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Subjectivity in Autistic Language: Insights on Pronoun Atypicality from Three Case Studies

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On est en présence d'une classe de mots, les « pronoms personnels », qui échappent au statut de tous les autres signes du langage. A quoi donc je se réfère-t-il? A quelque chose de très singulier, qui est exclusivement langagier: je se réfère à l'acte de discours individuel où il est prononcé, et il désigne le locuteur. [...] La réalité à laquelle il renvoie est la réalité du discours. C'est dans l'instance de discours où je désigne le locuteur que celui-ci s'énonce comme « sujet ». Il est donc vrai à la lettre que le fondement de la subjectivité est dans l'exercice de la langue.

(Benveniste, De la subjectivité dans le langage, 1958)

We are in the presence of a class of words, the 'personal pronouns,' that escape the status of all the other signs of language. Then, what does I refer to? To something very peculiar which is exclusively linguistic: I refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. [...] The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse. It is in the instance of discourse in which I designates the speaker that the speaker proclaims himself as the 'subject.' And so it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language.

Introduction

In this chapter, we examine a clinical feature typically associated with the speech of children with autism: pronoun-reversal and avoidance. Children

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Jennifer Shankey, who prematurely passed away while we were completing the writing of the manuscript.
with autism are reported to use the second-person pronoun you or third-person pronoun he/she to refer to themselves, as well as to use the first-person pronoun I to refer to the person addressed. This behaviour is referred to as pronominal reversal. In addition, affected children make frequent use of proper names to refer to self or the addressee and sometimes deploy agentless passive constructions. These speech patterns are referred to as pronominal avoidance. These phenomena are located at the intersection of linguistic and social-relational processes, and as such they constitute a particularly interesting area of investigation. For the study of language acquisition generally, these phenomena reveal language’s social underpinnings, as well as the relationship between language and the development of self. For autism research, atypical pronoun usage offers potential insights about core features of the condition.

We contend that a thorough understanding of the complex functioning of pronouns, and the mechanisms underlying pronoun use in normally developing children, can afford a more nuanced account of pronoun reversal and avoidance in childhood autism. Research on pronoun atypicality in children with autism is very often based on a partial view of how personal pronouns function. Specifically, it is grounded in what we refer to as the indexical-referential dimension of personal pronouns, articulated by linguist Benveniste (1971). Benveniste’s analysis, well known among linguists, discerned the important distinctive status of person pronouns as linguistic signs, which ‘do not refer to a concept or to an individual’ (Benveniste, 1971, p. 226). The I and you in particular are referentially empty signs with respect to reality in that they designate something internal to discourse and inherently linguistic. In Benveniste’s words: ‘I refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker’ (Benveniste, 1971). The first and second-person pronouns are deictic; that is, they enact their reference at the token level through actual contiguity between the utterance in which I / you occurs and the speaker/recipient of the utterance.

While personal pronouns cannot be properly understood without considering the indexical-referential function, scholarship in child language, conversation analysis, and linguistic anthropology has unveiled additional functional modes, not of secondary importance. We argue that more nuanced comprehension of the functioning of personal pronouns – one that appreciates these additional functions – has the potential to deepen our understanding of children with autism and their linguistic behaviour. In particular, the resulting insights provide support for a theory of autism centred around impairments in self-other relatedness, in identifying with the perspective of others (Hobson, 2010). At the same time, our analysis points to the inadequacy of considering atypical pronoun use as straightforwardly symptomatic of a condition residing within the affected child. For one, we point out that typically developing children display what has been referred to as pronoun reversal and avoidance
in autism research, and we show that difficulties in self–other relations need not manifest in pronoun atypicality. Furthermore, we find attempts by the child with autism to overcome these very difficulties through the experiential affordances of language, as well as a subtle sensitivity to interpersonal positioning – both of which have been largely overlooked by mainstream autism research. In addition, we point to the critical role of adults’ contribution to interaction in shaping the child’s non-normative use of personal pronouns.

**Pronoun atypicality in children with autism**

Difficulties with the use of personal pronouns in children with autism are long recognised. Kanner documented occurrences of atypical personal references in his first description of infantile autism and considered the phenomenon as characteristic of the condition, along with echolalia (Kanner, 1943). In fact, the Austrian-American psychiatrist considered pronominal reversal as an epiphenomenal manifestation of echolalia (see also Bartak & Rutter, 1974), the tendency to repeat the utterances of oneself or others.

Further study in the following decades revealed the autistic child’s difficulties with personal pronouns ‘too complex and too deeply ingrained to be accounted for completely within the surface framework of “reversals” secondary to echolalia’ (Fay, 1979, p. 248).

Fay contended that underlying personal pronoun errors are ‘multiple developmental obstacles of social, cognitive and grammatical nature’ (Fay, 1979, p. 247). Drawing from developmental research on self-differentiation, memory, and deixis acquisition in neurotypical and atypical populations, Fay identified three compounding sources of pronoun difficulties: (1) limited contact and involvement with others, which severely handicaps the child with autism in the development of a sense of self and the other; (2) restricted echoic memory, which may limit access only to the most recent information within an interlocutor’s utterance, leaving the segment with the person pronoun in subject position inaccessible; (3) a more general deictic impairment, which includes difficulties in the use of spatial and temporal deictic terms (e.g. here, there) as well as in pre-linguistic forms, such as pointing. Subsequently, other researchers emphasised and further delineated the psychosocial deficits that Fay had originally identified, by linking abnormalities in person pronouns to underdeveloped differentiation of self, atypical experience of self–other relations, and limitations in communicative engagement (e.g. Charney, 1980b; Oshima-Takane & Benaroya, 1989).

Noteworthy insight and nuance have been provided by Hobson and associates regarding the psychosocial factors underlying atypical pronoun use (Hobson, 1990; Hobson, Lee, & Hobson, 2010; Lee, Hobson, & Chiat, 1994). On the basis of a remarkably ample and varied set of experiments of perceptual viewpoint, shared agency, visuospatial role-taking, and photograph-naming, Hobson’s team has pronounced atypicality in children with autism.

