

# A Study of Simplification Strategies by Native Speakers of English —Use of Discourse Markers—

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**Abstract.** Recent research into non-native speakers' communication strategies has revealed some common features in their communicative efforts. On the other hand, native speakers' strategies to make their speeches comprehensible to non-native speakers have not been examined in great details yet. The present study compared the two texts: a letter (the original version) and a transcription of the speech which paraphrased the letter with explanations (the simplified version) and then analyzed the process of native speakers' simplification efforts in a spontaneous speech in terms of the use of discourse markers: micro and macro-discourse markers. At the same time, a quantitative comparison was made such as a mean length of T-unit/sentence and readability. As a result, a simplified version was proved to be not necessarily simple in terms of the syntactic aspect. However, in the discourse level, the simplified speech contained a lot more micro/macro discourse markers than the original text. This seems to suggest that discourse markers play a key role in simplifying a text and the foreign language teachers should realize the significance of discourse markers to make classroom input comprehensible to the learners.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recent second language acquisition research has focused on the nature and role of input in the language classroom. The growing interest in this field has largely been due to the claim that linguistic input which is comprehensible to the learner, or 'comprehensible input' (Krashen 1985), is the primary data for second language acquisition. Since then, a lot of inquiries have been made to find the process and mechanism of speech modification by native speakers (NS hereafter) when they are addressing to non-native speakers (NNS hereafter), describing their communicative efforts in terms of syntactic, discoursal, and/or lexical adjustments. As commonly assumed, NSs make a variety of simplifying efforts to make their speeches simpler and easier for the listener to understand. Among the research findings are that NSs use a reduced, or simplified variety of their own language, such as slower speech rate, longer pauses, shorter utterances, lower syntactic complexity, and avoidance of low frequency lexical items and idiomatic expressions (Henzl 1973; Gaies 1977; Tarone 1980). Several of the modifications in NS-NNS interactions reflect adaptations made in caretaker speeches, including 'motherese' made by mothers talking to their young children, or 'foreigner talk' (Ferguson 1975). However, while increasing research efforts have been made on the analysis of NNSs' communication strategies in their communications breakdown, NSs' simplification strategies have not been described in great details yet.

The purpose of the present paper is to seek strategies for making input comprehensible by a native speaker of English by comparing the text addressed to NS with the simplified version of the same text addressed to NNSs, particularly in terms of the use of discourse markers. An analysis of adjustments by a native speaker will be helpful for NNS teachers of English when they adopt some of NS strategies in the classroom situations to make the input comprehensible to their students. With increasing opportunities for NNS teachers of English to use English in

the communicative classroom, this kind of research will provide NNS teachers with sources for self-reflection and open an unexplored field of strategy training in ELT teacher education curriculum.

## 2. Foreigner Talk as NSs' Simplification Strategies

Simplification is the process whereby language users adjust their language behavior in the interests of communicative effectiveness. This speech adjustment is commonly observed in NS-NNS interactions. Through the analysis of speeches to both foreign and native listeners, Freed (1979) verifies that speech to foreign listeners differs significantly from that to another native listener in terms of not only syntactic complexity but also selection of surface sentence types. When NSs face communications breakdown with NNS, they try to avoid it by using a simplified variety of their language. This type of speech by NSs of a language is called 'Foreigner Talk' (Ferguson 1975); it is often used when they are speaking to foreigners who are not proficient in the language. Richards *et al.* (1992:142) summarizes that some of the characteristics of foreigner talk are:

- (a) it is slower and louder than normal speech, often with exaggerated pronunciation
- (b) it uses simpler vocabulary and grammar. For example, articles, function words, and inflections may be omitted, and complex verb forms are replaced by simpler ones.
- (c) topics are sometimes repeated or moved to the front of sentences, for example: "Your bag? Where you leave your bag?"

