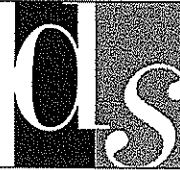


Introduction: discourse and autism



Discourse Studies
 Copyright © 2004
 SAGE Publications.
 (London, Thousand Oaks,
 CA and New Delhi)
 www.sagepublications.com
 Vol 6(2): 139–146.
 1461-4456
 (200405) 6:2;
 10.1177/1461445604041763

ELINOR OCHS AND OLGA SOLOMON
 UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES



This special issue of *Discourse Studies* introduces discourse analysts to ways in which autism organizes discourse, and, in doing so, illuminates certain fundamental underpinnings of discourse competence. Autism is a neurological disorder that hinders social, cognitive, and emotional functioning of affected persons. Although most individuals with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) suffer from mental retardation, roughly 25 percent have normal to above average intelligence (Wing, 1996; Wing and Attwood, 1987). This special issue analyzes conversational discourse involving children aged 8–12 years old who fall into this latter category – diagnosed as either high-functioning with autism (HFA) or Asperger syndrome (AS).

Researchers have established that children with autism have relatively intact grammatical ability but display pragmatic impairments in language use (see Tager-Flusberg, 2000, for review). What our research has illuminated is that HFA and AS children appear to have less trouble with certain pragmatic dimensions of language than with others (Ochs et al., this issue; Ochs and Solomon, in press). In many respects, the discourse practices of these children appear undifferentiated from those unaffected by this disorder. For example, they are able to participate relatively competently in adjacency pair conversational sequences (Kremer-Sadlik, 2001, this issue), notice social rule violations (Sterponi, this issue), display politeness and empathy (Sirota, 2002, this issue), and launch narratives in conversation (Solomon, 2001, this issue). Yet in other ways, the discourse of these articulate children has a distinct quality: it is subtly but systematically different from unaffected discourse.

Each article in this special issue delineates a range of competencies evidenced by HFA and AS children in specific areas of everyday social interaction. Examining question–answer sequences, politeness, accountability, and narrative, the contributors to this special issue address both the dimensions of social competence where the discourse of children with ASD is indistinguishable from

unaffected discourse, and the areas where the children face certain challenges. Together, the articles bring to light the heterogeneity of discourse competence, and not only begin to fill in the missing pieces in the picture of the ASD children's social engagement in everyday life, but also offer a socio-culturally informed account of discourse and autism, mutually illuminating for both fields of inquiry.

The ethnography of autism project

The articles in this issue are based on an integrated ethnographic and clinical study of the everyday communicative skills of children with autistic spectrum disorders, directed by anthropologist Elinor Ochs and clinical psychologist Lisa Capps.

Sixteen families with children aged 8–12 years old and diagnosed with either high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome were recruited to participate in the study. The ethnographic component of the project documented the children's conversational interactions with family members at home before, during and after dinnertime, and in transit to and from school, as well as with peers and teachers during the course of the school day. To ensure ethnographically informed data collection we observed each of the 16 children on numerous occasions before video-recording them for up to a month at school and for two evenings at home. In addition, the parents audio-recorded five days of interactions with their children in the morning before school and on the way home after school. The data corpus consists of approximately 320 hours of video and 60 hours of audio-recorded naturalistic data. The data have been transcribed according to the conventions of conversation analysis (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; see Appendix).

The clinical component of the project, conducted by Lisa Capps and her students, confirmed diagnosis through the Autism Diagnostic Interview–Revised (ADI; Le Couteur et al., 1989) and the Autism Behavior Checklist (ABC; Krug et al., 1978). Each child was evaluated using the Wechsler Intelligence Scale (WISC-III; Wechsler, 1992) to confirm high-functioning status. The children's perspective-taking abilities were assessed through theory of mind, emotion recognition, and empathy tasks (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985; Baron-Cohen, 1989a; Capps et al., 1992; Capps et al., 1993; Feshbach, 1982).

