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Title: Redefining the study of interactions with autistic adolescents: A discourse analytic perspective

SUMMARY

Language and communication difficulties belong to the core symptoms of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The prototypical features of autistic language include echolalia (repeating the words of others), pronoun reversal and pragmatic deficits. They all make an interaction with an individual on the autism spectrum more challenging for a neurotypical interlocutor. The presence of these characteristic features of autistic communication has been confirmed by numerous studies, most of which were of quantitative and comparative character. This resulted in the deficit-oriented approach, where autistic features were seen as a deviation from the neurotypical norm.

The growing number of ASD diagnoses led to the emergence of new approaches to ASD research and the application of alternative, language-focused, methods of analysis, in particular discourse and conversation analysis. This has allowed the researchers to reframe the meaning of communicative practices of people on the autism spectrum by situating and interpreting their utterances in the local context of interaction. As a result, a shift in the perspective has occurred from looking at the interaction with people on the spectrum as deficit-oriented to focus more on their strengths. The latter perspective entails the idea of co-construction of an interaction by both interlocutors, and thus opens the door for a reinterpretation of autistic features.

The current thesis introduces the reader to a language-oriented approach to ASD research. It demonstrates the value and importance of discourse-analytic methods in redefining communicative practices of autistic individuals by revealing their interactional functions and highlighting the role of the neurotypical interlocutor in a successful communication of both parties.

The data analysed in this research project come from two sources: semi-structured interviews and therapeutic sessions. The data were audio- or video-recorded, transcribed using simplified Jeffersonian transcription (Jefferson 2004) and analysed with the use of discourse and conversation analysis. The original language of interviews and sessions was Polish, the transcripts were subsequently translated into English by the author.

The dissertation consists of three articles, which complement one another. The first paper focuses on the language of autistic adolescents during an interview with a neurotypical researcher. It identifies communicative practices of participants in view of the prototypical features of the autistic language. The findings suggest how, by applying discourse-analytic methods, these practices can be interpreted in terms of their functional value in the local interactional context. Moreover, the article shows how the communicative behaviour of a neurotypical interactant may constrain the autistic interlocutor's input in a conversation. The second article also concentrates on the autistic adolescents' language, however, in a therapeutic setting. Different aspects of autistic communication are analysed and contextualised in a therapeutic interaction. Again, the application of language-focused methods of analysis enabled the positive interpretation of autistic utterances, demonstrating their interactional importance or construing them as coping strategies of people on the autism spectrum rather than their deficits. The role of the therapist is also considered in the article. The final article in the series focuses on the interactional practices of ASD therapists, who represent an understudied, non-directive therapeutic approach (GPS). The findings show how therapists structure their contributions in order to maintain an interaction with their autistic clients and develop their language skills. The article stresses the importance of the therapists' engagement in an interaction with autistic clients as well as the cooperation of both parties.