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# Language Socialization and Autism

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## Abstract

In this chapter, I examine the contribution of language socialization to the study of the verbal communication of children with autism. A condition at once cognitive, social, and communicative, autism has been widely studied since the 1940s, when it was first described by Kanner (*Nerv Child* 2: 217–250, 1943). However, no research prior to the contributions of language socialization scholars in the early 2000s had investigated autism from an anthropological perspective. In this chapter, I suggest that language socialization scholars' ethnographic and discourse analytic work has augmented traditional research on autism in two main ways: (1) by discerning dimensions of communicative competence in affected children that were previously undocumented and largely unrecognized and (2) by identifying interactional processes that have a bearing on the manifestation of autistic language. In this manner, language socialization scholars have challenged deficit perspectives, which assume that characteristic features of autistic language are inherently dysfunctional and pathological. Furthermore, they have questioned the assumption that those features are purely symptomatic of the autistic individual's condition. In the chapter, I also consider how the study of autism has generated theoretical insights that deepen our understanding of culture and human sociality.

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## Keywords

Autism • Autistic language • Ethnography • Discourse analysis • Echolalia • Neurodiversity • Pragmatic deficit • Pronoun reversal and avoidance • Language socialization

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## Introduction

Language socialization, as a theoretical perspective and field of study, has contributed remarkable insights to a wide range of research domains, from child language development to science and technology studies, from narratology to psychopathology (Duranti et al. 2012). This chapter examines how language socialization scholars have enriched our view of one of the most common and yet puzzling developmental disorders, autism.

Difficulties in verbal and nonverbal communication as well as in social interaction are among the core features of autism spectrum disorders. As such, autism represents a pertinent domain of inquiry for the language socialization scholar. Undoubtedly, an anthropologically informed perspective, such as language socialization, adds to the more prominent psychological accounts of the disorder. At the same time, deeper understanding of the social foundations of language is gained by looking at a condition in which those foundations are weaker or atypical.

In this chapter, I review the most significant contributions that language socialization scholars have offered to autism research. I suggest that their ethnographic and discourse analytic work has augmented traditional research on autism in two main ways: (1) by discerning dimensions of communicative competence in affected children that were previously undocumented and largely unrecognized and (2) by identifying interactional processes that have a bearing on the manifestation of autistic language. In this manner, language socialization scholars have challenged deficit perspectives, which assume that characteristic features of autistic language are inherently dysfunctional and pathological. Furthermore, they have questioned the assumption that those features are purely symptomatic of the autistic individual's condition.

In order to fully appreciate the contribution of ethnographic and discourse analytic work to the study of autism, in the next section I provide an overview of the main trends of research on communicative impairments in autism spectrum disorders, which, as we shall see, are rooted in psychology and overwhelmingly

employ experimental designs and quantitative analyses. Following the presentation of ethnographic and discourse analytic studies, I consider the insights that they have generated for anthropological theory and their implications for clinical intervention and education. I close the chapter with some suggestions for future investigation, in light of a brief discussion of lacunae and outstanding questions in autism research.

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## Early Developments

### An Overview of Main Trends of Research on Language in Autism

A condition included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) for Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association 2013), autism has been widely studied since the 1940s, when it was first described by Austrian psychiatrist Leo Kanner (1943). In his characterization of the disorder, Kanner considered language deficit as one of its core features. Kanner (1946) identified distinctive characteristics of autistic language, pointing to the prevalence of such phenomena as echolalia, pronominal reversal/avoidance, and literal language in the speech of those affected. For the most part, these linguistic features have been interpreted as epiphenomena, as manifestations of an underlying disorder located within the individual, generally characterized by social withdrawal, egocentrism, and an impairment of abstract thinking.

Building on Kanner's early observations, a large body of studies has aimed to identify the abnormal language features of autism. At first prevalently clinical and observational (e.g., Baltaxe 1977; Baltaxe and Simmons 1977; Rutter 1978; Simmons and Baltaxe 1975) and more recently cross-sectional and experimental in design, these studies have shown that the core and defining linguistic deficits in autism pertain to the domain of pragmatics (e.g., Frith 1989; Tager-Flusberg 1981).

