

Language Disorder of the Child with Autism in The Gentle Life's Youtube Channel

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A B S T R A C T

This study examines language disorder in a five-year-old child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), named Mikko, as observed in natural communication settings on The Gentle Life YouTube channel. Language is an essential part of everyday communication; however, children with ASD often experience difficulties in both understanding and producing language. While previous studies have widely explored language disorders in autism, most have been conducted in clinical contexts, providing limited insight into how these difficulties appear in real-life interactions. This study aims to identify the types of language disorder and analyse how they are expressed in natural communication using the perspective of Weak Central Coherence Theory. A qualitative case study design is employed, focusing on naturally occurring utterances produced by the participant. The findings reveal that Mikko demonstrates various language disorder features, with pragmatic impairment as the most dominant, followed by echolalia, syntactic irregularities, and limited vocabulary development. These patterns indicate that her communication is strongly influenced by a detail-focused cognitive processing style, which affects her ability to produce contextually appropriate and meaningful language.

Keywords: *Autism Spectrum Disorder, Language Disorder, Echolalia, Pragmatic Pmpairment, Weak Central Coherence*

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INTRODUCTION

Language is a fundamental component of human communication, enabling individuals to express ideas, share emotions, and engage in social interaction. In the context of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), however, communication development often differs significantly from typical patterns. Children with ASD commonly experience challenges not only in producing language but also in understanding meaning, context, and social cues. These difficulties highlight that language impairment in autism is not solely a linguistic issue, but also involves cognitive and social dimensions of communication.

Language plays a fundamental role in human communication as it enables individuals to express ideas, convey emotions, and participate in social interaction. Individuals with autism often demonstrate enhanced attention to detail, which can influence how they process linguistic information and interpret meaning in communication (Motttron et al., 2006). However, children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often experience significant difficulties in both understanding and producing language. These difficulties extend beyond structural aspects of language and include challenges in interpreting meaning, context, and social cues. According to Lord et al. (2018), language impairments in children with ASD are closely related to deficits in social communication and cognitive processing. Similarly, Baron-Cohen (2017) explains that individuals with ASD tend to process information differently, which affects their ability to integrate linguistic input into meaningful communication. Therefore, language disorder in ASD reflects not only linguistic limitations

but also underlying cognitive differences that influence how communication is constructed and understood.

Children with ASD commonly exhibit a range of distinctive language disorder features. These include echolalia, where utterances are repeated without modification; prosodic abnormalities, such as flat or atypical intonation; and pragmatic language impairment, which involves difficulty in using language appropriately in social contexts. In addition, repetitive or stereotyped speech patterns are frequently observed, along with literal interpretation of language, where figurative meanings are often misunderstood. Structural difficulties are also evident in the form of syntactic irregularities and limited vocabulary development, which result in incomplete or simplified utterances. As stated by Vogindroukas et al. (2022), these linguistic characteristics reflect impairments across multiple domains of language, including phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, making them essential analytical categories in examining language disorder in ASD.

This study focuses on a child named Mikko, who is currently five years old and was diagnosed with ASD at the age of two. Mikko was initially identified as a non-verbal child with sensory processing disorder, which significantly affected her ability to respond to and produce language. Over time, she has begun to develop limited verbal abilities, although her speech remains inconsistent and not yet fully structured. The gradual emergence of her language production provides an opportunity to observe how language disorder manifests and evolves in natural communication settings. The data are obtained from The Gentle Life YouTube channel, which documents her daily interactions in real-life contexts.

Weak Central Coherence Theory explains that individuals with ASD tend to focus on detailed information rather than integrating information into a global context. According to Frith (1989) and Happé (1999), this cognitive style leads to difficulties in processing meaning holistically, which affects language comprehension and production. As a result, children with ASD may exhibit repetitive speech, literal interpretation, and difficulty in understanding contextual meaning. This theory is particularly relevant to the present study because it provides a cognitive explanation for the linguistic patterns observed in Mikko's speech, especially in relation to her tendency to focus on isolated linguistic elements rather than constructing coherent and contextually appropriate utterances.

