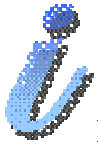


Finding the Words...

by Marge Blanc

To Tell the "Whole" Story Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum Part 2



In a radio interview earlier this year, Temple Grandin was asked, "Tell me about the process you went through to become as remarkably verbal as you are. You write early on that people said that you were a tape recorder. You had certain phrases that you said over and over again. And listen to you now!"

Temple responded, "Well, what happens is, as I put more and more and more information on the hard drive - and I do have a big hard drive; tiny processor, big hard drive - as I get more and more phrases on the hard drive, I can recombine them in different ways, and then it's less tape recorder-like....The thing is, it's gradual learning. You know, you gradually just keep getting better and better and better..."

If you are like me, and have been an admirer of Temple Grandin over the years, you would never doubt that her "hard drive" surpasses most, and that her public speaking skills have become very sophisticated. Her assurance to us that the process of "recombining" language continues well into adulthood is particularly validating to those of us who realize that the idea that our kids' language becomes hard-wired by age 8 is simply not true! Yes, with "typical" language development, kids' heads have all the rules of grammar by then. New learning seems to be "inhibited" by the rules they already know.

But not so with our kids! In our clinic, we see older kids, even teenagers, who are learning rule-based grammar...some for the first time! With older kids like Will, who was highlighted in our last column, the process of breaking down language "wholes" or "gestalts" doesn't happen as rapidly or as readily as it does with kids who are younger. But it still happens! We will return to these older kids in a later column, but, now, we want to give you a longitudinal picture of how the language acquisition process works when ASD kids begin it sooner. As promised, 4-year-old Dylan's ['Daniel' from our previous column] progression through the first three stages of Gestalt Language Acquisition (See Table) will be detailed in this column.

The Stage of Gestalt Language Acquisition

**Stage 1 – Communicative use of language gestalts
(learned and spoken in their entirety)**

Stage 2 – Mitigation into chunks and recombining

Stage 3 – Isolation of single words and morphemes, and beginning generation of original two-word phrases

Stage 4 – 6 – Generation of more complex sentences

It was ten years ago when Dylan's mother came to us. She told us that Dylan's mother came to us. She told us that Dylan's language was all "echoed" from his favorite videos, *Land Before Time* and *All Dogs Go to Heaven* at that time, and that she doubted that Dylan intended to communicate anything with this "video talk." She added, however, that Dylan would often use particular lines before certain behaviors. "Stay off the field, Charles" signaled a retreat into private space, and "Sharptooth attack!" heralded rough and tumble play.

We first met Dylan at his home, and played with him in our clinic the following week, recording everything he said during that second meeting. Most of what Dylan said was unintelligible to us, although his mother knew much of it, and even which video it came from. Long strings of vague sounds representing multiple sentences such as, "Let's go find him come on Spot now let me think where are you" made up the bulk of Dylan's verbal output. Other, shorter comments like, "Where's the snowball?" were easier for us to understand, but still confusing on this early fall, snow-free, day.

During our first clinic session, we knew about things like "snowballs" already, and it was exciting to discover that at least some of Dylan's utterances turned out to be quite related to what was going on! The following dialogue took place at the end of our session, when Dylan attempted to keep us engaged by introducing a play sequence he had witnessed in a video (a snowball fight):

D: Snowball! (Dylan reaches down to "pack" some "snow")

C: I'm gonna get you...ready?

D: Helen, Tom! (calling us by the names of movie characters)

C: I'm gonna get you!

D: Take that! Take that!

Dylan was having fun, and didn't want the play to stop! Granted, Dylan's peers would not have read this in his "opaque," "difficult-to-see-through" language. But we already knew not to take what Dylan said literally. That was our first "rule of conversation." And, over the years, it has remained our first rule with almost every ASD child we have met. This is both comforting and freeing...but not always easy to remember! We adults struggle when we don't understand; we often panic; and, to make matters worse, our feelings get hurt. When our child declares, "Back Off!" or yells, "Go 'way!" it's hard to see past the literal, and remember that we are witnessing an early gestalt. But, if we all do our parts, that rough-around-the-edges language will later be replaced by "recombinations" like, "Not yet, OK?," and, even more-nuanced language, like, "Wait a minute, OK? I just need some more time."

