

# Communication Issues *in Autism and Asperger Syndrome*

Do we speak the same language?



Olga Bogdashina





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in Autism and Asperger Syndrome

*also by Olga Bogdashina*

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*To my children, Alyosha and Olesya*

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# Introduction

It takes more work to communicate with someone whose native language isn't the same as yours. And autism goes deeper than language and culture; autistic people are 'foreigners' in any society. You're going to have to give up your assumptions about shared meanings. You're going to have to learn to back up to levels more basic than you've probably thought about before, to translate, and to check to make sure your translations are understood. You're going to have to give up the certainty that comes of being on your own familiar territory, of knowing you're in charge, and let your child teach you a little of her language, guide you a little way into his world. (Sinclair 1993, p.2)

There is a general agreement on the diagnosis of the syndrome of autism according to the behavioural symptoms people with autism exhibit. The present diagnostic classifications – the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV: APA 1994) of the American Psychiatric Association and the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (ICD-10: WHO 1992) of the World Health Organization (WHO) – contain the behavioural descriptions of autistic disorders which are based on the Triad of Impairments formulated by Lorna Wing (1992).

Difficulties with language and communication are one of the defining features of autism. Although language and communication impairments have been recognized as essential characteristics of autism (in fact, they are present in all autistic individuals no matter whether the person is verbal or non-verbal), the nature of the language and communication deficits and their role in manifestation of the syndrome remains controversial.

The researchers in the 1970s and 1980s focused on certain questions they tried to answer in their investigation of the role and nature of language idiosyncrasies in autism, the main question being: Are language deficits in autism primary or secondary characteristics of the condition?

Several possible hypotheses have been put forward:

- language deficits in autism are the product of some other primary impairments (Boucher 1976; Waterhouse and Fein 1982)
- language deficits are primary impairments, causing all the other manifestations of autistic symptoms: impairments in social interaction, rigidity of thinking and challenging behaviours (Churchill 1972; Rutter, Bartak and Newman 1971). However, it was found that some children who did develop good grammar and vocabulary still exhibited behaviours specific to autism.

Since the late 1980s, research on language and communication in autism has focused on deficits in the area of pragmatics of the language. Most studies of language development and deficits in autism have been conducted on children with high-functioning autism. This is understandable as these children have some spontaneous speech, which allows researchers to make certain comparisons and conclusions. Some other studies have investigated echolalia. Non-verbal autistic children have been underrepresented in the research of language development.

Traditionally, language is looked upon as a key prognostic factor in autism and the level of language and communicative competence achieved is seen as a measure of outcome. Besides, language development is closely related to the development of social behaviour. There is evidence that so-called bizarre and inappropriate behaviours that are a feature of autism can be significantly reduced with the development of communicative abilities (Carr and Durand 1985). Because of this, most treatments of autism have the development of language and communication skills as their major goal. Different approaches to address this goal have been developed. These approaches vary significantly depending on underlying theories and philosophies. While it is often the practical recommendations that are in demand, it is necessary to make sure that each particular approach has a sound theoretical framework/foundation in order to explain why some methods work with some children but not with others. If we do not understand *why* this particular approach works (or does not work) with this particular child, any progress becomes doubtful. A sound theory can provide a strong conceptual foundation for the understanding of

communication problems in autism and for improving the efficiency of strategies to develop communication skills.

Since the 1980s there has been a shift of attention from language to communication impairments as the fundamental problem. The argument is that both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication are affected and, even if structural language ability is good (in cases of individuals with high-functioning autism and those with Asperger syndrome), communication and the social use of language remain impaired. This approach to communication problems rather than language *per se* seems quite justifiable. However, in this book I try to combine both approaches and consider the tools of communication and cognition in autism. I would like to return to language difficulties in autism from different perspectives by answering the questions:

- What language are we discussing?
- Is the verbal language the only language possible?

The main assumption in this book (to which we will return over and over again) is that the 'triadic' impairments of social interaction, communication and imagination are better described as qualitatively different ways to interact, communicate and process information which do not coincide with conventional ones.

