Conversation with an Asperger’s Syndrome individual: Evaluation of dialectic use of particles.

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Introduction

Much of our social life consists of talk organised as conversation through which we expose our feelings and character (Levine, Lenvitch, and Safer, 2009; Southwell–Rend Yzer, 2009). However, natural conversations can develop in unpredictable manners and pose problems to individuals who may be unaware of cultural, linguistic or social conventions of verbal interaction. Our social existence is inextricably linked with our interpersonal skills, thus making the possession of a good conversation skill an essential ingredient for building social relationships. People also have various needs and motives for communicating, and can choose particular communication behaviours to fulfil these needs (Westmyre, DiCioccio, and Rubin, 1998). The aim of this study was to find out how the choice of particles influences the nature and outcome of an interaction between an Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) and non-AS individuals. Firstly, this paper will discuss the role of particles (joshi) in sentence construction. It will then present the research methodology and go on to discuss the results obtained from the data analysis. Finally, the paper will summarise the implications of the findings and make suggestions for future research.

Particles

Particles are prepositions or adverbs that follow phrasal verbs (Hewings, 2005). Particles, called joshi in Japanese language, indicate the relationship of a word to the rest of the sentence, and when used correctly, they place speech in context. In addition, particles are essential for fluent and accurate production because they define grammatical functions, and structural particles serve as guideposts to utterances in the Japanese language (Butler, 2002). Grammatical particles mark grammatical relations of noun phrases while sentence or interactional particles such as yo, ne, and na indicate the affective stance towards including the interlocutor in confirming the validity of a statement. Although many Japanese particles fill the role of prepositions in English, they differ from prepositions in many ways and some do not translate easily (Table1).

Similar to some languages such as Korean, Mongolian and Tibeto-Burman, Japanese particles often follow the word they mark, thus making them postpositional. Even in unrelated languages such as English, sentence-final particles do occur. For example, “nice day, huh” in which “huh” serves the same function as ne. According to Seely (2004), English writers have been placing prepositions at the end of sentences for centuries. Sentence-final particles express the speaker’s emotions, doubt, emphasis, caution, hesitation, wonder, admiration and so on. One characteristic feature of sentence-final particles is the ability to distinguish between male and female speech (Abe, 2011).
### Table 1: Particles and their applications.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Particle</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Situation used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ka: Nihon-jin desu ka</td>
<td>Are you Japanese?</td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Making a sentence into a question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na: Sonna koto wo suru na</td>
<td>Don’t do such a thing!</td>
<td>Prohibition</td>
<td>Opinion or suggestion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jyan (Ya*): Kore furui jyan</td>
<td>This is old</td>
<td>Confirmation or agreement</td>
<td>Informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ze (Ya*): Nomi ni ikou ze</td>
<td>Let’s go for a drink</td>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td>Men in casual conversation among colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un: Shiru mase(u)n</td>
<td>I don’t know</td>
<td>Denial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wa: Watashi ga suru wa</td>
<td>I’ll do it</td>
<td>Emphasis</td>
<td>By women only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (Nen*): Onaka ga itai no</td>
<td>I have stomachache</td>
<td>Explanation, emotive emphasis</td>
<td>Women and children informally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (Ka*): Onaka ga itai no (rising tone)</td>
<td>Do you have stomachache?</td>
<td>Question</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desyo (Yaro*): Kawaii desyo</td>
<td>Isn’t it cute?</td>
<td>Compliment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sa: Aso sa</td>
<td>Hey</td>
<td>Emphasis, not command</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yo (De*, Wa*): Okoranaide yo</td>
<td>Don’t get so angry at me!</td>
<td>Assertion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ne (Na*): Ii tenki desune</td>
<td>It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?</td>
<td>Seeking confirmation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mono: Ikite nda mono</td>
<td>Because I want to go</td>
<td>Emotive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ke: Sonna koto atta kke</td>
<td>Has it happened?</td>
<td>Question</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the particles in the appendix were contributed by the first author and the rest retrieved on the 11/03/2009 from http://llarc.mit.edu/kansai/3.BasicGrammar/1b.SentenceEnding/2.Grammar/1G.html

* kinki origin

The Japanese language has a dominant subject-object-verb order but remains flexible because of postposed particles (Hakuta, 1982). Hakuta suggests that children learning Japanese show neither a strong reliance on word order nor on particles alone. Rather, they tend to focus on the position of the particle in a sentence. In language learning therefore, choosing the appropriate particle can be quite perplexing. The second author, who is a Japanese language learner, finds **joshi** to be the most difficult and confusing aspect of the language. The apparent difficulties in using particles may not be peculiar to the Japanese language, because, according to O’Dowd (1998), English learners also have problems in learning and using particles correctly.

