Communication in Autism: Do we speak the same language?

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2.
Difficulties with language and communication are one of the defining features of autism.

However, the nature of the language and communication deficits and their role in manifestation of the syndrome remains controversial.
Traditionally, language is looked upon as a key prognostic factor in autism and the level of language and communicative competence achieved is seen as a measure of outcome. Besides, language development is closely related to the development of social behaviour. There is evidence that so-called bizarre and inappropriate behaviours in autism can be significantly reduced with the development of communicative abilities.

3. But
- What is the nature of communication impairments?
- What language are we talking about?
- Is the verbal language the only language possible?

4.
Before we start to discuss our subject matter, we have to clearly define the terms we are going to use, that is, communication and language.

Communication is the transmission and reception of information. According to this definition we may identify the elements necessary for communication to take place:
- A sender, i.e. someone who transmits information;
- A receiver, i.e. someone who receives information; - *In the case of 'mono'-processing, e.g., they may be unaware of the presence/absence whom they are supposed to address to, as all their energy is directed towards performing a learned phrase/sentence.*
- Something to communicate about, i.e. an awareness of one's needs, ideas, etc.; - *They have needs but sometimes they may not be aware of them (in the case of sensory agnosia, e.g.).*
- Communicative intent, i.e. desire/necessity to affect the receiver's behaviour, emotions, ideas, etc.; - *Research has shown, however, that very often autistic children do not lack communicative intent, but rather show a limited ability to use verbal or non-verbal communication for different purposes, and often use unconventional means of communication (their own means of communication, i.e. their language we do not share.)*
- A shared medium of transmission, - T*hey might use a different language to communicate and are likely to have difficulty in using any conventional system for communication in all but most basic ways.*

5.
The impairments of communication in autism are better described as qualitatively different ways to interact, communicate, and process information which do not coincide with conventional ones.

6.

However, it is important to remember that:

> [Non-autistics] can be ignorant of the autistic's struggles to communicate. In this case, more care must be taken to learn how to interpret autistic languages… Communication in Autism is not a 'failure'. It is not non-existent. It's simply different, in some way eccentric in an interesting way, and in some cases dormant (O'Neill)

7.

> "It takes more work to communicate with someone whose native language isn't the same as yours. And autism goes deeper than language and culture; autistic people are "foreigners" in any society. You're going to have to give up your assumptions about shared meanings. You're going to have to learn to back up to levels more basic than you've probably thought about before, to translate, and to check to make sure your translations are understood. You're going to have to give up the certainty that comes of being on your own familiar territory, of knowing you're in charge, and let your child teach you a little of her language, guide you a little way into his world." (Jim Sinclair)

8.
Communication is a two-way process.

In order to communicate successfully we need
- **shared experiences**
- shared tool of communication (language)

9.
Figure: Shared knowledge makes communication possible

10.
Communication is impossible as there is no shared knowledge

11.
Where does the shared knowledge come from?

12.
Perception is the process by which an organism collects, interprets and comprehends information from the outside world by means of senses.

Stages of perception

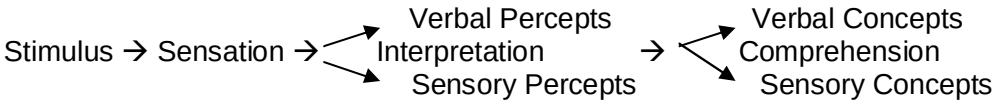
The process of perception has several stages. It starts with sensation, when we perceive (see, hear, feel, etc.) the object, then the incoming information passes through special areas in the brain and the sensory perceptions are interpreted (percept, or mental image is created) and then joined with appropriate cognitive associations (concept – idea of a class of objects/general notion – is formed). We sense (see/hear/touch, etc.), interpret and then get the idea of what we see/hear/touch, etc. and what we can do about it.

Stimulus → Sensation → Interpretation (Percept) → Comprehension (Concept)

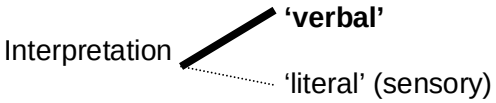
(A pen) → a long thin cylindrical plastic thing → a pen → I can write with it

13.
From sensations to concepts via different routes

With development, sensory experience becomes transformed into verbal thought.
Sometimes pre-verbal experiences are described as ‘primitive’, however, it might be more usefully seen as ‘primary’ modes of experience because, although verbal ways of knowing become more dominant over time, they do not take place of, nor are they necessarily more complex than, more sensory ways of knowing. Here we may distinguish two types of development: verbally-based and sensory-based development – where the central issue is feeling – without verbal interpretation. Although verbal capacities develop from the non-verbal ones, the two ways of knowing do not represent a continuum and they are not in opposition with one another but develop along side of each other as two interactive systems, according to different set of rules.



