

Functional echolalia in autism speech: Verbal formulae and repeated prior utterances as communicative and cognitive strategies

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Abstract

Echolalia, the word-by-word echoing of the prior speech of others, is a typical characteristic of autism speech (Kanner 1946; Prizant and Rydell 1984). Long considered meaningless repetition and a behavior to be avoided, echolalia may in fact be used functionally in autism (Roberts 2014; Sterponi and Shankey 2014).

This paper explores the functions of echolalia by children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Based on two studies of echolalia by Brazilian children with ASD (Pascual et al. 2017; Dornelas 2018), we designed an elicitation task involving 24 images, namely 12 individuals (e.g. ‘teacher’) and 12 objects (e.g. ‘birthday cake’), commonly associated with given conventionalized expressions in Mandarin (e.g. “生日快乐!” ‘*Happy birthday!*’). Eight Chinese children with ASD, familiar with the referents, were asked of these images: ‘What’s/Who’s this?’ and ‘What’s it used for?’/‘What does s/he do?’.

All our participants produced a relative high proportion of echoed utterances, mostly for the purposes of naming, description, and topic development. A small percentage of echolalia was used as a conversation maintenance strategy or as cognitive strategy to help thinking (e.g. for lexical retrieval). This indicates that echolalia is often used successfully for thinking and communicating in ASD.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder; linguistic units; socio-communicative formulae; socio-cultural emblems; function; elicitation