Communication in Autism: Do we speak the same language?

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Although language and communication impairments have been recognised as essential characteristics of autism (in fact, they are present in all autistic individuals no matter whether the person is verbal or non-verbal), the nature of the language and communication deficits and their role in manifestation of the syndrome remains controversial.

Traditionally, language is looked upon as a key prognostic factor in autism and the level of language and communicative competence achieved is seen as a measure of the outcome. Besides, language development is closely related to the development of social behaviour. In the 1970s and 1980s a lot of research was conducted to investigate the role and nature of language idiosyncrasies. Since the 1980s there has been a shift of attention from language to communication impairments as the fundamental problem. The argument is that both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication are affected and, even if structural language ability is good (for instance, in cases of individuals with high-functioning autism), communication and the social use of language remain impaired. So, where should our priorities lie? Addressing communication or language impairments?

The matter is, autistic individuals are *not* 'communicatively impaired' – they do communicate; they are communicating all the time. They do not lack communicative intent (a desire/ necessity to affect receiver's behaviour, emotions, ideas, etc.) but rather show a limited ability to use verbal or non-verbal communication for different purposes, and often use unconventional means of communication (that we do not share). Some autistic individuals might use a different medium of transmission (language) to communicate and is likely to have difficulty in using any conventional system for communication in all but the most basic ways. And, of course, in order to communicate successfully, we need shared experiences. Now we know that autistic ways of processing information are qualitatively different from non-autistic ones, so to cope with the 'chaotic environment' autistic individuals acquire and develop different cognitive styles and ways to select information (attention), process it (conceptualisation), store and retrieve it (memory) and manipulate the received information units (thinking). Different perceptual styles, conceptual systems and patterns of cognitive processes result in different systems of intelligence [1] and language.

Non-autistic people are often puzzled by the 'odd' communication expressed by autistic individuals. However, autistic individuals may be equally puzzled by their non-autistic communicative partners. It is often not so much that an autistic person has no regard for their rules as that the person cannot keep up with so many rules for each specific situation (Williams 1996). Sometimes they are not aware of social cues because of the same perceptual problems which affect their understanding of other aspects of environment. Communication is a two-way process, and it takes two people to mess up a conversation. Not all the problems are caused by autistic people. Non-autistic people have a lot to learn about the art of communication with individuals who do not converse in the same way, whether it is verbal or non-verbal language (Bovee) [2]. As it is those around them who do not recognise their attempts to transmit the information, it is better to describe 'communication impairments' in autism as qualitatively different ways to interact, communicate, and process information, which do not coincide with conventional ones [3]. It is important to remember that:

"[Non-autistics] can be ignorant of the autistic's struggle to communicate…
More care must be taken to learn how to interpret autistic languages…
Communication in Autism is not a 'failure. It is not non-existent. It's simply
different, in some way eccentric in an interesting way, and in some cases
dormant" (O'Neill 1999).

Establishing communication and understanding between any two people with different
experiences and perceptions involves developing a common language. As an autistic person's
experience and vocabulary (verbal and non-verbal) may be idiosyncratic, a great deal of
effort must be taken on both sides to develop this common language (Sinclair 1989).

Let us start from a different perspective by answering the questions:

- What language are we discussing?
- Is the verbal language the only language possible?

Language is typically defined as a system of symbols (words) and methods (rules) of
combination of these symbols used by a section or group of people (e.g., a nation) that serves
as a means of communication and formulating and expressing thoughts. It is conventional to
identify signs in this definition as words. The error of mistaking the acoustic/written
manifestation of language (reflected in speech) for language itself leads to the misconception
that the language is necessarily verbal. However, though conventional, verbal (linguistic)
words are not the only signs that satisfy the criteria of language. It is logical, therefore, to
distinguish two types of languages – verbal (consisting of words) and non-verbal (consisting
of non-verbal symbols). From this perspective, the assumption (expressed by some
professionals) that non-verbal children 'lack inner language' is incorrect. Autistic individuals
emphasise that all autistic people have a form of inner language even if they cannot
communicate through conventional systems, such as typing, writing or signing (O'Neill
1999; Williams 1996).

We may hypothesise that autistic children (or at least some of them) 'speak' (even those who
are non-verbal) a different language. Verbal language is sort of foreign to them. And as they
do not learn it naturally earlier in their lives, then we have to help master their second
language with the support of their 'first language' if we want to share a means of
communication with them. So, what language do they speak? And can we talk about any
language at all in the case of non-verbal people? The answer is affirmative. They do possess
their own language system, external and internal speech. Before we can teach them a 'foreign
language' we have to learn theirs first in order to develop the ability to 'interpret' their
messages at the initial stages of our communication with them.