These definitions, however, seem to cover only a partial picture of NSs' simplification strategies. Firstly, foreigner talk in their definition is associated with ungrammatical, or 'broken' form of a language to NNS who have very low or almost no proficiency in the language of communication. The concept of foreigner talk needs to be expanded to include all the NSs' communicative efforts in talking to NNS of various proficiency levels. As Tarone (1980:424) points out, characteristics of foreigner talk are communication strategies on the part of the native speaker in that they seem to be extended efforts to provide alternate means of communicating the native speaker's intended meaning. Secondly, strategic efforts are described at the sentence level, such as vocabulary and grammar. To help NNS learners to understand logical relationship between sentences and ideas, NS uses not only syntactic and lexical devices, but some semantic/discoursal devices, for example, link words (connectives) which act as discourse markers. Considering foreigner talk as a whole would enable us to make a closer observation of communication strategy in the NS speech. Supposing that these discourse markers play a key role in making NS speeches comprehensible, we should analyze some features of discourse markers for pedagogic purposes.

## 3. Discourse Markers as Comprehension Aids

The teaching of English as a foreign language has expanded its attention to the development of the active skills needed to comprehend at discourse level. The ability to recognize and understand logical relationships on a larger unit than sentences is one of the traits of good second language readers. An essential aspect of comprehensibility can be assumed to be the knowledge of the structuring and organization of information within a discourse. Connectives

between sentences or paragraphs have the function of indicators of topic transition, or discourse markers. Murphy and Candlin (1979) identify a number of markers of the rhetorical organization of lecture discourse, including what they refer to as markers (e.g. 'Well, right now'), starters (e.g. 'Well, now, let's get on with ...'), and metastatements (e.g. 'I want to mention two types of generator'). Furthermore, Ball (1986) classifies a variety of link words into 27 categories. Unfortunately, very little systematic explanation of discourse markers seems to be given in the current second language classroom. If we hypothesize that discourse markers affect L2 learners' comprehension, we should acknowledge the role of discourse markers in aiding comprehension of teachers' classroom talk as well as instructional materials.

In exploring the effects of discourse signals and markers on L2 learners' comprehension of lectures, Chaudron and Richards (1986) conducted a study with the following four different versions of recorded lectures, which dealt with the expansion of the United States in its history: (a) the 'Baseline' version passage without any special signals of discourse organization or linking between sentences; (b) the 'Micro' version passage with various markers of intersentential relations; (c) the 'Macro' version passage containing signals or metastatements about the major propositions within the lecture, or the important transition points in the lecture; (d) the 'Micro-Macro' version, a combination of versions of (b) and (c).

Baseline version:

The United States came into existence officially in 1783 after eight years of war ....

Micro version:

*Well*, The United States came into existence officially in 1783 after eight years of war ....

Macro version:

*To begin with*, the United States came into existence officially in 1783 after eight years of war ....

Micro-Macro version:

*Well, to begin with*, the United States came into existence officially in 1783 after eight years of war ....

As for materials for their experiment, a video tape and transcript of a natural lecture was presented to two groups of subjects: Pre-university ESL students (N=71) and University group (N=81). And the above mentioned four versions of the lectures were assigned at random to different classes in the respective subject groups and later they were given a recall cloze measures, the multiple choice questions, and the true-false quizzes as comprehension measures.

In consequence, they found a consistent result across groups that macro markers are more conducive to successful recall of the lecture than micro-markers and baseline version. This finding suggests that discourse markers signalling major transitions and emphases assist the learners in comprehending the lectures.

There are several important implications of their study. One is for those who devise teaching materials, because many published materials currently available are like baseline versions. And a more important implication is for language teachers. A teacher talk which contains more macro-discourse markers might help learners' comprehension, at least their recall.

In their study, micro-and macro-discourse markers were deliberately added or deleted. The

speaker of a language seems to know intuitively how to modify his speech simpler. We need to look into NS's simplification process in their spontaneous speeches if we try to see their intuition concerning the use of their simplification device, that is, micro/macro discourse markers. Further research into the features of NSs' simplification strategies in terms of the use of discourse markers will provide us with some clues in making NNS teacher talk more comprehensible.