Returning to the dialogue with Dylan, you will notice both Stage 1 and Stage 2 language: an obvious gestalt, "Take that!" and two mitigations, "Snowball!" and "Helen, Tom!" As we began our therapeutic relationship together, we wanted to make sure Dylan had plenty of Stage 1 experience with a variety of useful, non-movie gestalt models before we focused on the Stage 2 mitigation. The core language models Dylan had to work with were too limited to give him the "building blocks" for generative language construction. Names like "Helen" and "Tom" and pretend snowball fights might not work with anyone but the occasional savvy play partner!

The animation and language of movies make them a hard act to follow. Fortunately, real life provides the motor experiences our kids crave, and people who know how to make them fun! Our play had to be active and exciting, and our language had to be delivered with enthusiasm and all the theatrics we could muster. Predictable, "transparent," developmentally appropriate language can be deadly-dull, unless we make it otherwise! We wanted to compete successfully with Hollywood, so we created extremely fun, movement-based experiences (think, "sensory integration"), that just happened to include basic sentence forms like, "Lets...", "Hey, it's...", etc. Somehow we did it, because a few months later, Dylan routinely extracted these types of phrases from our language, and produced his own recombinations!

It was imperative to be lively, friendly, and fun, and to give Dylan something that he couldn't get anywhere else (meeting his sensory-motor needs helped!) He learned that listening to us was entertaining, and he trusted us to give him language he could use to keep us playing with him! Dylan still used movie gestalts as well, and mitigated them nicely, but all his language was becoming increasingly "transparent" and easier-to-interpret. Following are some utterances from our third month:

Let's get outta here!

Whoa! That was close!

Here I come!

I'm the king!

By our fourth month, Dylan was mitigating routinely. He used, "I got it!" (a modeled gestalt), but also changed it to "We got it!" During a paper-cutting activity, Dylan produced all of the

following:

Cut out Buzz Lightyear.

Cut out dinosaur.

Cut out the Slinky.

You cut out Slinky.

By the fifth month, Dylan included an interesting twist in his mitigation. He used the phrase from our tag game, "You're it!" in various mutations, creating the recombination, "I'm it!" but also a combination of combinations, referring to the game itself, "It's 'I it!!!"

During our sixth month, Dylan was producing far less-colorful language, in general, but it was almost all "transparent," and easy for familiar partners to "read." Following is a short excerpt from a session during that time. The two clinicians are labeled C1 and C2:

C1: Let's blow bubbles.

D: Bubbles? (goes and gets the bag of balloons)

C2: I want to play with the bubbles.

D: ...of balloons.

C1: There's a lot of balloons.

C2: I'm blowing a big balloon (blowing one up)

D: You bubble.

C2: What? What to do?

D: You try.

During our seventh month, Dylan clearly made the leap from Stage 2 mitigation to Stage 3 single word isolation and beginning generative grammar. He began building his own, unique sentences "from scratch," having isolated the building blocks from real-life language. His utterances sounded like those we'd expect to hear from a two-year-old ("I...toy" was his first!), but we knew how Dylan had gotten there, and we were so proud.

We also knew that now, the sky was the limit, and that during the next few years, we would be able to support Dylan through Stages 4-6, as he learned to produce all the grammar of childhood! We also knew that, since he already knew about whole stories, he was way beyond how his rudimentary generative sentences sounded. Just as we knew not to take him literally before, we knew not to take him literally now!

In time, Dylan was dismissed from our clinic, because his language was so recognizable and

useful that he was able to flourish in less physically-supportive environments, like his public school. Dylan and his peers were "catching up" with each other. By third and fourth grades, Dylan was learning to use complex grammar, while his classmates were learning about story construction, the moral of stories, and the meaning of metaphor. Dylan already knew these things, and was way beyond his peers in his use of imagination! Now, he was learning to use the language that matched his creativity!

The rest of Dylan's story will appear in the next column. For now, though, you have enough background information to begin to observe the ASD children in your life and to begin to recognize the communicative value of those colorful gestalts...and to imagine a time when they will lead to further steps in natural language acquisition!

Reference

Grandin, Temple, Conversations with Kathleen Dunn, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI: Wisconsin Public Radio, February 18, 2005.

"Dylan" is Dylan Schroud of Poynette, WI, now 13 years old. A story he wrote with his sister, Jesse, will appear in *Walk Awhile in My Autism: a Manual of Sensitivity Presentations to Promote Understanding of People on the Autism Spectrum*, edited by Nan Negri and Kate McGinnity. The book is available at www.walkawhile.org.

BIO

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