

Language acquisition among autistic children



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Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder characterized by impaired socialization, communication and language. Fraser (1981) describes autistic children and mentions that many of them are moderately or severely intellectually retarded. He defines autism, citing Rutter (1977), that it is “ a disorder evident before 30 months of age, in which there is a profound and general failure to develop normal social relationships, together with delayed and deviant language development and the presence of ritualistic or compulsive phenomena ” (97).

The term ‘ Autism’ is confusing; it may refer to the whole disorder ‘ Autism Spectrum Disorder’, or to one type of it. Needlman (2000) argues that this confusion occurs because the term changes over the years, and for the reason that it is used by different professionals to mean different things. There are five types of the autism spectrum disorders, these types are: Autism, Asperger Syndrome (AS), Pervasive Developmental Disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) (also called Atypical Autism), Childhood Disintegrative Disorder and Rett Disorder. In this study, I will refer to the autism spectrum disorder with the term autism.

the most common characteristics of autistic children,
these characteristics are:

They are unable to develop relationships

They have a delay in language acquisition

They have a non-communicative use of spoken language after it develops

They have a delayed echolalia

They have a pronominal reversal

They have a repetitive and stereotyped play

They maintain sameness

They have a good rote memory

They have a normal physical appearance

Autism is a developmental disorder where language disorder is the most common characteristic in it. Lahey (1988) argues that “ we can use the term language disorder to refer to any disruption in the learning or use of one’s native language as evidenced by language behaviors that are different from (but not superior to) those expected given a child’s chronological age” (21). Any autistic person faces delays in the acquisition of language and disorders in the language itself. Furthermore, autistic children may be either mute or verbal. Lahey (1988) states:

In fact, it is the language and cognitive deficits that have been suggested as the primary deficits rather than the social problems (Rutter, 1968). Onset of speech is late in the autistic child. For those with IQs below 70, first words appear at a mean age of 4: 7 and phrases at 6: 5. Age of onset for autistic children with IQs above 70 is 2: 6 for first word and 4: 8 for phrases (Bartak & Rutter, 1976). However, the language disorder involves more than late onset. Differences in language development are seen in form, content, and use and in the interactions among these components. (77)

Fraser (1981) mentions that “ when autistic children of normal or near normal intelligence acquire adult speech, deficits are still noticeable” (99).

Alemam and Aljawaldeh (2010) mention the characteristics of autistic children’s speech which are: echolalia, pronominal reversal, extreme literalness, metaphorical language, neologism, affirmation by repetition, repetitive questioning, demanding the same verbal scenario, autistic discourse style, and poor control of prosody. Fay and Schuler (1980), citing Kanner (1946), argue that when sentences are formed, they remain for a long time as repetitions of word combinations that autistic children heard previously. This behavior is called echolalia. For example, according to Kanner (1948), cited in Fay and Schuler, the absence of spontaneous sentence formation (which is replaced by echolalia) gives rise to pronominal reversal. When echolalic children are between 5 and 6 years old, they gradually start to abandon echolalia and produce spontaneously personal pronouns correctly.

Unlike autistic children, normal children acquire language in a completely different fashion because of their adequate physical and cognitive abilities. Insup Taylor and M. Martin Taylor (1990) state the different phases of language acquisition among normal children. They argues that a neonate, who is up to age one, communicates by using prelingistic means such as crying, gestures, and vocalization. From ages one to two years, a toddler enters the world of verbal communication by learning the pronunciation of speech sounds and the using of individual words. A child, aged two to three year old, masters a language which includes budding syntax with some grammatical morphemes and word combinations. This language allows him

to communicate most of his physical and social needs. When he grows up to become a preschooler, who aged from three to five years, his language is already acquired. He is able to produce a variety of utterances that enrich his communication skills which in turn enable him to socialize. From age six to twelve, a schoolchild is skilled in communicating ideas using sentences and discourse with complete syntax. Besides, he learns a new means of communication that are reading and writing.

Review of related literature

Many studies have been done in the domain of autistic children's language, but each one deals with specific issue. In this section, I will review some of these studies which, I think, are very much related to the area I am pursuing in this current research project.

Foudon, Reboul, and Manificat's study (2008) is a longitudinal study on language acquisition in autistic children. The sample of the study was followed for 3 years. It consisted of 9 children with autism (3 girls and 6 boys). Their ages were between 3: 9 years and 9: 2 years at the beginning of the study. The study concluded with some practical suggestions that could help improve speech therapy for autistic children. The authors proposed three hypotheses and testing them. The researchers studied three different groups of autistic syndrome children: Asperger, verbal and non-verbal autistic children. After testing the hypotheses, the researchers' corpus analysis results showed that the mean length of utterance (MLU) of autistic children develops very slowly. Besides, they noticed that the period of time between the first word combinations level and the first sentences level is difficult. They relate this to the limited number of referential words (nouns

and verbs) which in turn delay the start of the acquisition of grammar and morphology. Moreover, they noticed that the socio-pragmatic deficit in their language is a result of shared attention failure, which is an advanced stage of joint attention. According to them, “ joint attention merely consists in following the gaze of someone else. In shared attention, the child additionally verifies the direction of the other’s gaze” (63). Thus, they insured the hypothesis which argues that joint attention deficit in autistic children is not a result of an inability, but rather it is a result of a lack of interest. As a result of the previous hypothesis, they suggested an early diagnosis of autism. This is because joint attention is an early mechanism which appears around the age of 12 months, whereas most autistic children are diagnosed at around the age of 30 to 36 months. In addition, this hypothesis gives a possibility to rehabilitate autistic children and encourage them to develop this capacity, so that there will be an improvement in both social deficits and language acquisition.

