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Research paper

Repetition, response mobilization, and face: Analysis of group interactions with a 19-year-old with Asperger syndrome

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ABSTRACT

This Conversation Analytic study examined the talk of an adolescent with Asperger syndrome (under previously used diagnostic criteria), Nathan, as he interacts with peers in a small group setting. We focused on Nathan's repetition aimed at pursuing response, and rely on analytical frameworks including response mobilization, face-work, and agreement preference. We found that while Nathan's repetitions resembled 'topic perseveration' previously described in the literature, they showed evidence of interactional awareness as they were employed when peers offered little or no response to his original utterance. However, we also found that while much of Nathan's talk was sophisticatedly structured, his repetition to pursue response eschewed interaction rituals that work to maintain social cohesion. As a result, Nathan's interactional priorities appeared mis-aligned with those of his peers, and failed to produce extended interactions in most cases.

Learning outcomes: Readers will be able to describe features of conversational interaction, including response mobilization, agreement preference, and face work. They will understand the relevance of conversation analysis to the study of interaction in individuals with autism spectrum disorder. Lastly, they will be able to describe the conditions under which the subject used repetition within peer interactions, and the effects of his repetition on interaction.

Introduction

Prior to the publication of the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), Asperger syndrome (AS) was a diagnostic sub-category under the umbrella of autism spectrum disorders, a neurodevelopmental condition involving deficits in social communication and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior (APA, 2013). In the new classification scheme, individuals with characteristics of AS may meet criteria for autism spectrum disorder (ASD), with a low level of severity. Individuals with AS show difficulty in language pragmatics, but are often unimpaired in vocabulary and formal language skills (Paul, Orlovski, Marcinko, & Volkmar, 2009). Cutting across domains of impairment is the tendency for verbal repetition, which can occur in several forms, including echolalia and perseveration on topics of personal interest (Paul et al., 2009).

Recently, Sterponi, de Kirby, and Shankey (2014) called for multidimensional, interactional views of language to augment conceptualizations of talk as the expression of cognitive ability. The 'language as ability' view currently dominates research on individuals with disabilities impacting language, and does not account for the interactional contexts in which atypical

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language patterns arise. Conversation Analysis (CA), a method of examining the organization of talk, is uniquely suited to offer contextually sensitive analyses of language. CA holds that linguistic utterances are "shaped to perform social actions, and situated within specific interactional trajectories", rather than isolated entities (Sterponi et al., 2014, p. 1). The present study uses a CA approach to examine the talk of Nathan, a 19-year-old diagnosed with AS, in interaction with four peers during a small group intervention at a summer camp. Our chief concern is Nathan's use of repetition as a means to pursue response. We investigate both the conditions under which this form of repetition is produced, and the interactional consequences of repetition in a peer group context.

CA work on echolalia (Sterponi & Shankey, 2014; Stribling, Rae, & Dickerson, 2007) and topic perseveration (Dobbinson, Perkins, & Boucher, 2003; Stribling, Rae, & Dickerson, 2009) has re-examined repetition by speakers with ASD, which was once categorized as a target for remediation. Conceptualizations have now shifted from viewing repetition as an exclusively within-child marker of linguistic deficit that hinders interaction, to a more interactionally structured phenomenon that is responsive to surrounding talk and is conversationally relevant. Our analysis is situated in this tradition, with the aim of examining the interactive context that supports the occurrence of repetition.

Before presenting our method and findings, we review several facets of interaction that we use as analytic frameworks, which aid in making sense of how Nathan and his peers display differing orientations to the ongoing interaction. Our central thesis is that differences in orientation to the interaction both precipitate in and are made evident by Nathan's atypical interaction style, specifically the use of repetition. These interactional features include, response mobilization, face-work, and the preference for agreement.

1. Response relevance and response mobilization

In conversation, utterances vary in the degree to which they require an interaction partner to respond; this is known as *response relevance*. At least three features of the ensuing talk affect response relevance (Pomerantz, 1980; Stivers & Rossano, 2010), the first being the sequential position of the utterance. An early achievement of CA was to identify the adjacency pair, a sequence of two contiguous turns that go together in service of performing a particular action, such as summons-answer or question-answer pairs. The offering of a sequence initiator, or first pair-part (FPP) of the adjacency pair, occasions a relevant second pair-part (SPP) at the earliest opportunity (Schegloff, 2007). Thus, the absence of a SPP after a FPP can be said to be *recognizably* and *analyzably* absent. The interaction partner can orient to the lack of response as problematic, and the researcher can make claims that a due response was not forthcoming. Not all sequence-opening utterances normatively require response; an utterance can be in first position, but not part of an adjacency pair with obligatory and constrained response types. While FPPs project, constrain, and mobilize the production of relevant SPPs, SPPs can serve to close a sequence, and do not normatively require response.

Second, turn design (the manner in which a speaker formats a turn at talk) can also add response pressure. For example, formatting an utterance as an interrogative (e.g., wh- questions) or completing the utterance with rising intonation, both work to elicit contingent responses (Stivers & Rossano, 2010). Lastly, the action the initial utterance is meant to pursue can do work to invite response. Particular actions such as assessments provide relevant opportunities to respond with second assessments (Pomerantz, 1984). Similarly, topic proffering utterances invite expanded uptake and engagement in 'topic talk' (Schegloff, 2007).

1.1. Face-work and the pursuit of response

This implicit structure of talk, whereby an utterance can put pressure on a hearer to respond in particular ways, results in 'risk' for both speaker and hearer (Goffman, 1967). Erving Goffman, one of the most influential scholars of the organization of social interaction explains,

> "[W]hen a person volunteers a statement or message, however trivial or commonplace, he commits himself and those he addresses, and in a sense places everyone present in jeopardy. By saying something, the speaker opens himself up to the possibility that the intended recipients will affront him by not listening or will think him forward, foolish, or offensive in what he has said."
>
> (1967: 37; quoted in Heritage & Raymond, 2005).

Goffman is describing potential threats to 'face', where face is the positive social value claimed for oneself during social interactions through face-work. Face is essentially an image interlocutors collaborate in establishing for themselves and for each other (Goffman, 1955). Brown and Levinson (1987), who codified Goffman's theory into a set of interactional practices, describe 'negative face' as the desire to be unimpeded, which can be threatened by obligations to respond to others' talk. Alternatively, 'positive face' is the desire for approval and acceptance. Speakers engage in positive face-work when they pursue an acknowledging response to an offered utterance. Pursuit of acknowledgement entails a risk of failure if no response is forthcoming, and places an imposition on others who may wish to be unimpeded by the requirement to offer a response (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Heritage & Raymond, 2005). Thus, face-work involves a dynamic set of practices that must be carefully managed, to avoid situations where interaction partners work at cross purposes.

In ordinary conversation between typically developing individuals, interaction partners collaborate to minimize face-threats. Speakers work to structure turns at talk in a way that promotes alignment, and tend to avoid overtly marking talk as