In one of the first studies in autism that extended the scope of the linguistic analysis beyond the grammar of individual sentences to examine discourse, Baltaxe (1977) identified three aspects of autistic deficiencies in pragmatic competence. The first is impairment in the speaker-hearer role relationship, namely, a difficulty in role taking and shifting point of view in dialogue context. Baltaxe considered the prototypical autistic language features of pronoun reversal and avoidance, and formal speech, as indicators of these difficulties. A second aspect of pragmatics involved in autism is impairment in rules of conduct governing a dialogue, namely, a difficulty in understanding conventions that sanction utterances as socially appropriate, which Baltaxe argued sometimes results in autistic individuals being perceived as impolite or rude. The third aspect is impairment in foregrounding and backgrounding of information, that is, a difficulty in differentiating between new and old information in a conversational exchange, which results in the literalness and redundancy of autistic language.

Further delineation of the nature of pragmatic impairment in autism was provided by cross-sectional studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Notably, Landry and Loveland (1988) compared children with autism with two other groups: children with developmental language delay and typically developing children, matched for

nonverbal mental age and mean length of utterance. They found that autistic children were equally responsive to other initiations as the other two groups but mobilized attention-directing devices (i.e., pointing and showing) less frequently than typically developing children and those with developmental language delays. Tager-Flusberg and Anderson (1991) compared the discourse abilities of six children with autism and six children with Down's syndrome matched on age and language level and found that children with autism produced fewer adjacent, contingent, and relevant utterances. Surian et al. (1996) examined the ability to detect utterances that violate key conversational maxims (be informative but not redundant, be truthful, relevant, and polite) in high-functioning children with autism, children with specific language impairment, and normally developing children, matched on linguistic development. They found that children with autism were significantly more impaired in detecting pragmatic violations than the other two groups.

The contribution of studies that have discerned the abnormal language features of autism is of significant value. (Other noteworthy works include Happé 1995; Lee et al. 1994; Prizant and Duchan 1981; and Prizant and Rydell 1984.) While acknowledging their import, language socialization scholars have challenged some of the assumptions that underpinned those studies and have provided additional perspectives, leading to insights that nuance our understanding of language in autism.

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## Major Contributions

Language socialization scholars have brought to autism research both methodological and theoretical novelty. Although clinical studies were often based on extended observations of children with autism, and some psychological studies have been conducted outside of the laboratory, in natural contexts, language socialization scholars have offered an ethnographic perspective on autism. This methodological approach is closely related to language socialization's theoretical emphasis on the cultural domain (Ochs 2002). The assumption of the cultural organization of children's social and communicative practices and the interest in documenting it empirically across contexts and communities compel language socialization researchers to complement the psychological understanding of the social as interpersonal with the anthropological understanding of the social as cultural.

Examining the verbal communication of children with autism in the natural contexts of their everyday lives, language socialization scholars delineate with finer granularity the pragmatic difficulties of children with autism. In doing so, previously unrecognized resourcefulness on the part of affected children is revealed. In addition, in focusing on spontaneously occurring activities in their natural settings, language socialization scholars have contended that those contexts are multi-layered and consequential, that is, they can be structured in many different ways, which may differentially affect the child's participation and communicative performance. In what follows I present exemplary studies to illustrate the twofold scope of language socialization research on communication in autism.

## Toward a Delineation of Communicative Competencies in Children with Autism

Many of the pragmatic deficits related to autism have been considered as resulting from difficulties in perspective taking. An impairment of the capacity to place oneself in another's shoes – or more technically put, to grasp another's mental states – can explain phenomena such as irrelevant utterances, pronoun atypicality, and unintelligible speech. While not denying the importance of perspective taking for social functioning and felicitous communication, Ochs and associates contended that the psychological interpretation of such capacity needed further articulation (Ochs et al. 2004). More specifically, they argued that perspective taking is more fruitfully conceived of as comprising two distinct components, the interpersonal and the sociocultural. In privileging the cognitive dimension of social functioning, psychological studies have offered insight on the interpersonal component. However, perspective taking not only requires an understanding of the other's intentions, beliefs, and feelings but also the ability to take into account culturally organized expectations regarding roles, stances, and behaviors.

