

Narrative introductions: discourse competence of children with autistic spectrum disorders



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ABSTRACT This article examines the discourse competence of high-functioning children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) to participate in narrative introduction sequences with family members. The analysis illuminates the children's own efforts to launch narratives, as well as their ability to build upon the contributions of others. Ethnographic, discourse analytic methodology is integrated with the theory of discourse organization and the weak central coherence account of autism. Introductions of both personal experience narratives as well as fictional narratives (from television programs, computer games and other media) are examined. The children were especially competent in the use of stable introductory practices when launching fictional narratives, pre-organized by the media of expression. Their challenge was not in the introduction, but in the narrative co-telling, which often was not globally organized over an extended course of propositions. The heterogeneity of the ASD children's discourse competence and its implications for discourse analysis are discussed.

KEY WORDS: *autism, discourse competence, fictional narrative narrative, narrative introduction practices, narrative of personal experience*

Introduction

Autism as a widely accepted diagnostic category is relatively new, first appearing in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (APA, 1980) only in 1980. Although research on the autistic disorder had been conducted even before its official appearance in the DSM, the magnitude of studies increased dramatically since then. Nonetheless, the path to the understanding of autism has been far from straightforward, and often 'marked by false trails of reasoning and misleading findings' (Huebner and Dunn, 2001: 5). The discrepancy between numerous research findings is especially striking when it comes to the abilities of autistic individuals, including their competence to comprehend and produce narratives. For example, the current view of autistic children's

conversational abilities is largely based on experimental studies that recruited subjects with autism and mental retardation, which limits the applicability of the findings to more able children with autism (Capps et al., 1998). Moreover, little is known about the competence of autistic children to participate in everyday narrative discourse with family members, teachers and peers, outside of laboratory environments.

As a neurological developmental disorder, autism impairs the ability to orient, interpret and respond to social and physical environments, and specifically to participate in face-to-face interaction. This ability is profoundly important for taking part in everyday narrative discourse where conversational partners are expected to coordinate their contributions with those of their interlocutors in a recognizable, reciprocal, practice-driven way. To illuminate the participation of high-functioning children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD)¹ in such quotidian conversational activity, this article examines their discourse competence to co-construct narrative introductions with family members. The goal of the present study is to illuminate the scope of this competence, aiming especially to document the highest level of success *possible* for a child with ASD in bringing about narrative interaction. To this end, most data examples analyzed in the article highlight the interactional resources and processes that are instrumental to such success.

The discussion maintains a balance between two theoretical positions. On one hand, it follows Prizant's (1983) call for studies that are preoccupied not with nomenclatures of deficits and deviance, but rather with strategies and processes that underlie patterns of autistic individuals' communicative behavior, a view shared by Happé who argued that 'success is more interesting than failure' (Happé, 1999: 540). On the other hand, the discussion recognizes the importance of documenting and examining the challenges that children with ASD face when they are engaged in narrative discourse.

The study employs ethnographic, discourse analytic methodology to examine the children's point of entry into narrative co-telling when they are not explicitly directed by others to do so (as in 'Tell me about . . .'), thus capturing both the children's own contributions to bringing about narrative interaction, and their ability to build upon the contributions of others. Specifically, the discussion focuses on whether and how high-functioning children with ASD display to interlocutors their understanding that narratives are 'occasioned' (Jefferson, 1978: 220) by the social or physical environment, or are discontinuous with it in a conventionally justifiable way.

Discourse analysis of autistic members' participation in everyday talk provides an amplifying lens through which unaffected interlocutors' abilities and conventional characteristics of their discourse lose their homogenous 'status quo' normativity. Rather, from the precarious, not quite conventional position that individuals with ASD occupy in the social world as they struggle to keep up with the contingent, ever-changing landscape of social interaction, autism gives a privileged view of verbal and non-verbal behaviors that make up the ostensibly

seamless flow of ordinary conversation. Furthermore, autistic discourse is a worthwhile focus of attention in its own right, and not only in clinical or cognitive psychological sense. Besides its idiosyncratic poetics,² it opens an area of analytic inquiry that heavily overlaps with philosophical and moral issues of difference and inequality (e.g. Baroff, 1991; Ochs et al., 2001; Sonne, 1987). From this point of reference it is important to ask, as Goodwin (2003) does: what makes a member of society and culture worthy of being engaged with in a serious, meaningful conversation? Given the theories of autistic impairments, especially in the areas of affective reciprocity and ‘theory of mind’ (e.g. Baron-Cohen et al., 1985; see also Kremer-Sadlik, this issue), is an individual with autism to be taken seriously as a conversational partner and is s/he worth the effort often required to understand what (s)he is saying?

Although no ethnographic research, to this author’s knowledge, has been conducted prior to the work presented in this issue, the prevalent view is that the children do not usually participate in everyday narrative activity. When and if they do, their contributions are ‘off the wall’ and have little to do with the interaction at hand and much to do either with the child’s own idiosyncratic ‘special interests’ or with some unrelated, tangential content (e.g. Fay and Schuler, 1980; Landa, 2000). The data presented in this article, however, demonstrate that high-functioning children with ASD do evidence a proclivity and a competence to collaboratively introduce meaningful narrative interaction in everyday conversation with family members.

Analytic framework

This study is informed by three theoretical approaches:

1. The ethnographic, discourse analytic methodology.
2. The theory of discourse organization.
3. The theory of weak central coherence.

First, the study employs the ethnographic, discourse analytic methodology, which combines participant observation with extensive audio and video recording in naturalistic environments (Ochs et al., 1994; Ochs et al., 1997; Ochs and Jacoby, 1997). Further, a dimensional approach to narrative analysis is used which examines narratives across a set of five core dimensions (i.e. Tellership, Tellability, Embeddedness, Linearity and Moral Stance) (Ochs and Capps, 2001). These dimensions establish a range of possibilities realized in a particular narrative. Of the five core dimensions, the discussion focuses on Embeddedness, which delimits the position of a narrative both as text and as activity within larger discourse structures. This dimension captures a range of narrative formats from ‘display texts’ (Pratt, 1977, cf. Ochs and Capps, 2001) which are crafted rhetorically as a performance and are often stylistically and thematically detached from surrounding discourse, to a ‘work-in-progress’ format characteristic of conversational narratives designed primarily to make sense of life events and embedded in

the ongoing talk as a part of a larger topic or activity. The dimensional approach is used ethno-methodologically to examine whether and how children with ASD employ recognizably conventional practices to accomplish engagement in narrative activity with others and manage thematic continuity or discontinuity with prior talk.