Previous studies have highlighted the complexity of language disorder in individuals with ASD. Vogindroukas et al. (2022) found that language impairments in ASD occur across multiple linguistic domains, including pragmatics, syntax, and prosody. Similarly, Hanafiah et al. (2020) emphasised that communication difficulties in ASD are strongly associated with limitations in social interaction and contextual understanding. Furthermore, Moraleda-Sepúlveda et al. (2025) demonstrated that intensive and structured linguistic intervention can significantly improve communication abilities in children with ASD. However, most previous research has been conducted in clinical or experimental settings, which limits the understanding of how language disorder appears in natural environments. Therefore, this study aims to analyse language disorder using authentic, real-life data from everyday interactions.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design to investigate the characteristics of language disorder in a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). A qualitative approach is chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of language use in natural contexts, focusing on meaning, patterns, and individual behaviour rather than numerical measurement. The case study design is particularly appropriate as it provides a detailed and holistic understanding of a single participant's communicative abilities, capturing the complexity of language disorder as it occurs in real-life interactions.

Participant

The participant in this study is a child diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, referred to as Mikko. The participant was selected based on the presence of noticeable language and communication difficulties, particularly in everyday social interactions.

Data Source

The data were obtained from a series of naturalistic video recordings documenting the participant's daily communication. A total of 24 video recordings were analysed, with each video having a duration of approximately 10–12 minutes, resulting in a total observation time of around 240–288 minutes. The videos capture spontaneous interactions between the participant and familiar communication partners, such as family members, in natural settings.

Data Selection Criteria

The selection of video data was based on the following criteria: (1) The videos must include clear verbal communication produced by the participant. (2) The interactions should occur in natural, everyday contexts rather than structured or clinical settings. (3) The recordings must contain instances of communicative exchange (e.g., responses, initiations, or reactions). (4) The audio and visual quality should be sufficient to allow accurate transcription and analysis. (5) The videos were grouped based on the participant's age range, specifically from 3 to 5 years old, to observe the development and variation of language use across different stages within early childhood. These criteria ensure that the data reflect authentic language use and provide reliable material for identifying language disorder features.

Data Collection Technique

The data were collected through documentation, specifically by gathering and reviewing pre-existing video recordings. The researcher observed the videos repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the participant's communication patterns before conducting detailed analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using qualitative descriptive analysis. The analysis involved several steps: (1) Transcription: All verbal utterances produced by the participant were transcribed. (2) Identification: Instances of language disorder features (e.g., echolalia, pragmatic impairment, prosodic abnormalities) were identified. (3) Classification: The identified features were categorized based on established linguistic frameworks. (4) Interpretation: The findings were interpreted in relation to relevant theories, particularly Weak Central Coherence Theory, to explain the underlying cognitive processes influencing language use. This systematic approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the participant's language characteristics and how they manifest in natural communication.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of language disorder features observed in Mikko's communication, followed by their interpretation using Weak Central Coherence Theory. The analysis is organised into several categories of language disorder, including echolalia, prosodic abnormalities, pragmatic language impairment, repetitive or stereotyped speech, literal interpretation, syntactic irregularities, and limited vocabulary development. These findings answer the research questions regarding the types of language disorder experienced by Mikko and how these features are expressed in her daily communication.

Echolalia

Echolalia is one of the most frequently observed language disorder features in Mikko's speech. According to Prizant & Rydell (1984), echolalia refers to the repetition of previously

heard utterances, which may serve communicative or processing functions. Several instances were identified, such as when Mikko repeated her mother's utterances:

"Peppa, peppa!"

"Thank you." (repeated continuously)

These examples indicate immediate echolalia, where Mikko reproduces linguistic input without modification. Although this repetition may appear non-functional, it reflects her attempt to process and internalise language input. From the perspective of Weak Central Coherence, this behaviour demonstrates a focus on isolated linguistic units rather than understanding the overall communicative intent. Mikko tends to prioritise familiar sound patterns, which limits her ability to produce spontaneous and contextually appropriate responses.

In addition, this pattern shows that Mikko's echolalic speech is stimulus-bound, meaning it is highly dependent on immediate auditory input. Her repetitions also indicate limited generative language ability, as she relies more on imitation than on producing novel utterances. This suggests that echolalia functions as a transitional strategy in her language development rather than as intentional communication.

Prosodic Abnormalities

Prosodic abnormalities in Mikko's speech are evident in her use of flat or atypical intonation. Diehl & Paul (2013) explain that children with autism often exhibit unusual pitch, stress, and rhythm patterns. One example is:

"I did it." (produced with flat intonation while clapping)

Despite expressing success, Mikko's speech lacks emotional variation. This suggests difficulty in integrating emotional meaning with speech melody. Within the framework of Weak Central Coherence, this reflects impaired global processing, where emotional and linguistic elements are not combined into a coherent whole. As a result, her speech sounds monotonous and less socially expressive. Furthermore, Mikko's prosodic pattern can be characterised by monotonic delivery and reduced affective expression, which make her speech less responsive to social-emotional context. This limitation may affect how others interpret her intentions, as prosody plays a crucial role in signalling meaning beyond words.

