

Importance of task selection for connected speech analysis in patients with Alzheimer's disease from an ethnically diverse sample

Article

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1 Running Head: Task selection in linguistic profiles for AD speech

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5 **Importance of task selection for connected speech analysis in patients with Alzheimer's**
6 **disease from an ethnically diverse sample**

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Abstract

Features of linguistic impairment in Alzheimer’s disease (AD) are primarily derived from English-speaking patients. Little is known regarding such deficits in linguistically diverse speakers with AD. We aimed to detail linguistic profiles (speech rate, dysfluencies, syntactic, lexical, morphological, semantics) from two connected speech tasks – Frog Story and picture description – in Bengali-speaking AD patients. The Frog Story detected group differences on all six linguistic levels, compared to only three with picture description. Critically, Frog Story captured the language-specific differences between the groups. Careful consideration should be given to the choice of connected speech tasks for dementia diagnosis in linguistically diverse populations.

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Introduction

Alzheimer’s disease (AD) is characterised by hallmark changes in memory and language [1]. Recent research in the linguistic profile of connected speech in non-English speaking communities indicates that the profile of impairment is not comparative across languages, and certainly not comparative to impairments deemed characteristic of language breakdown in English [2, 3]. Manifestation of the linguistic impairments depend on the structure of the language system [4], and this principle has implications for symptoms of language breakdown in AD.

Recently, we reported that Bengali-speaking AD patients produced fewer pronouns in novel story telling [3], in direct contrast with the overuse of pronouns by English-speaking AD patients [5, 6]. Similarly, Kavé & Levy (2003) reported that Hebrew-speaking AD patients produced a similar proportion of inflected words compared to controls in Cookie Theft picture description [7], a difference that is typically found in English-speaking AD patients [5, 8]. Thus, profiling of linguistic features is implicitly linked to the specific language structure [8-10]. To elicit these language specific features, the type of connected speech task used is critical. Research with English speakers has consistently shown that the type of task used (e.g., picture description, story narrative, semi-structured interview) impacts the breadth of linguistic features captured [9-11], with implications for the accuracy of diagnosis.

To date, research comparing linguistic profiles across commonly used connected speech tasks in AD patients of South-Asian languages, such as, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Punjab, Tamil, Marathi, has not been published. Petti et al. (2020)’s systematic review of automatic AD detection from speech and language noted the dearth of research in non-European languages in AD and highlighted an urgency to investigate these languages in future studies [10, 12].

1 The aim of the current study is to detail the linguistic profile from two connected speech tasks
2 – story narrative and picture description – from Bengali speakers with AD. Bengali is a
3 highly inflected pro-drop East Indo-Aryan language [13]. It is currently the seventh most
4 spoken language in the world with over 265 million speakers; and is the national language of
5 Bangladesh, official language of three states in India (West Bengal, Tripura and Assam)
6 along with substantial Bengali diaspora in Western and Middle Eastern countries. This
7 research therefore fills a significant gap in the literature for profiling linguistic impairments
8 in ethnically diverse AD populations.

9 **Methods**

10 *Participants and background assessments:* Participants were six right-handed Bengali
11 speakers with a clinical diagnosis of probable AD dementia based on the NINCDS/ADRAA
12 criteria [14], and eight age-, gender-, education-, and language-matched healthy control
13 participants (HC) (Table 1). They were recruited from the Duttanagar Mental Health Centre,
14 Kolkata, eastern India. All participants were native speakers of Bengali and were Bengali-
15 English sequential bilinguals. They were living in a predominantly Bengali speaking context
16 (i.e., using Bengali at home and at work). At the time of the study, they were living with their
17 families in the urban metropolis of Kolkata. They were professionally engaged prior to the
18 onset of AD in education, business, agriculture, accounting, or engineering sectors. Exclusion
19 criteria for both groups included a known history of alcohol or drug abuse, or other
20 neurological or psychiatric illness, and less than ten years of education. Participants
21 underwent a battery of tests to profile general cognitive functioning and activities of daily
22 living (Table 1). All HC performed within the normal range on the test battery. Except for
23 AD07 with moderate dementia (i.e., Clinical Dementia Rating, CDR global score of 2), all
24 other AD participants had mild dementia (i.e., CDR global score of 1). This study was carried
25 out with ethical clearance from the University of Reading (2017-035-AB).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics and neuropsychological data on the various background measures for each individual with Alzheimer's Disease (AD) as well as Mean and SD of AD and Healthy Controls (HC) groups. This table is adapted from Bose et al. 2021 [3].

