

Communication attitude of Italian children who do and do not stutter

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Abstract

The purpose of this factorial study was to establish normative data for the Italian version of the Communication Attitude Test (CAT) in order to determine whether or not the speech-associated attitude reported by Italian children who stutter (CWS) differs significantly from that of their nonstuttering peers (CWNS). Toward this end, the Italian CAT was administered to 149 CWS and 148 CWNS between the ages of 6 and 14. The results showed that the mean CAT score of the CWS sampled is higher, to a statistically significant extent, than that of their nonstuttering peers. Moreover, age and gender did not differentially affect this result. Together, these findings and the large between-group effect size suggest that the CAT is a useful clinical aid in evaluating the attitude of Italian children whose fluency is problematic. It can serve well to determine if a child's speech-associated belief system needs to be addressed in therapy and, if so, whether or not the cognitive change tactics employed have been effective.

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It has been well established that speech disruption is but one component of the stuttering syndrome (Brutton & Shoemaker, 1967; Cooper, 1979; Williams, 1957; Wingate, 1964). Indeed, research has shown that the speech-associated attitudinal, emotional and coping reactions of those who stutter need to be assessed to fully highlight the multi-dimensional nature of this disorder. Moreover, clinicians and applied researchers have come to view the attitude of the person who stutters (PWS) as playing an important role in both the instatement and maintenance of fluency (Guitar, 1976, 2006; Peters & Guitar, 1991). In this regard, there is evidence that a PWS' negative attitude toward speech increases the likelihood of relapse (Andrews & Cutler, 1974) while a positive belief about one's verbal ability tends to aide long-term maintenance of improvement (Guitar, 1976, 2006; Guitar & Bass, 1978). The therapeutic importance of improving the attitude of PWS has been echoed by Ryan (1974, 1979), Cooper (1979), Perkins (1979), Boberg (1981), among others. The therapeutic value of improving attitude has been supported by a survey of members of the National Stuttering Association (McClure & Yaruss, 2003). They rated therapy that incorporated attitude change as resulting in a 'very successful' outcome, compared to stuttering modification (30% very successful) and fluency shaping (19% very successful).

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Self-report test procedures have long been used to measure the attitude toward speech of adults who stutter (Andrews & Cutler, 1974; Erickson, 1969; Johnson, Darley, & Spriestersbach, 1952; Lanyon, 1967; Shumak, 1955). However, it was not until a couple of decades later that inventories of this type were fully developed so that the speech-related belief of children who stutter could be adequately measured. The delay appears, in part, to have resulted from the concern that directly asking children about their attitude might draw attention to their speech and worsen their condition (Johnson, 1961; Johnson, Brown, Curtis, Edney, & Keaster, 1967).

Grims (1978) and Guitar and Grims (1979) were the first to propose a scale that directly assessed the attitude of children about their speech through their response to 19 speech-specific statements. The A-19 scale did not prove to significantly differentiate the attitude of children who stuttered from those who did not. Some years later, Brutton (1984) re-opened the issue of whether or not the speech-associated attitude of grade-school children who stutter differs from that of their peers who do not. Toward this end he designed the Communication Attitude Test (CAT), a self-report test containing 35 statements that children are to answer with true or false depending upon whether or not they reflect the way they think about their speech. The first investigation that employed the Communication Attitude Test involved 518 nonstuttering grade-school children (Brutton & Dunham, 1989). The results indicated both that nonstutterers display very little in the way of a negative attitude toward speech and that the CAT provided considerable room for measuring the attitude of children whose belief system might be more negative.

Since its development, the CAT has been translated into various languages and has been subject to extensive international use by clinicians and applied researchers. Moreover, the results of a series of investigations have shown that the CAT is an internally reliable instrument (Brutton & Dunham, 1989; Brutton & Vanryckeghem, 2003, 2007; De Nil & Brutton, 1991) that has good test–retest reliability (Vanryckeghem & Brutton, 1992a, 1992b), and is sensitive to behavior change (Johannisen & Wennerfeldt, 2000; Vanryckeghem & Brutton, 1992a, 1992b). In addition, the CAT has been shown to have content, criterion and construct validity (Brutton & Vanryckeghem, 2003, 2007; DeKort, 1997).

Between-group studies of the CAT have also shown that it is helpful in differentiating normally fluent children (CWNS) from those who stutter (CWS). As a group, youngsters who stutter report a significantly more negative speech-associated attitude than their peers who do not stutter (Boutsen & Brutton, 1990; Brutton & Vanryckeghem, 2003, 2007; De Nil & Brutton, 1991; De Nil, Brutton, & Claeys, 1985; Jaksic Jelcic & Brestovci, 2000; Vanryckeghem & Brutton, 1992a). Still more, within-group comparisons have shown that, cross-culturally, the mean CAT scores of the CWS studied fall well within 1 standard deviation of each other. This is also true for the CWNS sampled.

The clinical utility of the CAT as a supplementary means of differentiating children who stutter from those who do not also serves to highlight the speech-specific attitude change needed by a CWS. This test procedure also makes it possible to determine if the therapy tactics employed have served to improve a child's speech-associated belief system. With regard to these and similar matters, it is noteworthy that Italian clinicians have become increasingly concerned in recent years with the measurement of the speech-associated attitude of CWS as it relates to the cognitive aspect of the stuttering syndrome. It is this which has led to the present normative investigation whose purpose is to determine if the communicative attitude of Italian CWS and CWNS differs significantly, and if this difference, should it be observed, is affected by age and gender.

1. Methods

1.1. Participants

The Italian translation of the CAT was administered to 149 children who stutter and 148 nonstuttering children between the ages of 6 and 14. Seventy-one of the CWS were in elementary school and seventy-eight were in secondary school. Seventy-six of the CWNS were in elementary and seventy-two in secondary education. The mean age of the participants in the CWS group was 10 years 1 month, and in the CWNS group, it was 10 years 15 days. The CWS group was composed of 116 males and 33 females. There were 87 males and 61 females in the CWNS sample. A more specific breakdown in terms of age and gender can be found in Table 1.

Both the CWS and CWNS who served in this study were recruited from the northern and middle provinces of Italy. The CWS were referred over a 5-year period by a National Health Service's pediatrician or phoniatrist to either the Centro Medico di Foniatria in Padova or in Turin, because of concerns about their fluency. Their concern was confirmed by the assessment made during conversation, oral reading and play-related tasks. In each of these

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