Introduction: discourse and autism

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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 (Sirotta, 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 (Sorce 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 HFA 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 child'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.
word 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