All our earliest experiences are sensory. Babies are flooded with sensations through all their
sensory modalities. With development and maturation, and by interacting with environment,
babies learn to 'sort out' incoming information and stop 'experiencing sensory
flooding' (Williams 2003a). Sensory experience becomes transformed into verbal thought,
and verbal thoughts become realised through this primary experience, in their ongoing
interplay as alternately container and contained (Bion 1963):

Stimulus → Sensation → Verbal percepts (interpretation) → Verbal concepts

Sometimes pre-verbal experiences are described as 'primitive'. However, it might be more usefully conceptualised as 'primary' modes of experience because, although verbal ways of knowing become more dominant over time, they do not take place of, nor are they necessarily more complex than, more implicit ways of knowing (Charles 2001). Although verbal capacities develop from the non-verbal ones, the two ways of knowing do not represent a continuum and they are not in opposition with one another; they develop alongside each other as two interactive systems, according to different sets of rules (Matte-Blanco 1975):

Although we possess both capacities of interpretation and comprehension of the world all our lives, one of them becomes dominant in very early childhood and develops rapidly. In non-autistic development the dominant side of interpretation (and later on, communication and thinking) is a verbal one, whereas in autism we may observe sensory-based thinking or, at least, a later transition of dominance from sensory to verbal route.

Non-autistic children learn to form categories and generalise. They unite things (not identical but serving the same function, for example) under the same label. They store concepts (not perceptual images and experiences). These concepts become filters through which all sensory experiences are filtered and organised into classes, groups, types. All sensory information seems to be forced fit into the most likely interpretation based on our prior knowledge (Snyder & Barlow 1988). The outside world becomes conceptualised and represented and expressed in words that can be easily operated to create new ideas. Cognitive processes become more efficient and rapid as we 'jump' from a very few perceptual details to conceptual conclusions: we do not need to process all the details to get an idea of what we see. A few details are enough to create expectations and easily fit into their mental representations. In contrast, many autistic individuals perceive everything without filtration and selection and experience the difficulty of distinguishing between foreground and background sensory stimuli. This results in a paradoxical phenomenon: sensory information is received in infinite detail and *holistically* at the same time. It can be described as 'gestalt perception' – perception of the whole scene as a single entity with all the details perceived (not processed!) simultaneously (Bogdashina 2003; 2004; 2005) [4]. Autistic children often have difficulty moving from sensory patterns (literal interpretation) to an understanding of functions and forming concepts. For some, with severe sensory processing problems verbal language may be perceived as no more than noise that has nothing to do with either interaction or interpretation of the environment. However, it does not mean that they remain stuck at the early stage of development (before acquiring verbal concepts). They do develop but 'via different routes':

> "Those who appear not to seek to make sense of their environment may not necessarily be 'retarded', disturbed, crazy or sensorily impaired, but may, in spite of not using the same system everyone else uses, still have one of their own. They may, in spite of apparent delayed development, actually continue to use a system that others have left behind very much earlier" (Williams 1998).

With the sensory-based system being dominant, the sensory impressions ('sensory concepts') they store in their memory become templates for recognition and identification of things, people, events. It is at this stage that they develop their cognitive ('non-verbal') languages. The 'sensory concepts' are literal: everything is 'the' something. For example, if a child

remembers a 'cat' as a small silver Persian with a white spot on its head, any other feline (even a Persian with a yellow spot) cannot be identified as a cat, it is so different!

An interesting theoretical construct of cognitive differences in autism as key factors has been put forward by Professor Allan Snyder and colleagues – autism is the state of delayed [5] acquisition of concepts (Snyder, Bossomaier and Mitchell 2004). The arguments are as follows: we are not conscious of the details of percepts. Such details are inhibited from our conscious awareness. Instead, we often see what we expect to see or what is closer to our mental representations (Snyder 1998; Snyder *et al.* 2004). It is the object labels (concepts) that are of ultimate importance, as they give us the idea of what is there without any need to be aware of all the details. We are blinded by our 'mental paradigms' or 'mindsets'. On the other hand, certain people (e.g., autistic savants) would appear to have the opposite strategy. They have privileged access (Snyder & Mitchell 1999) to non-conscious information but are not concept driven (Snyder 1998). [6]. As Snyder (1996) puts it, an autistic mind – a mind without paradigms – is more conscious and hence potentially aware of alternative interpretations. However, there are disadvantages to this 'superability':

- Such a mind would have difficulty in coping with the flood of information and would need routines and structure to make sense of the world, because every detail has to be examined anew each time it is perceived and with equal importance to every other detail.