As an illustration, Ochs et al. (2004) consider speech acts and argue:

The ability to recognize, interpret, and respond to speech acts involves sociocultural perspective-taking, minimally including an awareness of (1) the sociocultural conventions for performing such acts; (2) the social roles being enacted by the performers; (3) the social activities in which the acts are both embedded and which they help to constitute; (4) the default knowledge states, beliefs, emotions, and intentions conventionally associated with performers of such acts; and (5) the possible, anticipated, and preferred next interactional moves conventionally projected by the performance and performers of these acts. (p. 156)

The twofold articulation of perspective taking allowed Ochs et al. (2004) to delineate a *cline of competence* with respect to social functioning in 16 children with high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome who were part of their ethnographic and discourse analytic study. The authors observed that the children in their study were more successful in achieving sociocultural perspective taking and encountered greater difficulty with interpersonal perspective taking, namely, “with the task of trying to interpret an individual's particular, sometimes idiosyncratic intentions, beliefs, knowledge and feelings” (p. 158). Within the domain of sociocultural perspective taking, the authors further discerned gradations of ability: The children were observed to master conversational turn-taking and sequences in ways that demonstrated fine coordination with the interlocutors and the capacity for sustained attention and attunement to a conversational sequence.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, the communicative abilities of children with autism appeared at the same level as neurotypical individuals. However, only moderate success was attained in recognizing and constructing situational scenarios; and the children were least successful in

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<sup>1</sup>For a detailed study of autistic children's mastery of question-answer sequences, see Kremer-Sadlik (2004).

grasping sociocultural indexes that engaged social roles, identities, institutions, and dispositions (p. 159).

By giving attention to the everyday interactions of children with autism as experienced by those children, Ochs and associates elucidated distinctive patterns of autistic children's practical reasoning and conversational participation (Ochs et al. 2004; Sirota 2004; Solomon 2004; Sterponi 2004). Of special interest is the phenomenon that Ochs and Solomon (2005) defined as *proximal relevance*: when experiencing and participating in a conversation on unfamiliar topics or requiring moment-by-moment recalibrations, the children in their study routinely remained engaged in the interaction by expressing ideas that were "not quite in synch with the focal concern" (p. 158) but were nevertheless connected to the unfolding conversation. Whereas a traditional deficit-oriented perspective would have dismissed those utterances as incoherent, Ochs and Solomon (2005) showed that they achieve proximal coherence in two alternative ways: either they "make the interactional contribution locally relevant to what was just said or what just transpired" (p. 158) (failing, however, to attune to the overarching concern or topic under consideration), or they "shift the focus away from personal states and situations to topically relevant impersonal, objective cultural knowledge" (p. 158). While confirming the children's social and communicative difficulties, Ochs and Solomon's notion of proximal relevance also recognizes intelligibility in the autistic modus operandi.

Other ethnographic and discourse analytic studies have focused on specific areas of language use or prototypical features of autistic language. Through detailed analyses of these language characteristics in spontaneous social interaction, these studies have qualified widespread ideas of generalized impairment in communication and interpersonal relatedness and have complicated the common depiction of autistic language's features as dysfunctional phenomena.

Solomon (2004), for instance, examined the production of narrative discourse in high-functioning children with autism in their everyday life to test the generalizability and ecological validity of laboratory studies, which evidenced severe difficulties with this speech genre and mode of thought in affected individuals (e.g., Loveland et al. 1990; Tager-Flusberg 1995). In contrast to these laboratory-based findings, Solomon observed that children with autism were able to spontaneously launch narratives in conversational interaction and that those sequence opening turns, which Solomon refers to as *narrative introductions*, displayed an orientation to the thematic content of ongoing talk. Her analysis revealed, however, that the affected children's capacity to secure thematic continuity could only extend to immediately prior talk. In addition, the author found that participation in jointly constructed narratives over the course of several propositions and turns was challenging for children with autism, who had difficulties grasping the overarching scope of narrative productions. Thus, while not denying the difficulties that children with autism encounter in everyday narrative discourse, Solomon discerned strength and competence that had remained unidentified within traditional psychological studies.

In similar fashion, Sirota (2010) examined "the lived contexts in which children with autism spectrum disorders actively engage with family members in co-constructed narrative recountings of personal life events and, as such, are

apprenticed into culturally consonant genres of life narrative” (p. 95). Drawing from Foucault’s notion of *technologies of the self* (Foucault 1988), the author demonstrates how in narratives of personal experience, the individual, and the sociohistorical domains coalesce, each articulating the other in ways that situate human subjectivity within a culturally and historically configured social matrix. In this study, Sirota focuses particularly on how issues of normativity, disability, and difference are shaped, understood, and refashioned through joint narratives. These recountings offer children with autism a venue and form of scaffolding for experiencing, apprehending, and expressing themselves and the intricacies of their lifeworlds.