Within this framework narrative introductions are seen as distributed among participants' actions within sequentially organized, collaboratively co-constructed communicative activity rather than accomplished through the intentions of a single speaker (Duranti et al., 1991). The interpretive framework affords a fundamentally different view on perspective-taking (or 'theory of mind') than the one currently articulated in cognitive psychology, a main source of information about ASD. Within the distributed approach, to have an understanding of others' points of view, as well as one's own, implies, minimally, the ability to coordinate propositions and actions with those of others. The focus on talk as a distributed phenomenon takes into consideration the tension that arises between the individual agency and the institutionally constitutive practices, assuming that every act of perception is always situated in larger activities and institutions (Duranti et al., 1991; Ochs and Solomon, in press; Ochs et al., this issue).

Second, the study draws upon the theory of discourse organization within discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1980, 1981, 1995; van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983), which articulates how utterances in discourse influence each other in systematic ways through the relations of local and global semantic coherence. Local coherence connotes pair-wise, linear connections between propositions at the semantic level. The propositions connected locally at this microstructural level enter higher-order hierarchical relations and ultimately form larger 'macrostructures', or 'global' semantic structures that organize the 'local' microstructures of discourse and interaction, and are fundamental to complex information processing and higher-level interpretation (van Dijk, 1980, 1981) present in narrative discourse. Thus, macrostructures play a critical role in the understanding, organization, and reduction of complex information, making possible the planning and execution of discourse, as well as its comprehension. The concept of macrostructure has certain parallels in cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence in such notions as schema, frame, script, or scenario. In both social and cognitive theories, these concepts are seen as specific, often conventionally determined, organizations of knowledge (van Dijk, 1980). Additionally, the concept of macrostructure illuminates such central notions of language use as 'topic', 'theme', and 'gist' (van Dijk, 1995). These theoretical notions gain special significance when integrated with the 'weakness of central coherence' (Frith, 1989) account of autistic deficits in complex information processing and higher-level interpretation outlined below.

Third, the study considers the theory of weak central coherence (WCC) (Frith, 1989) within cognitive psychology which accounts for anomalies of information processing in autism and explains the piecemeal, detail-oriented cognitive tendencies of persons with ASD. The theory is built on a central

argument of Gestalt psychology that perception is governed, at each level, by a 'field' consisting of elements that are inter-dependent because they are perceived as parts of a whole, a 'gestalt' or configuration, structured as a 'figure' against a 'ground'. The 'figure', the focus of attention, and the 'ground', its context, are organized by a dynamic relation driven by subjective perception in that differing shifts of attention or interest may produce different 'figures' from the same 'ground' (e.g. Koehler, 1929; Wertheimer, 1959). Formulated initially for visual perception, the gestalt psychological approach posits that human beings have a natural tendency to seek meaning and structure over as wide a range of stimuli as possible. Intact human cognition draws together diverse information to construct 'central coherence', or higher-level meaning in context, via a centrally acting cohesive force that pulls together information that has already been processed and interpreted at the multi-layered local levels. Without this centrally acting cohesive force, pieces of information would remain only pieces, be they small or large (Frith, 1989; Happé, 1994).

The WCC theory accounts for the characteristic, uneven cognitive profile of individuals with ASD who perform poorly on tests requiring communicative abilities, but excel, often out-performing neurologically typical control subjects, on tasks that draw on the ability to disregard context. For example, autistic subjects perform well on the Embedded Figures Test where they are asked to find hidden figures (e.g. a triangle) within pictures of objects (e.g. a pram), as well as on other tests where locally-driven, detail-oriented cognitive processing is an advantage (Frith, 1989). Studies of the WCC theory applied to language mostly examine whether autistic subjects rely on contextual information for accessing meaning of words or sentences³ (Happé, 1997; Jolliffe and Baron-Cohen, 1999, 2000; Snowling and Frith, 1986).

Studies designed to examine narrative competence in light of the WCC theory are rare. Notably, in a study of inferential processing and story recall in children with communication problems, Norbury and Bishop (2002) provided support for the WCC theory in autism, showing that high-functioning autistic (HFA) children were able to make inferences in principle, but the inferences were not always relevant to the story context. These important experimental studies shed light on underlying tendencies of information processing in autism, but cannot possibly duplicate the complexities and demands of everyday narrative discourse.

In summary, the integration of the ethnographic, discourse analytic methodology, the theory of discourse organization, and the theory of weak central coherence affords a hermeneutic analytic foundation for understanding narrative introduction competence of children with ASD. Specifically, the video- and audio-recorded real life interactions are examined against the backdrop of the explicit models of multi-level discourse organization and of autistic locally-driven information processing. The focus on narrative introductions *practices* fits this integrated analytic framework. While theory of weak central coherence captures the cognitive, information-processing aspect of narrative discourse, and while the 'macrostructures' theory brings the discussion to the level of *social*

cognition and language use as manifested in discourse organization, the notion of 'practice' illuminates how these theoretical formulations appear in the interactions of specific persons as they go about their everyday lives.

The Ethnography of Autism Project

The data corpus analyzed in this article is part of a larger corpus collected under the direction of linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs and clinical psychologist Lisa Capps. The original data corpus includes experimental data, extensive ethnographic observations, and video- and audio-recordings at school and home of 16 children of normal intelligence (Full IQ greater than 70) diagnosed with either high-functioning autism (HFA) or Asperger syndrome (AS), aged 8–12 years old. All the children who participated in the study attended regular public school classrooms.