	Individual AD Cases						Group Means						Results of Statistical Tests		
	AD01	AD03	AD04	AD06	AD07	AD09	Alzheimer's Disease (AD)		Healthy Control (HC)				<i>z</i> value	<i>p</i> value	<i>effect size</i>
							Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Min	Max			
Demographic information															
Age at the time of study (years)	67	76	78	51	71	56	66.5	10.89	71.7	4.2	67	78	-0.65	0.52	-0.17
Education (years)	15	14	10	15	17	17	14.7	2.58	16.1	1.2	15	18	-1.09	0.28	-0.29
Duration of symptoms (months)	36	36	24	12	30	48	31.0	12.25							
Age at the onset of symptoms (years)	64	73	76	50	68.5	52	63.9	10.82							
Sex	F	M	M	M	F	F									
Handedness	R	R	R	R	R	R									
General cognitive functioning															
Bengali Mini-Mental State Examination, BMSE (/30)	22	20	20	22	14	16	19.0	3.29	30.0	0	30	30	-3.44	0.00	-0.92
ACE-III, Bengali adapted (/100)	49	40	45	73	27	31	44.2	16.38	92.7	2.3	89	96	-3.10	0.00	-0.83
Attention (/18)	11	10	11	13	7	8	10.0	2.19	17.7	0.7	16	18	-3.23	0.00	-0.86
Memory (/26)	10	9	12	16	3	4	9.0	4.90	25.3	0.7	24	26	-3.15	0.00	-0.84
Fluency (/14)	4	1	0	9	1	1	2.7	3.39	8.0	1.0	7	10	-2.29	0.02	-0.61
Language (/26)	16	12	15	24	9	15	15.2	5.04	25.9	0.3	25	26	-3.31	0.00	-0.89
Visuoconstructional (/16)	9	8	7	11	7	3	7.5	2.66	15.8	0.4	15	16	-3.23	0.00	-0.86
Clinical Dementia Rating (CDR)	1	1	1	1	2	1	1.2	0.41	0.0	0	0	0	-3.53	0.00	-0.94
Instrumental Activities of Daily Living Scale in Elderly (IADL-EDR) (% impairment)	20	50	CNT ¹	11	81	36	39.6	27.56	0.0	0	0	0	-3.34	0.00	-0.93

BMSE [15]; ACE-III [16]; CDR [17] (CDR score of 0= no dementia, 0.5=questionable dementia, 1.0=mild dementia, 2.0=moderate dementia, 3=severe dementia); IADL-EDR [18] (a score >16 is in the impaired range with higher value representing higher level of impairment), ¹Could not be tested.

1 *Experimental Tasks:* Two connected speech tasks were elicited in Bengali: 1) Story
2 telling using the wordless picture book “Frog, Where Are you?” [19]; 2) Picnic Scene Picture
3 Description from the Western Aphasia Battery-Revised [20]. For both tasks, participants
4 were encouraged to speak in sentences. Other than occasional prompts and generic
5 encouragement, tester interruptions were kept to a minimum. For the Frog story, participants
6 were given a brief background about the story and were told that the main characters of the
7 story are a boy, his dog, and a frog. Before describing the story based on the pictures,
8 participants looked through the book once. For the Picnic scene, participants were given
9 Bengali equivalent of the instruction “Tell me everything you are see going on in this
10 picture”. Sessions were recorded using the digital audio recorder Olympus voice recorder
11 WS-833 for subsequent verbatim orthographic transcription. The Frog Story data have been
12 previously published in Bose et al. (2021) to develop language-specific linguistic profile for
13 Bengali speakers [3].

14 *Quantitative analysis of narrative speech and variables:* To capture the
15 multidimensional nature of connected speech, measures for this study were in keeping with
16 the recommendations from recent reviews for linguistic levels that are essential for
17 characterizing AD speech [21, 22]. They aimed at quantifying six different linguistic levels of
18 production: 1. speech rate; 2. structural and syntactic measures; 3. lexical measures; 4.
19 morphological and inflectional measures; 5. semantic measures; and 6. measure of
20 spontaneity and fluency disruptions [3, 5, 6, 21-24]. The Quantitative Production Analysis
21 (QPA; [25]) and the Correct Information Unit (CIU; [26]) analyses were implemented to
22 calculate a set of count and proportional measures for each sample. The QPA scheme was
23 augmented to capture specific linguistic features of Bengali (e.g., verbal and nominal
24 morphology, proportion of postposition). Supplementary Table provides the full definition of
25 all the variables along with the individual level data. To keep the comparisons between the

1 tasks succinct, we focused on the proportional measures. To ensure reliability, transcriptions
2 and coding were reviewed and agreed upon by multiple authors (AB, MD, NSD). Details on
3 transcription, along with definition and description for the full range of variables can be
4 found in Bose et al. (2021) [3].

