Title: Conversational Language in Adults with ASD

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Introduction: Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a pervasive neurodevelopmental disorder. Research has focused on children with ASD, with little attention to adults with ASD. Individuals with ASD have impairments in language skills including pragmatics and discourse (Eigsti et al., 2011). Parents report that adults have difficulty in engaging in interactions, and have more impaired language compared to adolescents with ASD (Seltzer et al., 2003). Language ability is known to be a significant predictor of symptom improvement and better vocational outcomes in individuals with ASD (Johnson et al., 2010). This is particularly important, given the poor outcomes for adults with ASD in terms of quality of life measures and vocational stability. However, we know very little about the conversational ability of adults with ASD and what impact this has on adaptive behaviors. The present study examined conversational language samples in adults with ASD to examine complexity and amount of language, and the relationship between language ability and vocational and residential outcomes. We also present longitudinal follow-up data on a small subset of the original sample in order to examine if language use changes over time.

Method: The data are from a larger longitudinal study on family caregiving for adolescents and adults with ASD (Seltzer et al., 2003). Participants included 141 adults with ASD (mean age = 24 years); they completed IQ testing, and a conversation language sample. Caregivers completed interviews and questionnaires about their child’s communication and adaptive behaviors (Vineland), and residential and vocational outcomes. The second time point included a conversation sample approximately 9 years later with 55 of these same participants. Interviews were transcribed and coded for grammatical and lexical complexity and language dysfluencies. Interviews were also coded for perseverative language.

Results: At the first time point, only 20 of the 141 adults produced at least 50 utterances; we set this cut-off point per standard conventions. These 20 participants had higher levels of grammatical and lexical complexity, as well as significantly more language dysfluencies even when controlling for amount of talk compared to the other adults with ASD in the study. Follow-up analyses indicated that these 20 individuals had higher IQ scores, but were similar on the Vineland communication standard score. These 20 adults with ASD were significantly more likely to live independently and have employment. At the second time point, 40 individuals with ASD produced more than 50 utterances and 14 had less than 50; 24 individuals produced a similar amount of language between the two time points. The 40 adults with ASD with more than 50 utterances were significantly more likely to live independently or with relatives ($t(50) = 4.18, p = .00$). Perseverative language coding is ongoing and will be included.

Discussion: This study highlights the limited ability of many adults with ASD to engage in spontaneous flexible conversation, and the significant association it has on vocational success and residential placements. Additionally only a small subset of individuals with ASD were producing a significant amount of language, which highlights the critical importance of intervention services during adulthood. The follow-up study also indicates at a preliminary level that language can change over time, which provides additional support for the importance of continued services.

References/Citations:

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