The total data corpus collected for the 'Ethnography of Autism' project consists of approximately 320 hours of video-recorded interactions at school and at home before, during and after family dinner, and 60 hours of audio data recorded in the morning at home and in the car in transit to and from school. Additional ethnographic information about the children's schedules, daily events and social networks was gathered via parental interviews and participant observations in quotidian environments.

THE NARRATIVE DATA CORPUS

The present discussion focuses on narrative interactions of 14 out of 16 children with ASD participating in the study, three girls and 11 boys.⁴ The data are a sub-corpus of the larger video-corpus of dinnertime and audio-recorded breakfast and transit interactions, and consists of approximately 56 hours of video- and 53 hours of audio-recordings. Narrative interactions were identified based on the definitions in Ochs et al. (1992), Ochs and Taylor (1992), Taylor (1995) and Ochs and Capps (2001). Narrative interaction is a collaborative conversational activity that articulates a central past or future reportable event or circumstance which may be cast positively (e.g. as surprising and unexpected) or negatively (e.g. as problematic, unusual, odd). Other past, present and future events and circumstances, often only implicated, may have relevance for interpretation of the central reportable event. Additionally, it represents a part of a sequence where, minimally, at least one other event or circumstance stands in a temporal and/or causal relation with it.

Following this definition, two kinds of narrative interactions were isolated: narratives of *personal experience* of one of the co-tellers, or other individuals who may be non-present, but are personally known by them; and narratives of *fictional experience*, about historical or imaginary characters of books, movies, TV – programs, video- and computer-games, etc.⁵

Some 67 data segments were isolated according to this definition of narrative interaction, and combined into a narrative corpus shown in Table 1.

The composition of the narrative corpus documents that children with ASD

TABLE 1. Narrative corpus by introduction roles and narrated experience type

	Introduced by		Total
	Children with ASD	Family members	
Narratives of personal experience	32	22	54
Narratives of fictional experience	12	1	13
Total narratives	44	23	67

TABLE 2. Children's names, age at testing, IQ scores (Verbal, Performance and Full Scale), Diagnosis (Dx), and frequencies of self- and other-introduced narrative interactions about personal and fictional experience

Child's name and age	VIQ, PIQ (FSIQ)	Dx	# Child-introduced narrative interactions		# Other-introduced narrative interactions		Total for child
			personal	fictional	personal	fictional	
Mary (9;4)	70, 98 (81)	HEA	0	1	0	0	1
Karl (9;8)	73, 78 (73)	HEA	1	3	3	0	7
Don (9;5)	73, 93 (81)	HEA	1	2	0	0	3
Anthony (9;2)	90, 95 (92)	AS	7	1	5	0	13
Jonah (13;0)	90, 94 (91)	AS	0	0	2	0	2
Erin (9;8)	91, 85 (88)	HEA	3	0	2	0	5
Keith (11;3)	91, 78 (83)	HEA	4	0	4	0	8
Angela (11;2)	92, 102 (96)	HEA	2	0	1	0	3
Sylvester (8;1)	97, 116 (106)	HEA	1	0	1	0	2
Jed (8;4)	106, 90 (98)	AS	1	0	0	0	1
Calvin (8;1)	111, 100 (106)	HEA	0	0	1	0	1
Mark (8;11)	126, 126 (128)	AS	2	4	1	1	8
Adam (11;1)	128, 89 (110)	AS	9	1	2	0	12
Connor (8;9)	145, 126 (139)	AS	1	0	0	0	1
Total			32	12	22	1	67

do have a certain proclivity to introduce narrative interactions and to participate in the narrative interactions introduced by others. The count for each child's self- and other- introduced narratives about personal and fictional experience, as well as the children's ages, Verbal IQ (VIQ) and Diagnosis (Dx) are shown in Table 2.

Narratives of fictional experience: story preface as practice of introduction

Of the 44 narrative interactions introduced by the children with ASD, 32 were narratives of personal experience and 12 of fictional experience. The children introduced all but one narratives of fictional experience in the corpus, showing that this domain is specific to their interests and distinct from the interests of

their interlocutors who overwhelmingly introduced narratives of personal experience. While these frequency counts reveal a picture that contradicts the view of children with ASD as obsessively talking about favorite TV programs, video-games etc., and being uninterested in interactions about personal experience, narratives of fictional experience do occupy a prominent role in the children's discourse. Additionally, these fictional stories are often co-constructed by the interlocutors as the area of special competence for the children with ASD who usually remember the most minute details and are able to reproduce long stretches of characters' talk by heart.

How the children introduce these narratives may shed some light on the attraction this kind of narrative activity may hold for them. First, narratives of fictional experience are often macro-structurally 'pre-packaged', with the events organized in a narrative plot, and the gist more readily available than in narratives of personal experience. The fictional narratives are already extracted from the experiential flow through their modalities of expression (e.g. printed text, video-recording, computer animation), demarcated into a beginning–middle–end plot structure, and organized as a 'story', a 'movie', or a 'game' about certain events that have stable temporal and causal trajectories. Moreover, they are accessible for re-reading, re-viewing, or re-playing, which satisfies the preference for sameness and stability that governs the lives of children and adults with ASD.

Consider the following example in which Adam,⁶ an 11-year-old boy with Asperger syndrome, tells his mother about his school day. The segment begins with a winding-up of a discussion of the exact moment in time when fall begins, befitting Adam's preoccupation with clocks and chronology (Ochs and Solomon, in press; Solomon, 2000, 2001a, 2001b). His mother does not appear convinced by his argument that fall has begun on that day when Adam introduces a narrative⁷ about the life of Clara Schumann, the wife of the famous composer, which was told by the music band teacher, Mr Gregory:

