

Elizabeth Fein · Clarice Rios  
Editors

# Autism in Translation

An Intercultural Conversation on Autism Spectrum  
Conditions

palgrave  
macmillan

*The Editors*  
Anne Elizabeth Fein  
Duquesne University  
Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Clarice Rios  
Department of Social Psychology  
Federal University of Rio de Janeiro  
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Culture, Mind, and Society  
ISBN 978-3-319-93292-7  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93293-4>

ISBN 978-3-319-93293-4 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018946796

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2018

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the right of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover image: © Abhishek S Padmanabhan/Alamy Stock Photo

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG  
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

## Commentary: Words, Voice, Silence

*Laura Sterponi*

### 8.1 WORDS

These days, I find myself dealing more in words, and less in sensations. And something is lost, something that I'm trying to find again. (Elizabeth Fein)

The relationship between words and meaning is complicated and paradoxical. The very moment a linguistic symbol brings into being an element of reality it also indicates its absence. With language, an irreversible rupture is produced: on one side, the reality, on the other, words; on one side, sensations, on the other, concepts; lived phenomenal experience and linguistic form. Arguably, philosophy of language has developed as an attempt to articulate as well as come to terms with this estrangement.

Analytic philosophy, culminating with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, has painstakingly endeavored to demarcate the limits of language and characterize the relationship between language and reality in the idiom of mathematical logic. Desire, emotions, and sensory experience fall outside the scope of the propositional calculus. Hence Wittgenstein's famous assertion: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent" (Wittgenstein 1922, 189).

---

L. Sterponi (✉)

Graduate School of Education, University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

© The Author(s) 2018

E. Fein and C. Rios (eds.), *Autism in Translation*, Culture, Mind, and Society, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93293-4\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93293-4_8)

The lively discussions that developed over our time together in Rio, and the three essays to which I have the privilege to respond, represent ways to engage with the silence, strategies to complicate the spoken and to interrogate the unspeakable. I suggest that two main strategies are leveraged in this semiotic enterprise. I would characterize them as *denotational layering* and *non-referential signification*.

Not dissimilar to Derridean drift—which challenges the idea of a stable, final, authorized, and authentic meaning (Derrida 1976)—denotational layering seeks to expand meaning through ad infinitum successions of referential characterizations articulated in relations, associations, and reworkations. As such, denotational layering defeats the purposes of the referential process the very moment it enacts it. Denotational layering is predicated on a fundamental principle of Peircean semiotics—“a sign is something by knowing which we know something more” (Peirce 1974, 8.332). At the same time, denotational layering eschews delimiting and limiting signification, and along with it the containment of meaning in a univocal, unambiguous definition.

Freire Costa and Grinker’s analysis of the ways individuals with autism account for their engagement with words attests to this process of denotational exploration. The authors highlight how the definitional practices of Mukhopadhyay and other individuals with autism transcend the denotational conventions by incorporating into word definition the contextual connections that a definition normatively effaces. Put another way, autistic denotational practices unveil language’s inherent relation to context, which entails polysemy and can never be entirely bracketed off or limited to the pretense of literal meaning. Autistic accounts of meaning-making thus reveal, as Freire Costa and Grinker suggest, engagement with the potential of language to expand experience, to deepen our connection with the world of others and cultural artifacts.

A most insightful reflection on autistic engagement with the world is articulated by Fein, in Chapter 6. Fein uncovers forms of engagement with the world, which are deeply sensorial and symbiotic, for which autistic individuals display a penchant. By way of thought-provoking inversion, Fein invites us to think of what conventionally is interpreted as autistic deficits—for example, impairment in self-other differentiation, difficulty in abstracting from the particular to the whole—in terms of more acute permeability to the surrounding. It is thus ironic, Fein points out, that “a condition of intimate co-existence with the outside world” ended up being labeled “by a word that means self-contained isolation” (this volume, p. 132).

Engagement with language, in autistic experience, is also profoundly sensorial. Autistic engagement with language is often experientially attuned to sound and form, in excess of semantic content, thereby revealing of dimensions of significance that tend to be overlooked in autism research. Non-referential signification refers to and affirms the possibility of linguistic expressions to be meaningful without denoting. Conjoining up realities through referential operations is undoubtedly a chief semiotic capacity of language. There is also semiotic potential, however, in the musicality of phrases and their articulatory texture—as they are experienced in ear and in mouth. Autistic modes of engagement with language subvert the referential hegemony to uncover additional dimensions of significance and experience of language (see also Ochs 2012).

The early work of Julia Kristeva provides theoretical grounding to this strategy. Kristeva theorizes a fundamental distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. These are two dimensions of meaning: the symbolic can be roughly described as encompassing the referential functioning of language—utterances with propositional content, signifiers standing for signifieds, language mobilized to predicate upon the world. The semiotic dimension, on the other hand, includes the non-referential aspect of linguistic signification—notably tone, rhythm, prosody, the musicality of language (so to speak). Kristeva refers to the symbolic and the semiotic as two distinct logics of signification, the former “based on a zero-one sequence (true-false, nothingness-notation)” (Kristeva 1980, 40), and the latter on the *0-2 interval*, which embodies the *power of the continuum*, “a continuity where 0 denotes and 1 is implicitly transgressed” (*ibid.*, 41).