- There would be lack of (or delay in) development of symbolic systems, such as communication, language and verbal thought (Snyder 1996).

This model suggests that autism appears like a failure (or delayed acquisition) of concept formation: at the low-functioning end of the autism spectrum we may find a lack of paradigms across various domains; and at the other end (HFA and AS) individuals can be deficient in only the most elaborate mindsets, such as those necessary for subtle social interaction (Snyder 1996) [6]. Interestingly, because autistic individuals have fewer (conventional) mental models (concepts) of the world, they can be more aware of novelty (Hermelin 2001; Snyder *et al.* 2004). This explains creativity and unusual solutions to problems by individuals whose autism is not complicated by co-morbid conditions.

Autistic children, like non-autistic ones, learn through interactions with the world, but this interaction is qualitatively different. They learn their language(s) through interaction with objects and people on the sensory level. That is why, their 'words' have nothing to do with conventional names for things and events we use to describe the function of these things and events. Their 'words' are not 'envelopes' but templates – if something 'feels' the same they know what to do about it; if the 'feeling' is a little bit different – they do not understand this 'word' and may be confused. Their 'words' are literal (- stored sensations produced by objects through interaction) and they name them accordingly. One sense (sometimes several) becomes dominant for storing memories, developing 'language', and constructing thoughts [7].

The most common type of perceptual thinking in autism is visual. For visual thinkers, the ideas are expressed as images that provide a concrete basis for understanding (O'Neill 1999). Every thought is represented by a picture (Grandin 1996a). Visual thinkers actually *see* their thoughts. For them, words are like a second language. In order to understand what is being said to them or what they are reading they have to translate it into images. Temple Grandin,

probably the most famous 'visual thinker' in the world, describes how she has to translate both spoken and written words into full-colour movies with sound, which run 'like a VCR tape' in her head (Grandin 1996) [8].

Contrary to recent stereotype, not all autistic people think in pictures. In fact, those with severe visual perceptual problems have a great difficulty to easily retrieve mental pictures in response to words (Williams 2003b). Instead, they may use auditory, kinaesthetic or tactile images. Many may not actually be able to visualise and may be deprived of what could work for them and their intelligence is then wrongly judged by their inability to link visual images with words (Williams Undated). Despite all the differences, the one thing in common for all these languages is that they are non-verbal and 'sensory-based'. Perceptually-based rather than meaning-based development leads inevitably to a lack of understanding of socially accepted categorisations (Powell 2000). Here we may distinguish several 'sensory-based languages':

Visual language: They use visual images.

Tactile language: Children 'speaking' tactile language recognise things by touching them, feeling textures and surfaces with their hands, bare feet, or their cheeks. Through touch they get the information about the size and form of things, but not about their function or purpose. They store the information for later reference and may find similar objects (e.g., a plastic cup and a glass cup) to be completely different 'words' in their vocabulary because they 'feel' different.

Kinaesthetic language: Children learn about things through the physical movements of their body. Each thing or event is identified by certain pattern of body movements. They know places and distances by the amount and pattern of the movement of the body.

Auditory language: Children remember objects and events by 'sound pictures'. If the object is 'silent', they may tap it to recognise it by the sound it produces.

Smell language: Objects and people are identified by smell.

Taste language: Children lick objects and people to feel the taste they give on the tongue.

No wonder, spoken words are often perceived as mere sounds. It is difficult to sense or feel a ball, for example, in the auditory frame BALL. They do not recognise the thing if given its verbal (conventional) name, however, they may identify it with the sound it produces while bouncing, the smell or the feel on the hand. Each child may use one or several 'languages' to make sense about the world. Given perceptual differences, including sensory perceptual problems (fragmentation, hyper- or hyposensitivities, etc.), one or several systems may become inconsistent and/or meaningless, and they have to use those that are reliable (different for different individuals) to check the information they are flooded with. Each child has unique sensory perceptual profile and has acquired (voluntarily or involuntarily) compensations and strategies to recognise things and make sense of the world. One and the same child may use different systems at different times depending on many factors that can influence the 'perceptual quality', such as stress, fatigue, 'environmental sensory pollution' (bright lights, noise), etc.

