

PARAPHRASING AS A COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGY AND TECHNIQUE OF ACADEMIC WRITING

Evelina Mezalina Graur, Assoc. Prof., PhD, "Ștefan cel Mare" University of Suceava

Abstract: To be able to reformulate the content of a message represents a highly appreciated communication skill among various professional communities, especially because paraphrases can play a wide range of roles in human interactions: to signal that the received message is given an interpretation, to check the manner in which a message is understood and interpreted in keeping with the communicative intention of its communicator, to distill or crystallize the ideatic content of a message, to encourage one's interlocutor to elaborate on a complex message. The present paper aims at revealing and discussing the attributes and characteristics of efficient paraphrasing viewed as a communication strategy, as well as an instrument of avoiding plagiarism in academic writing.

Keywords: communication strategy, paraphrasing, discourse markers, language skills, plagiarism.

Paraphrasing and the notion of communication strategy

Since interpersonal communication is *inescapable, irreversible, complex and contextual*, it is natural for most professionals in areas such as administration, education, training, research, business, management, consultancy, law, health and social care to revere people's capacity of sharing meanings using verbal and nonverbal channels. Interestingly enough, the ability of putting others' ideas into our own words is a communicative requisite that transcends schooling and academic success and enters the realm of workplace interactions and job-related tasks. Given this vast and complex 'territory', paraphrasing is part and parcel of *communication strategies*, a notion to be understood in very broad terms. A broad understanding of the notion in question is offered by Tarone (1981): "the term relates to a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared. (Meaning structures here would include both linguistic structures and sociolinguistic rule structures)" (p. 288).

Although Tarone was particularly interested in describing and analyzing aspects related to second-language acquisition and the communication in foreign languages, she has the merit of having pointed us towards a significant direction, namely the *interactional nature* of communication strategies. Thus, Tarone (1981) noted that "communication strategies have an interactional function, as they are used for a joint negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer" (p. 285). In this context, if we were to identify what differentiates *paraphrasing for academic achievement* (i.e. paraphrasing performed as part of educational activities) from *paraphrasing in the workplace* (i.e. paraphrasing performed as part of job-related duties), perhaps the first elements we should consider are the identity and number of interactants, as well as the motivations behind this *deliberate discursive activity*.

In educational environments, students interact with their teachers and their peers in order to perform the activities and tasks included in syllabuses and in order to attain the educational objectives stipulated in curricula. At this stage, the “joint negotiation of meaning” is part of a *training routine or program* aimed at developing and shaping a well-defined set of skills that graduates will eventually employ socially and professionally. For instance, it is during their high-school and college years that students are expected to develop and practice the skill of *reading with a critical eye*. In fact, school or college performance is highly dependent upon students’ comprehension level of perused texts and their capability to question textual ideas and their authority. As suggested by Axelrod & Cooper (1994), paraphrasing is, on the one hand, a *critical reading strategy* rooted in our capacity of filtering ideas through our own understanding and, on the other hand, a *writing technique* designed to integrate others’ ideas and information into a piece of writing at roughly the same level of detail. In spite of the prominence given to *reading* and *writing* in achieving *appropriate reformulations* of meanings, the other two language skills, namely *listening* and *speaking*, are equally supportive throughout the process of clarifying, simplifying and reorganizing original messages. This synergetic approach is evident in the way some educators provide guidelines and steps for using paraphrasing successfully in the classroom. For instance, Fisk & Hurst (2003) propose four steps: an initial reading followed by discussion, a second reading accompanied by note taking, the reformulation of the ideas extracted in note form, and the sharing of the paraphrases. Nevertheless, paraphrasing is mainly studied as a writing component in school. The motivation is obvious enough: as long as student grading usually involves the assessment of various types of reports and essays, the measurement of academic performance is biased towards the written mode.

In workplace environments, paraphrasing is part of ‘doing one’s job’, with a preponderance of the spoken mode involved in the restatement of ideas. At this level, paraphrasing is a *problem-solving technique*. In social work interviews, for instance, it is mandatory that human service workers build first a strong and positive relationship with their clients if they are supposed to assist the latter in solving a variety of socially problematic situations. Understood in terms of an *interactive event* (Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997), this relationship comprises a whole range of attitudes and behaviors such as “acceptance, empathy, genuineness, and authenticity, self-determination, confidentiality, individuality, interest, warmth, trust, and respect” (p. 133). Even if this complex ‘relational construct’ is an essential prerequisite in interviewing practice, it does not guarantee success unless it is conjoined with well-mastered interviewing techniques. In this respect, Kadushin & Kadushin (1997) opine that this symbiosis represents an invaluable *professional requirement*:

Technically skillful interviewing in the context of the positive relationship is what ensures that the objectives of the interview are likely to be achieved. Within the context of the relationship the interviewer has to apply effective techniques to propel the interview in the direction of success. Techniques in the absence of a positive relationship are sterile; relationships in the absence of technical skill are impotent. (p 135, emphasis in the original)

The toolkit of human service interviewers comprises a variety of conscious and deliberate verbal interventions. According to Kadushin and Kadushin (1997), this set of tools

includes “reflection and paraphrase, questioning, summarizing, transition, clarification, silence, humor, confrontation, interpretation, providing information, offering advice and suggestions, and modifying the environment” (p. 136). In this context, paraphrasing is a *professional tool* whose major functions are to encourage interviewees to maintain the flow of communication, to help them tell their stories and to assist them in identifying possible solutions in their *own* words.

