



# Constructing fictional stories: A study of story narratives by children with autistic spectrum disorder



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## ABSTRACT

Children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) are reported to have difficulties with narrative language but little is known about how this affects their production of fictional stories. In this study, we aimed to establish whether fictional narratives of children with ASD differed from those of typically developing children and if performance was commensurate with levels of oral language. Fictional stories produced by 27 high functioning children with ASD, aged 11–14 yrs, were compared with those of language and age matched groups of typically developing children. Differences were found between the children with ASD and comparison groups in structural, evaluative and global features of their stories indicating specific difficulties with this form of narrative. Stories of the ASD group were shorter and contained fewer causal statements than those of both comparison groups and sentences were less grammatically complex than those of the age match but not the language match group. In global measures, the stories of the ASD group were impoverished relative to both comparison groups. The results are discussed in relation to cognitive theories of autism and language development.

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## 1. Background

### 1.1. Why are narrative skills an important area of research?

Children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) display impairment in areas of reciprocal social interaction and in verbal and nonverbal communication. Although these social and communication difficulties have been extensively studied, little is known about the oral narrative language of children with ASD and, in particular, how this is employed in the construction of fictional stories. We considered this to be an important area of research given that narrative is an essential feature of communication and everyday conversational interaction, something with which children with autism are reported to struggle (Tager-Flusberg, 1996). Moreover, children who experience difficulties in constructing a story are at a disadvantage in key areas of the school curriculum and fictional narratives have been shown to be a strong predictor of academic achievement and school success (Petersen, Gillam, Spencer, & Gillam, 2010; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). If effective support is to be provided, it is important to clearly identify areas of weakness so they can be targeted appropriately.

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### 1.2. Narrative development in typically developing children

Research into narrative storytelling with typically developing children has identified that, by the age of nine, children are able to produce a globally constructed narrative, to use temporal and causal connections, to divide the information in a narrative into foreground and background and to make evaluative comments about the mental states and emotions of the characters (Berman & Slobin, 1994; Berman, 1997; Karmiloff-Smith, 1985). Karmiloff-Smith (1985) argues that to produce a coherent narrative, children need to integrate knowledge of coherence and cohesion, with coherence defined as the structure of a story and cohesion as the devices used to link together sentences, clauses and propositions. The development of narrative competence, therefore, is dependent on the child learning an accepted story structure and how to incorporate narrative devices. 'Narrative devices' include linguistic devices which make a story cohesive by linking one element to another thereby maintaining a common theme. This can be achieved through the use of cohesive ties such as 'and', 'then' and 'because' – also useful in conveying temporal and causal relations. Other linguistic devices include being able to refer to the main protagonist as 'he' or 'she'. Such referencing skills which enable a child to organise narrative fully are not acquired by children until the late primary school years (Karmiloff-Smith, 1981). However, although this model explains the development of narrative in typically developing children, we do not know if cognitive processes and narrative development in children with autism follow a similar trajectory.

Research has also examined how children employ evaluative devices in their narratives. In making use of evaluative comments, a narrator removes him or herself from what is actually happening in the narrative in order to comment on mental states and behaviours. This is achieved by including references to frames of mind, character speech (including direct and indirect speech), hedges (devices which have the effect of distancing the narrator, e.g., 'kind of', 'looks like', maybe), negative qualifiers (e.g., 'no' 'not') and causal connectors ('because', 'that's why', 'so'). Bamberg and Damrad-Frye (1990) reported that although children as young as five were able to use such devices, adults and nine year olds were more likely to employ these in their narratives. Again, it is not known if narratives of children with autism display a similar developmental progression.

### 1.3. Narrative language in children with autistic spectrum disorder

We know from previous research with typically developing children that the production of a narrative is a complex skill, developed over a period of time and drawing on a range of linguistic, social and cognitive abilities. All of these may be compromised in children with an autistic spectrum disorder. Individuals with autism are reported to experience difficulties in narrative language but studies have produced conflicting results. Some have demonstrated that, compared with typically developing peers, oral stories produced by individuals with autism are shorter and less complex (Siller, Swanson, Serlin, & Teachworth, 2014; Tager-Flusberg, 1995), less coherent (Loveland & Tunali, 1993) and contain fewer evaluative measures, such as the use of mental state language (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985; Capps, Losh, & Thurber, 2000; Siller et al., 2014) and causal statements (Capps et al., 2000; King, Dockrell, & Stuart, 2013; Tager-Flusberg, 1995). Imaginative impairments in story-telling have also been found (Craig & Baron-Cohen, 2000) and, in terms of global measures, studies report that stories of individuals with ASD show a bias towards providing local over global details (Barnes & Baron-Cohen, 2012; Diehl, Bennetto, & Young, 2006).

In contrast, there are many studies reporting few differences between the narratives of children with autism and typically developing children, particularly when groups are carefully matched on language and cognitive measures (Colle, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, & van der Lely, 2008; Diehl et al., 2006; Dillon & Underwood, 2012; Losh & Capps, 2003; Norbury & Bishop, 2003; Tager-Flusberg & Sullivan, 1995). These conflicting findings make it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the narrative ability of children with autism. However, Norbury, Gemmell, and Paul (2013) suggest there are some common features found in many of the studies of narratives of children with ASD. These include a relationship between Theory of Mind ability and the description of internal states (Losh & Capps, 2003; Tager-Flusberg & Sullivan, 1995), reduced use of causal statements (Diehl et al., 2006; Losh & Capps, 2003), difficulties in using referential expressions (Colle et al., 2008; Norbury & Bishop, 2003), pragmatic errors (Capps et al., 2000; Diehl et al., 2006) and a focus on the details of a story rather than its global whole (Diehl et al., 2006; Barnes & Baron-Cohen, 2012).

Given that few differences are found in studies where groups are carefully matched for language ability, it is unclear to what degree the ability to tell a story can be explained by levels of oral language. Furthermore, studies comparing narratives of children with ASD and those of children with language impairments (LI) have found few differences between the clinical groups in structural language, evaluation and pragmatic measures (Manolitsi & Botting, 2011; Norbury & Bishop, 2003). A recent study by Norbury et al. (2013) found that both children with ASD and those with LI produced impoverished narratives relative to a matched group of typically developing children in terms of structural, semantic and evaluative measures. Both clinical groups also displayed significant difficulties with story structure and pragmatics. There is certainly a need for more research in this area.

Studies examining narrative storytelling in children with autism have, in the main, focused on Mayer's (1969) 'Frog Story', a wordless picture book whereby children are shown a sequence of pictures and asked to tell the story. In this situation the child is supported in their narrative as they are not required to construct a fictional story of their own. Relatively little is known, however, about how children with autism construct fictional stories without such structured support – a situation which more aptly reflects the everyday educational and social contexts in which the child with autism will find themselves.

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