Perceptual thinkers have trouble with words that cannot be translated into mental images (whether visual, kinaesthetic, tactile, etc.) and often have problems learning abstract things that cannot be imagined via perceptual mode:

> "Abstract words are much harder for me to understand and I have a picture in my head for each that helps me to make sense of the meaning… for example, if I hear about a politician's 'election triumph' I imagine the politician holding a trophy over his head, like the winning team captain at an FA cup final" (Tammet)

Autistic children are concrete thinkers. And there is a need to understand associative and spatial thinking patterns. Being a spatial thinker means that a person represents things in the mind with a multidimensional model. This way of thinking brings both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it is easier to see certain patterns of the world and infer things from those patterns. On the other hand, it is more difficult to do things that are more sequential (one-dimensional and in a line), especially when such a task involves picking a one-dimensional line out of multidimensional possibilities (Baggs 1999).

When the child starts to talk, his speech is characterised with specific 'autistic' features as if the child was speaking a foreign language. Let us re-examine some peculiarities of verbal language exhibited by autistic children in the context of their differences in sensory perceptual development:

Echolalia (or the parrot-like repetition of another person's spoken words) [10]:

Prizant (1982; 1983) suggests that echolalia is one of the features of the gestalt mode of language acquisition when a child uses whole chunks of verbal utterances as single units. Echolalia may be both communicative and non-communicative. In the case of *non-communicative echolalia*, words and phrases are not linguistic units, they are 'sensory toys' to play with: a lot of autistic people will produce sounds, words or phrases to themselves, just in order to get some auditory/ tactile pleasure. In many cases, however, echolalia is *communicative,* and can serve several functions:

- It can mean 'I don't understand'. It increases when children are confused and cannot work out what is going on around them.

- Echolalia can be a means to 'win time' (in the case of delayed processing) or to 'get the meaning' from what has been said as some people understand speech better if they repeat the message. Immediate echolalia in this case is a strategy to 'translate' verbal words into meaningful inner language (whether visual, olfactory or kinaesthetic, etc.). Thus, while repeating the sentence, either loudly or silently (silent echolalia), they elicit pictures, tactile, olfactory images (whatever their inner language is) in their mind. Using this strategy, they gradually develop skills to speak meaningfully without any noticeable delay.

- Echolalia may be interpreted as a request; when echolalia is the only means of communication at the child's disposal, he would repeat the question he was asked, when he wants to get this item, for instance, when a child wants a biscuit he says: 'Do you want a biscuit?'

Extreme literalness: One verbal word has only one 'inner image', something the child can refer to in his 'mental vocabulary'. Some autistic children seem to have difficulty accepting synonyms. They cannot grasp that two or more different words can refer to the same thing, or that one and the same word can have different meanings in different contexts. It is hard for them to understand that words that have the same pronunciation may have different spellings, or that words that are spelled differently can sound the same. (For example, *'It is too noisy here.'* – *'No, it is one noisy here.'*)

Pronoun reversal: Autistic children are literal, one word stands for one object. In the case of pronouns (and other deictic words, e.g., 'here/ there, this/ that), the words seem to jump from one person to the other all the time. For instance, Mother was 'I' five minutes ago when she talked about her shopping trip, but then the father asked her about the traffic, and she became 'you'. It is confusing for autistic children, as they have difficulty in understanding that one and the same thing (or person) can have several 'names' attached to them.

Affirmation by repetition: 'Yes' is often a difficult word for autistic children to use and understand. (You cannot sensorily define 'yes'.) Instead, the child who wants to respond affirmatively will repeat the question he was asked.

Demanding the same verbal scenario: Autistic children often demand that the person say the exactly same words they have used in similar situation, otherwise, the situation is incomplete (gestalt is different) and they do not know how to respond or what to do next.

'Metaphorical language': To autistic people certain words may have some private meanings different from their common definitions. These definitions do make sense if you know their origin.

These and other 'autistic language peculiarities' are perfectly logical if we take into account their perceptual, cognitive and language processes. The usefulness of verbal language for an autistic child will depend on the degree to which he shares meaning of the verbal words with people from whom he learns the language. At the early stages of our work with the child, we should not dictate what mode of communication the child must use. We have to find the mode that is most natural to him, i.e. most close to his inner system, and on the basis of this communication system (shared with the child) we may introduce the conventional communicative rules and means and teach conventional concepts. In other words, we have to find out what (cognitive) language each child 'speaks' and introduce verbal language on the basis of their 'native tongue'.

