

## How do autistic children communicate orally?

Carmen Lucia FLOREZ-PULIDO

PhD student at University Paris Descartes.

MoDyCo Laboratory.

Laurent DANON-BOILEAU

Linguistic Professor at University Paris Descartes

Searcher at CNRS MoDyCo UMR 7114

Communicational limitations of children with autistic disorders are well documented. In this paper we will argue that dialogue in the autistic child develops along a specific genetic path. It evolves from echolalia (first immediate, then differed) towards sort of “cut-in” insertion of ready made sentences or utterances which eventually becomes a sort of fixed set of ready-made sentences slowly turned into «more natural» language (the passage from one step to the next being clearly dependent on the context of use). In that respect, one of their major symptoms such as echolalia (immediate or differed) far from being a mark of rejection of dialog must be interpreted, on the contrary as a first attempt towards meaningful exchange with others later replaced by more adequate utterances. Generally speaking, with the child with ASD’s syndrome, there seems to be a paradoxical difference of quality between real and imaginary dialogue.

When the child asks a question to the adult or answers one of his or her questions (and therefore interacts with him or her) the dialogue that he produces is far more constrained than the discourse he can produce when he describes an object of joint-attention or vocalizes a dialogue between two puppets or even states his feelings concerning what he experiences in the situation of discourse. It seems that it is linguistic expression in the context of face to face interaction with the other that makes things difficult for him.

For example when confronted to something he does not like the autistic child is able to word his dislike (\*I don't like to blow, I don't like to put the toys away"), In a pretend play, he is able to sketch a dialog and utter the discourse of each of the two puppets he puts face to face. However, when asked to give water to a cow in a pretend play, he directly goes to get a glass and pretends to give water to the therapist. This shows that it is his relation to his interlocutor that remains a source of difficulty for him. Expressing what he feels or even what the puppets in a pretense play feel is something he can do as long as he does not have to link it with anything that comes from what the other expresses or thinks.

### Methodology

Our study is based on natural corpora. As such, it is faced with the question of heterogeneity of the conditions in which the data were produced. In that respect three major situations can be distinguished. One first set of data is the result of video recording during therapy sessions : the first interview of the child , aged 3, with his mother and subsequent therapy sessions regularly recorded each year over a period of 8 years. The second set of data comes from written notes taken during therapy sessions at school. These sessions took place for 2 years one hour every week. The third type of data is based on some recent audio tapes shot at school. (where video recoding was not allowed).

Video data have been treated with Elan software , which enables annotation and comments on gesture and facial expressions . Audio tapes have been treated with Praat allowing for various measures related to intonation (duration intensity and melody). Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of these corpora (mainly due to variations in the conditions of exchange) our data allow for some considerations about the communicational evolution of the child.

### Results

Our major finding is that the core problem of autistic children in oral communication is not language in itself, but the necessary adaptation of linguistic expression ( both segmental and supra-segmental) to what comes from the other in direct interaction. Yet it seems that autistic children can make subjective assertions about themselves, and express what they like and dislike. They can do it in front of someone else, as long they are not in direct interaction with any other protagonist.

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