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An investigation on the Syntactic Ability of Cantonese-speaking Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The findings of syntactic abilities of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are inconsistent in previous studies. Some studies found no differences in syntactic ability of children with ASD and their language-matched normal peers (e.g., Tager-Flusberg *et al.*, 1990); while some studies found that children with ASD produced less mental state verbs, conjunctions, complex sentences (e.g., Park *et al.*, 2012). Previous studies are either confounded by not being able to match both age, cognitive ability and Mean Length of Utterance. Few studies have been carried out to investigate syntactic ability of Chinese children. The present study aims to investigate syntactic characteristics of Cantonese-speaking children with ASD as compared by matched typically developing (TD) children.

The present study includes (a) four Cantonese-speaking children diagnosed with ASD, aged from 5:09 to 6:04 years old, (b) four typically developing children (TD), who are chronological age-matched and are matched on non-verbal IQ and mean-length-of-utterance (MLU) with the four ASD children. Language samples of about 30-minute each in the form of semi-structured cooking set play were obtained from subjects. The Cantonese- Language Assessment, Remediation, Screening Procedure (CAN-LARSP, Leung & Li, in press) was employed to assess the speech samples, the number of (different) syntactic structures (NO(D)SS), the flexibility of syntactic structures (FSS) were calculated. Besides, more detailed analysis of syntactic structures Topic-

Comment (Top-Com), Subject-Predicate (SP), Serial Verb Construction (SVC), Sentence Final Particles (SFP), prosody, connectives and complex sentences was carried out.

Results illustrate both quantitative and qualitative differences between TD children and ASD children of the same age. Type-token ratio of Syntactic Structures (SS), FSS, Topic-Com and SFP as well as prosody difference were found. Theoretic reflections on differences and clinical implications on how to foster syntactic development of ASP with normal intelligence are discussed.

References

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