Example 1⁸

- | | | |
|----|---------|--|
| 1 | Mother: | Yeah, of course, but it still makes more sense to have it tomorrow |
| 2 | Adam: | It still <u>does</u> , but everyone tries to celebrate it today . ← |
| 3 | Mother: | ° Weird ° |
| 4 | Adam: | → So, I have a story to tell you about – (0.5) |
| 5 | | that Mister- Mister Gregory told us today? ← |
| 6 | Mother: | Yeah. |
| 7 | Adam: | Have you ever- you know- |
| 8 | | you've heard of- uh- Clara Schumann, right? |
| 9 | Mother: | Who? |
| 10 | Adam: | Clara Schumann. |
| 11 | Mother: | Uh- |
| 12 | Adam: | Wait a second. Clara Schumann, you know – |
| 13 | Mother: | You mean, Schumann the composer? |
| 14 | Adam: | Yeah, you know Robert Schumann? |
| 15 | Mother: | Mmm hmm. |
| 16 | Adam: | It's his wife. Clara Schumann. |

- 17 **And there's a big background behind Clara Schumann.**
 18 *(takes a deep breath)*
 19 **and Mister Gregory told us a wonderful story about it.**
 20 **He said, 'In eighteen-twenty, there- the- there was a - . . .'**
 ((narrative continues))

Speakers conventionally display their intention to introduce narratives by using a kind of a preface called 'pre-telling' (Sacks, 1972, 1974; Schegloff, 1992). Pre-telling signals to the addressee that something not already known, tellable and newsworthy is on the way, implying the speaker's assessment of the state of knowledge of the interlocutor. A pre-telling may reflect the speaker's stance to the telling on the way (e.g. 'Hey, I have good news'), or the source of the story. As Schegloff (1995) argues, a pre-telling is used 'not as an action/move in its own right . . . but for its relevance to and bearing on some action/utterance projected to occur' (1995: 20, footnote 5). Thus, the story preface has a globally, hierarchically oriented function, marking a 'story' beginning and projecting a narrative macrostructure that has to satisfy certain parameters (e.g. to be about Clara Schumann, represent a 'big background', and be 'a wonderful story').

Adam uses a story preface in a recognizably conventional way (Sacks, 1972, 1974). Because narrative co-telling is a departure from the usual conversational turn-taking system, narrative introduction has to secure participants' orientation to it as to an extended turn and as a transition from the prior discourse to the extended narrative co-telling sequence (Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 1992). Adam successfully manages these conventions: he projects an up-coming telling as a 'story', provides information about its protagonist (Clara Schumann), the source of the story (Mister Gregory) and the time he heard it (in class that day). The introduction meets the expectation that the telling will continue the larger theme of 'today's day at school' with a shift in focus signaled by the discourse marker 'So', which brackets the prior stretch of talk as concluded and projects the up-coming 'story' as relevant, if discontinuous, with the prior conversation. By repeating 'today' turn-finally in line 5, Adam also frames the up-coming 'story' about Clara Schumann as occasioned by his own prior turn in line 2, also concluded by a turn-final 'today'. In lines 7 and 8 Adam hesitates in deciding whether his mother constitutes a knowing or unknowing recipient in terms of her familiarity with the main character of the story (*Have you ever- you know- you've heard of-*), and he explicitly 'stops' the interaction (*Wait a second.*) to repair the mis-understanding that originates in his mother's lack of recognition of the protagonist's name in lines 12, 14 and 16 (*Clara Schumann, you know. Yeah, you know Robert Schumann? It's his wife. Clara Schumann.*) Once he succeeds in aligning his mother's background knowledge with the projected story, he amplifies the tellability of the story (*there's a big background behind Clara Schumann*), repeats the source of the story, as well as his own social role as its recipient – a member of the classroom (*. . . and Mr. Gregory told us*) and provides his own, enticing stance to the projected narrative (*. . . a wonderful story about it*).

Adam's participation in this narrative introduction sequence appears to

satisfy all the conventional prerequisite of discourse competence. Adam's contributions fulfill the requirements of maintaining the flow of thematic continuity while negotiating the shift in focus of attention and introducing a narrative. His orientation, interpretation and responses to his mother's contributions show a remarkable degree of perspective-taking. However, examination of the narrative itself (not shown here), that spans pages of single-spaced transcript and is characterized by unusual details (e.g. about spelling and pronunciation of German last names), circular repetitions and linear, micro-segmented progression of narrated events reveals atypical engagement in narrative activity.

Thus, practices of narrative introduction, especially in case of fictional, 'prepackaged' narratives, present little challenge to high-functioning children with ASD, while the area of difficulty appears to be not in narrative introduction itself, but in the actual narrative co-telling over an extended course of propositions (Ochs et al., this issue; Ochs and Solomon, in press). This may lend certain support to the weakness of central coherence theory (Frith, 1989) suggesting that a narrative introduction as a hierarchically implicative action may be achieved successfully, but its global function may not be successfully maintained over an extended propositional flow. Thus, the tacit expectation, taken for granted when unaffected speakers are involved, that a child with ASD will participate in narrative co-telling as competently as s/he executed the narrative introduction, is not fulfilled, raising the issue of heterogeneity of autistic children's discourse competence. This disparity in two closely related domains of competence, narrative introduction and narrative co-telling, is an example of the subtle but systematically present features of autistic discourse that set the children apart from their typically developing counterparts.

Comparison of the following two examples with Example 1 reveals the shape of the story preface as a narrative introduction strategy that children with ASD learn to use because it is stable, conventional, and effective. In Example 2 Mark, an 8-year-old boy with Asperger syndrome, introduces a narrative about a movie during family dinner, selecting his father as the story's primary recipient:

Example 2

- 1 Mother: (to Mark) Want some more rice?
- 2 Mark: → **Hey Dad. I'll tell you about this movie called 'Napoleon.'**
- 3 Mother: ((gesturing for him to sit)) Mark, sit down.
- 4 Mark: ((sits down))
- 5 **It's about this little puppy.**
- 6 **And he goes into a-** ((takes a bite of food))
- 7 **and he accidentally gets carried away in a balloon.**
- 8 Father: I don't know this story.
((narrative continues))

In Example 3, Karl, a 9-year-old with high-functioning autism, tells his mother during breakfast a story originating in a computer game:

Example 3

- 1 Karl: Just- just wait- I just have to get that Rice Krispie out. (.)
 2 Because you gotta crun:ch it ou:t. And mush it.
 3 Mother: Go sit down.
 4 Karl: → **I wanna tell you about the kitchen. Princess Camista.**
 5 Mother: Alright. Tell me about the kitchen. Sit down.
 6 Karl: **Uhh- In 'Mordack's Castle',**
 7 **there's a princess scrubbin' the floo::r.**
 8 **Because she tells her to get to work.**
 9 Mother: Yeah.
 10 Karl: **And she has a lot of work**
 11 **until she's done scrubbing the floo::r.**
 12 Mother: Just like mom. Princess Camista.

