the ‘occupation’ topic being verbalized most frequently. E.g.:

W: ***Do you want to be a director or writing, producing?***

M: I wanna ***go into writing, writing and directing***, as everyone said, direct

and write, they wanna get into both.

W: right, do both

M: both, aha.

Personal identification frame is represented by the largest number of topics: ‘hobby’, ‘leisure activities’, ‘physical appearance’, ‘traits of character’, ‘standards or behavior’, ‘gender relationships’, ‘religion’, ‘sex’, ‘life priorities’; the topics which are most frequently verbalized are ‘hobbies’ and ‘leisure activities’:

M: [...] Hmm, so, ***what do you do to your mind?***

W: Ah, so many things. I love the ***theatre, going to music gags, restaurants, reading, travelling, going on the train.***

The next point to refer to is pragmatic features of SD. The SD communicative goal is to encourage the participants to meet someone with whom they can start a romantic relationship, the matchmaking interaction being time-limited. Technically, the goal is achieved if both participants have chosen each other by putting a tick in the “personal match folder”. During a short burst of time the speed-daters must try to appeal to each other, to assess the prospects of further dating and, at the same time, to have smoothly flowing and pleasant interaction even if they do not feel there is a match. It has been observed that this goal employs two strategies to be achieved: firstly, *opposite sex attraction strategy*, and secondly, *cooperative communication strategy*.

Opposite sex attraction strategy engages certain tactics shaping the course of the interaction: *social identification utterance, personal identification utterance, expression of opinion, partner assessment, compliment, offer, confession*. Besides verbalized subgenres, we have also found non-verbal signs used for facilitating opposite sex attraction: smile, smart / coquettish glance, gestures and movements; gender accentuating clothes:

W: ***You look good! {smiling}***

M: ***You look wonderful yourself {smiling}***

W: Oh, thank you {laughing} ***{bowing her head in a coquettish way}*** Cooperative communication strategy in SD is

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primarily based on the explication of empathy, i.e. the speaker is focused not on their social identification (like in a personal ad), but on their interaction with a partner. Cooperative communication strategy involves such tactics as *greeting, small talk, jokes, sympathy, agreement, communicative support, expression of opinion*, as well as non-verbal signs (smiling and laughing):

W: I also like to read, I like to write, ehm, I play violine, eh, so...

M: ***Oh, I do too!***

W: ***Really? {smiling}***

M: ***Yeah!***

W: ***How funny is that!***

The speech markers of cooperative communication strategy are verbal and non-verbal elements expressing agreement, communicative support, sympathy, interest: *yeah, right, okay, absolutely, exactly! how about you? really? that's awesome; it's great! me too; as you, smile, spontaneous gestures.*

This strategy is aimed at creating a stress-free atmosphere which is often the precondition of the opposite sex attraction. Thus, in one of the SD events a compliment uttered in the middle of the talk was aimed rather at eliminating psychological stress (the woman burst into tears while telling about her ex-boyfriend and her fatherless daughter) than at noting the partner's attractiveness:

W: Ah, he wants to.... Fine, we should not be together, we broke up for a reason, just I want my little girl to grow up with a father. Sorry, I can't talk about it without crying. Ss... {crying}

M: ***{giving her a handkerchief} {smiling}. You know, you've got great eyes.***

W: ***{smiling} Thank you.***

M: ***I love that smile!***

W: ***{laughing}. Thank you.***

It might seem that in SD certain emotional barriers are smoothed away since the main purpose of SD - romantic encounter - is known beforehand, and even if it turns out unsuccessful, it is sure to finish soon. On the other hand, however, SD includes a lot of elements causing psychological stress. Participating in such kind of event is stressful by itself, and it may cause communication constraint and tension. Apparently, there are certain social stereotypes concerning the encounter technique like, for

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example. “A man and a woman should meet casually within a natural setting”; therefore, inconsistency with this stereotype instigates a subconscious feeling of social and gender inferiority. There is an episode depicting a ‘speed dating event’ in the novel by Jane Moore ‘Dot.Homme’ where the main character experiences emotional stress (*verbally impotent; uncomfortably; nervous glances*). Psychological stress has been caused by the necessity to show interest to the partner (*feigning interest*) with no hint of romance in their talk (*Here you know that they are ... looking for a relationship*):

James and I sit there for a few moments more, **verbally impotent** and exchanging **nervous glances**.