Shortly after the cross-disciplinary research project was initiated, project members encountered an unspeakable tragedy when Lisa Capps was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The articles that appear in this special issue continue her passion for understanding the manifestation of psychopathology in everyday discourse.

Autism and discourse

As a neurologically based social disorder, autism shed light on the discourse competence demanded in and across social encounters that build relationships,

institutions, and communities. While all of the children in our study acquired linguistic competence, some mastered language skills at a slower pace than unaffected children (Bartolucci and Pierce, 1977; Pierce and Bartolucci, 1977; Sigman and Capps, 1997; Tager-Flusberg, 1981, 1985, 1988; Ungerer and Sigman, 1987). Only the children with Asperger syndrome are believed to develop language at an age-appropriate pace, although because they are usually diagnosed at an older age than children with autism, it remains to be confirmed (Landa, 2000). Children with autism who develop speech may exhibit atypical language patterns, including reversal of pronouns, the referencing of oneself as 'you' and one's interlocutor as 'I', and neologisms. In addition, the speech of children with autism is often marked by unusual pitch, intonation, loudness, stress, and rhythm (Tager-Flusberg, 2000).

Although grammatical skills of children with autism tend to improve over time, their pragmatic skills may remain underdeveloped (Tager-Flusberg and Anderson, 1991). They have difficulty, for example, interpreting pragmatic meanings of utterances in context (Baron-Cohen, 1989c; Jordan, 1993; Tager-Flusberg, 1988, 1989; Wetherby, 1986). In laboratory settings, children with autism display a basic awareness of themselves and others but rarely initiate and sustain joint attention with others vis-à-vis a third referent (Baron-Cohen, 1989b; Kasari et al., 1990; Mundy et al., 1993). In early development, they may engage in 'protoimperative pointing' to request an object for instrumental purposes but infrequently share their interest in objects with other people through 'declarative pointing' for the sake of shared interest alone (Baron-Cohen, 1989d; Bates et al., 1979). In line with this instrumental tendency, children with autism are reported to produce more and comprehend better directive speech acts than speech acts that facilitate shared understanding and affect among participants (Baron-Cohen, 1988; Frith, 1989; Loveland et al., 1988). Moreover, unlike unaffected infants and young children, who typically track the gaze of co-present others in their social environment (Sorace et al., 1985; Trevarthen, 1979, 1993), children with autistic spectrum disorders engage less frequently in gaze monitoring (Mundy et al., 1993).

A significant contribution of this special issue is to suggest that autistic impairments related to social competence, especially the ability to take the perspective of others and participate relevantly and appropriately in social interaction, need to be analyzed not only on the interpersonal but also the socio-cultural plane. The article 'Autism and the social world: an anthropological perspective' (Ochs et al., this issue) notes that socio-cultural knowledge is constitutive of membership in human societies and lays out a framework for analyzing social abilities/disabilities in relation to norms, preferences, and expectations that are tied to participation in culturally configured social situations. Incorporating notions of conversational turn-taking, social situation, and indexicality, the authors argue that interpersonal and socio-cultural dimensions of perspective-taking are analytically distinct. They suggest a cline of ability in HEA and AS children's socio-cultural perspective-taking, with high success in conversational

turn-taking, moderate success in articulating and recognizing typical social situations, and least success in interpreting socio-cultural indexes of identities, institutions, and dispositions.

The framework articulated in 'Autism and the social world: an anthropological perspective' (Ochs et al., this issue) is further illustrated in the other articles included in this issue, as each of them addresses a distinct facet of socio-cultural knowledge of children with HFA and AS. Kremer-Sadlik (this issue) examines how the children engage in joint attention and perspective taking through analysis of their participation in question-answer sequences with family members. Her research demonstrates that the HFA and AS children answered appropriately 75 percent of all the questions addressed to them. Kremer-Sadlik discusses the children's ability to detect their interlocutors' communicative intentions within question-answer sequences and produce relevant responses. She also examines the communicative strategies employed by the family members to enhance the HFA and AS children's awareness of the socio-cultural expectations involved in participation in question-answer sequences.