5 *Statistical analysis:* The novelty of these data in a language that has not been
6 investigated before necessitates the capture of both group and individual level performance.
7 We approached the analyses in two ways: group and case-series analyses. We report the
8 comparative pattern of performance across the two tasks between groups. For the group
9 comparisons, non-parametric versions of independent samples t-test (Mann-Whitney U test)
10 were used for the selected variables. Given that finding might be informative for under-
11 researched clinical population and potential for future larger scale studies [27, 28], we report
12 findings with exact p-values and effect sizes for readers to appreciate the strength of these
13 effects. It has been suggested that over-correction of alpha level risks the chance of
14 increasing type II errors (i.e., rejecting significant findings) especially for under-represented
15 clinical populations [27, 29]. In addition, we implemented Crawford and colleague's single-
16 subject statistical method of comparing a single case to a small control group (at least five) to
17 identify differences between each AD participant and controls (e.g., [30, 31]). To facilitate
18 understanding of individual variation and to capture the heterogeneity of the AD population,
19 we mention the number of participants within the AD group who showed significant
20 difference from the control based on Crawford et al.'s single-subject analysis methods (see
21 Table 2).

22 **Results**

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25 Between group comparisons of the profile of linguistic impairments across the two
26 tasks revealed that for the Frog Story AD patients showed significant differences from the
27 controls in all six linguistic levels: speech rate, syntactic, lexical, morphological and

1 inflectional, semantic, and spontaneity and fluency measures. In contrast, the picture
2 description task could capture differences only in three levels: syntactic, semantic, and
3 spontaneity and fluency measures (see Table 2). With the picture description task, of the
4 linguistic levels that showed differences, fewer variables were different between the two
5 groups. For example, for the Frog story, three variables within the syntactic measures were
6 significantly different (i.e., mean length of sentences, proportion of well-formed sentences,
7 embedding index) vs. only one variable in the picture description (i.e., proportion of well-
8 formed sentences). Furthermore, for significant findings, the effect sizes were stronger for the
9 Frog Story than picture description. Individual level analyses revealed that, in contrast to
10 picture description, Frog Story resulted in a higher number of AD patients showing
11 significant differences from the control group (see Table 2).

12 Compared to controls, AD patients' Frog Story narrative was characterized by a
13 slower rate of speech with increased dysfluencies that was marked by increased reformulation
14 attempts. Their sentences had smaller mean length, were less well-formed and grammatically
15 simpler with lower embedding index. The lexical distribution of the production indicated
16 increased proportion of open-class words with a corresponding decrease in closed-class
17 words, decreased proportion of pronouns, and decreased number of reduplications. AD
18 patients produced a similar proportion of inflected lexical items compared to controls. Nouns
19 and verbs which were inflected were inflected correctly without obvious errors. However,
20 they defaulted to simpler types and forms of inflections as noted by a decrease in case
21 markers and increase in definiteness markers for nouns. Semantically their production had a
22 lower number of CIUs which resulted in lower idea density and efficiency. Unlike Frog
23 Story, picture description was unable to capture the language-specific differences between the
24 groups, showing no difference in pronoun usage, number of reduplications, or in the quality
25 of noun inflections.

Table 2. Summary of the key findings across the six linguistic levels of speech and language production for both connected speech tasks (Frog Story and Picnic Picture Description), and information on the proportion of AD individuals who showed similar results to the group differences. Grey shading indicates significant group difference.