A successful practice of fictional narrative introduction through story preface appears to represent a stable combination of the following components: (1) securing of interlocutor's attention through vocatives or other address terms (e.g. *Hey Dad*); (2) display of meta-linguistic awareness at the speech-act level, articulating an intention to introduce a narrative (a verb of intention combined with a speech-act verb and possible indication of content: *I wanna tell you about the kitchen; I'll tell you about this movie called 'Napoleon.'*); and (3) explicitly indicating that a *story* (as a movie, a video-game, etc.) is on the way (*I have a story to tell you . . .*). Even when the children with ASD did not frame narrative introductions of fictional experience as continuous with prior talk, the competence evidenced in the introduction itself and the generosity of the interlocutors (Ochs and Solomon, in press) appeared to secure a positive uptake and a successful narrative launching.

In terms of the theory of discourse organization, the ability to formulate a narrative preface that also includes an 'abstract', requires access to articulate the 'summary' or 'gist' of the story, its macrostructure. Children with ASD, however, usually employ the strategy of inserting the character's name in the format 'I want to tell you (a story) **about** . . .', thus achieving a globally implicative action, but with local means. The preposition 'about', present in all three segments, appears to have a critical procedural function in these introductions as it marks a global, macrostructural organization, a 'gist' of the upcoming narrative. It should be noted that in Example 3, Karl uses the conventional introduction format ('I wanna tell you about . . .', line 4) in a slightly unconventional way: instead of articulating the gist of the story following the preposition 'about', or even its protagonist, he inserts a physical locality: the kitchen. Naming the protagonist, Princess Camista, in line 4, further builds the background information, satisfying the listener's need to know who is involved in the narrative as well as where it takes place (Sacks, 1978), however, these narrative aspects put together in a list-like relation do not produce a 'gist' that the story is 'about'. While Mother accepts 'the kitchen' in line 5 as something 'tellable' (Alright. Tell me about the kitchen.), in line 8 Karl's ambiguous use of the personal pronouns (Because

she tells **her** to get to work.) makes the story appear cryptic. Mother, however, back-channels in line 9 (Yeah) encouraging Karl to continue the telling and giving a positive, if ironic, uptake in line 12 (Just like mom, Princess Camista.).

Although the small frequency numbers and the complexity of conversational narrative activity do not allow us to make categorical claims about the relation between the verbal ability (as reflected by Verbal IQ), theory of mind performance, or diagnosis, certain levels of verbal ability appear to have importance for narrative discourse. Three children with verbal IQs in the 70s (especially Karl, see Table 2) seemed to have a preponderance for introducing fictional narrative interactions while tending to introduce narratives of personal experience less competently as well as less often. Alternatively, the only child with a high verbal ability (Mark, see Table 2) who competently introduced a large proportion of fictional narratives appeared to follow a familial interactional style that favored literacy-oriented interactions centering on books, movies and television programs.

Embedded narratives of personal experience: practices of introduction

Embedded narratives may emerge in conversation in two ways: when they are 'occasioned' (Jefferson, 1978; 220) by (1) prior talk⁹ of the narrative introducer's own, or of an interlocutor's; (2) non-verbal behavior or an object. In this case interlocutors display that the introduction is 'triggered' (Jefferson, 1978) by an element that is a part of an *activity* or physical *environment*; thus, the narrative is introduced 'in response to something witnessed or noticed' (Keenan (Ochs) and Schieffelin, 1976). Displays of how a narrative introduction relates to on-going talk, to a physical environment or to an ongoing activity, are conventionally expected from the speaker by interlocutors who otherwise would have no point of reference for the interpretation of the up-coming narrative. Such narrative introduction entails projecting global, hierarchical relations between itself and surrounding talk. Thus, participation in narrative co-telling triggered in this fashion inherently relies not only on the interlocutors monitoring the surrounding physical environment and their own actions, but also on tracking others' orientation to it and their actions.

THEMATICALLY CONTINUOUS NARRATIVES

Thematic continuity in discourse may be realized through a series of linked discourse topics where their propositional content is drawn from prior utterances. When a speaker's conversational contributions are thematically continuous with and relevant to preceding talk, conventionally it is not necessary to explicitly mark the discourse topic (Keenan (Ochs) and Schieffelin, 1976). Thus, in the case of a narrative interaction thematically continuous with prior talk, the thematic unity allows the introducer to achieve a 'smooth transition' (Andersen, 1999: 10) from a current topic to the topic of the narrative. Such transition

displays that ‘contextual information crucial to understanding process’ (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 216) of the up-coming narrative remains continuous with that of prior talk.

Consider the following example where Anthony, a 10-year-old boy with Asperger syndrome and his father are driving home from school. They have been talking about an upcoming fieldtrip and that it would be ‘selfish’ for Anthony’s class to go without the other class in his grade:

Example 4
Thematic continuity via inference

- 1 Father: Right
 2 (1.0 sec)
 3 It’s not nice to be selfish either ()
 4 Anthony: Yeah
 5 Father: I mean (.) I don’t like it when people are selfish to me:
 6 Do you?
 7 Anthony: No!
 8 (2.0 sec)
 9 ((*sniffs his nose*)
 10 → **I saw like that girl that always-**
 11 **third grade girl that always bugs me again!**
 12 (1.5 sec)
 13 Father: ()
 14 What do you mean she always bugs you?
 15 Anthony: **YES she always BUGS me when she sees me!**
 16 Father: What- what does she do?
 17 Anthony: ((*sounds upset*)) She’s calls me a retarded kid.
 ((*narrative continues*))

Anthony’s introduction of a story in line 10 about a third-grade girl who bullies him does not involve any explicit display of the story’s connection with the previous talk, yet appears to be thematically connected. The father in line 5 mentions that he does not like when people behave in a certain way (‘I don’t like it when people are selfish to me:), and asks if Anthony feels the same. The theme of ‘some people treating others in ways that they do not like’ appears to be the interpretive context of Anthony’s introduction. Possibly because the connection of the introduction with this thematic focus is not clearly established, the father elicits additional information in lines 14 and 16.