**Pronoun atypicality in children with autism**

Patterns of pronoun errors developing child different explanations from an incorrect understanding as if they were themselves. (2) Intrinsic processing ties (e.g. Dale & errors will be incorrectly) but they may not be a predictonally. A third explanation has been advanced for considering a month-old boy they might be able to they might per use pronouns predictably (all the utterances they utterances). We find Chi.

First, it acknowledges considerably more Second, consists of pronoun use patterns. Third, it be functional for treatment.
Hobson's team has shown that, while children with autism can comprehend pronouns appropriately and only rarely produce pronoun reversals, they also manifest subtle but significant differences with respect to closely matched non-autistic subjects. These differences – such as a relative propensity to use the pronoun *I* rather than *me*, and the proper name rather than the first- or second-person pronouns – are interpreted as a reflection of the autistic child's difficulty in experiencing and understanding himself as self-in-relation-to-others, with a self of his own (Hobson, 2011).

**Pronoun atypicality in typically developing children**

Patterns of pronoun errors, however, have been documented also in typically developing children (see Bain, 1936 and Cooley, 1908, for early reports). Two different explanations have been put forward: (1) Pronoun atypicality results from an incorrect understanding of how personal pronouns function (i.e. treating them as if they have fixed referents, like names, rather than as deictic terms) – a problem of competence, so to speak (e.g. Charney, 1980a; Clark, 1978). This perspective anticipates a certain consistency in the children's errors such that, for example, *you* will systematically be used to refer to the child herself. (2) Instances of atypical pronoun use are performance errors, resulting from processing demands that exceed the child's cognitive and linguistic abilities (e.g. Dale & Crain-Thoreson, 1993). In this perspective, personal reference errors will be inconsistent (e.g. only sometimes would a child use *I/you* atypically) but they would correlate with factors such as the syntactic complexity of the utterances in which they are found.

A third explanation for pronoun errors in typical language development has been advanced by Chiat (1982) on the basis of a case study of a two-year-six-month-old boy. Chiat suggests that pronouns can be plurifunctional – that is, they might be used prototypically as speech-role-referring, but at the same time they might perform other non-adult functions. In other words, the child might use pronouns with more than one function, in ways that are both complex and predictable (albeit non-normative).

We find Chiat's perspective particularly insightful for three main reasons: First, it acknowledges that in discourse contexts personal pronouns are considerably more complex than the indexical-referential account would assume. Second, consistent with this, it suggests that multiple mechanisms underlying pronoun use may coexist, particularly in early stages of language development. Third, at the same time, it argues that atypical uses of pronouns may be functional and orderly.

**The semiotic functioning of pronouns in everyday speech**

Insights from linguistic anthropology and conversation analysis corroborate and expand Chiat's analysis (albeit not engaging with the literature on the
acquisition of personal pronouns directly or explicitly). Linguistic anthropologist Greg Urban (1989) has advanced a model of the semiotic functioning of person pronouns that expands the traditional indexical-referential analysis articulated by Benveniste (1971) by identifying additional functional modes of the I/you in discourse. For Urban (1989), the indexical-referential treatment of I/you is accurate but insufficient. He delineates two additional modes of functioning of I/you in speech production — the anaphoric and the de-quotative I/you — that are predicated on the idea that ‘the I of discourse is not only an actual in-the-world subject, indexically referred to by means of the first person form’ but ‘can also be any being or entity, imaginary or not, capable of being reported as a speaker’ (Urban, 1989, p. 29). The anaphoric I/you manifests in cases of reported speech, as in ‘He said “I am going”.’ In such cases, the personal pronoun is not used indexically to refer to the utterer or addressee of the sentence. Rather, it functions as ‘an anaphoric device, indicating the co-referential relationship between the subject of the two clauses’ (Urban, 1989, p. 30). In other words, the first-person pronoun I of an embedded clause in direct quotation achieves reference, not indexically, but anaphorically — its meaning depends on another element in the discourse.

The other mode Urban delineates, the de-quotative mode, functions when the matrix clause of a quotation (e.g. ‘he said’, ‘she said’) is omitted. The de-quotative I does not point to the speaker of the utterance but to the person/character she is representing and animating. Thus, once again the ordinary indexical-referential functioning of I/you is suspended. In de-quotative speech, the speaker may deploy a range of indexical cues (notably pitch and voice quality alterations) to signal that she is animating someone else’s utterances. The absence of the quoting frame however allows maximal projection of the speaker into another self (Urban, 1989).

Conversation analysis also offers a theoretical perspective that expands our understanding of pronoun use (see Fasulo, Chapter 1, this volume). Charles Goodwin (1981) has demonstrated that sentences emerge in conversation through the interaction between speaker and hearer. The interactional nature of turns in conversation cautions us from evaluating a child’s pronoun use in isolation, and it compels us to think about child language not solely in terms of cognitive and linguistic development. A child’s verbal contribution to a communicative exchange also relates to the specific contingencies of interaction in which she is engaged. By extracting utterances from the context of production and judging them as self-standing entities — that is, as individual outcomes that reflect an underlying linguistic capacity (or lack thereof) — we might attain inaccurate evaluations.

In order to gain additional analytic purchase for the examination of the inherent situatedness of talk-in-interaction, including the relationship between person.

Project overview

We now present a complete understanding of autism and autistic behavior, focusing on interaction, particularly from the perspective of action, this no participation in

Data corpus

Our study con Ivan, Benjamin, however, are 
between personal reference forms and their context of production, we draw on Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘language game’ (Wittgenstein, 1953) The phrase refers, not to a game with words, but to the idea that language is inseparable from activity, and that utterances take on meanings within distinguishable courses of action. For our empirical analysis of children with autism in interaction, this notion offers a useful lens, alerting us to the way children’s participation in these activities shapes their pronoun use.

Project overview

We now present empirical work with the intention to show that a more complete understanding of how personal pronouns function entails a more accurate picture of atypical pronoun use in children with autism and its relationship to autism more generally.

