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An Autist Speaks: Joint Attentional Concordance and Discordance in Conversations with ‘S’.

Persons with high functioning autism (either Kanner’s or Asperser’s varieties) are widely purported to show deficits in prosodic and pragmatic aspects of language (cf. Peppe, et. al., 2006), yet there are wide ranging explanations for such infelicities, from deficits in mind reading (Baron-Cohen, 1995), deficits in central coherence (Frith, 2003), to morphosyntactic delays (Eigsti, et. al.2007). Autism is a perceptual disorder; it is an attentional disorder; it is a theory-of-mind disorder; it is a symbolic disorder. Each of these possibilities exemplifies too narrow an aperture from which to view the disorder. A joint attentional paradigm (Carpenter & Tomasello, 2000) offers a unifying ontogenetic account of ASD from a multivariate perspective on ASD and language, insofar as it integrates social and non-social factors. What is more, autism research has one overriding confounding factor: anxiety. Most autism studies take place in educational or clinical settings prone to demand characteristic, which begs the questions of ecological validity.

In this presentation, I will present initial data from conversations with a young adult,* currently 19 years old, fitting the profile of a high functioning Kanner’s autist: the ability to use and understand language but with noticeable deficits in all areas of language use: prosodic over- and under-modulation, idiosyncratic deployment of morphological, syntactic, and semantic units, manifold pragmatic dysfluencies in understanding and producing conventional communicative intentions and co-speech gestures. I will present some preliminary highlights from corpus-in-progress as this single speaker as he interacts with him in a joint activity of watching videos: the first a non-narrative music video selected by the researcher, the second a narrative video clip selected by the participant.

Theory of Joint attention calls for an analytic phenomenology that breaks down the joint-attentional scene into three distinct types of mental space allocation (cf. Fauconnier, 1994): *joint attention to situations*, *joint attention to scenarios or scripts*, and *joint attention to scenes*. The preliminary conclusions are as follows: this participant—and perhaps autists in general—displays competence at situational integration and attention; that is, he can track the attention of the other to a familiar object as part of a interactional activity at the same time that he demonstrates coordinated interaction. However, the joint attentional capacities at the level of scenarios/script are less reliable. Interestingly, when engaging with the non-narrative and unfamiliar music video, the participant had seemed more vigilant at coordinating attention with the interlocutor than with the narrative and familiar movie clip. It is at the scenic level where vigilant joint attentional tracking becomes markedly *discordant*.

These preliminary findings provide an opportunity to better understand the underlying phenomenology of ASD in more naturalistic settings. After a brief description of the joint attention and intersubjectivity as they relate to mental space allocations, I will present preliminary evidence for concordant and discordant joint attentional tracking in discourse. I will then offer pose several research hypotheses to be tested with a wider pool of ASD participants.

References

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