This may be an example of ‘proximal relevance’ (Ochs and Solomon, in press), a strategy employed by children with ASD to maintain participation in conversation, aided by the fact that relevance is relative rather than absolute. Children with ASD have been shown to make ‘proximally relevant’ contributions that to some degree miss the gist of prior extended propositional sequence, as Anthony does in this example. The father, being a generous interactional partner (Ochs and Solomon, in press), readily follows the shift of focus that results from Anthony’s narrative introduction in line 10 and indexes a highly charged interest in the story (lines 14, 16), marking the introduction as unproblematic.

TRIGGERED NARRATIVES

In addition to continuing a theme, an embedded narrative may be triggered in the course of conversation or an activity when something that has been said reminds a participant of something worth telling (Jefferson, 1978). Such triggered introductions may be realized in a variety of ways, for example, through the use of repetition of a specific triggering element with or without a disjunct marker (e.g. 'Oh') or a paraphrastic expression such as 'Speaking about . . .'. The speaker may use all these resources together, combining the disjunct marker 'Oh' to signal a shift in attention and repetition of a prior topic within the 'Speaking about . . .' preface to conventionally initiate a story (Jefferson, 1978). Interlocutors may account for the relevance of a narrative introduction even if it is *not* thematically coherent with the conversation at hand. In cases of a partial topic shift, as when going from one sub-topic to another (e.g. from general to specific), interlocutors can repeat one or more noun or verb phrases from the immediately prior discourse. Such 'embedded repetitions' locate the triggering element of prior talk, which may originate in the speaker's own talk or in the talk of another person. Use of this discursive practice signals that the story is justifiably continuous with the ongoing conversation and a direct product of its monitoring (Jefferson, 1978).

In the following example, Adam recounts to his mother his first day in middle school. Adam's use of the disjunct marker 'By the way' and of repetition of the noun 'lunch' is an example of 'embedded repetition'. 'By the way' is a conjunctive adverbial, which conventionally marks the shift of attention to another topic (Quirk et al., 1985). Significantly, the repetition in this case involves a shift in semantic meaning evidencing a degree of cognitive flexibility. In the sentence 'we went to lunch' (line 3), 'lunch' stands for an activity and a period of a school day, while in the noun phrase 'half of my lunch' (line 6), 'lunch' means 'a meal':

Example 5**Disjunct marker and embedded repetition**

- | | | | |
|----|---------|---|--------------------------|
| 1 | Adam: | Anyway, so that was Mrs. Coolidge | |
| 2 | | and she was nice. | |
| 3 | | So the: ↑ n we went to lunch . ← | |
| 4 | | And uh- (.) oh and I uh- | |
| 5 | | → By the way | |
| 6 | | I ate only about <u>half</u> of my lunch . ← | |
| 7 | | I didn't eat mo:st of it. | |
| 8 | | I ate one half of a sandwich. | |
| 9 | | I didn't eat the other ha:lf and stuff. | |
| 10 | | That sandwich was so <u>me:ssy</u> and [stuff. | |
| 11 | Mother: | | [That's what Katie said! |
| 12 | | It was like <u>wet</u> [or something! | |
| 13 | Adam: | ((<i>laughing</i>)) [Yep! It was like- <u>wet</u> ! | |

Adam's 'embedded repetition' in line 6 of the noun 'lunch' (originating in line 3) appropriately locates the element of prior talk that serves as a trigger for the story, thus indexing its relevance and thematic continuity with prior discourse.

This introductory format, ostensibly simple, appears to require significant discourse competence from a child with ASD to perceive a ‘trigger’ in the flow of talk and integrate it into a relevant narrative introduction prefaced by an appropriate disjunct marker. It also displays Adam’s monitoring of conversation, as well as exhibiting an understanding of what his mother would want to know.

Narrative introductions occasioned by a trigger in an autistic child’s physical environment, rather than in ongoing talk, appear to present a special challenge. Consider the following interaction in which Sylvester, an 8-year-old boy with high-functioning autism helps his mother to prepare dinner. Watching the water boil in the pot, Sylvester slightly leans forward and blows on the bubbles. This action reminds his mother about a past incident: when Sylvester was a baby he became so fascinated with the boiling water that he touched it with his hand and burnt himself:

Example 6

- 1 Sylvester: → ((with his arms behind him, stands over the pot of macaroni
2 bends forward and blows on the boiling water))
3 [Can I blow on the bubbles?
4 Mother: → [Remember when you did **that** once
5 ((looks at Sylvester)) when you were a ba:by?
6 Sylvester: **Uhu?**
7 Mother: ((Stirring the pot of macaroni))
8 When you saw those bubbles?
9 Sylvester: **>What did I do?<**
10 Mother: You put your hand in it.
11 Sylvester: **((shocked, looks up at the mother)) OH-OHOH!**
((narrative continues))

The overlap in lines 3 and 4 indicates that in mother’s line 4, ‘Remember when you did that once’, ‘that’ refers to Sylvester’s bending over and blowing on the water, not his question ‘Can I blow on the bubbles?’ in line 3, since the two utterances are spoken in overlap. In this example, Sylvester may not remember what he did when he was a baby, or possibly not even realize that his action, blowing on the water, occasioned his mother’s question in lines 4 and 5. Moreover, it may be challenging to decipher the complex indexical relations implicated in his mother’s question in lines 4 and 5 (‘Remember when you did that once when you were a baby?’) which links Sylvester’s specific but unmentioned action in the present to a long past event. Sylvester is able, however, to build upon the mother’s contributions to co-construct a narrative introduction. Specifically, his ‘Uhu?’ in line 6 appears not as an acknowledgment of him remembering the incident, but a back-channeling response that selects his mother as the next speaker and gives her a go-ahead to continue the telling, which is what she proceeds to do in line 8, verbally articulating the non-verbal trigger. In line 9 Sylvester signals that he does not remember the events, asking ‘>What did I do?<’, passing to his mother again the role of the primary co-narrator, and displaying his appreciation of the narrative in line 11 (OH-OHOH!).

