

Active Language Development During the Autistic Developmental Plateau

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Autistic development does not follow the same trajectory as typical development. The frequently invoked notion of clinical heterogeneity in autism may obscure an understanding of language development that nonetheless reveals consistent developmental meta-regularities.

In prototypical autism, language and social development are frequently characterized by a developmental plateau that may last from several months to several years. In a subset of children, this plateau is most frequently followed by a sudden and rapid acceleration of language acquisition, despite the persistence of marked difficulties in social interaction. This developmental pattern supports two key inferences. First, impairments in social interaction and joint attention do not preclude language development. Second, language development remains active during the plateau period, even when its progression appears clinically latent.

The phenomenon of unexpected bilingualism, in which children acquire languages not spoken in their immediate social environment, provides strong evidence that language acquisition in autism may proceed through dominantly non-interactive pathways, although the respective contributions of non-social and social input remain to be determined. Such mechanisms may play a prominent role in early language development, extending beyond the case of autism. They challenge models that conceptualize language acquisition as strictly dependent on social interaction. Recent evidence suggests that this process remains active during the developmental plateau period and conceptually overlaps with autistic special interests during this apparently non-verbal period.

A comprehensive account of autistic development therefore requires integrating language as a core component of cognition, both shaping and being shaped by patterns of behavioral organization and developmental idiosyncrasies, rather than reducing language as a downstream consequence of social engagement.