> *Igor, a 6 year-old autistic boy, puts every thing he is given into his mouth. His teacher shouts a loud 'No' and relocates the thing (a toy car) beyond his reach. At this moment any teaching stops (at least for the boy). No matter how many times the teacher would repeat 'This is a car. Say, this is a car. Look it's a car', Igor is unable to connect the sensation/feeling (or lack of any sensation/feeling) in his mouth with the noise produced by his teacher.*
>
> *Ann smells everybody and everything. 'It's not nice to smell people. Don't do that again,' says her support worker. But how on earth will she recognise people and things? (Isn't it more productive to address possible sensory problems which make the girl's vision, e.g., unreliable, then she won't need to check everything by using her only reliable sense (smell)?)*

We can teach them to speak (use) a verbal language and, perhaps, even think in it, first only 'outside of their world' (as if they are tourists who come to the country to practice the language of this country). Some of them (with early intervention) may even forget their own language and use only a 'foreign' one (like a small child who was brought to a foreign country and acquired the language of this country) (Williams, 1996). To start, we have to identify their language and speak to them through *their* words [11]. To teach them to verbalise their thoughts, we have to 'hear' their thoughts, i.e. interpret them from whatever language they use, and 'wrap them up' into words. This way they are more likely to connect words with meanings (experiences). It is necessary to avoid long introductions as context through (often 'empty') words is likely to confuse them and definitely does not help comprehension.

Though, even if we become 'bilingual' and can understand their language(s), still there could be translation problems, as there are no direct 'word-for-word' translations in the qualitatively different systems we use. As our conventional linguistic representation of the world is so different from that of 'autistic words', it is often a hard job to understand autistic symbols that seem totally unrelated (from a non-autistic point of view) to the things and notions they represent. For example, Park and Youderian (1974) reported the use of visual symbols by a 12-year-old autistic girl Jessy Park. Jessy used symbols of doors and clouds to represent such abstract concepts as 'good' and 'bad', e.g., 'pretty good' in Jessy's interpretation was seen as two doors and two clouds; 'very bad' – zero doors and four clouds.

Verbal autistic children often do not use language in the same way we do. If they see our sincere desire to understand them they do cooperate and try to express themselves more clearly. Paradoxically, they often try to teach us how to teach them. it is not their fault that we do not see very subtle clues they give us.

> *Alex kissed his mother's forehead. 'Potato,' he said, smiling happily. Mother saw he wanted her to sit with him and 'talk'. She had learned to recognise these subtle signs of Alex's 'social mood'. 'Potato?' she asked. 'What do you mean? Are you hungry?' He kissed her again. 'Potato,' and another smile. He definitely looked happy. 'Oh, I understand. Mummy's forehead feels like potato to you. And you like potatoes. You say you love your mummy, don't you? I love you too, sweetheart.' This was yet another lesson the boy gave to his mother. They both equally struggled to learn a 'foreign language'. Crazy? Not them.*

Notes:

[1] About 70 per cent of autistic people are considered to be intellectually disabled. This claim is based on the results of the standard IQ tests. However, as autistic individuals have different information-processing strategies and styles, they might struggle with tasks presented in a conventional, non-autistic way (e.g., a child working in 'mono' – using one sense at a time – may be presented with multisensory information). (What do we really measure with the IQ tests if we do not take into account their perceptual and cognitive differences? It is as if we tested the IQ of a blind person by asking him to name the colours of the objects in front of him. Even using his hands (tactile recognition) he would not be able to pass the test successfully. Does it mean he would be diagnosed as intellectually disabled?) The IQ tests are designed to determine whether a person is developing within normal range or is 'slow' or 'stuck' in his/her development. However, as autistic people follow a different path in their development, they are not just 'less developed versions' of non-autistic people, but rather people who have developed, sometimes substantially, along a very different track from non-autistic people, while acquiring a whole range of adaptations, compensations and strategies on the way. Their abilities, while 'invisible', may be so unusual that no existing test can measure them. What

we really measure with IQ tests of autistic people is how well a person can function (or even communicate his functioning) in a different perceptual/ cognitive/ linguistic/ social world using any perceptual/ cognitive/ language systems available to him (but unidentified by the test). These standard IQ tests do *not* identify 'autistic intelligence'.