We structure our case studies in order to evaluate the two categories of explanation for atypical pronoun use in each child’s language. To evaluate the competence hypothesis, we start off with examining the range of linguistic resources each child mobilised to refer to self and others. This provides a general sense of the child’s capacity to position himself as subject and in relation to others in conversation. We then investigate the overall frequency, distribution, and consistency of person reference atypicalities, in order to evaluate if the errors could be related to an erroneous semantic representation of pronouns. To evaluate the performance hypothesis, we next perform an in-depth qualitative analysis of the utterances presenting atypical pronoun use. In this analysis, we consider the linguistic makeup (i.e. the syntactic complexity) of utterances containing the atypicality in order to evaluate if cognitive/linguistic demand could account for the abnormal reference form. We then consider another form of performance explanation, according to which it is pragmatic complexity – rather than the syntactic complexity – that accounts for atypicality when it is produced. Accordingly, we characterise those utterances pragmatically in terms of their discourse function. Finally, we consider a third hypothesis, which is that the language games initiated by the child’s interlocutors have a bearing on his personal reference and pronoun use. To evaluate this hypothesis, we draw on analytic tools from conversation analysis and philosophy of language to illuminate the sequential context in which the child’s utterances are produced.

Data corpus

Our study consists of a comparative case analysis of three children with autism: Ivan, Benjamin, and Aaron (see Table 15.1). All three boys are similar in age, having just passed or approaching their sixth birthday. Their linguistic abilities, however, are different, ranging from an MLU (mean length of utterance) of 2.28
Table 15.1 MLU and percentage of pronoun atypicality of the three case studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ivan</th>
<th>Aaron</th>
<th>Benjamin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>5;11</td>
<td>5;10</td>
<td>6;3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLU</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>5.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronoun atypicality (%)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

for Ivan, to 3.92 for Aaron and 5.85 for Benjamin. We purposefully selected for this comparative case study three autistic children with different verbal abilities in order to gain insight on the role of linguistic, psychosocial, and interactional factors in pronoun atypicality.

For each child, we have considered 90 minutes of video-recorded spontaneous verbal interaction in different contexts, meal, play with peer, reading/writing/drawing/music with parent/tutor, bath, and bedtime. The interactions were then fully transcribed according to the conventions of conversation analysis (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984).

Each person reference form was identified and coded as typical or atypical. In line with previous work on pronoun reversal in typically developing children (Dale & Crain-Thoreson, 1993; Evans & Demuth, 2012), frozen expression such as I love you, thank you, excuse me, let’s, lemme were not coded. The coding was carried out by the second and third authors of this chapter. They first coded independently 10% of the data and reached agreement to nearly 100%. Then they proceeded with the coding of the remaining data.

The three case studies

We begin with a presentation of Ivan’s case. Ivan has the lowest linguistic ability of the three children and the highest percentage of pronoun atypicality. This child’s case demonstrates the potential limitations of both competence and performance explanations. It also points to the value of an interactional analysis – key to the contribution of the child’s interlocutors – for shedding light on non-normative person reference forms. We next present Benjamin’s case, whose linguistic ability offers a stark and useful contrast to Ivan’s. We draw on Benjamin’s data to show that difficulties in self–other relations need not manifest in pronoun atypicality. Finally, we present data from Aaron, who combines a high level of both linguistic ability and atypical pronoun usage. For this reason, Aaron’s case is the richest and most interesting. We will argue that Aaron’s use of de-quotative speech – entailing non-normative use of personal pronouns – subtly but clearly demonstrates social sensitivity and manifests attempts to overcome difficulties in identifying with others’ perspectives.
Ivan

Firstborn of an upper-middle-class English-speaking family living in northern California, Ivan was five years and 11 months at the time of the video-recording. He had a sister who was three years old. He was in a regular kindergarten class 40% of the time and in special education classes the remaining 60%. Ivan was diagnosed with autism at age three. His language development was significantly delayed: at the time of video-recording his MLU was 2.28.

Ivan is an active participant in verbal interactions with family members and tutors. He often initiates conversational sequences, most typically basic adjacency pairs, and is fairly responsive to those launched by his interlocutors. However, the syntactic structure of Ivan's utterances is minimal and the range of verbal actions performed rather limited, consisting principally of requests, declaratives, protests, and responses to adult queries – most frequently yes/no interrogatives. Ivan's speech includes a noticeable component of repetitive phrases and frozen expressions. In his non-echolalic speech, grammatical errors are frequent, notably omission of copulae, verb inflections, and subjects (see Table 15.2).4

Table 15.2 shows that Ivan's person reference repertoire is rather limited and the rate of atypicality significant. Clearly, Ivan is capable of positioning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person Reference</th>
<th>Typical</th>
<th>Atypical</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proper/Role Name</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object (direct and indirect)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Possessive</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pronoun</td>
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<tr>
<td>First-person singular</td>
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<tr>
<td>I</td>
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<td>Second-person singular</td>
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<td>Third-person singular</td>
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<td>First-person plural</td>
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<td>Third-person plural</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>77</td>
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himself as subject and affirming relations of possession, as attested by the use of the first-person singular forms. His use of the second-person singular, on the other hand, is more vulnerable to mistakes. Third-person singular pronouns are absent from Ivan's repertoire, and so are the plural forms across persons and cases. This range of forms and the vulnerability to errors parallel the sequence of development of pronouns in the English-speaking neurotypical population: *my, mine, and I* are used consistently before *you; he/she are* normatively used last (Chiat, 1986). In addition, it is notable that Ivan's MLU is approaching that of normally developing children when they correctly use the first- and second-person pronouns, which is of 2.5. We'll return to this important point in the discussion.

The most significant area of atypicality in Ivan's person reference repertoire is the pronominal use of proper/role names — that is, the use of the proper name in self reference and proper or role names to refer to his interlocutor. As discussed earlier, these forms are referred to as 'pronom avoidance'.

In order to shed light on these atypical forms, we examined the linguistic makeup of the utterances containing the pronominal use of proper/role names, as well as their pragmatic function. The linguistic structure of utterances with pronominal use of proper/role names could not be distinguished in syntactic organisation, and in semantic constituents and relations, from those without pronom avoidance. At the pragmatic level, pronoun avoidance was found across speech actions performed by Ivan, except for protests, which overwhelmingly had the form of 'negation + complaint object' (for instance, 'no vacuum'). On this basis, we concluded that a performance explanation is inadequate in Ivan's case.

