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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### CONVERSATION REPAIR STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY COUNSELLORS AND CLIENTS DURING COUNSELLING SESSIONS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KENYA

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#### Abstract

Counselling programmes in schools are communicative events organised in group or individual sessions depending on the students' needs. However, just like any other naturally occurring conversation, there is a tendency of the interlocutors to deviate from the topic due to instances of miscommunication and these necessitate repair strategies to refocus the conversation. This study, therefore, sought to examine the conversation repair strategies employed by teacher-counsellors and student-counselees during counselling sessions in secondary schools in Kenya.

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#### Introduction:-

In order to achieve any meaningful results in student counselling in secondary schools, the counsellor, who designs the counselling environment, must view the counselling sessions as conversational and communicative processes. The school counselling session is a process of communication that addresses problems and challenges of the student client that the teacher counsellor receives for counselling (Journal of Genetic Counselling, 2001). The communication that arises from the dialogue between counsellor and client in whatever setting the interlocution takes place, constitutes a discourse that is specific to this counselling encounter in the school. Pare (2001) indicates that counselling models or theories are constructed as discourses, suggesting that the school realization of a school counselling session is in its manifestation as a discourse that is socially constructed within the institutional limits of a school. Miller and Silverman (1995) argue that counselling talk can range from the portrayal of an individual's life experiences to portrayals of undesired outcomes. They further argue that the description of troubles will only be achieved when a counsellor and a client monitor and respond to each other's talk.

A successful conversation is one in which participants interact with each other, provide adequate and unambiguous information and identify and resolve breakdowns as they occur in conversations. The ability to identify and repair breakdowns is defined as conversational repair. Breakdowns usually lead to misunderstanding during conversations. McRoy and Hirst (1995) describe misunderstanding as a situation where a participant obtains an interpretation that they believe is complete and correct, but which is, however, not the one that the other participant(s) intended them to obtain. At the point of misunderstanding, the interpretations of the participants begin to diverge. It is possible that a misunderstanding will remain unnoticed in a conversation and the participants continue to talk at cross purposes or continue deviating from the subject under discussion altogether. Alternatively, the conversation might break down, leading one participant or the other to decide that a misunderstanding has occurred and possibly attempt to resolve it. An example from Schegloff et al. (1977; in Liddicot, 2007: 187) demonstrates this;

Hannah: and he's going to make his own paintings.

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Bea: Mm hm,  
Hannah: and- or I mean his own frames.  
Bea: yeah,

In this extract, Hannah's repairable paintings is not taken up by Bea and in so doing she shows that she has understood paintings as unproblematic for her. Hannah now repairs the trouble source from her own turn in third position. While talk in the second position may indicate a misunderstanding, it is also possible that such a misunderstanding may not become apparent until the third position. In this case, the recipient of the original turn may initiate repair in the next turn, or in fourth position relative to the original trouble.

The nature and organization of repair in naturally occurring conversation was first characterized by Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977). The phenomenon addressed here includes responses to a wide range of problems of speaking, listening, and understanding, including but not limited to errors or mistakes. Repair may be initiated either by the speaker of the problematic talk (self-initiated repair) or by another speaker (other-initiated repair). The repair may then be carried out by the speaker of the problematic talk (self-repair) or by the other speaker (other-repair). Using data from interactions among native speakers (NS) of English, Schegloff et al. demonstrated a preference for self-initiation and self-repair over other-initiation and other-repair.

### **Statement of the Problem:**

Like any other discourse, issues of context of situation and other related extra-linguistic aspects of the discourse are important in enhancing communication. It has become increasingly imperative to study the conversational nature of such discourses in their elements in an attempt to identify inconsistencies that may lead to breakdowns and misunderstandings. A possibility of conversation breakdown as well as repairs occurring is normal. As the counsellor and client converse, each adopts a variety of repair strategies for resolving issues and minimizing misunderstanding that may arise during conversation. However, particular breakdowns often arise in conversation due to its informal nature that would render its contents and objectives difficult to interpret thus necessitating conversation repair among the participants. The effects of these repair strategies vary and may considerably determine the outcome of the conversation discourses. This study, therefore, sought to examine the effects of these conversation repair strategies employed by teacher counsellors and clients during student group counselling sessions in selected secondary schools in Kenya.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

The study was premised on the Conversation Analysis (CA) Theory. The central purpose of Conversation Analysis as used here in the present study is to investigate the norms and conventions that speakers use in interactions to establish communicative understanding.

### **Reviewed Literature:-**

#### **Discourse Units as Signal of Repair Strategies**

Discourse units are a vital component for analysing spoken discourse as well as written discourse. However, in spite of its crucial role in discourse segmentation, there is no consensus in the literature on what a minimal discourse unit is and how it should be identified. According to Degand and Simon (2007), the minimal discourse unit (MDU) should be defined in terms of two linguistic criteria: syntax and prosody. They develop a heuristics for identifying minimal discourse units in (spoken) discourse and illustrate this with a piece of spontaneous conversation.