Sterponi's contribution (this issue) explores the HFA children's moral positioning in everyday interaction with family members through analysis of the children's orientation to social rules and accountability in rule violations episodes. Her article illustrates that the children often engage in discourse about norms and transgressions and provide accounts for their (mis)conduct, thus actively positioning themselves in the moral framework. Furthermore, Sterponi shows that the children display their understanding of social rules as a guide for appropriate conduct not only for their own behavior, but for that of others as well, and are able to initiate interactions in which they call on others to negotiate moral positions.

Sirota (this issue) revisits the notion that children with autistic spectrum disorders have an impairment in emotion expression and recognition (Hobson, 1986). Sirota's analysis indicates that these impairments may be mitigated in everyday social interactions involving HFA and AS children. Examining the children's politeness practices, she found that nearly all 16 children in the study appropriately used non-idiomatic expressions of positive politeness (e.g. affiliative, sympathetic comments), indicating their ability to affectively align with others in ways that conform to social expectations.

Solomon's article (this issue) examines discourse competence of children with ASD to participate in narrative introduction sequences with family members. She focuses on the children's own efforts to launch narratives in conversation, as well as on their ability to build upon contributions of others. Examining both introductions of personal experience narratives and of fictional narratives that originate in television programs, computer games and other media, Solomon delineates the introduction practices that the children use to display thematic continuity or discontinuity of the narratives with prior talk or activity. Her analysis shows that the children are able to proactively engage in narrative introductions, and are especially competent in the use of conventional, stable

introductory practices when launching 'pre-packaged' fictional narratives. Their challenge appears to be not in the introduction, but in the narrative co-telling that follows, where the children with ASD often became sidetracked in minute details or 'stuck' in conceptual paradigms (Ochs and Solomon, in press) and are not able to globally organize their contributions to narrative co-telling over an extended course of propositions.

By illuminating the range of competence within these facets of social interaction, the contributions to this issue begin to unravel the mystifying and subtle heterogeneity of the social abilities of children with ASD. Taking as the point of departure what is currently known about ASD from elicited behaviors in laboratory settings, the contributors to this issue evaluate this information against the backdrop of everyday social behavior. Using ethnographic observations and video- and audio-recording, the authors examine autism as consequential within the children's social environments. The authors hope that this work will contribute not only to the current understanding of ASD, but also to the theoretical approaches to the study of discourse, society, and culture.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

.	a falling, or final, intonation contour, not necessarily the end of a sentence.
?	rising intonation as a syllable or word ends.
↑	rising intonation, usually in the middle of a word.
,	'continuing' intonation, not necessarily a clause boundary.
:::	stretching of the preceding sound, proportional to the number of colons.
-	a cut-off or self interruption.
<u>word</u>	stress or emphasis on the underlined item.
°°	markedly quiet or soft talk.
><	markedly compressed or rushed talk.
<>	markedly slow talk.
(())	transcriber's comments.
()	inaudible stretch of talk.
(1.2)	silence in tenths of a second.
(.)	a hearable 'micropause', ordinarily less than 0.2 sec.
[Separate left square brackets, one above the other on two successive lines
[with utterances by different speakers, indicate a point of overlap onset.
hhh	audible aspiration.
WORD	increased voice volume (loudness).
Word	boldface indicates relevance to the discussion.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, J.M. and Heritage, J. (eds) (1984) *Structures of Social Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baron-Cohen, S. (1988) 'Social and Pragmatic Deficits in Autism: Cognitive or Affective?', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 18(3): 379-402.
- Baron-Cohen, S. (1989a) 'The Autistic Child's Theory of Mind: A Case of Specific Developmental Delay', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 30: 285-97.

