Conversational Repair Strategies in Young Adults with Autism
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Abstract
In this study we examined the conversational repair responses of 6 young adults with autism to communicative breakdowns that occurred naturally in conversations. Language samples were analyzed for the sources of communicative breakdowns, types of clarification requests, and the types of repair responses. The repair responses were coded based on coding systems in the existing literature and those that emerged based on the data. Results showed that all participants identified and repaired communicative breakdowns. The data also suggests the need for revising the existing coding systems so as to account for subtle differences seen in autism.

Introduction
• Young children are aware of communicative breakdowns and adopt different repair behaviors to rectify them.
• Repair response behaviors have been extensively studied in typically developing children, language-impaired children, and children with autistic communication disorder.
• Previous studies examining repair behavior in individuals with autism (see Keen, 2003 for review).
• The primary author identified communicative breakdowns in the transcripts, based on the presence of a clarification request made by the second author to any of the 6 participants.
• The observed repair behavior responses were coded based on a compilation of coding systems that existed in the literature (Brinton & Fujiki, 1989; Garvey, 1977; Most, 2002; Yont et al., 2000).
• The coding system was also modified to include new codes for repair behaviors that emerged from the data.
• The second author served as the external audit during the coding process. Procedural checks & clarifications were discussed on a regular basis. Inter-rater reliability is ongoing.

Research Questions
• What are the sources of communicative breakdowns in the conversations of individuals with autism and their listeners?
• What are the types of clarification requests made by the listener?
• What are the types of repair behavior responses individuals with autism use to repair the breakdowns?

Participants
• 6 young adult males with autism, aged 18-21 years.
• Enrolled in an intensive training program in pre-occupational, community living, and communication abilities.
• Participants diagnosed as having autism based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-III (DSM-III, American Psychiatric Association, 1987).
• Childhood Autism Rating Scale (CARS, Schopler, Spence, & Reichler, 1980): 4 participants were in the mild-moderate range of autism, and 2 in the severe range.
• IQ scores on the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised (WAIS-R, Wechsler, 1981) ranged from 53-75.
• Language sample analysis indicated participants able to converse in simple sentences with 5/6 participants using compound and complex sentences.

Method
Participants engaged in natural conversations with the second author, who served as the facilitator for a Newsletter Club. Narrative language samples of their personal experiences of school and individual activities were collected at each meeting.

• The second author played the role of a listener unfamiliar with the events described by the participants.
• Interactions were 20-40 minutes long, for one school year.
• All language samples were audio-recorded, transcribed using SALT (Miller & Chapman, 1992).
• A total of 22 transcripts were collected.

Data analysis and interpretation
The primary author identified communicative breakdowns in the transcripts, based on the presence of a clarification request made by the second author to any of the 6 participants.

• The observed repair behavior responses were coded based on a compilation of coding systems that existed in the literature (Brinton & Fujiki, 1989; Garvey, 1977; Most, 2002; Yont et al., 2000).
• The coding system was also modified to include new codes for repair behaviors that emerged from the data.
• The second author served as the external audit during the coding process. Procedural checks & clarifications were discussed on a regular basis. Inter-rater reliability is ongoing.

Discussion
• Findings indicate that repair responses of these young adults with autism are characteristic of typically developing children, aged 7-9 years.
• High percentage of closed-ended responses possibly attributable to high frequency of close-ended requests or confirmation requests.
• Consistent with findings in literature: clarification requests influence type of repair responses.
• It may be speculated that listeners modify their clarification requests to accommodate the weaknesses of individuals with autism.
• Could explain the high percentage of occurrence of closure and confirmation requests.
• Data support the need to revise the existing coding systems to account for subtle differences seen in this population.

Future Directions
• Include non-verbal repair responses as part of the revised coding system.
• Particularly important for non-verbal individuals with autism.
• Information on linguistic pragmatics can provide useful insights for designing effective interventions & support for functional communicative success.

References