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The Study of the Autistics Children's speech based on Interpersonal and textual Metafunctions in the Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar

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1. Introduction

Autism, first introduced by Bleuler (1940) and later developed by Kanner (1940), is a neurodevelopmental disorder that poses challenges in communication for autistic individuals, hindering their social interactions and activities. Autism encompasses cognitive and linguistic difficulties, with genetics believed to be a contributing factor. Symptoms often become evident between 18 to 36 months of age. Autistic individuals commonly struggle with verbal and non-verbal communication, social interaction, and other activities. Communication difficulties are a core characteristic of autism, with approximately 50% of autistic individuals being unable to use language for communication. A notable trait is the avoidance of the pronoun "I," and the repetition of words and phrases, known as 'echolalia.' There is a wide spectrum of language development among autistic individuals, ranging from those who never speak to those who exhibit slow comprehension despite fluent speech. This spectrum includes both mild and severe forms of autism, with some severely affected individuals being non-verbal or having echolalia. Milder cases learn language but tend to use words and expressions based on their own perspectives, making simple conversations challenging. The speech performance of autistic individuals has been a subject of controversy in psychology, as their appearance is often similar to non-autistic individuals, making it difficult for families to recognize and accept their children's challenges. This lack of recognition can lead to frustration for parents, who may not receive the verbal and practical affection they need.

2. Materials and methods

This study aimed to examine the speech of autistic children aged 6 to 10 using Systemic Functional Grammar. Two groups, an experimental group comprising seven 6-10-year-old autistic children and a control group of seven non-autistic children in the same age range, participated in the study through stratified random sampling. Data collection and analysis were carried out using interpersonal and textual metafunctions. The Interpersonal metafunction encompasses concepts such as 'mood,' 'modality,' 'time,' and 'polarity,' seeking to address when and how the

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subject of a sentence conveys their message to the receiver with varying degrees of probability and positivity or negativity. Each sentence comprises 'mood' and 'residue,' with mood encompassing the subject and finite elements, including time, modality, and polarity, while residue incorporates predicators, complements, and circumstantial adjuncts. The Textual metafunction focuses on the textuality of the text, examining the presence of cohesive devices and coherence within the text. It also aims to identify the 'theme' and 'rheme' of each sentence.

3. Results and discussion

The results indicated that interpersonal communication among autistic children was infrequent due to their reticence and reluctance to communicate. A significant difference between the two groups was observed in terms of modality, but there was no significant difference in negative polarity. Both groups predominantly produced positive sentences. Autistic children exhibited a limited grasp of the concept of time, mainly using the present tense and, to a lesser extent, the simple tense. Future tense was rarely used in their speech. In terms of mood, indicative and imperative moods were most common among autistic children, while the subjunctive mood was rarely used. Out of all sentences produced by autistic children, 85% were in indicative mood, 12% in imperative mood, and only 3% in subjunctive mood. This suggests that they primarily discussed events present in their immediate surroundings and avoided expressing thoughts, probabilities, inclinations, and intentions. Imperative mood was used to request gifts or items from researchers. In contrast, non-autistic children used indicative mood in 48% of their sentences, subjunctive mood in 22%, and imperative mood in 30%, indicating their ability to discuss unreal and mental events. Another noteworthy result was that autistic children primarily used tangible subjects and themes within their reach.

4. Conclusion

Autistic children faced challenges in communicating with researchers and only spoke when their trainer was nearby or when incentives such as gifts and chocolates were provided. They tended to refrain from discussing events not present in their immediate surroundings, generally limited to topics within their mental scope. These findings are valuable for psychologists, autism trainers, and linguists.

Keywords: Autism, Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar, Interpersonal Metafunction, Textual Metafunction