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Communicative Problems in Autism

Echolalia

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KANNER'S EARLY OBSERVATIONS

In his first publication describing characteristics of the autistic syndrome, Leo Kanner (1943) noted that "the children's inability to relate themselves in the ordinary way to people and situations" (p. 33) and an obsessive insistence on sameness were the most prominent features of the syndrome. Yet, as one reads Kanner's early detailed clinical descriptions, it becomes evident that his great fascination and interest in his clients was due, to a large extent, to their specific patterns of speech and language behavior. In his second published article on autism, Kanner (1946) stated that "among numerous other features, the peculiarities of language present an important and promising basis for investigation" (p. 45).

In this chapter, Kanner's early observations will provide the starting point for examining and reevaluating our understanding of echolalia in autism. Since Kanner's observations, considerable new knowledge has accumulated. This new knowledge, which reflects contributions from a number of academic disciplines, will be reviewed critically in discussions of a number of pertinent topics. The classification of echolalic behaviors on the basis of their functional properties will be discussed in relation to matters of definition and intervention. This perspective will also provide a means to reexamine the extent to which autistic echolalia differs from other types of echolalia and from speech repetition, as, for example, observed in the context of normal language acquisition. Differences between more rote and automatic versus more functional

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forms of echoes will be discussed in reference to neurolinguistic considerations. Finally, echolalia will be reappraised from a broader developmental and biological perspective in an attempt to explain autistic echolalia in the context of the developmental and, particularly, the cognitive discrepancies associated with the syndrome.

Kanner's attention to speech and language symptomatology was dominated by his interest in echolalic behaviors, defined briefly as the rote and literal repetition of the speech of others. Kanner's (1943, 1946) examples of echolalic behavior in autism demonstrate that such utterances took many forms, occurred across many situations, and were used for a variety of purposes. His first use of the term "echolalia" appeared in a description of an affirmative response by his first case, Donald T.: "Don expressed his agreement by repeating the questions literally, echolalia-like" (p. 5) (Kanner, 1943). Later in the same article, Kanner distinguished between utterances repeated immediately, as in the example above, and utterances repeated at a later time, for which he coined the term *delayed echolalia*. Kanner noted that the utterances of others "are sometimes echoed immediately, but they are just as often 'stored' by the child and uttered at a later date. One may, if one wished, speak of *delayed echolalia*" (p. 35). Currently, this distinction between delayed and immediate echolalia is acknowledged and discussed frequently in the literature on autism (Schuler, 1976; Fay & Schuler, 1980; Prizant, 1983; Schuler, 1979). The essential similarity between immediate and delayed echolalia is that whole utterances, or parts of utterances, are repeated verbatim; however, differences in memory processing possibly underlie these two types of echolalia (Fay & Schuler, 1980).

In citing the occurrence of immediate echolalia, Kanner (1943) wrote "her [Case 11] reactions to questions—after several repetitions—was an echolalia-type reproduction of the whole question or, if it was too lengthy, of the end portion" (p. 31). Kanner (1943) added that "affirmation is indicated by literal repetition of a question" (p. 35). Although many researchers have come to regard immediate echolalia as a result of an inability to comprehend language (Fay, 1969; Shapiro, 1977), Kanner emphasized that such behavior reflects a more general profile of obsessive and repetitious behavior in autism, alluding to cognitive differences.

Kanner's (1943, 1946) discussions and examples of delayed echolalia produced by his clients comprise his most detailed and enthusiastic account of language behavior in autism. He seemed to imply that delayed echolalia provides a window through which one can observe how individuals with autism process information, organize their experiences, conceive of language, and in some cases, attempt to participate in social exchanges.

Kanner's observations on echolalic patterns included the use of "metaphorical language," or language with private meanings, and pronominal reversal.

in which "personal pronouns are repeated just as heard, with no change to suit the altered situation" (p. 35) (1943). Pronominal reversal was thus viewed by Kanner as an artifact of delayed echolalia.

Kanner (1943) first used the term "verbal rituals" to describe how Donald T. [Case 1] produced utterances such as "say, 'eat it or I won't give you tomatoes, but if you don't eat it, I will give you tomatoes'" (p. 4). Kanner stated that this utterance "had obviously been said to him [Donald T.] often" (p. 4). In highlighting pronominal problems, which he later referred to as pronominal reversal, Kanner gave the following examples from Donald T.: "When he wanted his mother to pull his shoe off, he said: 'Pull off your shoe.' When he wanted a bath, he said: 'Do you want a bath?'" (p. 4).

Other examples of delayed echolalia given by Kanner demonstrate the diversity in meaning and use of such "memorized" utterances. Kanner spoke of utterances that "were clearly connected with actions," such as one child who sang "cutting paper" while he cut paper, and stated "the engine is flying" while he "ran around the room holding it up high" (p. 14) (1943). Kanner noted that this same child produced complex utterances that "could not be linked up with immediate situations...[but]...could be definitely traced to previous experiences" (pp. 14-15). Another child, Charles N. [Case 9], produced the utterance "I'll give it to you!" when some blocks were taken away from him. Kanner interpreted this as meaning "you give it to me." Probably the example cited most frequently is that of Paul G. [Case 4], who produced the utterance "don't throw the dog off the balcony," which was "used to check himself" from throwing objects (Kanner, 1946, p. 46). According to Kanner, the child had been scolded by his mother for throwing a toy dog off a hotel balcony and he continued to produce the utterance for many years after when he was tempted to throw an object.

Despite Kanner's varied examples of delayed echolalia, his statements as to their significance reflect inconsistencies and, in some cases, contradictions. For example, in comparing the abilities of his original 11 subjects, Kanner (1943) stated that "as far as the communicative functions of speech are concerned, there is no fundamental difference between the eight speaking and the three mute children" (p. 35) and "in none of the eight 'speaking' children has language over a period of years served to convey meaning to others" (p. 34). Yet in Kanner's examples, some of which are cited above, there is clear evidence of echolalic forms functioning communicatively and being used to convey meaning. (It should be noted that all of Kanner's eight "speaking" children were reported as being echolalic.)

Regarding delayed echolalia, this apparent contradiction is softened in Kanner's 1946 discussion of the concept of metaphorical language in which "the autistic child has his own private, original, individualized references" (p. 47) resulting in language forms that may not be communicative because the