SECOND STORIES

Narratives can be told not only in response to a trigger of a certain kind, but to a whole story. Speakers who tell these 'second stories' (Sacks, 1970) conventionally transform features of a narrative told by an interlocutor to build a new narrative that is co-constructed as thematically linked and recognizably similar to the first story (Goodwin, 1990; Sacks, 1992). Second stories, though shaped by the earlier narratives, reciprocally shape the interlocutor's views of the earlier accounts by providing either contrasting or parallel experiences and perspectives (Ochs and Capps, 2001). Participants have to be able to attend to and analyze an in-progress story in a way that would allow them, on its completion, to do the following: (1) tell their own story using the information resulting from that analysis; and (2) conventionally display these results as evidence of connection between the two stories (Ryave, 1978). Thus, second stories entail an elaborate, conventionalized display of the teller's understanding of the gist of the first story. Specifically, in the example that follows, in the car on the way home from school, Anthony introduces a second story about his uncle's death that parallels an immediately preceding narrative interaction about sibling relationships and loss. A pervasive theme of interaction between Anthony and his father is 'having a good day' and includes future-implicative planning as well as problem-solving involving problematic events that happened in the recent past. Anthony sees the cause of his 'bad day' in his brother Daniel who 'always bugs him'. The father then suggests that if Daniel were no longer present Anthony would be very sad, and supports this notion with a hypothetical narrative about Anthony's friend, Burton C., who would have felt the same way about his sister (first story). Anthony continues this narrative with a specific example of Burton C. being interrupted by his sister while watching TV:

Example 7**Second story introduction**

- | | | |
|----|----------|---|
| 1 | Anthony: | Because <u>Daniel!</u> always (.) <u>bugs!</u> me |
| 2 | | (2.5) ((<i>sound of cars</i>)) |
| 3 | Father: | I- get a funny feeling |
| 4 | | that if Daniel was no longer around |
| 5 | | that you'd be very very very very sad (0.5) |
| 6 | | I mean after all (.) |
| 7 | | when you go to bed at night |
| 8 | | you like him to come (.) to bed with you |
| 9 | Anthony: | 'cause I want some <u>company</u> |
| 10 | Father: | Imagine if he wasn't around at all. |
| 11 | Anthony: | Mm-hmm |
| 12 | Father: | So I would think that Burton would feel the same way |
| 13 | | about his sister (.) |
| 14 | | if you asked him now |
| 15 | | he'd probably say my sister drives me <u>nuts</u> from time to time |
| 16 | | but- if she wasn't around he'd really be sad |
| 17 | Anthony: | Maybe- maybe-when um Burton C. is watching something? |

Conclusion

This article has examined the activity of narrative introduction that brings the children with ASD together with their family members in a discursively constituted human relationship. Although the study did not specifically concentrate on the instances when the children's engagement in this activity was problematic, this area remains important for understanding the entire range of their discourse competence in everyday interaction.

There is no simple, binary distinction, however, between success of the children's participation in narrative introductions and its lack. Rather, the shared meaning that arises from a narrative introduction is inevitably dialogic in that it resides, as the rest of discourse, 'on the boundary between two consciousnesses, two subjects' (Bakhtin, 1986: 106), and thus inherently relational. While it may be less frustrating for both the children with ASD and the family members when narrative introductions are achieved successfully, the importance of the children's *effort* to bring about narrative co-telling has to be acknowledged independently of its success.

Through their engagement in narrative introductions, children with ASD evince their relatedness to family members and cast their place in family life and history. Positioning themselves as active, focal co-participants in narrative activity they also take certain risks. Being at the intersection of human experience and social action, of inter-relatedness and inter-textuality, conversational narrative activity is the site where autistic impairments may emerge as a 'visible phenomenon in the natural world' (Goodwin, 2003: 7). Such characteristically autistic nonverbal behaviors as paucity of eye gaze, rocking, hand and finger flapping, and verbal behaviors such as repetitions, lists and 'stuck in set' paradigmatic perseverations (Ochs et al., this issue; Ochs and Solomon, in press; Solomon, 2000, 2001a; Turner, 1997) become interactionally consequential not only for the child with ASD, but also for the family members. Whether these manifestations of autism are noticed and commented upon, or taken in stride and integrated into a quasi-normative conversational organization, acquires a moral dimension, since, as Goodwin (2003) writes, 'all participants are forced to come to terms with how they treat someone manifesting troubles in the most central domain of human competence, the ability to use language to engage in relevant social action' (2003: 7). This area deserves future analytic attention.

This article illuminated the scope of discursive competence of high-functioning children with ASD to introduce narratives into conversation, aiming especially to document the highest level of success *possible* for the children. Employing ethnographic, discourse analytic methodology, and theories of discourse organization and weakness of central coherence in autism, the discussion focused on the children's management of thematic continuity or discontinuity with prior talk in narrative introductions. Both the children's own contributions to bringing about narrative interaction, and their ability to build upon the contributions of others were considered. The article examined narrative introduction

practices to illuminate what the children oriented to in the flow of conversation and what specific discursive resources they employed to bring about narrative co-telling.

The data presented in this article document that children with ASD are able to proactively engage in narrative activity with family members, establish themselves as focal co-participants, and effectively shape their participation over the course of narrative introduction. Some of the children with ASD adopted highly conventionalized introduction formats, especially when introducing fictional narratives. Fictional narrative introductions appeared to be well within the reach of children with lower verbal ability who competently and successfully used the procedurally stable practices afforded by the global pre-organization of these narratives by their modalities of expression (video-recording, printed text etc.). Narrative co-telling over the extended course of propositions, however, was more challenging, lending a degree of support to the theory of weak central coherence. The analysis suggests that even when a narrative introduction as a hierarchically implicative action is successfully achieved, its global function may not be successfully maintained over the projected propositional flow.

