

Contextual inferences and conversation profiles: A comparison between autistic and neurotypical adults

Elena Castroviejo Miró

Abstract

Pragmatics has been identified by clinicians as a domain of difficulty throughout the autism spectrum, persisting in adulthood. This broad term encompasses various abilities, which have also been assessed by researchers, for instance, conversation skills (see e.g. Hale & Tager-Flusberg, 2005; Pagmar et al., 2022). Relatedly, while the interpretation of certain implicatures in the autistic population has been a matter of debate, there is little investigation of other types of implicature, especially, particularized implicature.

This talk (joint work with Agustín Vicente, Mark Jary and Isabel Martín-González) presents ongoing research that builds on previous work by Wilson & Bishop [WB] (Wilson & Bishop, 2020, 2021, 2022). In their 2020 paper, WB compared the outcome of neurotypical (NT) adults and individuals with autism (AUT) on a battery of structural language and pragmatics tests. Focusing on their Implicature Comprehension Test, featuring particularized conversational implicature, they observed that autistic individuals were more likely to choose a “non-normative” interpretation of an implied meaning, and five times as likely to select an “I don’t know answer” when asked about the presence of an implicated meaning. Inspired by WB’s Implicature Comprehension Test, our **first study** aimed to find out whether we could replicate WB’s results with Spanish-speaking adults, and check whether the different behavior in the autistic population might really be due to the non-generation of an implicature, or rather the result of a local (rather than a global) processing of discourse, an idea suggested by WB. To achieve these goals, we slightly modified WB’s design to allow for the comparison between two types of pragmatic abilities: one that informed about the generation of a material implicature (in the sense of Jary, 2013, 2022), and one that informed about the local/global interpretation of discourse. We collected and compared data from NT adults (N = 19) and verbal adults with an autism diagnostic (N = 19), all of them Spanish speaking. Results revealed that the autistic group was less prone than the NT group to choose an option that involved generating an implicature and attending the global context (63% vs. 92%), but there was no effect of the pragmatic ability variable (implicature vs. discourse). These results did not show a strong tendency of autistic adults towards addressing the local context nor were they able to clarify the reason for the group difference. In view of the materials we worked with and our qualitative analysis of the results, we designed and collected data from two further studies. Our **second study** addressed the interpretation of the results that we favored, namely, that the observed differences were due to the different conversational preferences of NTs and AUTs. In particular, we examined whether NTs exhibited a stronger tendency than AUTs to use acknowledgments in conversations more often than AUTs, while being less prone to shift topics than AUTs (see Capps et al., 1998; and Hale & Tager-Flusberg, 2005, on difficulties with topic maintenance in autistic children). The **third study** reproduced, with some adjustments, our first study, this time also including a different, more demanding, type of particularized implicatures than the ones tested by WB. While the second study revealed some differences in conversational styles, the results of the third study suggest identical competence in implicature derivation in autism.

References

- Capps, L., Kehres, J., & Sigman, M. (1998). Conversational Abilities Among Children with Autism and Children with Developmental Delays. *Autism*, 2(4), 325–344. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361398024002>
- Hale, C. M., & Tager-Flusberg, H. (2005). Social communication in children with autism: The relationship between theory of mind and discourse development. *Autism*, 9(2), 157–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361305051395>
- Jary, M. (2013). Two types of implicature: Material and behavioural. *Mind & Language*, 28(5), 638–660. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mila.12037>
- Jary, M. (2022). *Nothing Is Said: Utterance and Interpretation*. Oxford University Press. <https://academic.oup.com/book/44125>
- Pagmar, D., Abbot-Smith, K., & Matthews, D. (2022). *Predictors of children's conversational contingency* [PDF]. <https://doi.org/10.34842/2022-511>
- Wilson, A. C., & Bishop, D. V. M. (2020). Judging meaning: A domain-level difference between autistic and non-autistic adults. *Royal Society Open Science*, 7(11), 200845. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.200845>
- Wilson, A. C., & Bishop, D. V. M. (2021). “Second guessing yourself all the time about what they really mean...”: Cognitive differences between autistic and non-autistic adults in understanding implied meaning. *Autism Research*, 14(1), 93–101. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2345>
- Wilson, A. C., & Bishop, D. V. M. (2022). A novel online assessment of pragmatic and core language skills: An attempt to tease apart language domains in children. *Journal of Child Language*, 49(1), 38–59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000920000690>