

STUDYING REPAIR IN ADULT-CHILD INTERACTIONS: LESSONS FROM CONVERSATIONS WITH TYPICALLY DEVELOPING CHILDREN AND HIGH FUNCTIONING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Kerrie Delves and Lesley Stirling
University of Melbourne

The concept of 'repair' in conversation derives from work in Conversation Analysis (CA). However after three decades of research, little attention has focused on repair in non-adult conversation or on the classification and analysis of repair beyond its turn-taking/sequential structure. Work on repair in children's naturalistic conversation has been done by some researchers, but for the most part repair in children's language has been investigated within an experimental paradigm where other-initiated, self-repairs are deliberately elicited from children. Even within work on adult speech, most attention has been focused on the self-other patterns of initiation and implementation of repair and on where repairs occur with respect to the trouble source.

The work to be reported here investigates repair in a corpus of dyadic interactions between a psychologist and 40 children aged 4-7 years, half of whom were typically-developing (TD) and half of whom had been diagnosed with high functioning autism (HFA). The data sessions were recorded as part of an investigation into pretend play abilities, without the intention of being analysed linguistically. In this project the interactions have been transcribed using CA conventions and used as the focus of an examination of differences in repair behaviour by children with HFA compared with TD children. This is potentially of interest given the well documented difficulties experienced by individuals with autism in taking account of the mental, perspective and conversational needs of others.

This paper presents some of the trends in the analysis so far, such as the higher instance of trouble sources (and thus the need to repair) in the conversation of children with HFA as compared to the TD children, and the tendency for children with HFA to require multiple attempts at repair before being successful, whilst the TD children usually achieve successful repair in their first attempt. However, the data give rise to significant questions and issues of a more general nature. In particular, how we understand and define the notion of 'repair' and operationalise identifying and categorising it. This paper aims to examine issues such as the clarity of the distinction between 'conversational' and 'conceptual' repair; whether the nature of adult-child interaction makes identification of repair particularly problematic; and the adequacy of categorisation systems of repair strategies in the analyses of naturalistic data?

Contact: Kerrie Delves, School of languages and linguistics, Arts Centre building, University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC 3010.
Phone: (03) 8344 3608. Email: kdelves@unimelb.edu.au