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Report on the PhD dissertation “Redefining the study of interactions with autistic adolescents: A discourse analytic perspective” by Eliza Maciejewska

In her PhD dissertation, Eliza Maciejewska (the author) uses linguistic methods to investigate the communication of autistic persons. Her mainly conversation analytic (CA) approach allows her to emphasize aspects of autistic communication that as of yet are still underresearched, including the communicative strengths of autistic persons and the ways therapists try to support them. In my estimation, the most important contribution of this work is the change in perspective it aims to set off from a methodological angle – investigating actual communicative behavior of autistic persons – and from an empirical angle – focusing on the resources of autistic persons as well as on the co-construction of any perceived problematic behavior they might display. In the following I comment in more detail on the different parts and aspects of the dissertation.

As stipulated by the university’s regulations, the dissertation consists of an introduction, in which the author gives an overview and a summary of her thesis, and of three individual publications. The introduction comprises 30 pages, in which the author first briefly introduces the autism disorder as well as some of the research that has been conducted with respect to it. The author rightly points out that, due to the very high volume of publications on autism, it is impossible for her to discuss all the relevant literature or even identify all trends within the literature. Instead, she divides the research into quantitative and qualitative works and then picks out some quantitative studies that are discussed in some detail. She focusses on ageing autistic persons, camouflaging of autism and female autism. While these points are interesting, the author does not explain why she focusses on them, neither does she return to them in the later parts of the thesis. Furthermore, the discussion of the studies is very brief and therefore does not allow for a true understanding of the reported investigations. The presentation of the qualitative studies in section 2.2 is



also rather brief and does not describe the specific research process that was done. As readers, we do not really understand how the authors achieved their respective findings. As there is no page limit to this part of the thesis, I would have preferred a more detailed presentation of the relevant studies, particularly in 2.2, because these works are very relevant for the dissertation.

In section 3, the author describes the aims of her dissertation. These consist on the one hand in contributing to a methodological shift that investigates actual communication and interaction by autistic individuals. Thereby, autistic persons are not only seen as (deficient) objects of investigation, but as subjects that act and interact themselves. This, on the other hand, allows for a better understanding of the communicative strengths and capabilities of these persons, because their communicative resources become visible in the data. In my estimation, this does indeed have the potential to contribute to a change of how autistic individuals are examined and categorized in science and how they are seen in society – a change from a purely deficit-oriented approach to an approach that perceives of the respective phenomena as socially and interactionally produced and that accounts for strengths and weaknesses of all the persons interacting in these settings. Contributing to these important changes that have potentially far-reaching consequences is the most important achievement of this thesis. I will discuss this further when referring to the individual papers.

The author describes the approaches of discourse analysis (DA) and CA in section 4. She thus uses established and reliable methods that fit very well to her research questions. The author's presentation of the approaches is correct and to the point, although a bit more detail could have been added.

The data analyzed in the dissertation is briefly discussed in section 5 of the introduction. The data is very good and adequate for the project, the presentation is convincing and leaves little questions unanswered. In two of the articles, however, it is mentioned that the therapists involved in the project – not the scientist – decided which parts of the data could be analyzed. To my knowledge, this is rather unconventional, and it raises questions about the objectivity of the data. The author touches on these questions very briefly in the articles, but one would wish for more information about how exactly the process of data selection proceeded, which criteria were applied, whether the author was able to identify any biases (regarding for example only 'good' therapeutic practice) in the data she received etc. These questions should have been addressed in the introduction.

The author continues by describing her research process, a section in which she mainly presents biographical information regarding her motivation and the development of the project. This section is informative and interesting, even though I am not sure that such personal details need to be provided as part of a PhD dissertation. She then briefly presents the findings of the three different articles

(section 7) and points out future research perspectives that to my eye are important and convincing.

In the following, I briefly discuss each of the three publications of the project separately. Thereby, I will focus on the analysis and results parts of the articles, as – understandably – much of the literature and methods sections mirrors the respective sections in the introduction and the other articles.