#### 4. Analysis of Discourse Markers in an NS's Simplified Talk

##### (1) Materials:

A letter in English by an NS of English and a transcript of its simplified version were used as a source material for analysis. The original letter, which dealt with the controversy in regard to the logging industry in the United States, takes a form of a voice letter, a letter recorded on a tape addressed to an NS. The letter was paraphrased for the listeners of an NHK English conversation program by the NS of English, who is well experienced in teaching English to Japanese, and broadcasted in January 1991. The audiotaped recording was transcribed as shown below. (Underlined are the examples of micro/macro discourse markers. The full transcripts of both the original and the simplified version are attached in Appendix.)

##### *Original Version:*

Living here in the Pacific Northwest I am quite aware of the controversy in regard to the logging industry. Some people come and see fortunes to be made and want to cut the trees, while others come and see trees as priceless as great art and want to preserve them. To see an area devastated by clear-cut logging is very upsetting. Men can replant trees, and they have done so by the billions, but they can never recreate one of these old-growth forests. The conflict is mainly over these old-growth forests where some of the Douglas fir, cedar and spruce trees are 500 years old. (The rest is omitted for the paucity of space)

##### *Simplified Version:*

*Well, there's a lot of content in this one. She talked about many aspects of this very controversial subject. And as probably most of our listeners know, the Pacific Northwest, where Sandy lives, is one of the major logging areas of the country. And a lot of the logs end up here in Japan.*

*And she starts off by discussing kind of two basic approaches when somebody sees the beautiful forests. Some people see it as priceless as a great art. They see the beauty in the forest and others see it as the business opportunity. They can cut down the trees and sell them or make them into something. And so inevitably these two different points of views are going to collide with each other and they have. Of course her point of view is pretty clear. She doesn't like the trees being cut down and especially clear cutting, which means to cut down all of the trees in the area. And she says of course trees can be replanted but the old-growth forest which includes trees maybe 500 years old or more to grow, these can never be replanted. You know, once that forest is cut down, we can't just plant trees. You know, it'll take another 500 years or more to grow that type of forest. (The rest is omitted)*

(2) Analysis

The original and the simplified version were recorded, transcribed, and compared in terms of an average number of words per T-unit and sentence, readability, and a frequency of appearance of micro/macro discourse markers. A computer software, Correct Grammar, was used to measure two types of readability scores: Flesche reading ease score and Flesch-Kincaid grade level. Discourse markers were counted each time a macro-or micro-marker (word, phrase, clause) occurred. Since the primary concern of this study was discourse markers used in NS's simplified speech, features of syntactic and lexical simplification devices were not examined.

(3) Result and Discussion

Table 1 shows the result of the analysis of both versions.

Table 1: Comparison of Original and Simplified Version

	Original	Simplified
Total words	523	805
Mean number of words per T-unit	12.5	13.2
Mean number of words per sentence	17.4	18.2
Flesch reading ease score	58.1	66.3
Flesch-Kincaid grade level	9.3	10.3
Micro discourse markers	0	44
Macro discourse markers	1	6

Unlike the prior expectation, the simplified version does not show much reduction; for example, the total number of words is increased by more than 50 percent, and both the mean number of words per T-unit and per sentence are increased, too. Comparing the both versions, we can see little topic reduction; therefore, repetition and restatement, which are common features in foreigner talk, eventually stretched the sentence/T-unit length. In addition to these quantitative differences, the readability index is showing an interesting result. Both Flesch-Kincaid readability index and grade level are slightly higher in the simplified version than in the original version. This means that NS's simplification attempt does not necessarily lead to the simplified speech in linguistic terms. As far as syntactic and lexical aspects of

Micro marker	Frequency
And	17
Of course	7
Well	6
You know	4

input are concerned, we do not really know for sure what the effect of NS's use of foreigner talk is on the learner's success in understanding the target language.

However, if we look into the difference between these two versions in the discourse level, we can notice a dramatic increase in the number of discourse markers. While the original version does not contain any micro

markers, the simplified has a number of them. According to Chaudron and Richards (1986), those words function as temporal links (and, then, ), contrastive relationship (but, actually), relative emphasis (you see, of course), framing and segmentation (O.K., well). Shown above are a list of micro discourse markers in the simplified version in the order of frequency of occurrence. These markers do not add much semantic information, but simply signalling intersentential relations, framing segments, and filling pauses.