14.
Though we possess both capacities of interpretation and comprehension of the world all our lives, one of them becomes dominant in very early childhood and develops rapidly. In normal development the dominant side of interpretation is a verbal one.



We learn to form concepts. The information that does not fit the concepts is screened out as irrelevant. With the appearance of language and the development of vocabulary the conceptual system changes. Children learn to get meaning from things, people and events, that goes beyond what is perceptually available. They move from nonverbal (and less conscious) to verbal forms of perception, thinking and communication:

15.
Concepts
FIGURE: **A** cat

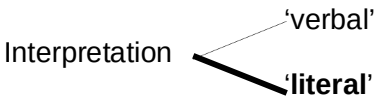
They learn to form categories and generalize. They unite things (not identical but serving the same function, for example.) under the same label. Thus ‘A CAT’ becomes a representation of a small soft-furred four-legged domesticated animal, no matter what colour, smell or breed they are.

They store concepts (not perceptual images and experiences). These concepts become filters, through which all sensory experiences are filtered and organized into classes, groups, types. Concepts bring order. They help to put ‘bits and pieces’ of information together to form a cohesive picture.
The outside world becomes conceptualized and represented and expressed in words that can be easily operated with creating new ideas. Cognitive processes become more efficient and rapid as we ‘jump’ from a very few perceptual details to conceptual conclusions: we do not need to process

all the details to get an idea of what we see. A few details are enough to create expectations and easily fit into their mental representations.

16
In autism:
(If the capacity to perceive and interpret information is impaired, no verbal conceptualisation is achieved spontaneously)
- Sensory interpretation remains dominant
- A later transition of dominance from sensory to symbolic plane of comprehension
- Very few individuals remain 'fluent' in both 'languages'

17.
Sensory interpretation may be dominant:



18.
Many autistic individuals stop at the first stage of perception – 'literal perception' much longer than non-autistic babies. So-called low-functioning autistic people may remain on this stage well into adulthood and store experiences on the level of sensation:

"Those who appear not to seek to make sense of the environment may not necessarily be 'retarded', disturbed, crazy or sensorily impaired, but may, in spite of not using the same system everyone else uses, still have one of their own. They may, in spite of apparent delayed development, actually continue to use a system that others have left behind very much earlier" (Donna Williams)

19.
They do form concepts but these concepts are different from verbal ones.

Literalness
- 'Perceptual words' ('sensory concepts')
- Everything is 'the' something

As the interpretation of 'sensory concepts' remain literal, each stored item may remain separate. It results in autistic hyperselectivity and a lack of generalization when the item to be recognized must be exactly the same that was stored the first time.
Remembering 'literally' means that everything is 'the' something. For instance, different breeds, colours, sizes of cats make these pets different 'sensory concepts' as they are perceptually different

20.
Figure: The cat

21.

For those who are at the stage of literal perception verbal words have no meanings. They are meaningless sound-patterns and may serve as 'auditory toys' to play with. For example, for a young autistic boy, Tito when his mother was reciting poetry,

> all these words with their timber… got so much of my silent appreciation that I tried to make my own little word game with them… Most of the meanings of all those words, I could not tell because I never bothered to find out. In fact, I did not even have the faintest idea, that the words should mean anything. They were just patterns of sounds to me. Wonderful sounds. (Tito)

22.

Literal perception → Literal interpretation → 'Sensory words'

Literal perception leads to literal interpretation and development of 'sensory words'. At the stage of literal interpretation they do not connect verbal labels with sensory experiences. Instead, they have their own 'words' for things, based on sensory patterns. They construct and store sensory perceptual mental images. Autistic 'perceptual words' at the level of interpretation are very concrete and specific. They recognise (interpret) things by these sensory impressions they stored in the memory. For example:

> "Most words do not relate in any direct way to sensory experiences. The word 'cat' says nothing of the sound that comes from the thing when stroked, the noise it makes or the tactile sensation felt when stroking it. I had developed two words for the sensory experience of 'cat'. One was 'foosh' which defined it by the sound made by your hand over the fur when stroking the creature. The other was 'brook'…which defined it by the noise which came out of the creature when it was stroked." (Donna Williams).

The sensory impressions they store in their long-term memory become templates for recognition and identification. It is at this stage that they develop their 'non-verbal languages' - the language of touch, visual language and auditory language.

23.

- One word – one object
- 'Sensory synonyms' (categorisation of things and events by their 'sensory feel' – perceptually-based generalisations)

Non-autistic children learn socially and culturally accepted notions and have no problems to unite for instance, different breeds of dogs under one label, or similarly accept that one and the same thing may be referred to differently (e.g., coat, anorak or jacket). Autistics either stick to 'one name – one object' scenario, or categorise things and events by their 'sensory feel' ('perceptually-based generalisations') (Example 2):

Example 1: One word – one object: [……..]