- Baron-Cohen, S. (1989b) 'Joint Attention Deficits in Autism: Towards a Cognitive Analysis', *Development and Psychopathology* 1: 185-9.
- Baron-Cohen, S. (1989c) 'Are Autistic Children Behaviourists? An Examination of their Mental-Physical and Appearance-Reality Distinction', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 19: 579-600.
- Baron-Cohen, S. (1989d) 'Perceptual Role-Taking and Protodeclarative Pointing in Autism', *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 7: 113-27.
- Baron-Cohen, S., Leslie, A.M. and Frith, U. (1985) 'Does the Autistic Child Have a "Theory of Mind?"', *Cognition* 21: 37-46.
- Bartolucci, G. and Pierce, S.J. (1977) 'A Preliminary Comparison of Phonological Development in Autistic, Normal, and Mentally Retarded Subjects', *British Journal of Disorders of Communication*, 2(2): 137-47.
- Bates, E., Camaioni, L. and Volterra, V. (1979) 'The Acquisition of Performatives Prior to Speech', in E. Ochs and B.B. Schieffelin (eds) *Developmental Pragmatics*, pp. 111-31. New York: Academic Press.
- Capps, L., Kasari, C., Yirmiya, N. and Sigman, M. (1993) 'Parental Perception of Emotional Expressiveness in Children with Autism', *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 61(3): 475-84.
- Capps, L., Yirmiya, N. and Sigman, M. (1992) 'Understanding of Simple and Complex Emotions in Non-Retarded Children with Autism', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 33: 1169-82.
- Feshbach, N. (1982) 'Sex Differences in Empathy and Social Behavior in Children', in N. Eisenberg (ed.) *The Development of Prosocial Behavior*. New York: Academic Press.
- Frith, U. (1989) *Autism: Explaining the Enigma*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hobson, R.P. (1986) 'The Autistic Child's Appraisal of Expression of Emotions', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines* 27: 321-42.
- Jordan, R. (1993) 'The Nature of the Linguistic and Communication Difficulties of Children with Autism', in D.J. Messer and G.J. Turner (eds) *Critical Influences on Child Language Acquisition and Development*, pp. 229-49. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Kasari, C., Sigman, M., Mundy, P. and Yirmiya, N. (1990) 'Affective Sharing in the Context of Joint Attention Interactions of Normal, Autistic and Mentally Retarded Children', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 20: 87-100.
- Kremer-Sadlik, T. (2001) 'How Children with Autism and Asperger Syndrome Respond to Questions: An Ethnographic Study', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Kremer-Sadlik, T. (this issue) 'How Children with Autism and Asperger Syndrome Respond to Questions: A "Naturalistic" Theory of Mind Task', *Discourse Studies* 6(2): 185-205.
- Krug, D.A., Arick, J.R. and Almond, P.J. (1978) *Autism Screening Instrument for Education and Planning*. Portland, OR: ASIEP Educational.
- Landa, R. (2000) 'Social Language Use in Asperger Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism', in A. Klin, F.V. Volkmar and S.S. Sparrow (eds) *Asperger Syndrome*, pp. 125-55. New York: Guilford Press.
- Le Couteur, A., Rutter, M., Lord, C., Rios, P., Robertson, S., Holdgrafer, M. and McLennan, J. (1989) 'Autism Diagnostic Instrument: A Standardized Investigator-based Instrument', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 9: 363-87.
- Loveland, K.A., Landry, S.H., Hughes, S.O. and Hall, S.K. (1988) 'Speech Acts and the Pragmatic Deficits of Autism', *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research* 4: 593-604.
- Mundy, P., Sigman, M. and Kasari, C. (1993) 'The Theory of Mind and Joint-Attention Deficits in Autism', in S. Baron-Cohen, H. Tager-Flusberg and D.J. Cohen (eds)