Hannay and Kroon (2005) propose a link between strategic units ('acts') and conceptual units ('ideas'). The conceptual units correspond to the conceptual content of the discourse, individualized in the form of ideas thus, they are abstract entities involved in text processing (production and comprehension), but not as such materialised within the discourse. Following Chafe (1994), discourse units come in three types: (i) fragmentary units are truncated, and will at this stage be disregarded from the analysis; (ii) substantive units convey ideas of events, states or referents; (iii) regulatory units, regulate the interaction of information flow; that is, the development of discourse, the interaction between participants, the expression of the speaker's mental process, and/or the judgment of the validity of the information. According to this study, substantive and regulatory units were used to contribute to the mental representation of the ongoing discourse.

**Conversation Repairs in Discourse:**

According to Yun (2005), repair is a universal phenomenon and some of its mechanisms can be observed cross-linguistically, a fact that informs us of the general nature of human communication through language. He observes that spontaneous conversation is characterized by frequent instances of “broken” language segments that have of late elicited a lot of research interest. Since conversation in itself has its own order (Schriffin, 1994), it has an abundance of “repair”, which as defined by Fox et al. (1994) is “any instance in which an emerging utterance is stopped in some way, and is then aborted, recast, or redone”. In this way, the conversation remains tractable.

The relevance of repair to syntax-for-conversation is universally considered to be one of the most influential papers on the repair mechanism in conversation. A distinction needs to be drawn between the initiation of repair and the potential outcome of the repair. In other words, “the one who performs or accomplishes a repair is not necessarily the one who initiated the repair operation”. It is also important to bear in mind that not all initiations will necessarily lead to repair outcome because sometimes a repair can be initiated and later abandoned.

According to Bateman, Tenbrink and Farrar (2006), language interpretation is inherently highly flexible and context dependent. Linguistic terms and expressions typically need to be resolved against context in order to pinpoint their intended meanings. This process of flexible interpretation is often invisible to interlocutors; the unfolding dialogue and its context evidently provide substantial cues concerning just how underspecified meanings are to be filled out. Moreover, whenever there are difficulties in resolving interpretations, interlocutors are able to construct clarificatory interactions to home in and construct common shared interpretations with considerable precision. Several mechanisms have been proposed in the linguistic literature for accounting for this facility (Yun, 2005). However, these remain fragmented and oriented to specific cases. This is particularly important in repair and can be regarded as a conceptual repair that frequently occurs in conversation.

**Effects of Conversation Repair Strategies:**

Specific training in the use of repair strategies is effective (Tye-Murray, 1991). Most conversations are unduly interrupted by turns, whose meanings and intentions cannot be readily understood, and as such there is a tendency of the interlocutors to focus more on the turns than on the conversation at hand hence, they serve as a distraction than as a repair strategy. The use of requests for clarification is done to seek better interpretation of the subject matter and also emphasise the point of discussion. It serves to improve understanding between conversational partners (Tye-Murray et al., 1990). Some requests for clarification are considered specific, or contingent, for example, requests for confirmation, whereas others like neutral queries are considered non-specific, or non-contingent. This is because the former is more articulated to the conversation and is easily interpreted while the latter can at times be ambiguous. For example specific requests can take the form of requests for confirmation of new information, such as, “Does he have a job”, requests for confirmation of already given information like, “Did you say he had a car” and requests for elaboration, such as, “What colour was his car.” Non-specific queries are like, “What?” “Huh?” they make no reference to anything and are therefore vague.

Contingent requests for clarification are more likely to sustain interaction over multiple turns than non-contingent requests (Kenworthy, 1984) since they are weightier and influence the conversation in the original direction. Requests for specific clarification are viewed more favourably by the speaker than non-specific requests (Gagne, Stelmachovich & Yovetich 1991; Caissie & Gibson, 1997). Speakers find it easier to respond to specific requests due to their direct nature since they are more concerned with the particulars of the issues being addressed. Strategies that elicit rephrasing by the speaker are more likely to repair the communication breakdown (Gagne & Wyllie, 1989) by seeking alternative words and phrases that are clear and easily understood in the conversation without necessarily affecting its flow.

However, repair strategies employed and their effects are largely on the interactants’ ability to accurately characterize the trouble source, their language competencies and the social communication context at play (Schriffin, 1994). This is so because language is largely a social action and as observed in studies on discourse analysis including the current study, not all repairs were accurate and some repairs were abandoned as soon as it was perceived that the repair was on track. That is, the participants in the conversations did not necessarily have to wait until the repairs had run their full course owing to their shared world view (Rohde, 2006) or their need to construct the conversation meanings to suit them (Cicourel, 1980). Therefore, it can be concluded that both interlocutors communicate more effectively when more specific or contingent repair strategies are employed.

