

Language acquisition in the context of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Elective class, 2nd semester, 2023-2024 academic year

The Autism Spectrum Disorder is a neuro-developmental disorder that is (briefly) characterized by deficits in social communication and social interaction, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V/DSM V* (APA, 2013). DSM V does not include linguistic impairment in the ASD diagnostic criteria and yet a very rich body of linguistic research documents the existence of such impairment. To complicate matters more in this respect, there is a quite large individual variation in the child ASD population when it comes to language learning. More precisely, most researchers agree that a small group, those with high-functioning autism, do not have notable difficulty in the process of language acquisition; they align, in fact, with their typically developing peers. But the majority of ASD children do have a special linguistic profile: they start speaking late, they have syntactic deficits (for instance, in structures with non-canonical word order like object relatives or object *wh*-questions) and also pragmatic impairments. In addition, a portion of this population remains minimally verbal, ranging from children with no language at all to those with very limited vocabulary.

This class aims to be a gentle introduction to the extremely complex domain of language acquisition by the child ASD population. We will (i) look at a categorization of the relevant language groups (no easy task given the above mentioned heterogeneity of the child ASD population), (ii) areas of linguistic vulnerability and (iii) connections between linguistic and cognitive development.