Next, concerning the use of macro discourse markers, the simplified version contains more of them at the important topic transition points. For example:

*Well, there's a lot of content in this one.*

*She talks about many aspects of this very controversial subject.*

*And she starts off by discussing ...*

On the other hand, the original version includes only one at the end of the letter.

*I will end this with ...*

These results indicate that a speech read from a written text usually lacks macro discourse markers whereas more conversational style of speech contains more macro markers.

Why is a speech with more macro discourse markers likely to be easier to follow? Micro markers and macro markers seem to have different effects. Micro markers simply provide the speaker with time to think about what to say next and the listener time to digest what has been said. They do not have much semantic value and the excessive use of these might even distract the listener's attention. On the other hand, in planning macro discourse markers, the speaker needs to process the important parts of the text and to place the expression at the right time. In this way, carefully planned macro discourse markers will enhance the learner's listening comprehension.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study attempted to identify some of the simplification strategies noticed in foreigner talk, the speech adjustment by an NS in talking to less proficient speakers of English. Particularly, the use of discourse markers was found to be one of the major comprehension aids in the more conversational style of discourse.

There seem to be some important contributions in this study to English language education in Japan. In teaching listening and reading, discourse markers are not paid due attention; they are simply translated between Japanese and English at a word or phrase level, and usually not treated at a discourse level. It would help L2 teachers to stretch their focus of concern.

Secondly, it would help NNS teachers in paraphrasing teaching materials in English for the students. So far, the studies of communication strategies have focused on the simplification of the information conveyed, especially at syntactic and lexical levels. On the other hand, the importance of discourse markers as comprehension aids seems to have been neglected. Considering that discourse markers help NNS learners to understand the macro level of discourse organization, language teachers should realize the importance of including discourse markers in their talk in English.

Finally, there are some points yet to be investigated in this study. The data of this study are very limited. It investigated only one NS sample. And most importantly, because of the nature of radio broadcast, no interaction was taking place. Caution must be used in generalizing from them. Further research is necessary to find a clearer picture of NSs' simplification strategies in their speeches. Also, for the future teacher education, similar features of simplification strategies common to most Japanese English teachers should be analyzed for the comparison with those of NSs'. Among few studies in Japan, for example, Yoneyama(1987: 108) points out that repetition as a means of making input comprehensible was a predominant strategy in a teacher-centered classroom. Research findings in this field would give a new insight to second/foreign language classroom research and add an unexplored field in the curriculum development in future teacher education.

## APPENDIX

### *Original Version:*

Living here in the Pacific Northwest I am quite aware of the controversy in regard to the logging industry. Some people come and see fortunes to be made and want to cut the trees, while others come and see trees as priceless as great art and want to preserve them. To see an area devastated by clear-cut logging is very upsetting. Men can replant trees, and they have done so by the billions, but they can never recreate one of these old-growth forests. The conflict is mainly over these old-growth forests where some of the Douglas fir, cedar and spruce trees are 500 years old. By destroying too much forest, the animals, birds and plants that thrive there may become extinct. The discovery of the spotted owl, which is on the endangered species list, was found to survive only in old-growth forests. Last year environmentalists went to the Federal Court and got an injunction against timber sales on thousands of acres of the owl's habitat. The environmentalist's dream became the woodsman's nightmare. It's a heated dispute and the loggers are incensed that owl's future is being considered over the future of the families already affected by diminished jobs and incomes. The trees are not the only victims. The logging community is concerned because this is their livelihood. The response to the loggers is that they should have considered the ramifications of extreme clear-cutting 15 years ago. Last year the Forest Service allowed 60,000 acres of old growth to be cut, a rate that conservationists say could deplete such forests in 15 years. There is considerable frustration that large amounts of timber have been sent to Japan over the last several years. The Japanese will pay twice the price that American sawmills can offer for the giant old-growth trees. The anger is that much of it is exported as way logs, leaving little business for local sawmills. Many feel the greed by some timber companies has not only diminished the timber industry jobs but destroyed the beauty of the forests. The stakes are high and so are the hostility levels. Last summer, anti-logging radicals from a group called "Earth First" invaded the woods and chained themselves to loggers' bulldozers and formed human chains around trees targeted for cutting. An administration task force is trying to find a better balance between owl preservation and timber jobs. So far the solutions have been in the form of a compromise that may not satisfy anyone. Some old-growth will be saved but some will be intentionally cut. Nothing is likely to happen until more irreplaceable forest is lost. This isn't just a local issue but a worldwide one. In one year an average tree inhales 26