**Methodology:-****Research Design:**

This study adopted analytical research design, which is suitable for a qualitative research, to examine the effects of conversational repair strategies in group counseling discourse. A qualitative research thus offered the present study an opportunity to describe conversational repair strategies used by interlocutors in group counseling discourse.

**Target population:**

The target population for this study was teacher counsellors and student-counselees in selected eight secondary schools where student group counselling is practised. The sample comprised eight (8) selected secondary schools in the area with an average student population of 550 per school. The study targeted secondary schools within the study area which reportedly had a high number of student unrest despite the counselling sessions. The study purposively sampled thirteen counseling sessions in the eight secondary schools both private and public within the area. The group guidance and counseling sessions were well suited for the study because of their interactive nature involving responses from both teacher-counsellors and student-counselees.

**Data analysis:**

Conversation Analysis (CA) procedure was used in the analysis of data in this study. CA may be conceived as a specific analytic course which may be used to reach a specific kind of systematic insight in the ways in which members of society interact (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984). CA researchers insist on the use of audio or video recordings of episodes of naturally occurring data which is non-experimental and have interactions as their basic data. In this study, data was collected by use of audio recording of the counselling sessions as well as interview guides for the teacher counsellors. Since the system used in CA is specifically designed to reveal the sequential features of talk, the researcher examined the adjacency pairs as they occurred in the discourse. The process entailed the identification of the repair strategies following the typology set out by Kenworthy (1984) as well as additional patterns emerging from observations during the counselling discourse.

**Finding:**

The research findings revealed that preference was given to other-initiated and other-repair and other-initiated and self-repair in group counselling discourse. This result disagreed with those of Yun (2005) who found overwhelming self-initiation and repair within the trouble source turn in a one on one conversation. Request for repetition, Neutral query, Request for paraphrasing, Conversational devices, Request for confirmation, Request for specification, Specific constituent repetition, Other repetition and Conceptual repair were the conversational repair strategies observed in the school group counselling discourse.

Requests for Repetition as a conversational repair strategy were used directly and indirectly depending on the discretion of the speaker. The direct request was preferred and it elicited more information negating the need for clarification. A notable example of an indirect request for repetition was observed when a speech act "Speak up!" was used to address inaudibility in the discourse.

The research also identified the occurrence of the Neutral Query as a conversational repair strategy. In these types of conversational repair strategy, the trouble source was only conceived after the repair initiation act. This repair initiation was indicated by interjections such as, "Mhh!" which the hearer (s) chose to indicate that either they had not heard clearly or had not understood what the previous speaker had said. The characteristic of the neutral repair strategy that emerged in the data was the ambiguity of the neutral repair as opposed to the straight forward nature of the request for repetition. The choice of this interjection in the repair initiation act could have been informed by the power relations evident between them and the teacher counsellor. In this case, it was a polite way the students could express their need for clarification. Moreover, the use of this repair strategy may be confined, in terms of group counselling episodes, to the participant(s) who had limited access to alternative words that would prompt the speaker to repair the affected segments of speech without appearing impolite.

Existence of requests for specification as conversational repair strategies was also established in the study. These requests occurred where the speaker requests the hearer to repeat information with the aim of providing a specific response to an earlier assertion in a manner as to confirm that assertion. The requests for specification could not obtain due to the failure to adequately identify the actual trouble source and could lead to the creation of other trouble sources and repairs.

Repetition of the trouble-source by the addressee was identified as instrumental in helping to locate the problem and is often used to invite correction or clarification, or express disagreement and disbelief as observed by Yun (2005). Other repetition strategy occurs when the speaker repeats what the hearer has spoken in the previous turn perhaps with an intention of confirming that assertion (Kenworthy, 1984). In the current research, this phenomenon of conversation was observed to be instrumental in addressing a conceptual problem in the trouble source as well as a competence problem.

The data also revealed Conceptual Repairs as a conversational repair strategy. The manifestation of this repair strategy was similar to the shift in the focus of discourse. However, when read in the context of the interactions, it was evident that the speaker was trying to correct a perception the hearer had or to direct the discourse towards the speaker's conceptualisation of the subject of interaction. Understanding a piece of discourse is an incremental process in which new segments are integrated with the preceding ones to construct a coherent mental representation of the discourse content. (Van Dijk 1999).

The study also found that, trouble sources, repair initiations and repairs can occur in multiplicity within a transaction. In such instances, there occurred more than one trouble sources in a segment of conversation that naturally necessitated more repairs hence the multiple repair initiation efforts by the interlocutors.

The study recommends that teacher-counsellors need to be made more aware of the role of language in promoting better communication of ideas and the need to preserve its integrity. Also, given that speech is the principle medium of communication during school counselling sessions, there is need for policy makers to include linguistic studies in the training of teacher-counsellors to better equip them with techniques of identifying conversation breakdowns and ways of repairing them for effective communication during counseling sessions.

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