Pragmatic Language Impairment

Pragmatic impairment refers to difficulty in using language appropriately in social contexts (Bishop, 1997). Mikko demonstrates several pragmatic difficulties, such as:

Not responding to greetings

Ignoring questions (e.g., "Where are you going?")

Responding irrelevantly (e.g., answering "Pizza!")

These examples indicate challenges in understanding conversational context and social expectations. From a Weak Central Coherence perspective, Mikko processes language in isolation rather than integrating contextual cues, resulting in inappropriate or absent responses. This suggests that her communication is not guided by shared social meaning but by limited interpretation of linguistic input. Moreover, Mikko's pragmatic difficulties reflect impaired turn-taking ability and lack of conversational reciprocity, which are essential components of effective communication. Her responses also suggest limited awareness of listener needs, indicating that communication is not yet oriented toward shared understanding.

Repetitive or Stereotyped Speech

Repetitive speech is a core characteristic of autism (Association, 2013). Mikko frequently produces repeated utterances, such as:

“Push, push, push”

“Aaaaa...” (non-contextual vocalisation)

Repeating “Thank you” excessively

These patterns indicate a preference for familiar and predictable linguistic forms. According to Weak Central Coherence Theory, such repetition reflects detail-focused processing, where Mikko concentrates on specific sounds rather than generating varied and flexible expressions. This limits the communicative function of her speech and reinforces repetitive language patterns. Additionally, this repetitive pattern demonstrates perseverative behaviour, where Mikko continues producing the same utterance despite changes in context. It also reflects low communicative flexibility, as she shows difficulty shifting to new expressions or adapting her speech to different situations.

Literal Interpretation of Language

Literal interpretation is another feature observed in Mikko’s responses. According to Happé (1999), individuals with autism often struggle to interpret meaning beyond the literal level. For example:

“What is this?” “Yellow, red, green, white”

Instead of identifying the object, Mikko focuses on describing colours. This indicates that she processes specific details rather than the intended meaning of the question. From the Weak Central Coherence perspective, this reflects difficulty in integrating contextual information to derive global meaning. Her responses remain accurate at the detail level but fail to meet communicative expectations. This behaviour also indicates difficulty in inferencing, particularly in understanding implied meaning or communicative intention. Mikko’s responses are therefore accurate at the descriptive level but fail to fulfil the functional goal of the interaction, highlighting a gap between perception and interpretation.

Syntactic Irregularities

Syntactic irregularities are evident in Mikko’s use of pronouns and sentence structure. Tager-Flusberg (2000) notes that children with autism often produce simplified or grammatically inconsistent utterances. Examples include:

“Are you baking?” (referring to herself)

“You” instead of “Thank you”

“Oh no drip! I drip the water dripping.”

These utterances demonstrate pronoun reversal, incorrect word choice, and incomplete sentence structure. Within the Weak Central Coherence framework, this reflects difficulty in integrating lexical and grammatical information into a coherent structure. Mikko tends to rely on memorised patterns rather than constructing sentences based on contextual rules. In addition, Mikko’s syntactic production reflects inconsistent grammatical control, particularly in the use of pronouns and verb forms. Her utterances suggest reliance on formulaic language patterns, rather than rule-based sentence construction, which limits structural variation in her speech.

Limited Vocabulary Development

Limited vocabulary development is also observed in Mikko’s speech. According to Tager-Flusberg (2000), children with autism often rely on restricted lexical items. Examples include:

“Pizza!” (to indicate location or situation)

“Mom! Picture!”

“A, B, C” (irrelevant response to age question)

These utterances show that Mikko uses a limited set of words to express various meanings, often without clear structure. From a Weak Central Coherence perspective, this reflects her tendency to focus on specific lexical items rather than expanding vocabulary in a flexible and meaningful way. Consequently, her communication remains limited and contextually incomplete. Furthermore, Mikko's vocabulary use shows over-reliance on familiar lexical items, which are applied across different contexts without precise meaning. This indicates restricted semantic development, where word usage does not expand proportionally with communicative needs.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that Mikko exhibits multiple features of language disorder commonly associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder, with pragmatic impairment emerging as the most significant. Pragmatic difficulties are evident in Mikko's inability to maintain coherent conversations and provide contextually appropriate responses. This aligns with the view that individuals with ASD experience challenges in using language for social purposes rather than merely producing speech. Mikko's responses often contain unrelated or loosely connected words, indicating difficulty in organizing thoughts into meaningful communication.