To the semiotic Kristeva associates poetic language. While never dispensing entirely with the symbolic, poetry makes room for the expression of the semiotic potential of language. The poetic word, Kristeva claims, is polyvalent and multi-determined, adhering to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse.

Autistic attunement to sound, rhythm, and form, to the articulatory makeup of words and phrases, adheres to the semiotic logic of signification. It is a profoundly embodied form of engagement with the sensorial attributes of linguistic signification. In their own way, Freire Costa and Grinker give credit to semiotic signification. Drawing from the first-person account of Naoki Higashida, they acknowledge echolalia as a meaningful act, motivated by the pleasurable experience of playing with sound, in excess of meaning.

## 8.2 VOICE

toward bringing 'autistic voices' to the fore of the discourse. (Michael Bakan)

There is more to echolalia than the pleasurable engagement with rhythm and sound. In my own work on the topic (Steroni and Shanky 2014), I have demonstrated that when we approach echoic utterances with an attunement to the phenomenological dimensions of language, we do not find automatic or self-stimulatory regurgitations of past strings of words. In those echoes, voices can be heard—that is, the animation of subjective expressions, one's own or others'. Therefore, I have suggested to consider echolalia as *revolving*. As such, echoes can articulate and negotiate—actively and creatively—social, interpersonal, and affective experiences, navigating the complexities of perspective-taking and emotional processing (see also Steroni et al. 2015).

Borrowing from anthropologist Greg Urban (1989), we can thus reframe echoes as “de-quotative speech”: indexical cues (e.g., voice quality, pitch, and volume) allow different voices to be animated while the absence of a quote-framing clause affords a maximal projection of the speaker into another self. Drawing further from Urban, it can be emphasized that insofar as a quoted utterance is an icon of the utterance it purports to re-present, the speaker is also engaged in “iconic otherness” (Urban 1989, 46). My work has thus invited to reappraise echolalia with a sensibility toward the experiential affordances that language yields: the repetition of another's utterances can be thought of as mechanism to experience the other, or to access the experience of the other. In this sense, echolalia can be interpreted as a form of perspective-taking.

The notion of voice features centrally in Bakan's essay, which advocates for the autistic voices to be re-presented rather than represented in scholarly discourse. In other words, the author argues that too frequently the autistic experience is investigated from an outside perspective, made object of representation, as if autistic individuals lack the reflective capacity to understand and account for themselves. While both Freire Costa and Grinker's and Bakan's chapters offer correctives to this misconception, Bakan's paper places this issue further in the foreground. Bakan's not only petitions to bring autistic voices to the fore, he also enacts this move by making space in his pages for the voices of individuals with an

autism spectrum condition, by letting them inhabit no less than half of the pages of his text, directly, in quotation marks, without the filter of rephrasing or editing and with minimal side commentary. The autistic voice is re-presented on the page and we hear it with its distinctive tonality and texture. But voice as semiotic dimension of signification, as subjective expression of being, is present in silence too.

## 8.3 SILENCE

What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen (John Cage)

In 1952, in Woodstock, New York, in an open-air theater, with a rustic style that matched with the surrounding natural environment, one of the most surprising and influential musical works of the last century was premiered. It was 4' 33" by American composer and music theorist John Cage. The composition was popularized with the name “Silent Piece” since it comprises three movements during which a performer—or performers—are instructed to produce no intentional sounds for 4 minutes and 33 seconds.

It was a radical gesture, a paradigm-shifting move that upended the traditional structure of music and subverted conventional expectations about what music is. The purpose of the silent piece was to make people listen, attune their ears to phenomena that would have typically been considered nonmusical (Kostelanetz 1988). Cage's composition opened up a space—4 minutes and 33 seconds long—to experience sounds that we habitually do not listen to, or might perceive as noise or interference, and to experience them with the same ear with which we listen to music.

Each in distinctive ways, Fein's, Bakan's, and Freire Costa and Grinker's papers have accomplished a similar move of opening and transformation. They have expanded our capacity to perceive signification and meaning; they have discerned significance and value where traditionally there was meaninglessness or chaos; and they have engaged the silence. So do I, now.

## REFERENCES

- Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kostelanetz, Richard. 1988. *Conversing with Cage*. New York: Limelight.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1980. "Word, Dialogue, and Novel." In *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, 64-91. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ochs, Elmor. 2012. "Experiencing Language." *Anthropological Theory* 12 (2): 142-160.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1974. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sterponi, Laura, Kenton de Kirby, and Jennifer Shankey. 2015. "Subjectivity in Autistic Language: Insights on Pronoun Atypicality from Three Case Studies." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Child Mental Health*, 272-295. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sterponi, Laura, and Jennifer Shankey. 2014. "Rethinking Echolalia: Repetition as Interactional Resource in the Communication of a Child with Autism." *Journal of Child Language* 41 (2): 275-304.
- Urban, Greg. 1989. "The 'I' of Discourse." In *Semiotics, Self and Society*, edited by Ben Lee and Greg Urban, 27-51. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1922. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Kegan Paul.