Although paraphrasing is quite frequent in one-to-one settings, it is often overlooked in group settings. However, it is generally acknowledged that “the groups that develop consciousness about paraphrasing and give themselves permission to use this reflective tool become clearer about their work and more cohesive as a group” (Garmston & Wellman, 2013, 133). As opposed to questions by themselves, which may suggest a degree of psychological difference between the asker and the asked, paraphrasing has the advantage of aligning the parties and creating a safe environment for thinking (Lipton & Wellman, 2000).

The structure and flow of efficient paraphrasing

In mediation, mentoring and cognitive coaching, a proper selection of words and verbal structures ensures the distillation of any transmitted content to its essence and supports the communicative flow. The content conveyed and the emotions displayed by the speaker need not escape an attentive and observant listener. Moreover, the listener is expected to signal his/her intention to produce a paraphrase by controlling his/her intonation and adopting an amicable voice. At the same time, it is advisable for listeners to launch their reformulated content only after introducing a *reflective stem* signaling that a paraphrase is about to follow. According to Garmston & Wellman (2013), the most appropriate stems are the ones that “put the focus on the speaker’s ideas, and not on the paraphraser’s interpretation of those ideas” (p. 33). Hence the preference for the personal pronoun *you* and the vote of censure for the personal pronoun *I*. The following reflective stems are provided by Garmston & Wellman (2013) as examples of good practice in signaling the insertion of reformulations: *You’re suggesting ...*, *You’re proposing ...*, *So what you’re wondering is ...*, *So you are thinking that....*

Interestingly enough, Kadushin & Kadushin (1997) use the term *lead-ins* to refer to the same elements that announce the presence of the paraphrase. The authors believe that a constant variation of lead-ins may assist the interviewer in sounding *less mechanical* when he/she introduces reformulations. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the fact that the authors support their declared goal with examples that instantiate profusely *I + Sentient Verb* constructions. Furthermore, they present no overtly expressed opinion on the rhetorical implications of *you* versus *I*. Here are their suggestions: *If I get you right ...*, *It seems to me ...*, *In other words ...*, *As I understand it ...*, *I hear you saying that ...*, *I gather that ...* (p. 143).

The crafting of appropriate paraphrases depends on the interplay of three interdependent actions: the labeling of the speaker’s *content*, the acknowledgment of the speaker’s *emotions* about the content and the selection of the *logical level* that frames the content. The scaffold for crafting effective paraphrases capable of supporting thinking and problem solving comprises three communicative intentions: *acknowledging and clarifying*, *summarizing and organizing*, and *shifting focus of thinking*. Garmston & Wellman (2013) use these intentions to propose three types of paraphrases:

1. Brief statements in the listener's own words that *acknowledge* and *clarify* emotion and content. If the paraphrase is felt to be inaccurate, the interlocutors can work together to provide corrections. Phrases such as *You're concerned about ...*, *You would like to see ...* or *You feel badly about ...* are often employed to initiate the validation of first impressions or opinions, with a considerable focus on what the speaker *looks like*, *feels like* or *takes interest in*. As Kadushin & Kadushin (1997) suggest, the offering of paraphrases to people is like holding a mirror up to their communication. Perhaps the role of this metaphor is to make us detect a paradox in paraphrasing: misinterpretations, distortions or misconceptions are good because they foster further explorations and lead to deeper understandings.
2. Utterances that *summarize* information and introduce themes and containers in order to allow the *organization* of multiple statements or apparently disconnected issues. This type of paraphrase is extremely valuable when several speakers contribute to the same topic or when so many things were said in a long stream of language. This type of paraphrase is meant to capture the key elements in the speaker's message and to propose some organization for the collected facts or ideas that may attract the speaker's reaction. The syntactic patterns employed to summarize and organize ideas commonly comprise discourse makers that signal conclusions, contrasts or alternative, as illustrated by the following two statements: 1. *So, there seem to be two key issues here: one is related to power relationships and the other one to matters of symbolic representation.* 2. *On the one hand smokers should have the right to enjoy their smoking if they want to, but on the other hand non-smokers should have the right to breathe smoke-free air.* A further example to illustrate the level of conciseness and crystallization of the original message was selected from Kadushin & Kadushin (1997):

Interviewee: You make out applications one after the other, and you go out for interviews one after the other, and they take one look at you, and because you're African American you don't get any consideration for the job.

