

**The functional use of echoed verbal formulae
by Mandarin-speaking children with autism: An elicitation study**

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Linguistic reference is typically accomplished through proper names, common nouns, or noun phrases (e.g. ‘engagement ring’, ‘marriage ring’), but can also be done through a direct speech construction associated with the intended referent (e.g. “‘*will you marry me*’ ring”, “‘*I do*’ ring”). In adult language, such verbatim non-actual speech is mostly used for restricted purposes, like humor (Pascual 2006, 2014). By contrast, in early child language acquisition there is a wider occurrence and functionality of such verbal formulae (Lieven 1992; Nelson 1973), as there is in the speech of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In fact, so-called ‘echolalia’, that is, the word-by-word echoing of the prior speech of others, as in saying “Goal!” for ‘soccer’ or quoting somebody’s words to refer to them, is a characteristic of autism speech (Kanner 1946; Prizant and Rydell 1984).

Long considered meaningless repetition and a behavior to be avoided, echolalia may be used functionally in autism and may even help language development (Roberts 2014; Sterponi and Shankey 2014). Very few studies on autism have examined the functional use of echolalia for naming or reference, and there has barely been any work on the distribution of echolalic verbal formulae (“Happy birthday!”) vs. corresponding common nouns associated with them (‘birthday cake’). We will present an elicitation experiment aimed at exploring the frequency of occurrence of different forms of functional echolalia by children with autism and young typically developing controls.

Based on a prior naturalistic study (Pascual et al. 2017) and a follow-up elicitation study of functional echolalia by Brazilian children with ASD (Dornelas 2018), we first designed a survey with 50 pictures that were filled by 175 parents of children with ASD in three Chinese cities, meant at learning about the children’s familiarity with the target concepts and the verbal formulae they associated with them. Upon studying this report, we selected 24 pictures as elicitation material, namely 12 professions or types of individuals (e.g. ‘teacher’, ‘toddler’) and 12 entities (‘birthday cake’, ‘telephone’), which the children were familiar enough with and which may easily elicit echolalic expressions (“上课啦!” ‘Class begins!’ for ‘teacher’; “生日快乐!” ‘Happy birthday!’ for ‘birthday cake’). The visual stimuli was presented to 30 preschool children with autism (both high- and low-verbal) and 30 young typically developing children matched in verbal ability. All participants had to answer two questions on each (i.e. “Who/What is this?”; “What is it for?”).

We hypothesize that the autism group will produce more nominal labels than verbal formulae, but more verbal formulae than young controls. The production of echolalia is also expected to be negatively correlated with age and vocabulary size. We expect the findings to be of theoretical and clinical significance in helping us further understand the use and significance of functional echolalia in both autism speech and in young language acquisition.

Keywords: Echolalia; Functional language; Nominal labels; Vocabulary development; autism spectrum disorder

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