It is like learning to speak a foreign language. When we find ourselves among foreigners, we do not assume that they have nothing to say or that they cannot communicate. If we want to understand them and to establish communication with them, we have to learn their language or find an interpreter.

Now that we do realize how fundamentally different autistic people are, it is worth acquiring knowledge about the culture of these 'dyscultural' (Richer 2001) people in order to make the 'culturalization process' less painful for them.

To acquire such knowledge one must put aside all theories, pertaining to developmental psychology and actually try to gain an understanding of how people with autism think and feel. The best way of doing that is, of course, to listen to and read accounts by young people and adults with the disability. (Gerland 1998, p.32)

Imagine the situation. You have to go on a business trip to a foreign country, say, to China. Do you bother to learn the Chinese language and culture? I doubt it. Does it stop you from going there? No way. You expect that the

Chinese know your language (at least a few hundred words), so you can communicate with them. The same is our approach to autistic people. We expect *them* to know our language and our culture (and we are always happy to help them learn it), but we are not bothered to learn even a few words of theirs. It is unfair. Let us meet them halfway. Let us learn their communication systems and teach them to translate from ours to theirs. It will enable both sides to communicate with each other.

Let us learn their language(s). If they try to interpret our way of functioning, why can't we do the same? Since imagination is one of the areas in which people with autism have difficulty, it should be easier for us to imagine what it is like to experience the world in an 'autistic way' than the other way round. Then we could help autistic people use their natural mechanisms to learn and develop their potential. We could help them develop strategies to deal with their difficulties, such as sensory hypersensitivities and information overload. We could help them cope with behavioural and emotional problems. And, what is very important, we could learn their communication systems and teach them translation skills in order to make communication easier for both us and them.

As we know that autistic people have differences in their brain structure or/and chemistry (for whatever reasons this might be) we must assume that their development is different and they follow different stages (or the same stages but in a different order). So, in this book the comparison of their development with that of the non-autistic population is undertaken only in order to explain about their differences and not to find ways to 'correct' or 'repair' their development.

In **Part 1** we identify the theoretical foundation and the main concepts that will be used throughout the book. First we define communication, language and speech, and examine a range of communicative functions and different means of communication (Chapter 1) in order to create a framework for the discussion. In Chapter 2 there is an overview of theories of language acquisition in normal development and a brief discussion of factors that may cause problems in this domain. We will further consider how sensory perceptual differences affect cognitive processes and are reflected in the differences of thinking, language and communication development (Chapters 3 and 4), and then move on to the discussion of the 'autistic languages' and a controversial issue of 'autistic culture' (Chapters 5 and 6).

**Part 2** is devoted to language characteristics, learning styles and language development (Chapters 7 to 9) and 'fluent speakers' problems (Chapter 10).

**Part 3** contains the information on assessment and intervention issues, with practical recommendations for selecting the appropriate methods and techniques to enhance communication based on the specific mode of communication a person uses. It gives some clues as to where to look and what to do in order to help autistic people use their natural mechanisms to learn and develop social and communicative skills.

Now that more and more personal accounts written by autistic individuals have become available, we have a unique opportunity to learn about their own explanations of some phenomena and to get an idea about their inside perspective. For at least 30 years autistic people have been publishing information, trying to communicate the existence of the misinterpretations of their differences, without much professional notice. They are trying to explain something that most of us have *never* experienced. That effort alone can be complex; in addition, they are trying to speak in the language form of typical non-autistics, not in their own language. Many of them have had to learn to translate between the languages. Besides, the ideas are *unconventional* to most of their audience.

The 'What they say' section at the end of each chapter helps the reader to 'see through the eyes' of people with autism and to 'listen to' their problems and experiences first hand.

The 'What we can do to help' sections contain practical recommendations on what to do in order to help autistic individuals in certain areas of functioning.

Throughout the book examples are offered to illustrate different phenomena of autistic perception, thinking, language and communication.

The use of 'he' or 'she' should be taken to imply both genders.