Given Ivan's significant delay in language development, it seems plausible that his tendency to 'avoid' personal pronouns is primarily a manifestation of his limited linguistic competence. We argue, however, that attention to the sequential context of atypical pronom use, which includes a consideration of his interlocutors' contribution, adds important insights on why Ivan uses proper/role names when he does.

We noticed that the pronominal use of proper/role names frequently occurred in the context of baby talk. Parents and tutors often used the baby talk register when addressing Ivan. In addition to other forms of simplification, they used parental or proper names (e.g. Mommy, Daddy, Shelly) in self-reference when talking to the child. They also sometimes addressed the child in the third person using the corresponding pronoun or his first name. In such occasions, we found that Ivan often adapted to the personal reference frame and syntactic construction of the interlocutor, which resulted in his 'avoidance' of personal pronouns.

Consider the following extract, in which the child is with his after-school tutor Shelly. Ivan and Shelly are cleaning the board to begin drawing shapes. Ivan ta
(line 1). His f
person singular sequence introc response.

Extract 1 – Dra

1 IVAN
2 SHELLEY
3 IVAN
4 SHELLEY
5 IVAN
6 →

In turn 2, Shell and in persona response in line confirms the ac lates an open it an alternativ from pronoun ture). The alter repetition (i.e. line 6, which i noun avoidanc alternative que One could o
in line 1 was a
We would arg includes also i such as gaze, e
ly refuted: Wl of action, whi indexical-refer He continues clarification se ification quest to make room
ed by the use of the pronouns are singular, on the one hand, persons and the sequence of population: matevally used to indicating that the first person singular pronoun I. We shall see that Shelly's subsequent clarification sequence introduces a shift in personal reference to which Ivan adapts in his response.

Extract 1 - Drawing shapes with tutor (Ivan, Tape#1)

1  IVAN  I want to make a heart. (sits in front of board with back to Shelly; holds a marker in hand)
2  SHELLEY okay, mh. (of effort: moving Ivan's chair closer to the board)
you want to make a heart?
3  IVAN  make heart (turns to look at Shelly)
4  SHELLEY who makes a heart, Ivan or Shelly?
5  IVAN  Ivan Shelly (hands marker to Shelly)
6  →  Shelly make a heart.

In turn 2, Shelly utters an understanding check that is in keeping, syntactically and in personal reference format, with Ivan's opening utterance. Ivan's echoic response in line 3 seems to be only partially satisfying for Shelly (Ivan's response confirms the action being projected but not the agent). In line 4, Shelly formulates an open wh- interrogative (who makes a heart) and then appends to it an alternative question (Ivan or Shelly?), which shifts personal references from pronouns to proper names (thereby instantiating a typical baby talk feature). The alternative question format projects a response that contains a partial repetition (i.e. one of the provided options) (Raymond, 2003). Ivan's reply in line 6, which if taken in isolation would be treated as an occurrence of pronoun avoidance, thus emerges as appropriate response to his tutor's simplified alternative question.

One could object that Ivan's response in line 6 indicates that his utterance in line 1 was actually an instance of pronoun reversal, referring to Shelly as I. We would argue, however, that if the analytic focus is not limited to talk but includes also the moment-by-moment use of non-verbal semiotic resources, such as gaze, embodied action, and object use, this interpretation can be easily refuted: When Ivan opens the sequence (line 1) by announcing his plan of action, which linguistically constructs him as subject/agent through the indexical-referential I, he faces the board and holds the marker in his hand. He continues to hold the marker and orient to the board during the first clarification sequence (lines 2 and 3). When the tutor poses the second clarification question, in line 4, Ivan turns to look at her, shifts his torso sideways to make room for Shelly to access the board and then hands the marker to
her, just prior to uttering his response in line 6. So Ivan’s bodily orientation and object use support an interpretation of the child’s referential forms as appropriately used.

Benjamin

An only child of an upper-middle-class English-speaking family, living in an urban area in northern California, Benjamin was six years and three months old at the time of the video-recording. He was in a regular first-grade classroom. Benjamin’s parents reported noticing something unusual in his development as early as age one, when he begun to show a precocious interest in literacy activities – first with spelling of words and composition of multi-digit numbers, then with books, maps, and different counting systems. At age three, Benjamin could not only read fluently and spell difficult words correctly, he also manifested a tireless preoccupation with them. His speech had been developing at a comparably exceptional rate, but his parents soon realised that Benjamin was not using language to communicate with them as much as to sustain his involvement with written texts. When Benjamin was diagnosed with autism at age three years and six months, he was also identified as hyperlexic. Since receiving the diagnosis, Benjamin’s parents carefully crafted learning environments and intervention strategies that aimed to engage Benjamin’s proclivity with textual practices in a way that could support his social and communicative development.

At the time of the data collection, Benjamin’s MLU was 5.85, which exceeds the level of typically developing children. His turns often consisted of complex sentences, exploiting a wide range of subordinating conjunctions. Indeed, the pragmatic scope of Benjamin’s speech was wide, including assertions, questions, requests, directives, and assessments. While his speech was always addressed to an interlocutor, minimally one that was spatially co-present but most frequently participating with him to the ongoing activity, Benjamin rarely pursued joint narratives or spontaneously inserted himself in the verbal interactions of his family members. The verbal interactions comprised by the study present Benjamin constantly, almost incessantly communicating with others through language, yet perceptibly without a strong orientation towards his interlocutors as other selves – that is, towards the attitudes of the other as a central dimension to explore and to relate to his own (see Table 15.3).

