CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter summarises and integrates the findings of the study. The study is critically evaluated. Implications for clinical practice in AAC are discussed, as are recommendations for further research.

5.2 SUMMARY

Current legislature obligates employers to develop strategies for the employment of people with disabilities. This process, however, is riddled with many challenges. Social integration into the workplace is an important factor in job retention (Butterworth & Strauch, 1994, p. 118), yet poses a particular challenge to persons with LNFS. Social conversation is one tool by which social relationships are initiated, maintained and intensified. Giving people with LNFS access to social conversation should thus be a focus for AAC interventionists.

Text-based systems such as CHAT and TALK have been proposed for conversation, as these systems are designed to meet the requirements of speaking rate through the use of pre-stored messages. In order for these systems to be effective, it is necessary to pre-programme messages relating to certain topics which can be used in conversation. The person programming the device thus needs to be able to predict which topics are appropriate or likely to be referenced by communicators within a particular context.

Topic of conversation is subject to the influence of various factors, such as goals of communicators, role relationships of communicators, locale, culture and language used. When selecting or predicting topics, these influences need to be taken into account.

The current study aimed to expand on previous topic research by analysing the topics referenced by South African adults in particular employment contexts. Conversations were recorded in two work contexts. Transcribed samples were segmented into

communication segments. Each segment was coded under the three referential frames of time, person and content. Frequencies and patterns with which each of the categories per frame was referenced were established, per context and overall. As far as possible, findings were compared to those of Balandin and Iacono (1998a) as well as - to a lesser degree - to those of Stuart et al. (1993) and Marvin, Beukelman, Brockhaus and Kast (1994).

Most frequent reference to 'present' (followed by 'intermediate past'), 'self' (followed by 'none') and the content frame categories 'food', 'interpersonal relations' and 'work' were the overall findings of this study. Reflected in these findings are several general principles of topic selection, these being:

1) The adherence to the *given-new-contract,* whereby communicators establish a common knowledge base, upon which new information can be built (Haviland & Clark, 1977, p. 4). Frequent reference to the present, as well as to topics related to the 'here and now' such as 'work' and 'food' may result from this need to refer to a common knowledge base.

2) The view that conversation involves *collaboration* (Crow, 1983, p. 137). Topics most likely to be successful in interaction are thus those which will enable equal participation from all communicators. Topics such as 'food', 'work' or 'interpersonal relations' are examples of topics that are appropriate to people from various ages and backgrounds, and might be called 'universal' topics.

3) Adherence to the maxim of *relevance* (Grice, 1975). Closely linked to the concept of collaboration, this maxim requires speakers to remain relevant in their conversational contributions. Topics that are familiar to all participants, such as 'food' and 'work', appear to facilitate this task for communicators.

4) A selection of topics based on the wish to bring familiar partners up to date with current or recent life events (Todman et al., 1999, p. 304). The frequent reference to 'self' could be a reflection of this desire. The same tendency was found amongst American pre-schoolers (Marvin, Beukelman, Brockhaus & Kast, 1994), elderly American women (Stuart et al., 1993) and employees at Australian jobsites (Balandin & Iacono, 1998a). The amount of personal information a communicator shares would probably be related to the role relationship between him and his listeners. Frequent reference to 'self' within

the current employment contexts would suggest fairly close relationships. Although beyond the scope of the present analysis, there seemed to be differences between the likelihood of referencing personal information depending on the participants present. Furthermore, there seemed to be a tendency (also not formally analysed) of female participants to reference themselves more often than male participants, probably due to a general tendency of females to reference people and relationships more often than men (Stuart, 1991, pp. 43 - 44).

5)   A tendency to reference an *Issue* rather than an *Event* (Reichman, 1978; Tracey, 1982) This point seems in direct contrast with the previous point made. However, the category 'none' was the second most frequently referenced person frame category. Referencing inanimate things or 'issues' appears to be a strategy to converse more generally, and to elicit participants' opinions, thereby involving them in the conversation. References to specific events might not be as conducive to participation by all communicators.

Apart from these general principles which seemed to govern especially the most frequently referenced topics, there were also topics which seemed to emanate from the physical or social context. The involvement of specific participants in certain activities such as selling clothes, a personal business or home improvements appeared to have a direct influence on topic selection. In addition, such topics were seen to reoccur on consecutive days in some cases. Taking the activities of participants and previously referenced topics into consideration when predicting topic selection is thus crucial.

In comparing the topic referencing analysed in the current study with data obtained from employees at Australian employment sites (Balandin & Iacono, 1998a), a fair amount of overlap in topics was observed. This could imply that, firstly, there are topics that seem to be generally referenced in employment settings, or, secondly, that cultural similarities are indicated between the respective employment contexts. South Africa and Australia do share certain traits, such as both being 'immigrant countries' infiltrated by the European society. The weather and the national sports are similar. Western cultural norms, which, for example, permit a topic such as 'gambling' to be

referenced (which might not have been found permissible in certain Eastern cultures) are shared amongst both societies.