Interviewer: You make every effort to find work, but you feel discrimination prevents you from getting a job. (pp. 141-142)

3. Statements that *shift* the conversation to a *higher or lower level of abstraction*. Listeners often identify highly global patterns of thinking and decide to present them as *concepts*, *goals*, *categories*, *values*, *assumptions* or *intentions*. The shifting up is a way of helping the speakers who think in highly sequential and concrete patterns to accept the exploration of a larger territory or to consider the projection of their thoughts into a wider context. When shifting down, paraphrasers focus on providing specific examples and details that increase the precision of thinking, provide supplementary clarifications and establish focal centers of interest. Here are the examples provided by Garmston & Wellman (2013) for each strategy:
 - a. shifting up: So a major goal here is to define fairness in the budgeting processes and compare those criteria to the operating values of the school. (p. 34)

- b. shifting down: So *fair* might mean that we construct a needs assessment form for each department to fill out and submit to the site council for public consideration. (p. 34)

Paraphrasing as an instrument of avoiding plagiarism in academic writing

In order to integrate other people's ideas and information into one's writing, one may resort to *quoting* (the exact reproduction of the language employed in the source text), *summarizing* (getting the gist of the source text) and *paraphrasing* (restating the ideas in the original text in one's words and sentence structures). The authors of successful essays or reports manage to keep a balance between them by establishing appropriate rhetorical and discursive priorities while constructing their own text, and by considering the overall quality and quantity of the source's language. In this last respect, the advice given by Axelrod & Cooper (1994) seems to fit the profile of an oriented and inspired writer: "You might choose to paraphrase rather than quote when the source language is not especially arresting or memorable. You might paraphrase short passages but summarize longer ones" (p. 450).

When students embark on reading and studying guides for academic writing, they might get the feeling that paraphrasing is the ultimate form of redemption from plagiarism. On the one hand this feeling can be challenging and constructive especially for those who (re)discover the pleasure of juggling with major linguistic means to recast original information and ideas: changing vocabulary by using synonyms, changing word classes, and changing word order (Bailey, 2011, 46). On the other hand the same feeling may have a paralyzing effect on those who believe that the application of Bailey's linguistic strategies and the proper citation of the sources employed are enough to declare their immunity from plagiarism. However, as Professor Septimiu Chelcea (2011) holds in his recent manual, there is never enough linguistic evidence and accuracy displayed in citations to place us at a safe distance from the text that we need to paraphrase. At the same time, the scholar sadly admits that he is completely baffled and that he can offer no word of advice on keeping our distance from the original:

Plagiatul involuntar se poate ivi și în cazurile în care parafrăzăm enunțurile altora, când exprimăm cu cuvintele noastre ce au spus alții înaintea noastră. Cât de mult trebuie să ne îndepărtăm de textul original pentru a nu fi acuzați de original? Dacă ne distanțăm prea mult, nu trădăm autorul pe care îl parafrăzăm? Mărturisesc că nu am un răspuns precis la aceste înrebări. (p. 48)

And yet, the answer is well-hidden between the lines of another book instructing its readers how to conduct their research and write papers. Booth, Colomb & Williams (1995) hold that close paraphrases are good candidates for plagiarism, even if sources are properly cited. The concept of *close paraphrase* describes in fact a particular process of obtaining a paraphrase. It seems that in the process of restating the essence of a textual message, writers often end up cancelling the validity and efficiency of Bailey's linguistic techniques when they start to write down their reformulations, because they tend to preserve the original text *in sight* or *at hand* for constant comparison or inspiration (Booth, Colomb & Williams, 1995, 169). The authors claim that this *simultaneity* or *synchronism* is almost impossible to conceal as long as

“someone could run her finger along your sentences and find synonyms or synonymous phrases for words in the original in roughly the same order” (p. 170). Consequently, the construction of proper paraphrases requires not only cognitive skills and linguistic competence, but also discipline and accuracy in note taking, as well as a final decision to drive the original text into exile while devising one’s paraphrase.

Conclusions

Paraphrases relate to the content of communication, allowing people to create *parallel texts* that ultimately reflect what the original signified to the ones who aimed to clarify and simplify it. While paraphrasers strive to restate the essence of other people’s thoughts, they also need to find the proper balance between a consistent summary of ideas and examples, and a complete reproduction of someone else’s words.

The paraphrases performed in the spoken mode require active listening skills and speedy decisions to shift the conversation to higher or lower levels of abstraction. The paraphrases produced in the written mode require the alternation of various types of reading and the capacity to convert ideas from notes in full sentences, without echoing the ordering of the original.

Paraphrases have a paradoxical nature, inviting both *connections* and *disconnections*. As a special form of *reflection*, the paraphrase projects content back to the speaker for further consideration and connects that response to the flow of discourse emerging within the group. As a means to avoid plagiarism, the paraphrase requires that we get physically disconnected from the original in order to report what original had to say to us.

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