‘I guess it’s probably your first time at this too’, I say eventually.

‘Yes.’ He smiles but doesn’t elaborate.

‘So what do you do for a living?’ I lean forward slightly **feigning interest**.

He shifts **uncomfortably** on the bench. ‘I’m a student.’ (J. Moore ‘Dot.Homme’)

The present data suggests that the range of elements causing psychological stress might include:

- necessity to comply with social and gender stereotypes;
- time restraints for the interaction;
- one-sided or mutual rejection of the partner;
- necessity to disclose personal information;
- fear of failure or unattractiveness;
- public nature of the interaction;
- recurrence of the conversation pattern.

The last element flows out of the great number of encounters during a single SD event. Being under the necessity to repeat the same piece of information to each new interlocutor, the participants experience emotional fatigue which, in its turn, does not facilitate gender attraction. Thus, Miranda Hobbes, one of the main characters of the ‘Sex and the City’ serial, was repeating one and the same phrase: *I’m a lawyer in a mid-size firm / I’m a lawyer/ I’m a lawyer, I went to Harvard Law School*. At first Miranda smiled and flirted, but later her voice revealed fatigue, needless seriousness and stress, all these making her less alluring for men. Then she suddenly said to her next partner: *I’m a stewardess*. This cue brightened up both her and her partner:

Miranda: Er, I’m, er, a lawyer in a mid-size firm. Eh, actually I was recently {pause} made partner. [...]

Miranda {smiling}: I’m a lawyer. [...]

Miranda {tiredly}: I’m a lawyer. [...]

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Miranda {seriously}: I'm a lawyer, I went to Harvard Law School. [...]

Miranda {*smiling cheerfully*}: *I'm a stewardess.*

Man: *Really?* {*smiling*}

Miranda: {*nodding and smiling back*} (Sex and the City, Season 3, episode 14).

It is commonly known that emotional states are little subjected to conscious control. There are certain markers of psychological stress in the participants' speech: 1) paralinguistic elements, such as hesitations and awkward pauses; 2) syntactic hesitations: abundant repetitions, uncompleted and incoherent sentences; 3) kinetic elements (nervous mimic movements); 4) evading the answer, lack of communicative support and initiative. The analyzed material reveals up to 90% of SD dialogues with the markers of emotional constraint, e.g.:

M: We make sushi. Do you like sushi?

W: *I'm, eh, kind of, eh, I*, I really like chicken sushi, there's really good place...

M: {laughing}

W: No, I'm serious.

To overcome potential psychological stress the interlocutors use the following tactics:

- small talk at the beginning and at the end of the interaction;
- initiation of neutral topics;
- prepared answers;
- utterances in the style of personal ads.

Let's scrutinize each tactic briefly. Small talk, as it was stated in our previous research, is the speech genre supported by the Anglo-American culture. That is why the use of small talk is natural for the native English speakers in the situation of the beginning and the end of the talk [12]. Within a SD event small talk fulfils an additional function of creating relaxed and friendly atmosphere, thereby helping overcome a communicative barrier in the romantic encounter. Moreover, small talk helps save "face" in case of failure, e.g.:

M: Hi, Rebecca. *How are you?*

W: *Hi! I'm great! How, how're you doing?*

M: *I'm doing well.* I'm a chef, eh, eh, alrea... eh, a restaurant.