Echolalia, as observed in several examples, reflects Mikko's reliance on repetition as a communication strategy. Rather than generating novel utterances, Mikko tends to imitate input from others. This behaviour may function as a coping mechanism to participate in interaction despite limited linguistic competence. Furthermore, Mikko's repetitive speech and limited vocabulary suggest restricted language development. The frequent recurrence of the same words indicates difficulty in expanding lexical knowledge, which in turn limits expressive ability.

The tendency to interpret language literally also supports the presence of cognitive processing differences. Mikko's inability to understand figurative expressions demonstrates challenges in going beyond surface-level meaning. These findings can be explained through Weak Central Coherence Theory, which suggests that individuals with ASD tend to focus on isolated details rather than integrating information into a coherent whole. Mikko's fragmented responses and difficulty in connecting ideas reflect this cognitive style. Instead of processing language as a meaningful unit, Mikko appears to focus on individual words or phrases.

In addition, prosodic abnormalities further contribute to communication difficulties. Unusual intonation patterns may affect how messages are conveyed and interpreted, making interaction less effective. Overall, the results indicate that Mikko's language disorder is not limited to structural aspects of language but extends to functional and cognitive dimensions. This reinforces the idea that language impairment in ASD is deeply interconnected with underlying cognitive processing differences.

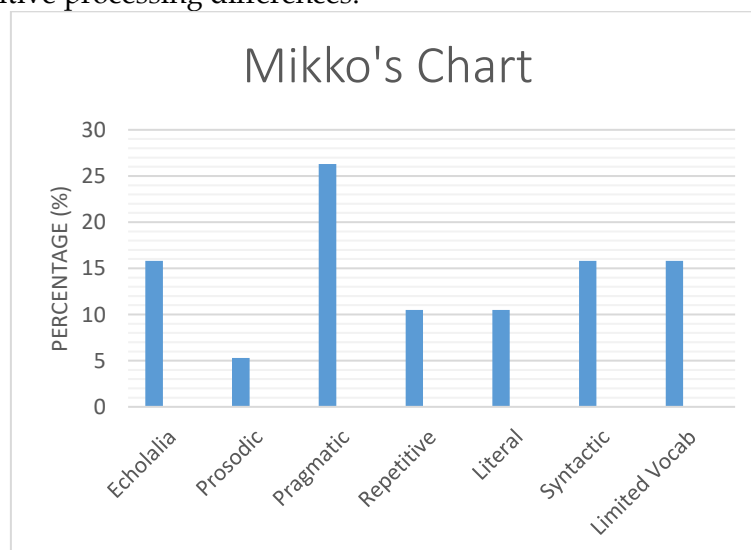


Figure 1. Distribution of Language Disorder Features in Mikko

These frequency patterns also indicate that language disorder features are interconnected rather than independent. For instance, pragmatic impairment often co-occurs with echolalia and repetitive speech, suggesting that difficulties in social communication may influence other aspects of language production. This interrelationship highlights the complexity of language disorder in autism.

Development of Language Disorder by Age

The analysis shows that Mikko's language disorder develops progressively across ages 3 to 5, with different dominant features emerging at each stage. At the age of 3, Mikko's communication is primarily characterised by echolalia and early pragmatic difficulties. She frequently repeats words such as "Peppa" and "Hi," indicating reliance on imitation rather than spontaneous language production. In addition, she often fails to respond appropriately to questions, reflecting early signs of pragmatic language impairment. These patterns suggest that at this stage, her language use is still largely stimulus-bound and lacks communicative intention.

At the age of 4, Mikko's language becomes more varied but also shows an increase in atypical features. Repetitive or stereotyped speech begins to appear more clearly, such as "push, push, push," alongside continued echolalic patterns like repeating "thank you." Furthermore, difficulties in comprehension become more evident, as seen when she misinterprets instructions (e.g., placing the wrong letter). This stage also shows the emergence of prosodic abnormalities, where her speech lacks appropriate emotional intonation. These findings indicate that although her verbal output increases, her ability to integrate meaning and context remains limited.

By the age of 5, Mikko demonstrates slightly improved verbal production but continues to experience significant difficulties in meaning construction and contextual understanding. Literal interpretation becomes more prominent, as shown when she responds with colours instead of identifying objects. Pragmatic impairment also persists, with irrelevant responses such as "Pizza!" when asked about location. In addition, syntactic irregularities and limited vocabulary are still evident, suggesting that her language development remains constrained. From the perspective of Weak Central Coherence Theory, this progression reflects a consistent tendency to focus on isolated details rather than integrating information into meaningful communication.

