Abstract

Discourse is a naturally occurring language phenomenon across sentences. Discourse analysis takes into account a wide range of language abilities that are used regularly in one’s own environment. Discourse abilities in adults with acquired cerebral pathology have come under closer examination in the last three decades. One such disorder which has caught attention of speech language pathologists is the communication abilities in persons with dementia. Dementia is a debilitating condition that causes chronic and progressive deterioration in intellect, personality and communication functioning (Bayles & Kaszniak, 1987). There are several factors which influence the discourse abilities in persons with dementia. One important factor is bilingualism/multilingualism due to globalization. Therefore, there is a need to study discourse of bilingual elderly from countries like India, where the native languages are spoken at home and in the environment, yet they acquire literacy in English.

The aim of the present study was to investigate the discourse abilities in predominantly monolingual and predominantly bilingual persons with dementia (PWD) as compared to the healthy elderly (HE). The study considered 60 healthy elderly and 20 persons with mild dementia and profiled discourse abilities as well as the cognitive-linguistic features in them. The discourse genres were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively using various methods.

Discourse production distinguished persons with healthy aging from those with dementia as well as the monolingual and bilingual participants in the clinical group. There was a differential performance of monolinguals and bilinguals in the clinical group which was not always seen in the typical group. The tests on cognitive linguistic based measures revealed that PWD demonstrated impairment in the ability to learn and remember new information, with mild-word finding difficulties and difficulty in tasks related to memory, problem solving and visuospatial skills.

Cognitive abilities and the language use can vary due to dementia which was observed in the present study. The cognitive difficulties experienced by persons with dementia have influenced their discourse production skills which are reflected in their discourse genre. The study has identified the relative importance of linguistic variables in discriminating persons with dementia from healthy elderly. The qualitative analysis of the discourse genre identifies the role of speech-language pathologists in the identification, diagnosis, and treatment of cognitive-linguistic measures in the field of dementia are well documented in the present study.