As Table 15.3 indicates, Benjamin’s person reference repertoire comprises all person forms, at least in the nominative case, always used in normative manner. Ego-centred forms (i.e. first-person pronouns across cases) largely predominate, representing 47% of the pronominal references produced by the child. It is also worth noticing, however, the use of the first-person plural, which is not

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person Referent</th>
<th>Proper/Role</th>
<th>Na</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Object (direct)</th>
<th>Possessive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pronoun</td>
<td>First-person sing</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>me</td>
<td>my</td>
<td>mine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second-person sing</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>your</td>
<td>yours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third-person sing</td>
<td>he/she</td>
<td>him/her</td>
<td>his/her</td>
<td>his/hers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First-person plu</td>
<td>we</td>
<td>us</td>
<td>our</td>
<td>ours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second-person plu</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>your</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third-person plu</td>
<td>they</td>
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<td>infrequent.</td>
<td>himself as p.</td>
<td>The only Benjamin can occur within</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 15.3 Benjamin’s person reference repertoire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person Reference</th>
<th>Typical</th>
<th>Atypical</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proper/Role Name</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object (direct and indirect)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronoun</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-person singular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>me</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mine</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-person singular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yours</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-person singular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he/she</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>him/her</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his/her</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his/hers</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-person plural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>us</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>our</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ours</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-person plural</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yours</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-person plural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>them</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>theirs</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

infrequent. We take this as an indication of the child’s capacity to position himself as part of a multi-person unit.

The only few cases – two to be precise – of person reference atypicality in Benjamin are pronominal uses of the first name, in object position. They both occur within an exchange between the child and his mother, which we present
here below. After some spelling games on an erasable board, Benjamin projects the shift to a next activity, the watching of some home movies:

Extract 2 – Playing with Mom (Benjamin, Tape#2)

1. **BEN**
   I want to- (0.4) and watch four t- (0.4) two t- (.).
   three tapes.

2. **MOM**
   on tv?

3. **BEN**
   three tapes.

4. **MOM**
   (we ) to play and watch tv later=

5. **BEN**
   =three tapes I want to watch.

6. **MOM**
   which ones.

7. **(2.0)**

8. **BEN**
   I meant four- I mean I mean one mo- one more- I mean
   one more than three.

9. **MOM**
   one more than three.

10. **BEN**
    it's=

11. **MOM**
    =four

12. **BEN**
    yes. four tapes. and of the f- (.4) of the four tapes I
    wanna pick the tape that’s about Benjamin.

13. **(1.6)**

14. **BEN**
    it will be Benjamin sweep=sweep=sweep (...)
    creep=creep=creep (... meow=meow=meow and (...)
    hanoo=hanoo=hanoo. ((sic))

15. **MOM**
    home movies he wants to watch ((to researcher behind
    camera))

16. **BEN**
    yes.

After obtaining his mother's assent to play home videos, Benjamin expresses his intention to watch a tape about himself (line 14). Both in that turn and in the following (line 16), which specifies what is featured on the tape, the child refers to himself with the proper name. The normative person reference in that context is the accusative form of the first-person pronoun *me*. The reflexive pronoun *myself* would also be acceptable. Although our data corpus for Benjamin does not comprise occurrences of reflexive pronouns – and in typical language development, these pronominal forms are the latest to be acquired – we have no evidence to infer that the child does not master this specific pronominal case; we did not encounter instances in which he used (atypically) non-reflexive forms in lieu of reflexive pronouns. In addition, it is evident that Benjamin has no problem with *me*. Thus, this instance cannot be accounted for by the competence hypothesis. Regarding a performance explanation, the syntactic structure and pragmatic scope of the two utterances containing the pronominal use of the proper name are neither infrequent nor challenging for Benjamin.

In light of the proper name on texts: each title. In product memory, so t

Aaron

Aaron was a family of the video- also taking the language an distinct with his parents able to build.

Interesting developing atypicality of utterances in the interface be particularly

Table 15. in subject one second-percept notice in A
his interloc except once than typicalisation of the is that of pronoun
In light of these considerations, we would argue that the atypical use of the proper name in this sequence is to be related to the child’s pronounced focus on texts: each home video tape has a label that includes the child name and a title. In producing the utterances in lines 14 and 16, Benjamin is reading from memory, so to speak, the label of the tape he wants to watch.

Aaron

Aaron was a five years and 10 months old boy at the time of the video-recording. He was living with his English-speaking parents in an affluent residential area in northern California, where he was also attending a fully inclusive kindergarten class. His parents reported that Aaron’s language development was initially significantly delayed: He was only babbling until well beyond 18 months and his first utterances were highly repetitive and formulaic. Since receiving the autism diagnosis at age three, Aaron underwent a wide range of interventions, from physical and speech therapy to applied behavioural analysis (ABA) therapy, pivotal response training (PRT), and floortime. At the time of the video-recording, he was receiving one-on-one Floortime tutoring. He was also taking music lessons at home. The parents reported significant progress in language and social skills accomplished by their child over the course of the last 18 months. As a matter of fact, at the time of the data collection Aaron’s MLU was 3.92, which is only slightly below that expected in typically developing children of his age. Aaron was an active participant to verbal interactions with his parents and familiar interlocutors. While his verbal interactional bids are not frequent, Aaron is responsive to his interlocutors’ initiatives and is able to build on their turns to remain engaged and expand the conversational exchange.

Interestingly, while Aaron’s MLU is higher than the level at which typically developing children exhibit full mastery of the pronominal system, his rate of atypicality in personal reference is not insignificant, amounting to 28% of the utterances comprising personal reference forms (see Table 15.4). This child’s interface between linguistic abilities and personal reference repertoire is thus particularly interesting.

Table 15.4 shows that Aaron is able to deploy a range of person pronouns in subject position and correctly at least once. Not surprisingly, the first- and second-person singular are the most recurring pronominal forms; but we also notice in Aaron a frequent use of proper or role names to refer to himself or his interlocutors. While the first-person singular form is always used correctly, except once, for the second-person pronoun we find more atypical occurrences than typical. These are cases of pronoun reversals, in the traditional characterisation of the phenomenon. Another area in which atypical forms are frequent is that of proper and role names, in subject and object position. These are cases of pronoun avoidance.
Table 15.4  Aaron's person reference repertoire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person Reference</th>
<th>Typical</th>
<th>Atypical</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proper/Role Name</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object (direct and indirect)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessive</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronoun</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-person singular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>me</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>my</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mine</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-person singular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yours</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-person singular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he/she</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>him/her</td>
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<td>his/her</td>
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<tr>
<td>his/hers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-person plural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>us'</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>our</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ours</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-person plural</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-person plural</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to shed light on these two areas of person reference atypicality, we turned to a qualitative analysis of the utterances and sequential contexts in which the errors were lodged. The largest portion of pronoun atypicality in Aaron is found within utterances that are distinguishable in sequential, pragmatic, and acoustic terms as follows: (1) the utterance is addressed to the interlocutor and solicits a response from him/her; (2) it is produced with perceivable pitch alterations, notably a sing-song voice; and (3) it is recognisable as part of a familiar language game between the child and the interlocutor. In fact, in the prototypical format of the language game, the child's utterance belongs to the adult - it is proffered by the adult to invite a response from the child.