In addition, the progression observed across ages suggests that language development in children with autism does not always follow a linear pattern. While there is an increase in verbal production, the quality of communication does not necessarily improve at the same rate. This indicates that language development should be evaluated not only based on quantity but also on functional and contextual effectiveness.

Frequency of Language Disorder Features

Based on the quantitative distribution illustrated in the chart, pragmatic language impairment is the most dominant feature, accounting for approximately 26.3% of the total data. This is followed by echolalia, syntactic irregularities, and limited vocabulary development, each contributing around 15.8%. Repetitive or stereotyped speech and literal interpretation each account for approximately 10.5%, while prosodic abnormalities appear least frequently at 5.3%.

These findings indicate that Mikko's primary difficulty lies in the social use of language rather than in speech production alone. The dominance of pragmatic impairment suggests that she struggles to interpret communicative intent, respond appropriately, and maintain interaction. This aligns with the principles of Weak Central Coherence, where individuals tend to process information in fragmented ways, leading to difficulties in understanding context and global meaning.

Language Disorder and Weak Central Coherence

Overall, the findings reveal that Mikko experiences multiple types of language disorder, including echolalia, prosodic abnormalities, pragmatic impairment, repetitive speech, literal interpretation, syntactic irregularities, and limited vocabulary. These findings directly answer the first research question by identifying the dominant linguistic features present in her communication. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that these language disorder features are closely related to the cognitive processing style explained by Weak Central Coherence Theory. Mikko consistently shows a tendency to focus on isolated linguistic elements—such as sounds, words, or specific details—rather than integrating them into meaningful and contextually appropriate communication. This explains why her speech often appears repetitive, literal, and structurally incomplete (Fitrawati & Safitri, 2021; Susanto et al., 2022).

Therefore, the second research question is addressed by showing that Mikko's language disorder is not merely a linguistic issue but is deeply rooted in her cognitive processing style. Weak Central Coherence provides a comprehensive explanation for how her detail-focused processing influences the way she understands, produces, and uses language in daily interactions.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study provide several important implications for both theoretical and practical perspectives. From a theoretical point of view, this study supports the relevance of Weak Central Coherence Theory in explaining language disorder in children with autism spectrum disorder. The consistent appearance of detail-focused processing across different language features reinforces the idea that cognitive style plays a central role in shaping communication patterns. From a practical perspective, the results suggest that intervention strategies should not only focus on improving linguistic structure, but also on enhancing contextual understanding and social communication skills. For example, teaching children to interpret communicative intent, maintain interaction, and respond appropriately in conversation may be more beneficial than focusing solely on vocabulary or grammar.

In addition, the use of naturalistic data in this study highlights the importance of analysing language in real-life contexts. This approach allows researchers and practitioners to better understand how communication difficulties actually occur in everyday interactions, rather than in controlled clinical settings. Therefore, future teaching and therapeutic approaches are encouraged to incorporate more natural communication environments.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research focuses on a single subject, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other children with autism spectrum disorder. Each individual with autism has unique characteristics, and therefore the results of this study may not fully represent the broader population. Second, the data are obtained from YouTube videos, which may not capture all aspects of the child's communication behaviour. Some interactions may be edited or selectively recorded, potentially influencing the completeness of the data.

Third, the study applies a qualitative descriptive approach without incorporating in-depth quantitative measurement. Although percentages are provided, they are limited to frequency distribution and do not fully capture the complexity of language development. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve a larger number of participants, combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, and include more controlled observational settings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of language disorder in autism.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to investigate the characteristics of language disorder in a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through a qualitative case study approach. By analysing

naturalistic communication data, the study focused on identifying key linguistic features that reflect the participant's communicative abilities. The findings reveal that Mikko exhibits several prominent characteristics of language disorder, including echolalia, pragmatic impairment, prosodic abnormalities, repetitive speech, literal interpretation, syntactic irregularities, and limited vocabulary. Among these, pragmatic impairment emerged as the most dominant feature, as reflected in Mikko's difficulty in maintaining coherent and contextually appropriate conversations. Overall, the results indicate that Mikko's language difficulties extend beyond structural aspects of language and involve broader cognitive and communicative challenges. These findings support the view that language disorder in ASD is closely related to differences in cognitive processing, particularly in integrating meaning and context during communication.

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