Adamo’s study (1996) compared the languages of autistic children and prechoolers with developmental language disorder (DLD). Concisely, it investigated the similarities and differences between the two groups. The sample of the study consisted of 39 children; 21 DLD and 18 autistic children. The mean age in months for DLD children was 60. 48, and was 55. 56 for autistic children. Adamo noticed that the autistic children make more pragmatic errors than DLD children. In addition, the language of autistic children is less grammatically sophisticated than the language of the DLD children. Moreover, she inferred that there is an inverse relationship between pragmatic errors and nonverbal performance.

Local and Wootton's study (1996) analyzed the interactional and phonetic aspect of 11 years autistic boy's speech. It focused on one type of autistic speech called pure echoing; a subset of immediate echolalia. The researchers distinguished three subsets of pure echoing. One of these subsets (called 'unusual echoes') does not have a counterpart in non-autistic speech. They explained the reason behind the occurrence of such unusual echoes in that these echoes, which consist of repetitions, are the obvious device for the autistic child to be able to deal appropriately with people's questions. They found that unusual echoes have a number of features, suggesting that they are constructed as repetitions of what the adults said. These echoes are more acoustically matched to their models than the pure echoes, which according to them, "represent appropriate moves in language games, and that at a segmental level they systematically, and selectively, preserve particular portions of the model" (161). Accordingly, these unusual echoes sound like empty repetitions.

Kopelovich's study (1979) attempted to analyze the functional relationship between receptive and expressive language in autistic children. Noun labels were used to examine the generalization from one mode to the other. The sample of the study consisted of six autistic children. Their ages were between 4 and 8 years. This study stated that receptive and expressive language modalities can be functionally related under a specific range of conditions. Kopelovich argued that comprehension is the trigger of production, and is retained longer than expression. As a result, Kopelovich suggested ways for language training. The first one is receptive training which can be applied if a receptive vocabulary is all that is intended. The

second one is expressive training which can be applied if both expressive and receptive are intended. Also, she demonstrated that receptive abilities may precede expressive ones, so that they do not need a direct training or a separate development.

Karpf's study (1977) examined the language of autistic children. It emphasized on three forms of the autistic children's speech: echolalia, pronominal reversal, and metaphoric language. Besides, it included a comparison between autistic children's language and normal children's language. The sample of the study consisted of 15 children for each group. Their ages ranged between 5 and 12. Karpf argued that autistic language is a problem of great complexity. In addition, she found a significant difference between the language of autistic children and the language of normal children. Overmore, she showed that autistic children do not learn language in the same way normal children do.

Statement of the Problem

All studies in autistic language acquisition have focused on lexical acquisition. However, in order to have a clearer picture about language acquisition in autistic children, we must delve into the area of structural acquisition because the lexicon and structure are highly related. Therefore, in my study, I will make use of researchers' findings in lexical acquisition and try to contribute to issues related to sentence structure and word order.

Purpose of the Study

In this study, I am going to analyze language acquisition among autistic children. However, it will focus mainly on the structural acquisition by autistic

children. My main purpose will be first to figure out the order of words, i. e., which constituents of the sentence are acquired first and second to find out ones that receives special focus. Unlike all previous studies I have researched, my study will be purely linguistic.

Hypotheses

1- The first acquired constituent in autistic language is the nouns, and they are the most prominent ones which receive the focus.

Methodology

Population

The population of this study consists of all the autistic children in Jordan.

Subjects

The subjects of the study will be twenty five mute and verbal autistic people between the ages of 2 and 20. They will be chosen randomly from Special Needs Centers in Irbid.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher will use more than one method in collecting data. Firstly, she will interview the children and ask them questions about themselves and their surrounding environment. Secondly, she will expose them to pictures and picture stories, and let them discuss what they have seen. Besides, because autistic children are interested in music, the researcher will sing and play songs in front of them and allow children sing with her and repeat the songs after her. Furthermore, she will observe their spontaneous conversations with other people. Their speech will be recorded.

Limitations of the study

This study will be limited to structural acquisition by autistic children. It will shed light only on autistic children's speech.

Significance of the Study

The stages of language acquisition among autistic children and the main constituents in their speech are very important issues in the domain of autism. They contribute to understanding autistic language development. This may help autistic children's parents, caregivers and speech therapists by suggesting special treatments and significant language learning methods for the children in their care.

Finally, this study will be a positive contribution to the understanding of autistic language, by combining lexical and structural issues. With a better understanding of language, more effective solutions can be reached for fixing language disorders. And so when language issues have been resolved, the children will be able to communicate and develop their personality.