Variables	Frog Story								Picnic Picture Description (WAB-R)							
	AD		HC		p value	Effect size	Direction of effect for AD	# (%) of AD patients showing sign difference	AD		HC		p value	Effect size	Direction of effect for AD	# (%) of AD patients showing sign difference
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD					Mean	SD	Mean	SD				
Speech rate																
Total number of words	322.00	133.43	466.00	211.98	0.16	-0.38			103.00	42.21	91.43	41.54	0.73	-0.10		
Words per minute	60.07	29.52	135.92	31.89	0.00	-0.79	decreased	5 (83%)	77.26	24.94	76.93	4.61	0.73	-0.12		
Structural and syntactic measures																
Proportion of words in sentences	0.86	0.05	0.80	0.15	0.05	-0.52			0.99	0.02	0.94	0.07	0.14	-0.44		
Mean sentence length	4.26	0.64	7.68	0.82	0.00	-0.83	shorter	6 (100%)	4.76	0.70	5.11	0.68	0.63	-0.16		
Proportion of well-formed sentences	0.79	0.13	0.95	0.06	0.01	-0.68	lesser	2 (33%)	0.58	0.18	0.90	0.17	0.01	-0.68	lesser	4 (67%)
Embedding index	0.03	0.05	0.60	0.22	0.00	-0.83	lower	6 (100%)	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.05	0.95	-0.04		
Lexical measures																
Proportion of open class words	0.81	0.03	0.76	0.04	0.03	-0.57	increased		0.83	0.06	0.82	0.03	0.73	-0.10		
Proportion of closed class words	0.19	0.03	0.24	0.04	0.03	-0.57	decreased		0.17	0.06	0.18	0.03	0.63	-0.14		
Proportion of noun, N (N/all NW)	0.33	0.04	0.33	0.03	0.48	-0.19			0.34	0.06	0.37	0.05	0.63	-0.14		
Proportion of pronoun, P (P/all NW)	0.05	0.03	0.10	0.03	0.02	-0.61	decreased	3 (50%)	0.10	0.09	0.08	0.04	0.95	-0.02		
Proportion of pronoun to noun (P/P+N)	0.14	0.08	0.24	0.06	0.03	-0.57	decreased	4 (67%)	0.22	0.16	0.17	0.08	0.73	-0.10		
Proportion of verb, V (V/all NW)	0.27	0.02	0.24	0.04	0.15	-0.38			0.23	0.04	0.21	0.04	0.73	-0.12		
Proportion of postposition, PP (PP/NW)	0.09	0.03	0.08	0.02	0.19	-0.35			0.06	0.05	0.09	0.02	0.37	-0.26		
Number of reduplication	0.50	0.55	3.00	2.78	0.05	-0.53	decreased	3 (50%)	1.17	0.90	1.43	1.40	0.95	-0.02		
Morphological and inflectional measures																
<i>Nouns inflections</i>																
Noun inflection index	0.98	0.03	1.00	0.00	0.09	-0.45			1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00		
Proportion of inflected nouns	60.95	14.39	58.05	10.72	0.80	-0.07			26.81	8.59	26.94	9.86	0.95	-0.02		
Proportion of noun with 1 inflection	0.82	0.06	0.85	0.09	0.56	-0.16			0.84	0.18	0.92	0.15	0.30	-0.33		
Proportion of noun with 2 or more inflections	0.17	0.06	0.18	0.07	0.70	-0.10			0.16	0.18	0.08	0.15	0.30	-0.33		
Proportion of definiteness markers in %	60.38	19.95	27.09	12.07	0.01	-0.66	increased	5 (83%)	27.78	27.22	19.10	13.85	0.95	-0.02		
Proportion of case markers in %	39.16	17.18	72.44	12.56	0.01	-0.72	decreased	5 (83%)	72.22	27.22	83.26	14.16	0.30	-0.33		
<i>Verb inflections</i>																
Verb inflection index	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00			1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00	0.00		
Verb complexity score	1.99	0.01	1.99	0.04	0.92	-0.03			3.32	0.13	3.26	0.55	0.84	-0.06		
Semantic measures																
Number of CIU	135.67	29.65	161.63	5.71	0.01	-0.70	fewer	4 (67%)	65.83	21.98	74.86	26.96	0.63	-0.16		
CIU% (Idea density)	62.48	12.44	90.87	5.54	0.00	-0.83	decreased	6 (100%)	67.43	13.58	84.85	8.55	0.02	-0.67	decreased	3 (50%)
CIUs per minute (Idea efficiency)	41.23	12.34	98.24	15.93	0.00	-0.83	decreased	6 (100%)	49.86	48.77	65.17	6.51	0.01	-0.67	decreased	3 (50%)
Measures of spontaneity and fluency disruptions																
Repetition	2.83	2.56	0.75	1.04	0.11	-0.43			2.33	2.39	0.00	0.00	0.02	-0.67	greater	3 (50%)
Revisions	8.50	4.59	2.25	2.55	0.01	-0.72	greater		1.83	1.64	0.14	0.38	0.23	0.34		
Reformulations	0.00	0.00	0.13	0.35	0.39	-0.23			0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.94	0.02		
Total count of disruptions of fluency (repetition, revision, reformulations)	11.33	5.96	3.13	2.90	0.01	-0.71	greater	3 (50%)	4.17	4.03	0.14	0.38	0.02	-0.65	greater	5 (83%)