The three articles all tackle different aspects of the topic and show very little overlap regarding data and findings. This is certainly one of the strong points of this dissertation. In the first article ('Discourse analysis as a tool for uncovering strengths in communicative practices of autistic individuals') the author points out communicative strengths and capabilities of autistic persons. She shows that phenomena like 'listing', the use of a formulation 'schema', or repetitions ('echolalia') can not only be seen as co-constructed by the neurotypical non-autistic individual with which an autistic person is communicating, but also – and most importantly – as communicatively adequate in the situation they are used. These phenomena are thus not necessarily deficient symptoms of a disorder, but functional in the respective communicative context. The author shows convincingly that this is true also for so-called off topic-comments by autistic persons or question-answer sequences in which the autistic person only gives one-word answers. These answers are on the one hand a product of the questions by the neurotypical participant, on the other hand related to the topic (school) in which the autistic adolescent is not interested in. As mentioned above, in my estimation, these are crucial findings that have the potential to contribute to a shift in how autism is researched scientifically and understood societally.

The second paper ('Autistic resources from a discourse-analytic perspective') uses data from different participants and a different communicative situation (therapy vs. interviews/ picture description) to illustrate how autistic individuals adapt to the communicative situation. Relying in parts on the same concepts and analytic tools (repetitions, topic shifts), the author demonstrates that her findings are valid for a different data set. The data also illustrate specific strengths of autistic persons, like determination and the possibility to understand other autistic persons.

The third paper ('Non-directive play therapy with autistic adolescents: A qualitative study of therapists' interactional practices') focusses on the therapists and their ways of supporting their autistic clients. The author bases this study in parts on the concept of professional stocks of interactional knowledge (Peräkylä & Vehviläinen 2003) and their relationship to conversation analytic research – a concept that is in my view very fitting and promising for this kind of applied CA research. In the analytical part, the author shows how therapists support the communication and development of autistic persons by for instance establishing and upholding joint attention, mirroring, correcting (rephrasing) or expanding and thereby explaining

their utterances. While I do see these observations as very valuable, I wonder whether the analysis could have gone deeper – in which respect do these methods help clients develop, which mental changes do they set off, which communicative patterns might they help establish, etc.? In my estimation, the author here would have profited from applying more discourse analytic methods that allow for a broader understanding of the data and for overcoming the ‘antimentalistic’ (Deppermann 2007) restrictions of CA. I am also not sure whether the explicit correction of the autistic person by one of the therapists in example 6 should be seen as scaffolding, as this is a very mundane and common phenomenon in everyday discourse, be that between parents and children, teachers and pupils or amongst peers. I thus find that this paper as well as the other ones makes interesting and very valuable observations, but that the analysis could have gone further and provided a more thorough understanding of the respective processes.

Overall, I see this dissertation as a very valuable contribution to the research on autism spectrum disorder. It aims to change the perspective on the concerned individuals and their communicative abilities and highlights the contribution of their neurotypical interaction partners, both as therapists trying to support the autistic persons’ development, and as participants whose contributions might constrain the autistic persons’ communicative options and thereby co-produce reactions traditionally perceived as deficient. This dissertation thus has the potential to contribute to changes in the research on autism and in our understanding of autism. Despite these important strengths and contributions, I do not suggest that a distinction should be granted. The reason for this is mainly that from my perspective, the findings remain – as touched on above – somewhat limited. While important and overall convincing, the idea that any contribution in an interaction is co-constructed by all involved parties is by now part of the common sense of CA. Demonstrating this for communication with autistic interlocutors thus holds relatively little novelty and can be seen as almost self-evident. And while I agree with the description of the strengths and resources of autistic individuals in articles 1 and 2, I find that the analysis could go deeper and try to provide a more thorough understanding of the investigated processes that could possibly include, for instance, the mental aspects of the interaction or try to reconstruct more specific structures of interaction. This holds true also for the methods or ‘strategies’ applied by the therapists – the author describes the interactive processes but does not provide an analysis of their communicative and developmental meaning. The author also repeatedly mentions that her research can change how communication with and by autistic persons is viewed, but she does not explain in detail what these changes could be and what that could mean for our understanding of autism and the related communicative and societal challenges. The same is true for the discussion of the therapists’ methods – the author mentions that her findings are relevant for the further development of therapeutic practice, but she does not detail how this could be achieved and what changes specifically could be set off. She also

does not describe how her research would modify professional stocks of interaction knowledge. Even if the individual papers might leave little room for questions like these, they could have been addressed in the introduction. Furthermore, from my perspective, the dissertation makes a contribution to research on autism disorder but contributes little to the methodology and the theories of linguistics.

Overall, I therefore conclude that this dissertation should receive a positive assessment and that Eliza Maciejewska should be allowed to proceed to the final stages towards earning a PhD title. Because of the somewhat limited scope of the results, however, I do not suggest that a distinction should be awarded.



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