- Understanding Other Minds: Perspectives from Autism*, pp. 181–203. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ochs, E., Kremer-Sadlik, T., Sirota, K.G. and Solomon, O. (this issue) 'Autism and the Social World: An Anthropological Perspective', *Discourse Studies* 6(2): 147–83.
- Ochs, E. and Solomon, O. (in press) 'Practical Logic and Autism', in R. Edgerton and C. Casey (eds) *A Companion to Psychological Anthropology: Modernity and Psychocultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pierce, S. and Bartolucci, G. (1977) 'A Syntactic Investigation of Verbal Autistic, Mentally Retarded, and Normal Children', *Journal of Autism and Childhood Schizophrenia* 7: 121–34.
- Sigman, M. and Capps, L. (1997) *Children with Autism: A Developmental Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sirota, K.G. (2002) 'The Social Reciprocity of Positive Politeness Practice: a Micro-Ethnographic Study of High-Functioning Children with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome', unpublished Master's thesis, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Sirota, K.G. (this issue) 'Positive Politeness as Discourse Process: Politeness Practices of High-Functioning Children with Autism and Asperger Syndrome', *Discourse Studies* 6(2): 229–51.
- Solomon, O. (2001) 'Narrative Introduction Practices of Children with Autism and Asperger Syndrome', unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Solomon, O. (this issue) 'Narrative Introductions: Discourse Competence of Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders', *Discourse Studies* 6(2): 253–76.
- Sorce, J.E., Emde, R.N., Campos, J. and Klinnert, M.D. (1985) 'Maternal Emotional Signaling: Its Effect on the Visual Cliff Behavior of Infants and Young Children', *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 35: 369–90.
- Sterponi, L. (this issue) 'Construction of Rules, Accountability and Moral Identity by High-Functioning Children with Autism', *Discourse Studies* 6(2): 207–28.
- Tager-Flusberg, H. (1981) 'On the Nature of Linguistic Functioning in Early Infantile Autism', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 11(1): 45–56.
- Tager-Flusberg, H. (1985) 'The Conceptual Basis for Referential Word Meaning in Children with Autism', *Child Development* 56(5): 1167–78.
- Tager-Flusberg, H. (1988) 'On the Nature of a Language Acquisition Disorder: The Example of Autism', in F.S. Kessel (ed.) *The Development of Language and Language Researchers: Essays in Honor of Roger Brown*, pp. 249–67. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Tager-Flusberg, H. (1989) 'A Psycholinguistic Perspective on Language Development in the Autistic Child', in G. Dawson (ed.) *Autism: Nature, Diagnosis and Treatment*, pp. 92–115. New York: Guilford Press.
- Tager-Flusberg, H. (2000) 'Understanding the Language and Communicative Impairments in Autism'. In L.M. Glidden (ed.) *International Review of Research on Mental Retardation*, vol. 20, pp. 185–205. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Tager-Flusberg, H. and Anderson, M. (1991) 'The Development of Contingent Discourse Ability in Autistic Children', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 32: 1123–34.
- Trevarthen, C. (1979) 'Communication and Cooperation in Early Infancy: A Description of Primary Subjectivity', in M. Bulowa (ed.) *Before Speech: The Beginning of Interpersonal Understanding*, pp. 321–48. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trevarthen, C. (1993) 'The Functions of Emotions in Early Infant Communication and Development', in J. Nadel and L. Camaioni (eds) *New Perspectives in Early Communicative Development*, pp. 321–48. London: Routledge.

- Ungerer, J.A. and Sigman, M. (1987) 'Categorization Skills and Receptive Language Development in Autistic Children', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 17(1): 3-16.
- Wechsler, D. (1992) *Manual for the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children*, 3rd edn. New York: Psychological Corporation.
- Wetherby, A.M. (1986) 'Ontogeny of Communicative Functions in Autism', *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 16(3): 295-316.
- Wing, L. (1996) *The Autistic Spectrum: A Guide for Parents and Professionals*. London: Constable.
- Wing, L. and Attwood, A.J. (1987) 'Syndromes of Autism and Atypical Development', in D.J. Cohen, A.M. Donellan and R. Paul (eds) *Handbook of Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders*, pp. 3-19. New York: Wiley.