5.3   CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE STUDY

The present study sampled conversations at only two work contexts, and a total of only 3 hours, 47 minutes of recording were obtained. This sample is relatively limited for making generalisations about topics of workplace conversations.

The use of omni-directional microphones placed at various points in the room rather than body-worn lavaliere microphones resulted in recording the contributions of all participants. While this enabled a more complete 'picture' of conversations, it sometimes complicated transcriptions as participants moved closer and nearer to the microphone, and overlapping talk occurred. Fitting all participants with lavaliere microphones might be a consideration for future research of this nature, although the co-ordination of all the resulting recordings might be difficult.

The topic analysis of this study was solely based on audio-recordings. Non-verbal aspects of communication and visual contextual cues were thus not available to help in the interpretation of meaning. As a result, some utterances related to the immediate context remained 'not codeable'.

A greater degree of participant involvement on various levels might have contributed to the validity and reliability of the study. Participants could have been more involved in the following ways:

1)   Supplying more background information that could aid interpretation of the recorded utterances as well as the overall interpretation of the topic analysis results. Such data might include:
   ❖ Exact family set-ups and names of household members of each employee to clarify references made in conversation
   ❖ Ratings of the degree of intimacy that a participant perceives to share with each of the potential communication partners

2)   Aiding in the definition of topic categories by supplying the researcher with their own interpretations of which topics were 'talked about' after a day's recordings. Sigman (1983) bemoans the fact that researchers do not employ native informants to decide either relevance or topic transitions, but instead rely on their own categories to make such judgements (p. 181). Having participants interpret and name their own topics might give contextual validations to topic categories defined by researchers.

While factors potentially influencing topic selection (e.g. home language, gender, constellation of participants in a particular conversation) were mentioned, the analysis did not reflect what influence these factors did in fact have. Such information could further contribute to establish guidelines for topic prediction.

5.4   IMPLICATIONS FOR CLINICAL PRACTICE IN AAC

In order to make the use of pre-stored text relevant to social interactions at the workplace, appropriate discourse topics for such conversations need to be identified. In the present study, topics frequently referenced in South African employment contexts were established. The results of the study suggest the presence of topics that are generally appropriate for workplace conversations. A list of such topics might be a useful tool for interventionists to consult when suggesting vocabulary and text for an AAC user who enters the work setting. The inclusion of such topics in AAC devices and systems would enable users to access relevant text more quickly than when having to compose such text word-by-word or letter-by-letter. An AAC user might thus have phrases and sentences ready on such topics as 'work' or 'food'.

However, the influence of the background of communication partners, personal life events and previously discussed topics on topic selection in workplace conversations was also demonstrated. Although a list of topics considered 'generally appropriate' for workplace conversations might be helpful, it cannot replace ecological inventories and contextual information of particular work settings on which topic prediction can be based. Interventionists should particularly consider:

1)   Interests that are shared among employees

2)   Particular activities of importance to communication partners, such as hobbies or other business activities

3)   Family backgrounds of participants - this will determine whether the topic 'family' would be referenced frequently

4)   The level of 'intimacy' shared amongst employees. Within close relationships references to personal matters appear more common, while more distant relationships might result in more 'general' topics with a focus on issues rather than specific events.

5.5   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

From the present data, suggestions can be made as to a list of ecologically relevant topics for conversations at particular types of employment sites. The most practically relevant next step would be to validate this list by pre-storing messages based on the identified topics on text-based systems such as TALK, and evaluating the effect of access to such phrases on the user's competence and appropriateness in social conversation.

Programmes such as TALK, however, also make use of generic speech acts and content-sensitive comments to enhance conversational performance. In order to employ such a programme, research needs to be done regarding the particular speech acts occurring in social conversation at the work place, and in particular, what generic utterances or content-sensitive comments are commonly used.

Researching the influence of certain factors on topic selection during workplace conversations could further aid in establishing guidelines for pre-storing text. Future studies might thus control for the influence of, for example, home language, gender and constellation of participants in a particular conversation.

Although the degree of overlap between the topics referenced at Australian work contexts and those found to be referenced in the South African employment contexts is encouraging, both contexts seem to share aspects of the Western culture. Topic inventories obtained from work contexts across different cultures are needed to

establish whether there are indeed 'universally appropriate' topics for workplace conversations.

5.6   SUMMARY

The results of the study were summarised and integrated in this chapter. A critical evaluation of the study was given. The implications of findings for clinical practice in AAC were discussed, and recommendations were made for further research.