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The language of literary texts - between artistic philosophy and cognitive-behavioral therapy

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Abstract

The fundamental goal of this paper is to provide several therapeutic approaches that are not exclusively imperative for the autistic preschool and school children. The prevailing impercipientence of a text, or of a sentence is a result of the deficient semantic comprehension of a child with autism spectrum disorders. Children's literature contains a wide range of possibilities to shape language and its attributes by means of an original communication system, open to various interpretations, therefore providing numerous educational messages adapted accordingly to each environment, using a language that fosters thinking, reason. At the narrative level, the autistic child exhibits severe language deficits, because the narration of an event, situation, and fiction, despite the use of a special kind of language limited to only a few words, is almost non-existent. The encouragement of the communicative intention through an active literary language in which the present progressive verb is prevailing, the avoidance of static language, especially descriptions with no reasoning for the autistic student, the avoidance of narrative time and step-by-step story building games by means of audio, visual (videos, drawings), tactile stimuli, continuously doubled by the customary language of literary texts for children, the transformation of a character towards whom the autistic child exhibits an appropriate behavior, the transposition of the fictional reward into and as part of reality, irrespective of its social, verbal or physical nature, offered in the educational space by the educator, are only some of the effective approaches to changing the behavior of the autistic child.

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1. Introduction

Whether only the restricted meaning of 'language' is considered, namely the ability to speak, i.e., to produce sounds and words, the role of the language defficiencies in the context of autistic symptomatology would be less observed. It is true that more than half of the autistic children will never be able to speak. However, there are also autists, approximately 25% of them, who are able to do so, to utter words and there is a minority among them able to communicate in a functional manner, allowing them, to some extent, to assimilate the language and to understand what they receive from the sender. Nevertheless, even in their case, the identifiable defficiencies at the

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superior levels of communication, beyond mere production and understanding of utterances, are a significant barrier for their social integration. (Jordan, R. , 1995)

The difficulties in language and communication are specific to autistic young persons. The non-verbal forms of communication are especially affected and even though sometimes the language skills may be good, the social usage of language is limited. (Muraru-Cernomazu, O. , 2005)

Non-autistic children do not have to develop their own communicative conventions, being normally socialized in an existing system. The early communication is characterized by transparency, the purposes and beliefs being overt, nu covert. Autistic children do not seem to acknowledge these mental states and hence, early communication is rather opaque to them. Thus, they miss the socializing process by which the future communicative conventions will be clarified.

The situation in which the language acquisition is made with apparent easiness is limited to structure and form, for the naive listener to get eventually the wrong impression of what the autistic persons actually understand from what they communicate. (Muraru-Cernomazu, O. , 2005)

Philosophy of language assumes that understanding usually precedes production of utterances, but this is not necessarily valid for autistic children, for it has been proved that, even though pronunciation and the sentence and message structure may seem correct, a minute analysis would reveal that the language perception may be a lot weaker than the ability to produce it.

The issue of autism is not the absence of a wish to interact and communicate, but a lack of possibility to do so. These socializing difficulties exert a powerful influence over the comprehension of complex aspects and constant changes in social life, the autistic subjects finding shelter in non-changeable aspects of the world ; they prefer their routine. In order to control their lack of understanding capacity and their fear, they stick either to objects or rituals, or they focus their energy upon topics with fixed rules. And they become agitated, even aggressive, when distracted from their repetitive activities.

1.1. Main language disorders in autism

Although autistic children often vocalize or produce words, these do not qualify as messages sent to another person, being mainly uttered only to hear themselves.

Here is a short classification of C. Mureşan, concerning the language realization and comprehension level:

- The phonological level – most often, autists who speak to not present vocalizing defficiencies, but they develop thgeir phonological system at a slower pace than the normal one.
- The morpho-syntactical level – many researchers emphasized the occurence of some differences in syntax and morphology at the autistic children, such as an incondite usage of morphemes of verbal tenses or the articles, which seems to denote a slower development, a restriction of this development.
- The semantic level is highly affected in cases of autism. Autistic children prove serious difficulties to use words and to observe their semantics. They may sometimes reach a satisfactory vocabulary level, however, they fail not to represent the meaning of the words, but to use them correctly. Specific difficulties are especially related to the usage of characteristic terms for space, time and interpersonal relations.
- The pragmatic level – social use of language is also highly disturbed. There has been described, in cases of autism, a limited unconstraint of the language, with accidental verbal phrases, the lack of an apparent intention to communicate, deficiencies in acommodation in conversational roles, non-observance of politeness rules and of the turn to speak, a certain rigidity and non-acommodation of language with respect to context or task, and a irregularity of communicative quality and quantity, depending on the interlocutor, more or less familiar with the situation.
- The prosodic level – the existence of anomalies such as monotony in intonation, with a high percentage of high-frequency sounds, hypo- or hypernasality, voice volume deficient control, and frequent whispers for them to hear. There can be also instances of halting pronunciation and a scarcity of arses.
- The echolalic level – very frequent, often representing the only linguistic realization of the autistic child. Studies in the cognitive field focused primarily upon the functions of echolalia, generally regarded as non-communicative. Nevertheless, Prizant and Duchan (1981) acknowledge six functions of it: turn