In the case of narratives of personal experience, thematically continuous introductions appeared relatively unproblematic. Narrative embeddedness realized via thematic continuity seems to be the type favored by the children, or at least used most often by them. Moreover, the children with ASD appear to be remarkably competent in the conventional marking of this kind of embeddedness. This competence may be an example of 'proximal relevance' (Ochs and Solomon, in press), which appears to be a strategy aided by the fact that relevance is relative rather than absolute. Children with ASD often are able to make 'proximally relevant' contributions that may miss the gist of prior talk, but will be accepted as relevant, and further built upon, by the *generous interactional partners* (Ochs and Solomon, in press).

The article highlights a tacit expectation of neurologically intact interlocutors, as well as of the researchers who analyze their talk, that discourse competence of a participant in interaction is a homogenous entity, equally distributed across sub-domains of conversation and continuous over time. This expectation, however, is not fulfilled when it comes to autistic children, bringing forth the issue of heterogeneity of their discourse competence and illuminating the origins of the subtle 'off' quality of autistic discourse that sets the children apart from typically developing peers.

Nevertheless, the discourse competence of children with ASD to introduce narrative must be acknowledged. It has been argued that a 'talented minority' of autistic children are able to 'hack' their way into representing others' minds through the use of alternative, conscious strategies which increase social competence (Frith et al., 1994). The roots of the children's success in introducing narratives may originate in the relative stability of introductory formats. It is possible to suggest that they use this stability strategically, even algorithmically.¹⁰ As did this author, the children may have approached the task of narrative

introduction analytically and identified the combination of the narrative introduction components: securing of interlocutor's attention, articulating an intention to introduce a narrative or explicitly indicating that a story is on the way. When not all the components were in place, the generosity of the interlocutors (Ochs and Solomon, in press) assured a positive uptake and successful narrative launching.

It would be inaccurate, however, to contribute the children's competence in narrative introductions to their computational abilities and others' interactional generosity. The analysis showed that the children were able to appropriately build upon others' contributions and demonstrated not only a competent use and monitoring of discourse structures, but also affective reciprocity (e.g. Adam's concern with his mother's lack of recognition of Clara Schumann's name, Sylvester's 'OH-OHOH!' in response to his mother's articulation of a problematic event; Anthony's 'Did you feel sad when your brother died?' second story introduction).

While the article focused on strength and competence, the difficulties that children with ASD have in everyday narrative discourse should not be overlooked. Future studies focusing on the whole range of discourse competence, from the most impaired to the most spectacular, should provide a well-informed, realistic picture of the narrative abilities of children with ASD.

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NOTES

1. ASD is a 'spectrum' disorder because it encompasses children sharing the same underlying deficit but with greatly varied levels of functioning (Wing, 1988; Frith, 1989). The diagnosis of Asperger syndrome is given to those high-functioning children who exhibit impairments associated with autism but do not have a language delay. The children of normal intelligence but with delay in language development are usually identified as high-functioning autistic.
2. See Tito Mukhopadhyay's (2000) book of poetry, *Beyond the Silence: My Life, the World and Autism*.
3. For example, in a homograph test (Happé, 1997; Snowling and Frith, 1986) in which pronunciation of target words depended on their meaning within sentential context (e.g. 'In her eye there was a big *tear*' vs 'In her dress there was a big *tear*'), able autistic subjects tended not to process information for context-dependent meaning. Jolliffe and Baron-Cohen's (1999, 2000) research of linguistic processing by high-functioning adults with autism and Asperger syndrome supported the weakness of central coherence theory. In addition to replicating Happé's (1997) homograph test results, these researchers found that their subjects were significantly impaired in a coherence

inference task, where a correct inference sentence had to be combined with another sentence in order to form an integrated, coherent propositional whole (e.g. 'George left his bath water running. George cleared up the mess in the bathroom *because*' (the correct inference) – 'the bath had overflowed'; (an incorrect inference) – 'his brother had left it untidy'.)

4. Two of the families were bilingual Mandarin/English. Although the autistic children spoke English fluently, their parents did not. Moreover, the code-switching was pervasive, bringing with it a complex interactional dynamic not present in monolingual families, which led to the decision to concentrate on the 14 monolingual children.
5. This binary distinction between narratives of personal and fictional experience is not expected to be exhaustive and does not capture the whole range of possibilities across this dimension. It was adopted for the scope of the present analysis and was motivated by the notion that a fictional narrative is macrostructurally prepackaged by the modality of its expression.
6. All names have been changed.
7. This narrative falls under the 'fictional experience' type as Clara Schumann is a historical character and, as Adam tells his mother in the course of this interaction, the story was downloaded by Mr Gregory from the Internet.
8. Transcription conventions were based on Atkinson and Heritage (1984). See the Appendix to the Introduction to this issue for a list of the conventions.
9. Interlocutors may display this type of narrative embeddedness using a range of narrative introduction practices. Such practices include displaying (1) thematic *continuity* with prior discourse by continuing a topic, representing the most local relation of the up-coming narrative and prior talk; (2) that the introduction is '*triggered*' (Jefferson, 1978) by an element of *talk*, constituting a relatively local relation, but within higher hierarchical structure (e.g. 'By the way. . .'); and (3) that the narrative interaction is introduced as a '*second story*' (Sacks, 1970, 1992; Ryave, 1978), in response to and thematically continuous with a prior other narrative, which represents the most globally integrated relation with on-going talk;
10. Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983: 67) make an important distinction between a strategy and an algorithm: 'a good strategy is something that works most of the time, whereas an algorithm always works – but only in principle, not in real situations. Strategies are intelligent but risky; algorithms rely on blind, methodological application of rules.' While the children in the study appeared to rely on the stability of introductory formats, they did not do so mechanically or without consideration of their interlocutors' contributions. Thus, their competence was based on a strategy rather than an algorithm.

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