Thus, these utterances of the child containing pronoun atypicality - most frequently I/you reversals - can be characterised as ventriloquisations, which are utterances animating the interlocutor's voice. Put a slightly different way,
borrowing from linguistic anthropologist Greg Urban, these utterances are de-quotative, they are quotations wherein the matrix clause has disappeared. Despite the absence of a quoting clause, there are indexical cues that frame the utterance as ventriloquisation, thus negating the (unmarked) indexical referential functioning of I/you. These cues are the pitch and voice quality alterations, and the synecdochic valence of the utterance itself, which by virtue of belonging to a familiar language game, with scripted turns and speech roles, points to the game as a whole.

We have ethnographic evidence for this interpretation. However, compelling evidence also comes from the interlocutor's uptake of these utterances: in most cases the interlocutor repeats the child's utterance with no pronoun adjustment, thus ratifying it as ventriloquisation and as animating his/her own voice.

As an illustration, we examine an episode from a dinner that Aaron and his mother are having together. Mom has been attempting to make small talk with her son about the events of the day, but Aaron has offered no or minimal responses. After another of Mom's open-ended prompts, Aaron produces an utterance that, while not actually answering his mother's question, is responsive to its implicit aim of re-engaging the child in the verbal exchange:

Extract 3 -- Dinner with Mom (Aaron, Tape#4)

1  (12.0)
2  AARON  mh-uh-uh ((looking away from mom))
3  MOM   what are you thinking about.
4  AARON   ((turns further away from mom looking behind him))
5  MOM   uh-oh.
6  AARON   → you're looking at the barista ((singsong voice))
7  MOM   you're looking at the barista. we are not together.
8  AARON   ((turns immediately and rapidly))
9  MOM   uh ((of surprise)) now we are together.
10  AARON  ((turns away from mom again and then turns back))
11  MOM   now we are together.
12  AARON  ((turns away rapidly))
13  MOM   uh-oh.
14  AARON  ((laughs and turns back toward mom))
15  MOM   do you want to be together?
16  AARON   yes.
17  [....]
18  AARON  ((turns away again and laughs))
19  MOM   uh-ho.
20  AARON   ((laughs and turns back))
21  MOM   ((laughs))
22  AARON   → now we're together.
23  MOM   mh. ((nods and looks at Aaron))
24  AARON   now we're together.
25  MOM   uh huh.
26  AARON  ((turns away and laughs))
27  MOM   ((laughs))
After a 12-second silence, in which Aaron progressively turns his torso and gaze away from his mother and then mumbles at low volume, Mom proffers a question (line 3, 'what are you thinking about') that she frequently uses to reorient her son’s attention when he seems to be disengaged from their dyadic exchange. Aaron responds with a familiar phrase (line 6) that ventrilogues another of Mom’s typical re-engagement devices, this one specifically related to a playful interactional format of rapid shifts between withdrawal and engagement. Typically, Aaron’s interlocutor establishes the format by noting aloud that the child is not making eye-contact or facing him/her. The opening phrase usually deployed is: ‘Uh-oh. you’re/Aaron’s looking at the ____’, uttered with a very distinct prosody and voice quality (notably elongated vowels and sing-song voice) and frequently followed by another phrase, ‘we are not together’, with the same suprasegmental characteristics. The playful exchange then unfolds with Aaron turning to face his interlocutor (who signals his/her satisfaction with the expression 'now we are together') before abruptly turning away again, thereby triggering another round of the same exchange.

Aaron’s de-quotative utterances in lines 6 and 21 are prosodically marked as re-animations of Mom’s voice and familiar expressions. They are produced with a sing-song voice and a prosodic contour similar to Mom’s characteristic re-engagement device. Interpreting Aaron’s utterances as ventrilouisations recasts the pronoun form contained within the utterance as appropriate to the pragmatic scope of the turn, rather than reversed.

Indeed, in both utterances with atypical pronoun forms, the mother confirms that Aaron was right, the first time by repeating Aaron’s de-quotative turn herself, with a sing-song voice and remarkably similar prosodic contour, and adding the next typical phrase ('we are not together', line 7), and the second time assenting, verbally and gesturally (line 22). Aaron’s laughter and repeated initiations of new rounds of the game attest to his pleasure in ventrilouising his mother and having her confirm that his guess was correct.

Thus, what superficially could be labelled as pronoun reversal within a formulaic, echolalic utterance emerges here as complex layering of voices and processing of another’s perspective. Ventriloquisation offers the child the possibility of making conjectures about the other and submitting them to that very other, for ratification or revision.

The second area of atypicality in Aaron is the pronominal use of the proper name to refer to himself and his tutors, and role names to refer to his parents when they are the addressees of his utterances. We have observed pronoun avoidance to occur prevalently in two contexts: the first is the same as that of pronoun reversals we just discussed; the second is a context that requires the child to shifting perspectives and relate to different speech roles.

In the first context, i.e. de-quotative speech, the utterances containing pronoun avoidance present the use of the child’s proper name for self-reference and can be text in which is that of sec-

Excerpt 4 –

1  SARAH
2  AARON
3  SARAH

4  SARAH
5  AARON
6  SARAH
7  AARON
8  SARAH
9  AARON
10 AARON
11 SARAH
12 AARON
13 SARAH
14 AARON
15 SARAH
16 AARON
17 SARAH
18

While Aaron together, w
and can be characterised pragmatically as ventriloquisations. The second context in which we observed the pronominal use of the proper/role name to occur is that of sequences where there is a high demand on the child in terms of shifting perspectives or weaving them together in his speech. These utterances are thus onerous not only in cognitive processing but also in terms of linguistic composition.