NW: Narrative Words; CIU: Correct Information Unit

1 **Discussion**

2
3 The key finding of this study is that complex narrative tasks that entail the integration
4 of characters and events within a temporal framework, such as, the Frog Story task, capture
5 *more* differences between Bengali-speaking AD patients and controls than single picture
6 description. Compared to a picture description task, learned or novel story retelling tasks
7 enable speakers to generate a rich and extended language output. For the reasons of
8 simplicity and resource constraints, picture description tasks have been most commonly used
9 in the field of connected speech analysis research and clinical practise [32]. However, this
10 study shows that picture description is limiting in terms of richness, length and quality of the
11 speech produced.

12 In the Frog Story, all six linguistic levels — speech rate, dysfluencies, syntactic,
13 lexical, morphological and semantics — showed significant differences between AD patients
14 and controls, whilst only three linguistic levels showed group differences using the picture
15 description task. Moreover, even the linguistic levels that showed differences in both tasks,
16 such as syntactic measures, Frog Story resulted in broader data capture with three variables
17 revealing significant differences (mean sentence length, proportion of well-formed sentences,
18 embedding index) versus only one variable with picture description (i.e., proportion of well-
19 formed sentences). These findings can be attributed to the fact that picture description often
20 encourages listing of items in the picture, as speakers do not need to generate complex and
21 long sentences to describe the image (see Table 2; [33, 34]). Overall, the Frog Story was
22 more sensitive in detecting differences at several different linguistic levels whereas picture
23 description was most useful in evaluating semantic impairments.

24 Furthermore, amongst these observed differences Frog Story captured several
25 language-specific features of Bengali, which were not evident in picture description. For
26 example, in Frog Story, the AD patients produced a lower proportion of pronouns in Bengali,

1 which is in direct contrast with the overuse of pronouns by English-speaking AD patients
2 consistently reported in the literature (e.g., [5, 6]). Differential performance on the pronoun
3 usage is driven by the pro-drop nature of Bengali, as it allows dropping of the subject nouns
4 [3]. However, a lower proportion of pronouns was not observed in the picture description in
5 Bengali. Similarly, the AD patients were defaulting to simpler noun inflections despite being
6 able to produce equivalent proportion of noun inflections, which was only evident in Frog
7 Story.

8 Recruiting a large sample of clinical group remains a perennial difficulty for
9 researchers. This study had six participants with AD. A larger sample of AD participants
10 would be desirable, although such number is not unusual in clinical studies particularly where
11 participants belong to an underrepresented group. The methodology was selected to mitigate
12 challenges of generalisation. As such, statistical analysis captured findings at both the group
13 and individual levels, offering a comprehensive, detailed and nuanced approach to the
14 profiling of linguistic impairments in a language which has not yet been linguistically studied
15 in depth in neurological impairments. Future research must consider recruitment strategies for
16 these underserved populations for development of larger sample sizes with varying severity
17 and impairment profiles.

18 These findings highlight the need for researchers and clinicians to pull together
19 resources to identify, characterize, and analyse the linguistic features of connected speech
20 among individuals with dementia from different language users. Currently, our understanding
21 of linguistic breakdowns in dementia in diverse languages is limited, as the vast majority of
22 studies have been conducted in English-speaking participants [22, 23]. Furthermore, studies
23 undertaking linguistic research in under-explored languages should employ a range of tasks
24 and variables to consistently and reliably capture variables that differentiates patients and
25 controls. Moreover, these tasks and variables must be sensitive in capturing language-specific

1 differences. Clinical assessments limited to single picture descriptions would delay
2 identification of early signs of dementia, which in turn would lead to delayed diagnosis,
3 access to pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions leading to poorer outcomes
4 for patients.

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13

14 **Conflict of Interest/Disclosure Statement**

15 The authors have no conflict of interest to report.

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1 Supplementary Table.
2 Definition of the connected speech variables across six linguistic levels and individual
3 raw scores for both connected speech tasks (Frog Story and Picnic Picture Description)
4 for each AD participant, and mean group data from Alzheimer's Disease (AD) and
5 Healthy Controls (HC) across these variables along with the results of statistical
6 analysis. Shaded cells represent significant difference ($p < .05$) in single-subject
7 statistics, where individual AD's score was significantly different than the HC group
8 mean. The check marked (\checkmark) variables are used for group comparison in this study.
9