

Proto-role encoding in a narrative production task: A comparison of autistic and neurotypical children

(Marta Sánchez, University of the Basque Country)

Empirical evidence suggests that agents and patients constitute core knowledge categories and that these event roles are decomposed into semantic entailments. Among the proto-role entailments proposed by Dowty (1991) to characterize the agent (causation, volition, sentience, movement), volition has been empirically shown to be especially salient (Rissman & Lupyan, 2022; Woodward, 1998). Previous research has focused on neurotypical individuals, with no studies investigating how these categories are represented in autism, where language trajectories may diverge from typical patterns. In the present study, we compared the production of agents and patients between autistic and neurotypical children in a storytelling task, with a particular focus on the role of specific proto-agent entailments. Results revealed that neurotypical children produced more agents than autistic children, a difference driven by the entailments of volition and movement. When describing the same events, autistic children opted for verbs that did not denote intentionality in their participants (e.g., *the boy saw the frog*), whereas neurotypical children preferred verbs that did (e.g., *the boy looked at the frog*). Autistic children also produced fewer agents involving movement than their neurotypical peers, particularly in goal-directed actions (e.g., *the dog jumped to catch the frog*). These findings indicate that autistic and neurotypical children differ in the salience of agent entailments, revealing that autistic children place less emphasis on the intentional aspects of event participants than their neurotypical peers.