taking, declarative, positive response, request, repetition, helping deal with information and discourse self-adjustment. They advance a hypothesis according to which there would be various levels of language acquisition, divided between an analytical pole, which does not presuppose echolalia and a gestalt pole (see philosophical theories), based on echolalia. The autistic children would be placed at the extreme end of this gestalt pole, probably because of their conjugated attention defficiency, which strips them off the language segmentation indicated by the adult.

In what the comprehension is concerned, there have emphasized autistic children's difficulties in understanding the meaning of linguistic phrases when the context is not evocative. Tager-Flysborg (1981) proved that the understanding of sentences is precarious when compared to that of normal children, not because a defficient syntactic comprehension, but mainly because of semantic comprehension reasons.

Failure to develop normal communicative abilities is nowadays unanimously regarded as one of the most important traits of autism.

2. The literary text for children – between the art of speaking and behavioral therapy

Statistics show that 50% of the autistic children use verbal language. Unfortunately it does not always have communicative value, for it does not encode 'the same world'. It sometimes contains such hermetical formulae that only the intimate people are able to decode. Irrespective of the domain approached, the semantic, the semiotic and the context do not resonate. Communication and speaking are always vexation sources, laborious efforts and intense frustration fits which often cause the complete reliquishment. The autists speak or try to speak out of necessity, to describe their states or to manifest their requests. When they listen, should they understand what it is communicated to them, they understand it only at the primary level, since they cannot conceive the existence of communication mutuality.

The mechanisms defining the autist communication disorder seem to be the following ones: the perception instability, inability to segment the sound flux in discrete elements, inability to concord meaning and context, and lack of the mutuality sentiment presupposing a different point of view. Most probably, failure to use language with the purpose of social communication is the main characteristic of the autists. However, in order to stimulate their participation in the games as well as a primary form of socializing, we can resort to children's folklore, consisting in formulaic songs, recitative counts, literature per se but also motion, gesticulation and mime, which the autistic children are able to easily reproduce, through imitation. "*Ala, bala, portocala, Ieși Gheorghii la porțiță; /, Hai să zicem una...*", "*Una este luna...*", "*Un elefant se legana...*" etc, are just a few of the rhymed songs that activate autistic children, intergrating them unforcefully in a social activity which they tend to accept. Due to their specificity, we preferred to quote them in the original, without attempting at a translation that would have surely affected the very essence of their rhythm.

The autistic child tends to manifest an extremely limited eagerness to communicate. He does it only, as they say, 'for communication's sake'. The development of the generative language is delayed, while the repetitive, stereotypical utterances tend to replace the creative ones. The delayed, inadequate echo is often present, so is the pronoun reversal and the abnormal, egotistic use of language.

In their research carried out for the discernment of the relationship between language and thought, J. Bruner and C. Feldman (1993) reached the conclusion that two important features of the productive language are missing in cases of autism; these defficiencies are highlighted both in dialogue and general language. In a dialogue, the autistic child seems unable to expand the previous comment of the interlocutor. When it comes to general language, he seems unable to build a storyline. Both remarks suggest the inability to encode the arguments of an action within a structure. The casual conversation, description of a set of images narrating a story, re-telling, explanation of a story told by someone else – all these are separate genres, with separate linguistic patterns. Except for conversation, all the others can be regarded as monologues which require a high cohesion in the juxtaposition of some predicates. After watching a cartoon film or a play, listening to a story, to a dialogue or a dramatization for a short period of time (their attentiveness and patience are limited), autistic children build communication without comments or profound thoughts on the situation.