The following extract is illustrative of this context: In this sequence, we find Aaron with his music tutor Sarah. Sarah offers Aaron the chance of a break from music lesson and the child proposes a variation on the game we saw him play with his mom (in Extract 3). Aaron deploys quotative framing clauses and direct reported speech to instruct Sarah on what she should say as participant to the language game.

Extract 4 – Music lesson with Sarah (Aaron, Tape#4)

1. SARAH do you need some silly time?
2. AARON no. (0.2) yeah.
3. SARAH yeah? some silly time? okay. ((lower volume)) don't make a face or else I'm gonna tickle you.<
4. ((Aaron opens his eyes and mouth really wide))
5. SARAH OHHHHhhhh. ((tickling Aaron))
6. AARON ([laughs]) if we're NOT toge- (. ) if I will say if we're not together. (1.0) if we're not together, then what.
7. SARAH I don't know:
8. AARON how about, um; (3.0) if we're not together, (1.0) then I'm gonna (. ) tweak your nose.
9. AARON ([gets up]) no; (laughing and walking away)
10. SARAH OH:: NO:: WE'RE NOT TOGETHER:::(running after Aaron, out of frame) TWEAK.
11. AARON if we're- (0.4) if we're by ourselves, (0.2) scare::ry.
12. SARAH how about-
13. AARON if we- if Sarah says- if we're by ourselves scary (Sarah says). how if Sarah says that. (0.4) Sarah will say that.
14. SARAH tell me again.
15. AARON if Sarah will say (. ) if you: (1.2) if we (. ) if you:: (0.2) how about Sarah says if you go be by yourself Shelly's gonna get you. yeah?
16. SARAH do you wanna play (. ) with Shelly ((co-present Floortime specialist)) a little bit Aaron?
17. AARON ((Aaron moves towards the door and enters the house))

While Aaron's music tutor Sarah has some acquaintance with the 'we are together, we are not together' language game, she does not frequently engage
in it (in our data corpus this is the only occasion). Aaron seems sensitive to Sarah’s relative unfamiliarity with the game and in launching it (in line 6) he self corrects to insert a framing clause—a pronoun and verbum dicendi (‘I will say’), which pragmatically serve as quotation marks for what is said next.

In attempting to have Sarah produce certain game’s moves in subsequent turns, Aaron repeatedly uses framing clauses (lines 14 and 16). In those clauses, however, the child avoids the use of the person pronoun and refers to his tutor in the third person using her name. By referring to his interlocutor as Sarah instead of you, a shift in reference of the pronoun you between the matrix clause and the quotation is avoided (in line 16). While the linguistic and cognitive demand of such sentences might result in the simplifying strategy of pronoun avoidance, the trouble in pronoun use might also relate to a difficulty in relating to the other as you. The game offers a frame for experiencing speech roles and perspectives. Yet, at the same time this scripted scaffold seems to remove the child from the more immediate I—you relationship so that the tutor becomes a sort of character on the game stage.

Discussion

In this study, we examined the person reference forms used by three children with autism, who, while being similar in chronological age, exhibited different language abilities. A comparison of the range of person reference forms deployed by the children and the patterns of atypicality in pronoun use revealed differences, both quantitative and qualitative. These differences suggest that multiple interrelated factors might underlie the difficulties in person reference forms in children with autism, belting a single explanation in terms of either competence or performance. Two explanations in particular illuminate the data from our comparative case study. The first is the idea that central to autism is a difficulty in self—other relations, in identifying with the perspective of others (Hobson, 2011). Since language is inherently interpersonal, we maintain, such difficulties would be expected to manifest in talk, very likely in the use of personal pronouns specifically. While our work confirms such difficulties, it also points to ways that children with autism may deploy language-based resources for processing others’ perspectives, an insight unavailable from a deficit-oriented approach. The second explanation cautions us from over interpreting the psychological significance of atypical pronoun use. Our data show that atypical personal reference by children with autism may often be chiefly an interactional outcome—the result of specific language games or practices in which children participate with their adult interlocutors.

Ivan, whose language ability is the lowest of the three children we studied, displayed the most limited range of personal reference forms and the highest rate of pronoun errors (35%). Typically developing children of Ivan’s language level are closer in their use of these personal pronouns. However, these children addressed their interlocutors in first- and second-personal forms, which might be explained by their greater development of social understanding and the frequent use of personal pronouns in a conversational context. Ivan’s language development is not only indicative of his social development but also of his speech development. His use of personal pronouns is limited, often addressed to the child’s self, indicating a difficulty in identifying with others. The implications of this study extend to the understanding of children with autism and their social development.
level are close to full mastery of the first- and second-person pronouns. The absence of third-person pronouns and plural forms in Ivan's repertoire might thus be assimilated to the normative progression in acquisition of pronominal forms in combination with his language delay. However, the anomalies in first- and second-person references require another explanation: Ivan frequently refers to himself and his interlocutor in the third person and reverses half of his second-person singular pronouns. We conjecture, on the basis of this finding, that in children with autism the acquisition of the pronominal system might be to some degree dissociable from the general process of language development. Put a slightly different way, the mastery of person reference form is not only a linguistic accomplishment. We thus consider these findings as indicative of the child's difficulty in representing himself in relation to others. The frequent occurrence of pronominal use of proper and role names might be indicative of the child's proclivity to see himself and his interlocutors from distance, a propensity related to a difficulty in engaging in the I/you of the conversational interchanges. At the same time, our qualitative analysis has revealed that Ivan's pronominal use of proper and role names was partly an interactional outcome. It sometime resulted from his interlocutors' use of baby talk, which included 'pronoun avoidance,' to which Ivan adapted (see Extract 1). As such, the child's pronoun non-use was contextually sensitive. In simplifying speech addressed to the child with autism, the interlocutor can constrain him to use simplified forms himself. Thus, a clinical feature such as pronoun atypicality appears not solely as instantiating an underlying syndrome, but as a response to contextual conditions.

