Non-autistic versus autistic children: Why should I say “um” if I’m not talking to anybody?

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BACKGROUND

• When speakers use “um,” they may be pausing to plan an utterance, and/or intending to take a turn in the exchange.1,2
• Research has reported that autistic individuals use “um” less often than non-autistic (NonAu) individuals when they answer questions during diagnostic testing,3 describe how to play a sport,4 and describe pictures.5
  • These authors argue that differences in “um” use are due to autistic individuals’ general pragmatic challenges.
  • However, a recent study reported no difference in “um” usage between NonAu and autistic children during dyadic conversation.6
  • This suggests that differences in “um” use may not persist in all contexts.

OBJECTIVE: To compare “um” use by Autistic & NonAu speakers across datasets that utilize different discourse elicitation tasks

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITE A</th>
<th>SITE B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autistic Group</td>
<td>NonAu Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 16)</td>
<td>(n = 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronological Age</td>
<td>13.5 (2.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADOS Total Score</td>
<td>10.3 (2.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NonAu Group</td>
<td>Autistic Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 15)</td>
<td>(n = 21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronological Age</td>
<td>13.4 (2.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADOS Total Score</td>
<td>10.3 (2.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: NonAu groups from both sites did not receive the ADOS-2

RESULTS

SITEM A:

- Autistic < NonAu in TSST (p = 0.043), but not in conversation task
- Both groups: TSST < Conversation (ps < 0.05)

SITEM B:

- No significant difference between groups in conversation task, p = 0.159

DISCUSSION

• Findings suggest that “um” use differs depending on the nature of the discourse context (i.e., monologic vs. conversational).
• Further, both autistic and non-autistic participants at site A used “um” significantly more often during conversation, suggesting they recognize its usefulness as a turn-taking device.
• This function of “um” is unnecessary in a context like TSST, where speakers are asked to talk for a specified amount of time without interruption.
• Overall, findings reveal pragmatic strengths for autistic speakers, including not only their use of “um” in the first place, but also their ability to vary their frequency of “um” use across contexts.

REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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