Sterponi and Shankey (2014a) critically reexamined echolalia, one of the defining and most distinctive features of autism spectrum disorders. Broadly described as the repetition of the speech of others, echolalia was traditionally conceived of as an automatic behavior with dubious communicative function. Through the case study of a 6-year-old child with autism, the authors offered a contextually situated look at echoic utterances, elucidating how social interaction organizes autism echolalia and how repetitive speech responds to discernible interactional trajectories. Complementing discourse and acoustic analyses with ethnographic observations, the authors demonstrated that the child was able to mobilize echolalia to mark different stances, through the segmental and suprasegmental modulation of echoes. They thus argued that autism echolalia “cannot be characterized solely in terms of the traditional parameters of accuracy and temporal relationship with respect to the model utterances, but is best captured in its complexity in terms of voicing” (Sterponi and Shankey 2014a, p. 299). In echoing stretches of talk, the child did not simply repeat utterances but also animated voices; and in exploiting the subtleties of voice, the child deployed echoes as a powerful and flexible resource to mark his stances, affiliative or disaffiliative, vis-à-vis his interlocutors. In summary, Sterponi and Shankey’s work debunked the presumed automaticity and randomness of autism echolalia and contributed a novel conceptual framework that illuminates the nuanced interactional work that children with autism can accomplish through echo usage.

## **Toward an Understanding of the Influence of Context on the Communication of Children with Autism**

Electing the laboratory setting as the most favorable environment for conducting research is often motivated by the awareness that contextual features may influence the phenomena under investigation. In contrast, rather than trying to control and restrict the influence of naturalistic contextual factors on the practices and behaviors being studied, language socialization researchers opt to include those factors within the scope of their investigation.

Ochs et al. (2005) reflected on the influence of the cultural context on children’s language development, taking as a case in point children with severe autism. The authors challenged the view that culture solely supports and amplifies the social and

communicative potential of these children and showed how the culturally organized communicative dispositions of Euro-American caregivers, which result in specific language socialization practices, may be unsuccessful with children with severe autism and, indeed, may limit these children's opportunities for social interaction and language development.

Drawing upon Bourdieu's practice theory (Bourdieu 1977), the authors conceived of child-directed communication as *habitus*, that is, as a set of historically rooted, socially organized dispositions that inform beliefs, structure practices, and guide actions. Thus, child-directed communication as *habitus* consists of temporally contingent, socioculturally shaped communicative arrangements, conducts, and beliefs mobilized in interacting with children.

Ochs et al. (2005) discerned features of Euro-American child-directed communicative *habitus* that exacerbated the communicative difficulties of children with severe autism: Face-to-face bodily arrangement, insistence on speech as primary expressive medium for the child, and caregivers' slowed speech articulation and profuse praise proved to hinder the communicative exchanges of the six autistic children who were the subjects of this study. That is, language socialization dispositions and behaviors common among caregivers in mainstream, middle-class Euro-American culture, as well as among clinical workers, proved ineffective, or counter-productive, in interactions with these children.

In addition to demonstrating the impact of *habitus* and its perdurance, Ochs et al. (2005) were also able to document its transformation. Albeit small in scale, a noteworthy modification of the child-directed communicative *habitus* occurred when an Indian woman, Soma Mukhopadhyay, mother of a severely autistic boy, disputed commonly held assumptions about her child's condition and initiated an alternative set of communicative practices attuned to severe autism. Ochs et al. offered a glimpse of how Soma Mukhopadhyay's method<sup>2</sup> positively transformed the communicative experiences of the children and family members with whom she worked.

The influence of contextual characteristics on the communicative behavior of children with autism has also been investigated at a more micro-level, that of conversational sequences. In a study of therapist-child interactions in a center for the treatment of social deficits associated with autism spectrum disorders, Fasulo and Fiore (2007) showed how, in engaging affected children in conversation with the goal of strengthening their communicative skills, the therapists often disregarded fundamental characteristics of everyday conversational exchanges, notably tellability, granularity, and sequential orientation. Furthermore, the therapists often restricted the topic of conversation to already known matters, set the level of detail in the dialogue to a simplified level, and ignored courses of actions launched by the

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<sup>2</sup>In the early 2000s, Soma Mukhopadhyay moved to the USA and formalized her approach into a trademarked method, Rapid Prompting Method (RPM), which elicits responses from children with autism through intensive verbal, auditory, visual and/or tactile prompts. She also founded a nonprofit organization, Helping Autism through Learning and Outreach (HALO), to disseminate her approach (<http://www.halo-soma.org/>).



young patients. As the authors pointed out, what is at stake here is not simply a restraint in deployment of conversational technicalities but rather an underestimation of the child's communicative capacities and a withholding of trust in the interlocutor. Fasulo and Fiore's analysis revealed the children in their study to be highly sensitive to the way the therapists positioned them, displaying frustration, resistance, and withdrawal when they were given limited conversational space to express their agency and capacity.