Benjamin, whose linguistic skills exceeded those of typically developing children of his age (in terms of length and complexity of utterance), displayed a wide range of person reference forms, deployed normatively except in one sequence (Extract 2). Yet, Benjamin's speech remains markedly atypical in its weak orientation toward others' attitudes and the co-construction of shared stances. This finding suggests that pronoun atypicality is neither pathognomonic of autism nor the single linguistic manifestation of the children's difficulty in self-other relatedness. Moreover, this finding indicates that language skill can afford the child mastery of the pronominal system despite persistent difficulties in self-other relatedness.

Aaron's linguistic abilities and rate of errors in pronoun use (28%) were between those of Ivan and Benjamin. Compared to typically developing children, who at Aaron's MLU level exhibit full mastery of the pronominal system, Aaron's rate of atypicality in personal reference was still considerable. Aaron's resorting to proper names and third-person constructions in the articulation of shifts in perspective and speech roles further corroborates an interpretation of the child's person reference atypicality that connects it to difficulties in sense of self and others in relation to one another. Such interpretation adds
insight to Hobson and associates' claim that 'even when autistic individuals have achieved the potential for adequate speech-role-referring pronoun use, they might be subject to lapses in the propensity to identify with others in role-appropriate ways...and they might be prone to experience themselves in a relatively "uncommitted manner"' (Lee et al., 1994, p. 174). Our analysis suggests that those 'lapses' overwhelmingly occur when the child is attempting to weave together multiple perspectives - that is, when he is addressing his own weaknesses.

We demonstrated that the child's non-normative use of pronouns and proper/role names was also systematically related to discernible language games. In fact, we determined that many of Aaron's I/you reversals and pronominal uses of his proper name were de-quotation pronouns, within utterances that animated the voice of the interlocutor. We suggest that such a propensity to reproduce the words of another is both evidence of the child's difficulties in identification with others, and, at the same time, an indication of the child's efforts to overcome them. Because of the intimate connection between language and experience (Ochs, 2012), the talk of Aaron's interlocutors affords a point of entry into their experience, perspective, and orientation. (For more on this, see Sterponi, de Kirby, & Shankey, 2014.)

**Clinical relevance summary.**

As a final note, we would like to suggest that our study has important implications for intervention (see Table 15.5). Indeed, the perspective that we as researchers bring to understanding autistic language has direct implications for how we are likely to conceptualise the process and goal of clinical intervention. If we regard stereotypical features of autistic language as manifesting deficits alone, we are likely to support efforts to encourage the child to suppress or replace them. By contrast, from an appreciation that these linguistic features often represent efforts to marshal the affordances of language to overcome difficulties, we may conceive of interventions that could support these efforts. Furthermore, if we regard talk-in-interaction as joint accomplishment of participants in the verbal exchange, we are moved to consider the quality of the child-clinician interaction and the clinician's role in shaping the child's talk. For a simple summary of the implications for practice, see Table 15.5.

**Summary**

As we have argued in this chapter, a perspective on language that foregrounds its interactional and experiential dimensions has the potential to reframe our vision of pronominal reversal and avoidance in the communication of children with autism. On the one hand, our work confirms that pronoun atypicality is salient in other hand not find su
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Table 15.5 Clinical practice highlights

1. In order to promote exposure to and opportunity for usage of pronominal contrast, it may prove helpful to involve the child in triadic interactions (for instance, the child with two clinicians, or with one clinician and a family member). Such interactional context can bring the child to attend to the talk not addressed to him and to track pronominal functioning therein; for instance, the use of you to refer to a person other than himself.

2. We would encourage activities that mobilise the articulation of different voices, through a range of semiotic means including de-quotation. Within these activities, the clinician could scaffold the use of person pronoun while encouraging the child to engage in stance- and perspective-taking, that is in identifying with himself and the others as selves. Play with puppets or dolls can provide engaging opportunity for voicing and perspective-taking moves.

3. Across activities, the specific characteristics of the clinician turns may go a long way in offering the child opportunities to exercise and improve his communicative potential. While baby talk’s person reference forms may be justified in the earliest intervention stages, as an attempt to introduce self/other designation without the complications of indexical reference, once the child demonstrates to be able to differentiate self from others, even at a basic level, it is opportune to begin introducing language forms that make salient the inherent relational aspect of communication and aim towards experiencing perspective-taking.

is salient in autism and related to difficulties in self-other relations. On the other hand, a single, deficit-oriented interpretation of the phenomenon does not find support in our analyses – for two primary reasons. First, the heterogeneous manifestation of person reference atypicality in our three case studies calls for a model that includes multiple explanatory components, which reflects the inherently multifaceted nature of personal pronouns use in general. The interaction between different explanatory factors has yet to be investigated and represents a potentially fruitful line of research. Second, we have suggested that the child’s difficulties are often manifested most precisely in the child’s efforts to overcome them. Indeed, children with autism can go a long way towards mastering the pronominal system, engaging language to explore and express the subjectivity of self and the other. In this sense, Benveniste’s emphasis on the exercise of language as basis of subjectivity (1971) still represents a valuable insight for autism research and intervention.

Notes

1. Echoic memory, also called auditory store, retains the raw auditory stimulus for 2–3 seconds (Neisser, 1967).

2. Chiat points out that in adult language we can observe the impersonal use of the second-person pronoun and additionally hypothetical and perspective-shifting functions.
3. The MLU for typically developing children of six years of age is 4.5 (Rice et al., 2010). Typically, developing children come to master the pronoun system, in comprehension and production, when their MLU is 3 (Brown, 1973).

4. Ivan’s omission of subjects might be related to the phenomenon of pronoun avoidance. However, we did not code them as pronoun avoidance as we found it too difficult to systematically judge whether a given case of subject omission was an instance of grammatical error or genuine pronoun avoidance.

5. On the basis of a study of five parent–child dyads, Willis (1977) has articulated a systematic account of pronoun in child directed speech. She has observed that ‘most BT pronouns are conventional pronouns used grammatically but deviantly in regard to participant role, number, or gender’ (Willis, 1977, p. 273). Willis has also provided a classification of the baby talk deviations in pronounal use. The most frequent deviation in her data was reference to the speaker by means of a third-person form such as the role name, in place of the first-person singular pronoun.

References


Chiat, S. (1982). If I were you and you were me: The analysis of pronouns in a pronoun-reversing child. Journal of Child Language, 9, 359–379.


Recommended reading