There are several particles in the Japanese language, but this study will be concerned with a few such as **syu-joshi**; sentence-final particle, **kaku-joshi**; a case particle which describes the relative position of its preceding noun to the verb (-ga, -wo -de –e), **huku-joshi**; non-sentence-initial particle (wa), and setsuzoku –joshi; conjunctive particle. Of particular interest is the **ne** particle which is often used to seek confirmation, attention, and agreement or share...
information. It is usually the first joshi children learn from about the age of two, but Watamaki (1997) claims that, children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) do not use the ne particle in speech. In his study of two groups of children, one with ASD and mental retardation, the other with mental retardation only, only the group of mentally retarded children used the ne particle.

Taking account of the brief review above, it is worth pointing out that this study is hampered by the authors’ inability to access any published work in English on the use of joshi. However, the assumptions we would make for this study is that AS individuals employ unconventional particles in sentence construction.

Research Question

How do Asperger’s Syndrome individuals use particles in sentence construction?

Method

The participant was assessed for choice of particles employed in a dialogue with a non-AS adult conversation partner.

Participant

The treatment is an eleven-year old primary school female diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome and spelling disorders with Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children-Ⅲ (WISC -Ⅲ) test scores of VIQ = 118, PIQ = 120, and FIQ = 121. Additional language and speech characteristics shown by the AS individual include: slightly delayed language development, formal language use, peculiar voice characteristics, partially impaired comprehension, excessive verbosity and incoherence. The control is a typically developing child of similar sex and age with no learning disabilities. The adult interlocutor study is graduate student of a local university in Kyoto, Japan. All the participants are of Japanese nationality.

Measures:

The study was piloted with six children; three in the treatment group and three in the control group. Each had a conversation lasting between 112 and 120 minutes with non-AS adult interlocutors. This was a free conversation on the children’s favourite topics, designed to assess comprehension, verbosity, cohesion, idiosyncrasy, repetition, and voice characteristics. Each conversation was recorded, transcribed and analysed. The speech was classified into eleven categories including four classes of postpositional particles (joshi) - syu-joshi, kaku-joshi, huku-joshi, setsuzoku-joshi, and noun/ pronoun, auxiliary verb, verb, adjective, adverb, conjunction, and exclamation. Data obtained from this prompted further investigation, thus making the eleven-year old the sole treatment of this study.

Results and Discussion

Figure 1 shows the categories of particles and parts of speech used by both the treatment and control. The particles include: Type 1 syu-joshi, Type 2 kaku-joshi, Type 3 huku-joshi, and Type 4 setsuzoku-joshi.

Figure 1 show significant use of the syu-joshi particle by the AS individual. Syu-joshi is often used to express doubt or belief, or to indicate attentiveness. The scope of this study does not extend to grammaticality of sentence-final particles; rather, the discussion will focus on discourse construction instead of sentence construction. Her speech is seemingly formal as a result of appropriate use of syu-joshi. The figure also indicates that she surpassed the control in the use of all joshi except
Figure 1: Sentence-ending particles and parts of speech used by both the treatment and control.

Figure 2: Postpositional particles used by the treatment and control. *kinki origin

*kaku-joshi*, which might explain why her command of the standard forms of the language is better than the control. Interestingly, her utterances are above her mental age, comparable to those of a twenty-year old. No plausible explanation can be offered for this observation; however, Figure 2 reveals a more detailed analysis of her conversation with the interlocutor.

The particles were de-categorised for further analysis, and out of a total of nineteen particles, the treatment used fourteen while the control used thirteen in their conversations. It might appear rather unusual for the AS individual who is of Kinki descent to use *sa* and *jyan*. These particles are used informally in the Kanto district, and users in the Kinki area could be perceived as snobs. It is noticeable that the control did not use these two particles. Particles *no, yo, ne* which the treatment
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Conclusion

We have highlighted the formal nature of the language used in a conversation between an AS individual and non-AS interlocutor. The seemingly unfriendly attitude of the AS individual towards the conversation partner might presumably be linked to the choice of particles, which has not only linguistic but interpersonal dimensions. One of the limitations of this study is the lack of English or other languages' equivalent of the Japanese *joshi* and may threaten the reliability of the study. Even with its restrictive applicability, taking account of other limitations, similar studies can be replicated even in other languages with a larger sample size to find out how children with Asperger’s Syndrome use particles or their equivalents in communication, and how these particles influence the social context.

Some of the limitations of this study include the absence of previous research on related topic in order to situate the legitimacy of the theoretical assumptions made and the method used in this study. This study also fails to differentiate between particles that are simply grammatical markers and those that are interactional particles and clearly delineating how the use of these makes certain utterances socially acceptable or not. This study could also benefit from empirical justification of the discussion of standard Japanese particles as opposed to Kinki particles to avoid risking stereotyping.

References