Based on language socialization theoretical underpinnings and employing discourse analytic methods, Sterponi and Shankey (2014b) delineated the interactional matrix of two distinctive features of autistic speech, pronominal reversal/avoidance, and echolalia, in the communication of the same 6-year-old child with autism described earlier in this section. The authors demonstrated that those two linguistic phenomena were not only frequent but also orderly, that is, they occurred in specific interactional circumstances.

The use of proper names in third person constructions, for referring to self or the interlocutor – which traditional autism research labels as pronoun avoidance and interprets as atypical – often occurred in sequential contexts in which the adult interlocutor had him/herself been using such personal reference forms and constructions, as part of the baby talk register. Thus, the child's atypical reference forms were often contextually sensitive in that they aligned to corresponding forms found in the talk of his parents. In simplifying their speech addressed to autistic children, well-meaning interlocutors can unwittingly constrain the children to use simplified forms themselves.

Echolalia as well was shown to respond to discernible interactional trajectories. More specifically, different kinds of repetition were systematically produced within different interactional contexts. Sterponi and Shankey (2014b) highlighted that within these contexts, the repetitive speech was not simply context shaped but also context-transformative as echolalia was mobilized to divert, redirect, and negotiate courses of action set up by the adult interlocutor.

In summary, studies informed by language socialization have complicated traditional perspectives on the verbal communication of children with autism by discerning contextual factors that have an impact on these children's speech production and participation in interaction. Encoded in cultural dispositions and shaping turn design, these factors can exert a facilitating influence<sup>3</sup> on the child's communication but can also restrict his contribution to form and content that do not reflect the child's communicative potential. At the same time, language socialization scholars have shown that cultural dispositions are not static but open to modifications, and conversational turns and trajectories can be diverted or redirected. In this way, the

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<sup>3</sup>Description of facilitating factors can be found in Solomon (2004), who identified adaptive conversational strategies, devised by the parents to foster autistic children's participation in everyday narrative discourse (see also Kremer-Sadlik 2004; Ochs et al. 2004; Sterponi and Fasulo 2010).

structuring impact of linguistic habitus and the transformative role of individual agency are illuminated in equal measure.

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## **Work in Progress: Implications for Education, Clinical Intervention, and Anthropological Theory**

In documenting capacity and resourcefulness in individuals with autism, and in identifying complex influences of cultural dispositions and interactional circumstances, language socialization researchers' understanding of autism has an affinity with claims and aspirations of neurodiversity scholars and advocates. Paralleling terms like *biodiversity* and *cultural diversity*, which are considered as valuable societal pursuits, neurodiversity promotes the recognition of different forms of brain wiring, which manifest in different ways of perceiving the world and others, none necessarily defective or inferior (Brownlow and O'Dell 2013; Siberman 2015; Walker 2012).

Already in a 2001 publication, Ochs and associates petitioned to regard the autistic ways of "thinking, feeling, and acting in the world outside the parameters of ordinary expectations" as enriching human sensibility (Ochs et al. 2001, p. 416. See also Ochs and Solomon 2010). In the same article, the authors endorsed inclusion as educational practice, arguing that "giving autism greater dialogic space in the school curriculum may enhance the perspective-taking skills and nurture the creative potentialities of all children" (p. 416). Current efforts of language socialization scholars are also oriented toward crediting the value of alternative therapeutic approaches, which are more expansive in their appreciation of sensory modalities as means of communication and self-expression (Solomon 2015; Sterponi and de Kirby 2016; Yu 2016).

For language socialization scholars, investigating autism does not represent a diversion from the fundamentally anthropological scope of their research program. As Ochs et al. (2004) have contended and compellingly demonstrated, the study of autism enhances "theories of society and culture, in that both the struggles and the successes of those diagnosed with autism make evident what is most essential to participation in human society" (p. 172).

Autistic individuals' predilection for predictable environments and unvarying courses of action, and their propensity to organize information into categorical structures, and activities into systems of rules and procedures, corroborate social and anthropological theories that anchor societies and cultures to stable orders of norms and scripts. The difficulties of people with autism in navigating social situations that are not univocally and exhaustively codified, conversely, substantiate theoretical perspectives that place a premium on individuals' capacity to respond to indeterminacy and to improvise, affirming that individual agency plays a constitutive role in societal order as well as societal change.

