

## **Referential Marking in High-Functioning Autism**

Autism is a disorder that involves deficits in communication, problems in social interaction and repetitive and stereotyped behavior. Associated language and speech impairments mainly involve pragmatics, while the more rule-based or grammatical aspects of language are less impaired.

Referential marking represents one pragmatic aspect of language by being highly context-dependent and listener-oriented. Marking a referent appropriately requires constant judgements about what is appropriate in the current context. This involves mentalizing abilities in order to be able to assume the state of a referent in the listener's mind to avoid ambiguous references.

Referential marking has been reported to be problematic in Autism, being either more specific than needed (Baltaxe 1977; Arnold et al. 2009), or too ambiguous (Colle et al. 2008). This study investigates the referential marking of high-functioning autistic individuals during a picture story task. Compared to previous story telling tasks, this task was specifically controlled for referent maintenance and change in order to be able to carry out a more thorough analysis of referential marking, being able to investigate and quantify the differences between autistic and neurotypical speakers.

Results reveal several differences between referential markings of autistic and neurotypical speakers. These include anomalous lexical choices, a lack of pronominalization, and distinct prosodic features in the autistic speech, resulting in ambiguous referential marking and seemingly pedantic speech. Also, an apparent preference for routine patterns in prosodic and lexical choices of autistic speech can be observed. Possible further investigations are discussed.