Small talk sets a tone for the whole SD interaction, especially in terms of judgements. The participants

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normally choose neutral topics for the conversation such as: ‘their SD experience’, ‘origin/place of birth’, ‘job/occupation’, ‘hobbies’, ‘spending free time’, ‘travelling’, i.e. the topics connected with social life. Here are some typical questions getting communicative support and assisting emotional balance in SD: *Where’re you from? What do you do? What’s your dream job? How about your week? What kind of things do you like to do for fun? What do you do to your mind? Do you have any hobbies? Do you like sports?* In the following SD episode the development of the ‘hobby’ topic is accompanied by the markers of psychological comfort: laughing, smiling, approval, which dominate the markers of psychological stress:

W: Eh, so, what kind of things do you like to do for fun?

M: Well, so, as you, dancing, as you, drinking.

W: really *{smile}*

M: *{laugh}* shopping, yeah, I like to go in the pop, salsa dancing.

W: *mmm, awesome!* I go salsa dancing as well.

M: *oh, ah, that’s awesome!*

W: *Yeah!*

M: *It’s great!*

We have identified the following topics causing psychological stress and leading to a communicative failure: ‘former relationship/ex-partners’, ‘details of private life’, ‘sex’, ‘religion’, ‘age’, ‘personality of one of the partners’, ‘assessing each other’s acts or personality’, i.e. the topics relating to the interlocutors’ privacy or intimate life. Here are some typical “taboo-questions”: *How old are you? Are you religious? What’s your favorite sexual position? What do you think of me? Why are you single?* The next example demonstrates how the partner feels ill at ease while answering a question of this kind:

M: Sorry, *are you religious?* Is there anything I shouldn’t talk about?

W: *No, not really. I’m...* So what do you do workwise?

Time restraints combined with the wish to choose the most suitable partner prompt many SD participants to prepare the questions beforehand. The prepared questions can be differentiated from the spontaneous ones, firstly, by the topic (it has no connection to the previous context of the talk), secondly, such questions are too sophisticated, so they would hardly be asked during the first romantic encounter within a casual dating. The prepared questions and utterances, on the one hand, help lower the level of psychological stress as they keep the conversation going. On the other hand, however, being unexpected, the prepared questions and

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utterances confuse the addressee and lead to visible awkwardness which is transmitted to the author of the question, too:

M: Oh, I'm I'm a math teacher, high school.

W: Really? That sounds great.

M: Yeah, it is okay.

W: *So, what do you think is the biggest difference between men and women?*

M: *I don't know. What?*

W: Oh, I don't know. *I'm just ...*

M: *Oh, oh, okay, I'm-m-m... {pause} women have more common sense.*

Another type of the prepared speech in SD (especially at the beginning of the interaction) are the utterances that remind personal ads. The speaker routinely informs the partner about his/her biographical, professional details, enumerates hobbies, interests, etc. obviously repeating one and the same pattern to all the interlocutors:

M: Heather? Hi, Heather!

W: Hi.

M: *I'm 45 years old, I'm a native New Yorker, telephone sales analyst and make about 35 thousand dollars a year, hope to get away soon. I'm Jewish but that doesn't mean that I want make...*

W: {raising her hand} *I am sorry, what are you doing?* I'm new with this.

Such tactic generally leads to a communicative failure, as it makes the interaction more official whereas a more romantic environment is required. The communicative failure is marked by the verbal and nonverbal reaction of the addressee indicating misunderstanding and confusion: *I am sorry, what are you doing?* We assume that, men use the style of personal ads more often than women. Perhaps, it is justified by men's more pragmatic and utilitarian view of SD as a speech genre.

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7. Conclusion

In conclusion we try to briefly represent the general structure of SD as a speech genre. Following our analyzed material the structure of this genre is formed by the topic frames *social identification* and *personal identification* verbalized by such topics as ‘occupation’, ‘hobbies’, ‘spending free time’. Pragmatic aspect of the genre is represented by two leading strategies: *opposite sex attraction* and *cooperative communication*. Being rather an “artificially created” genre, SD has a number of factors causing psychological stress which is reduced by tactics such as *small talk* and *neutral utterances*. The tactics of *prepared questions* and *personal ads*, however, create false sense of stress-free atmosphere which often leads to communicative failures.

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