[2] For example, many autistic individuals find it strange that if there are a few people present one is expected to talk about anything, even if they have nothing in common. It is being polite for the sake of politeness. However, some people do not need 'empty' social contact; they may be bored but they do not feel lonely. Isn't it more logical to communicate only with those who are interested in you as a person? E.g.:

> "People seem to expect me to notice them and relate to them no matter who they are, just because they happen to be there. But if I don't know who people are, I don't know how (or why) to talk to them. I don't have much of a sense of people-in-general as things to be involved with. And I don't know how to have prefabricated relationships; if I happen to be involved with some person-in-particular, I practically have to learn to talk all over again to develop a common language with that person… (Sinclair 1992)

And again, it is very logical – what is the point of smiling and being polite if you don't like the person? Isn't it better just to ignore him or leave? Or to say 'I'm fine' when you are not? Should you lie to 'get it right'?}

[3] It is like learning to speak a foreign language. When we find ourselves among foreigners, we do not assume that they have nothing to say or that they cannot communicate. If we want to understand them and to establish communication with them, we have to learn their language or find an interpreter.

[4] Autistic people may experience gestalt perception in any sensory modality. A person who experiences visual gestalt has great difficulty in separating a single detail of the scene from the whole picture (without this detail, the whole picture would be different). People with auditory gestalt seem to pick up all the sounds with equal intensity. They often feel 'drowned' in the 'sea of background noise' and cannot isolate, for example, the words of the person they are talking to from other noises in the room: fans working, doors opening, somebody coughing, etc.

[5] In this article I take a liberty to replace the original term 'retarded acquisition' with 'delayed acquisition'

[6] This hypothesis builds on research that newborns, unlike adults, are probably aware of the raw sensory data available at lower levels of neural processing and that they quite possibly have excellent recall of this information. But, with maturation, there is a strategy to suppress such awareness. Instead, the mind becomes increasingly aware only of concepts to the exclusion of the details that comprise the concepts. Snyder *et al.* (2004) believe that this strategy of suppression is continued with the formation of metaconcepts, to the exclusion of the concepts comprising them.

[7] Thanks to this internal (very real) language they can experience thought as reality. It means, when they think about something, they relive it visually, auditorily, etc. and emotionally. O'Neill (1999) compares it with 'watching a movie: a mind-movie' – the pictures of thoughts in this movie 'transport you and create emotions as you view scenes'. It is not uncommon to see an autistic child giggling to himself. One of the reasons might be that the child relives some funny moment, using recorded, stored sensory images. What is very difficult for the parents to comprehend (and accept) is that a child might laugh or giggle non-stop when someone is crying. It might be one of the defensive strategy used by the child – when he is sad he tries to lessen it by 'feeling the cheerful emotions of a happy mind-movie' (O'Neill, 1999) or he might be just confused and even frightened by all the emotions around him. In these cases, giggling does not mean that the child is happy about the situation.

[8] Visualized thinking patterns vary from one person to the other. Some 'visualizers' can easily search the memory pictures as if they were searching through slides and are able to control the rate at which pictures 'flash' through their imagination. Others have a great difficulty in controlling the rate and may end up overloaded, with too many images coming all at once. Still others are slow to interpret the information into the 'visual mode', or mentally hold visual images together. Besides, the 'quality' of visual thinking may depend on the state the person is in, and even the time of the day. For

example, for Temple Grandin (2000), her thought pictures are clearer and with the most detailed images when she is drifting off to sleep.

[9] Sometimes even high-functioning (very verbal) autistic people may temporarily lose their ability to talk because of stress and anxiety.

[10] There are usually distinguished two types of echolalia: *immediate echolalia* (or repetition of words and phrases just heard) and *delayed echolalia* (or repetition of words and phrases heard in the past). Echolalia may be observed in normal language acquisition as a language-learning strategy. An echolalic utterance is usually equivalent to a single unit (word) for a situation or event. However, in normal development it is a short phase and is accompanied by many modifications that children make in the learnt patterns of words and sentences. In autism echolalia lasts much longer, sometimes well into adulthood, or even remains the only verbal means of expression a person possesses.

[11] The language system to be taught should be matched to the child's inner (internal) language in order to make it easier for her to 'translate' from external to internal 'code'. If we use one system (e.g., PECS) for all children in the classroom, for some it might work, for others it might not. For example, using pictures with someone who relies on the 'tactile system' won't help.

References

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