pounds of carbon dioxide and exhales enough oxygen to keep a family of four breathing for a year. If there were only 10 billion more, trees would absorb almost all the 3 billion pounds of carbon dioxide we annually pump into the air. I will end this with the words of Theodore Roosevelt, our 26th President: "A people without children face a hopeless future; a country without trees is almost as hopeless."

*Simplified Version:*

Well, there's a lot of content in this one. She talked about many aspects of this very controversial subject. And as probably most of our listeners know, the Pacific Northwest, where Sandy lives, is one of the major logging areas of the country. And a lot of the logs end up here in Japan. And she starts off by discussing kind of two basic approaches when somebody sees the beautiful forests. Some people see it as priceless as a great art. They see the beauty in the forest and others see it as the business opportunity. They can cut down the trees and sell them or make them into something. And so inevitably these two different points of views are going to collide with each other and they have. Of course her point of view is pretty clear. She doesn't like the trees being cut down and especially clear cutting, which means to cut down all of the trees in the area. And she says of course trees can be replanted but the old-growth forest which includes trees maybe 500 years old or more to grow, these can never be replanted. You know, once that forest is cut down, we can't just plant trees. You know, it'll take another 500 years or more to grow that type of forest. And of course when the forest like that is destroyed, many of the animals and plants and birds and things that live there in the forest lose their home. And they become extinct. They cease to exist. And there is a policy of the United States Government of protecting species which are about to become extinct. And one of these is the spotted owl. And recently the spotted owl which is on this endangered species list, that means spotted owls may completely disappear. Well, they found that the spotted owls only survive in the old-growth forest, so the Federal Court ruled that there can be no timber sales, maybe more than timber sales you might say. Timber can no longer be cut on these old-growth forests where the owl lives. Well, Sandy says the environmentalist's dreams. You know, the environmentalists were of course very happy when they found out that the Court was protecting the spotted owls thereby protecting the forest. But the environmentalist's dream was a woodman's nightmare. In other words, the people who are in the industry, who are cutting down the trees, were very, very unhappy about it. And of course this is only natural because loggers depend on cutting down the trees to make a living and futures of the family are already being affected by diminished jobs and incomes. In other words, their jobs have been cut back and their incomes are going down. And of course responses to this by the environmentalist is that the loggers should have thought about these problems years ago, that they've been cutting too much forest. And that eventually was bound to come to this. Well, last year, the forest services of the United States Government allowed 60,000 acres, which is an awful lot of land, of these old-growth forests to be cut. So this continued for another 15 years, there will no longer be any old-growth forests. So the environmentalists are feeling that, you know, 'now is the time to stop it!' And one other problem which is connected with all of this is that a lot of the big logs are old-growth trees and are being sent to Japan. And the Japanese companies are willing to pay twice as much as American sawmills would. And also the American sawmills don't process the trees at all so

that American sawmills lose their jobs and logs have been cut down so a lot of people are very angry. Sometimes that is taken out on Japan. But of course it is American companies which are selling it to the Japanese. Well, to stop this whole process, last summer a lot of anti-logging radicals went into the forests and they chained themselves to the bulldozers and to the trees and so forth and tried to prevent the loggers from doing their work. And the government is kind of caught in the middle of all of this, they are trying to find a better balance between owl preservation or really forest preservation and jobs. But if they compromise, really the compromise is never going to satisfy anybody. And meanwhile much of this irreplaceable forest is being lost. Well, Sandy winds up by pointing out that trees are an answer to the problem of too much carbon dioxide or CO<sub>2</sub>, a kind of carbon gas in the atmosphere. And replanting more trees it would probably help solve a greenhouse problem. I like the quote at the end, "People without children face a hopeless future, and a country without trees almost as hopeless." This is from Theodore Roosevelt, one of our first environmentalist presidents.

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