THE LITERARY TEXT MADE ACCESSIBLE	
AT THE CONTENT LEVEL	AT THE FORM LEVEL

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ fragmentary approach of the texts ▪ simplifying the content of certain literary works (variant of the fragmentary approach), in the sense of deleting some episodes /characters, without that to affect the storyline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ alterations of the text structure – indentation, sentences with a complicate syntactic structure, transformation of indirect speech in direct speech, with the help of active verbs, such as <i>he comes, he leaves, he rings, etc.</i>; ▪ dramatization of simple epic texts (Little Red Ridinghood, The Three Stoogies etc); ▪ specific ways of presenting the written text: images accompanied by simple words or words easy to pronounce, envision, and represent; ▪ specific ways of presenting the spoken text: explanations provided in the stage of preparation for text reception and also during the reading – roleplaying patterns, valorization of images, boards, objects, recorded parts, etc.; ▪ the use of video recordings, programs, websites, cartoons or adaptations of literary works for children.
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Table 2. Ways to make a literary text accessible for autistic pupils

Considering the hypothesis of narrative deficiency in autism, the frequent use of words denoting an intentional action at normal children – *he brings, comes, goes, leaves, watches, pushes* - is equally interesting. The autistic subject manifests predilection for the word *to put*, in order to express an intentionality reduced to a certain action which a character in one image is performing at some point, an action in which he holds something. Therefore, autistic children seem to lack the causal, temporal and pragmatic-intentional signs required for making up a story. The hypothesis advanced by J. Bruner is that communicative issues in autism are owed to a weak impulse (or the lack thereof) to transpose life experience in a narrative and the other way round. And this deficit lingers, manifesting as a difficulty to tell a story.

The majority of the studies dealing with the autistic children language show that they do not use the pronoun *I*. L. Kanner named this phenomenon ‘pronoun reversal’, considering that the child uses the personal pronoun ‘*you*’ instead of the first person *I*. He also reminded of *delayed echolalia* and the *repetition statement* for such instances in which the child is asked: ‘Do you want to hear the story?’ and he answers ‘You want the story’. However, this concept of pronominal reversal is not meant to solve the existing issues, for, in fact, the child does not reverse the pronouns, but avoids using them, all the more when he speaks about himself. The avoidance of using the pronoun *I* either denotes a denial of the self or the absence of self-consciousness, while its substitution with ‘*you*’ proves a certain awareness of the self of the others. The anxiety with respect to the self does not surface only by the child’s refusal to speak, avoiding the use of personal pronouns. Communication does not refer to words, but also to their purpose. Using a puppet, positive character in the story, introducing itself as “I am Puss in Boots”, “I am Little Red Ridinghood from the story, I am going to visit my grandma to give her cake”, “I am the giant radish / cute and fatty”, “I am Pinocchio and I have a loong nose”, etc. The participation in the story must be carried out at a slow pace, as a game, through sound, visual (video images, drawings), and tactile stimuli. “Mimic the character X or Y”, “Do as he is doing”, “Show me the character!”, “Who are you in this story?”. Answer: “I am...”. Naming objects is more accessible to autistic children, for it does not engage them whatsoever, nor does it reveal any of their thoughts.

The easiness of some autistic children (those who succeed in mastering the language and do not display a profound deterioration of intellectual abilities) learn to reproduce sometimes entire insignificant lists of states, capitals, presidents, song titles, even in a foreign language, is also relevant. This happens, most likely, primarily because any personal involvement is avoided by repetition. Also, these enumerations reveal nothing or almost nothing of their thoughts and inner feelings that need to be hidden. The use of language by autistic children seems to focus rather on hiding their true thoughts and on limiting their contacts with other persons than on creating communicative bridges with their peers.

Dealing with the autistic children’s language issues, G. Bosch (1970), German psychiatrist and neurologist, insists that, apart from the lack of the pronoun *I*, there have been observed similarities in what concerns the language forms correlated with the meaning of the verbs *to have, to possess, to influence* or *to do*. Therefore, not only the use of the pronoun *I* is delayed, but also that of the basic verbal forms, connecting the first person, *I*, with the future

tense, as well as the imperative forms. Stating one's intentions, anticipating procedures or purpose of an action are also missing. G. Bosch proves this way the autistic children's inability to deal with these concepts.

3. Conclusions

As we already know, language develops in interaction with the others. It presupposes a series of evolutions at the pre-verbal stage, which precedes the verbal stage. Considering the above statements, we note that the autistic child does not avoid only the use of the first person pronoun and its functions, but also the general pattern of building utterances, that is an avoidance to ask directly, in any case, to ask other persons. Only by vivid, active, non-invasive, empathetical, ludic interaction - resorting to characters from children's literature as potential partners in action and conversation, we can – to some extent- retrieve socially and verbally a child manifesting autistic spectrum disorders.

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