Theoretical insight of great significance has also resulted from the study of how children with autism engage with language. In the perseverative speech of a child with autism, filled with repetitions of precise time references and onomatopoeic

words, Ochs (2012) highlighted the transportative power of language, that is, the capacity of language to become “an experience in itself” (p. 149). In so doing, Ochs (2012) brought the phenomenological potential of language to the forefront. The traditional focus on the symbolic capacity of language – i.e., of language as arbitrary sign system, standing apart from reality and experience, and functioning as representational apparatus – has engendered obliteration of the fact that “utterances, are themselves *modes of experiencing the world*” (p. 142). The way children with autism sometimes relate to and mobilize speech makes the phenomenological potential of language particularly conspicuous, which has afforded Ochs the basis and inspiration for layering the anthropological theorization of language (see also Sterponi et al. 2015).

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## Problems and Difficulties

The longitudinal scope of language socialization research – which has deepened our understanding of processes of cultural transmission and transformation, reproduction and change (Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002) – has still to enrich the autism research program. In their review essay on language socialization, Kulick and Schieffelin (2004) remind us that reproduction can’t be assumed and that the task of the language socialization scholar is to “document not only how and when practices are acquired, but also how and when they are acquired differently than what was intended, or not acquired at all” (p. 352). The authors contend that an investment in long-term ethnography is key to this assignment.

Intense emotions often pervade the vicissitudes that result from obtaining an autism diagnosis. An autism diagnosis also sets in motion a complex bureaucratic process related to eligibility for services and accommodations (Angell and Solomon 2014). Unarguably, autism refashions habits, beliefs, and life trajectories not only of those who are given an autism diagnosis but also their family members. These aspects may render the task of close and long-term ethnographic inquiry particularly difficult. Yet these very aspects make the ethnographic inquiry all the more important.

Precisely because it is a domain of uncertain intelligibility, autism can further illuminate how culturally specific forms of subjectivity come into being. Language socialization, as a theoretical and methodological approach, has the capacity to provide sensitive understanding of the complex interrelationship between the subjective and the social.

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## Future Directions

In endeavoring to make a phenomenon previously strictly confined within the biomedical paradigm the object of their investigation, language socialization scholars have promoted a view of autism that is germane to anthropology, human development, and social theory. In other words, in moving away from autism as

developmental psychopathology toward seeing it as a “human, social, and cultural phenomenon” (Grinker 2010, p. 172), language socialization scholars have delineated a program for interdisciplinary autism research. However, such a program has yet to be developed to a significant extent. For instance, it would be fruitful to illuminate the complexity of topics such as subjectivity and intersubjectivity in autism by merging the understandings of developmental psychologists with those of social theorists and anthropologists. This interdisciplinary enterprise would likely necessitate devising mixed-method studies, where the ethnographic and in-depth qualitative approach of the language socialization scholar is combined with the quantitative breadth of the psychologist and the historical and epistemological scope of the social theorist.

As a human, social, and cultural phenomenon, autism is also rapidly changing. In the past two decades, no other mental disorder has received as much attention, in the popular media and scientific domain, as autism. The Internet and emerging practices of electronic communication have both propelled and witnessed profound transformations of discourses around autism (e.g., Grinker 2010) as well as the development of self-advocacy movements (e.g., Bagatell 2010). Documenting the birth and life span of autism and neurodiversity communities represents an important enterprise for the language socialization scholar, arguably one with significant theoretical and methodological potential.

In their article “Autism and the Social World,” Ochs et al. (2004) suggested that “autism is the last frontier of anthropology” (p. 172). The anthropological commitment to apprehend the other is under pressure when the other is an individual with autism; as Ochs et al. ask, “how can we begin to understand the social logics of persons with autism from an emic perspective if a disruption in ‘social logic’ is positioned precisely at the heart of this condition, as it has been conceptualized from the etic perspective?” (p. 172). The challenge of autism for anthropology is perhaps insurmountable. However, by illuminating the lifeworlds of individual with autism, their ways of being, thinking, and relating with themselves and others, language socialization scholars have undoubtedly expanded the horizon of autism research and deepened our understanding of human sociality.

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## Cross-References

- ▶ [Language Socialization: An Historical Overview](#)
- ▶ [Pragmatic Socialization](#)
- ▶ [Signed Language Socialization in Deaf Communities](#)

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