

Interactional challenges in conversations with autistic preadolescents: The role of prosody and non-verbal communication in other-initiated repairs



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Abstract

This paper focusses on repair sequences occurring in institutional interaction with autistic preadolescents. More precisely, the paper discusses the role of prosodic and non-verbal features in situations where the participants of interaction have difficulties understanding each other. The discussion will include analysis of the prosodic and non-verbal features of trouble-source turns that launch other-initiated repairs. Methodologically, the study falls within the framework of conversation analysis (CA). The data consist of audio-visual material recorded from group therapy sessions during which 11- to 13-year-old Finnish-speaking boys afflicted with autism talk about their lives with one another and with their therapists.

The study findings suggest that certain prosodic and non-verbal features are often associated with trouble-source turns. For example, in 84% of the cases here, there is no eye contact between the speaker producing a trouble-source turn and the one who initiates the repair sequence. Sometimes the lack of eye contact is associated with overlapping speech (38%). Concerning the prosody, the most frequent feature is a creaky voice, which occurs in 35% of the trouble-source turns. A quiet voice (31%), large pitch excursions (24%), stretched syllables (18%) and jerky speech rhythms (16%) are examples of other prosodic features that could be found in the trouble-source turns of the data.

The results of this study demonstrate that ASD persons' tendency to avoid direct eye contact as well as the occurrences of certain deviant prosodic features in their speech are factors that affect the fluidity of interaction and are related to the creation of understanding problems. However, only in a very few cases do non-verbal and prosodic features seem to be the main cause of the problem of understanding. The two most common causes of understanding problems in these data are overly literal interpretation of speech and topical discontinuities.

The study also gives new evidence about autistic persons' pragmatic and interactional skills. Indeed, the data include passages in which the informants seem to have the ability to make certain inferences about the mental states of others. This is remarkable, because it is known that the ability in question is impaired in autism.

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1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterized by deficits in social communication and social interaction as well as by restricted repetitive behaviours, interests and activities (APA, 2013). The life of a person with ASD is often characterized by problems of understanding, including misunderstandings. This article discusses the role of prosodic and non-verbal features in situations in which the participants in the interaction have difficulties understanding one another.

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The discussion will include analysis of the prosodic and non-verbal features of the trouble-source turns that launch other-initiated repairs (Schegloff et al., 1977). Repair types and typical causes of the understanding problems materialized by the repairs will also be discussed. Methodologically, the study falls within the framework of CA (Sacks et al., 1974). Instrumental phonetics has also been used in observing the prosodic features.

The data consist of audiovisual material recorded from group therapy sessions during which 11- to 13-year-old Finnish-speaking boys afflicted with ASD talked about their lives with one another and with their therapists.¹ The data include two sessions with two different groups. One of these groups consists of four participants and two therapists, and the other one consists of three participants and two therapists. The data include 72 other-initiated repairs. Most of these (62) are repair initiations² and not outright corrections (10). Most repairs (84.7%) occur between the boys and the therapists. The remaining cases are between the boys (11.1%) or between the therapists (4.2%) (Lehtinen, 2012). The data will be described in more detail in Section 2.

CA constitutes an innovative and an efficient method for studying the understanding problems of children afflicted with ASD. Indeed, most previous studies that have treated the discourse practises of people afflicted with ASD have been carried out by experimental methods. In this study the interaction of autistic preadolescents is however approached from a CA perspective. That is, the data come from naturally occurring interaction, and not from an experimental setting that could easily render the interaction unnatural and therefore bias the results of the study. As the 'repair organization' of CA describes how parties in conversation deal with problems in speaking, hearing, or understanding, the method in question gives the perfect tools for the purposes of this study.

The repair abilities of children with ASD have been studied earlier from another methodological point of view by Volden (2004). The author examined the repair abilities of nine, high-functioning ASD children confronted with communication breakdown indicated by a stacked series of requests for clarification. The results showed that ASD children's repair abilities are in many respects similar to those of non-autistic children. The ASD children in Volden's (2004) study were able to respond to requests for clarification, and they used a variety of repair strategies. Like the non-autistic controls of the study, the ASD children were able to add more information when a breakdown persisted. However, they were also significantly more likely to use an inappropriate response when faced with a request for clarification than were the controls.

It has been shown that it is difficult for children with ASD to use the linguistic context to interpret a verbal message (Loukusa et al., 2007). These children also have difficulties in the pragmatic use of language, perspective-taking and shared understanding (Baron-Cohen, 1996; Baron-Cohen et al., 1999; Eales, 1993; Happé, 1994; Kleinman et al., 2001; Tager-Flusberg, 1993, 2001). Indeed, pragmatics of persons with ASD is an area which has attracted considerable clinical and research interest (Cummings, 2009, 2014a,b). It is often said that persons with ASD "fail to use language in either an appropriate or effective way in a range of communicative situations" (Cummings, 2009:56). For example, such persons have difficulties in the production and the comprehension of speech acts, in the use and understanding of non-literal language, in the ability to draw upon contextual information during language interpretation, as well as in different conversational skills (such as turn-taking) (Cummings, 2009:56, Cummings, 2014b:49). Ziatas et al. (2003) have found that autistic children use significantly lower proportions of assertions involving explanations and descriptions than typically developing children. Concerning mental assertions, children with ASD refer predominantly to desire and make few references to thought and belief.

The tendency of those with ASD to understand things literally and to miss implicit messages in interactions are well known (Cummings, 2009; Lehtinen, 2012; Lewis et al., 2008; Martin and McDonald, 2004; Nieminen-von Wendt et al., 2007a,b). According to Cummings (2009:57), this is probably related to the fact that in order to understand an utterance which is used to imply something beyond what is stated, a listener must be able to establish the communicative intention of the speaker. This, in turn, requires the ability to make certain inferences about the mental states of others (that is, to have a 'theory' of other 'minds'), an ability which is known to be impaired in autism.³ MacKay and Shaw (2004) report that children with ASD perform more poorly than controls without ASD on a test of understanding and identifying intentionality behind figurative utterances. According to Lewis et al. (2008), adults with ASD perform significantly less well than neurotypical (i.e. non-autistic) controls in pragmatic tests examining the comprehension of inferred meaning and the appreciation of humour. Emerich et al. (2003) found that autistic persons have difficulty with surprise and coherence aspects of humour. Problems of understanding humour amongst those with ASD are probably also a consequence of their general difficulty to make inferences about the mental states of others (Cummings, 2009; Martin and McDonald, 2004). In a study by Dennis et al. (2001), children with ASD failed to make inferences about what mental state verbs implied in context. They also failed to make inferences about social scripts, and they could not draw the inferences necessary for understanding metaphors and producing speech acts.

¹ The boys have been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome's. As Asperger's Syndrome has been eliminated from *DSM-5* (APA, 2013) as a distinct classification, I will refer to the condition of the informants as 'Autism Spectrum Disorder' (ASD), which nowadays encompasses Asperger's Syndrome.

² In a 'repair initiation' a repair sequence is started, but the outcome of the repair is left for the speaker who produced the trouble-source turn (Schegloff et al., 1977; Sorjonen, 1997).

³ Surian's (1996) study, for example, provides more evidence about the role of the 'theory of mind' deficits in the pragmatic difficulties of autistic children.

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