Example 2: Instead of uniting objects under one 'word-umbrella' in accordance with their meaning – purpose, function, form, shape, etc. (for instance, cats, dogs, horses are animals), they unite them by the sensory perceptual impressions, thus forming very unconventional for verbal language 'synonyms' [……]

24.

With development and maturation many autistic individuals learn how to ‘proceed to the next stage of processing information’ – interpretation, while so-called low-functioning autistic persons may be stuck at the stage of sensation much longer.

Later transition of dominance from sensory to symbolic plane of comprehension (Very few individuals remain ‘fluent’ in both ‘languages’):
For instance, Donna Williams, a high-functioning woman with autism, has become ‘bilingual’ in acquiring and becoming reasonable able to use both systems:

> In my case, I remember this transition from the system of sensing into the system of interpretation began to happen not in the first days or weeks of life as usual but at around three years old. It was not until around the age of ten that the system of interpretation (with much begrudgement) eventually came to be relied upon rather than merely put up with or tuned out. Even then, it was taken on, not as a first and primary ‘language’ but as a secondary one and much later as one of two equal but different ‘primary’ systems. (Williams).

Some autistic individuals acquire a system of symbols later in life as a secondary (not dominant/primary) language. Some remain ‘monolingual’ with a sensory-based system in contrast to monolingualism in non-autistic individuals – based on verbal (symbolic) system of functioning.

25.
Memory:
- Conceptual memory
- Perceptual memory

Memory may take many forms. Some people tend to remember concepts, ideas, abstract information. It is so-called conceptual memory. Perceptual memory is characterized by little or no conceptual capacity, it contains ‘sensory experiences’. Some people exhibit good conceptual memory. Many autistic people seem to possess remarkable perceptual memory. Some people may have different combinations of both.
‘Items’ of conceptual memory are not fixed. They are constantly changing, becoming modified with new experiences we have everyday or when we think about them. Everything is continually updated, being re-categorized and re-generalized. When we retell a story we always bring some tiny changes into it. Conceptual memory is very flexible.
‘Items ‘ of perceptual memory are without ‘verbal names’.

26.
Perceptual memory:
The main characteristics of ‘autistic memory’ are
– Gestalt
– Literalness

27.
‘Gestalt memory’

In Gestalt memory the ‘items’ (whole episodes of the situations) are not ‘condensed’ (i.e. are not filtered, not categorized, not summarized for a gist). They are remembered as the whole chunks of events and situations, including all the irrelevant (from non-autistic perspective) stimuli. That is

why, while retrieving information (whether to answer a question or prepare a response) people with this type of memory have to 'play' the whole part in their memory to 'find' the right 'word' (image, situation, etc.), for instance:

> …If a mental replay of a…memory relating to a certain time or place is triggered, however, I will re-experience the placement of people in different parts of the room and replay a kind of mental audiotape of what was said as it related to where people were in relation to the objects around them when they said things. (Donna Williams)

Gestalt memory (in whichever modality – visual, auditory, tactile, proprioceptive) is characterized by undistinguished equality of all the stimuli – the large and small, the relevant and irrelevant get the same prominence.

28.
Literalness

'Perceptions' are stored in the memory as unprocessed, uninterpreted (in preferred sensory modality).

These images are fixed and do not change with time. These memories remain unchanged for years

29.
What is it like to remember 'perceptions'?

It means that
while remembering they actually experience the sensations they had when they first remembered the object/event/situation, i.e. they see, hear, feel, smell or taste it (in their mind).

The thought about something produces real experiences they had when encountered this thing or event for the first time. They store their visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile memories which are very real.
Drawings by autistic savants give us a revealing glimpse into the autistic mind. Their pictures show naturalism and realism of the individual animal or object. Louise's drawings, for example, exhibit no conceptualisation but rather an immediate representation of his thoughts. He draws in details scenes he has seen, sequentially presenting movement of the main characters

30.
A glimpse into the autistic mind

31
Memories according to 'preferred modalities'

Though visual memory seems to be quite common in autism, it is by no means the only one. In accordance with the modality that is most reliable for each individual, they may have auditory/ kinaesthetic/ tactile, etc. memories. People with a very good auditory memory ('sound memory') seem to have 'audio tapes' in their memory with detailed 'sound pictures' of objects, people, events. Some autistic people store 'smell images' in their memory, others – 'proprioceptive pictures' (kinaesthetic memory) etc.

Alex, who has a remarkable 'sound memory' and who often uses his hearing to 'see' (because of his unreliable visual perception) once asked his mother: "What is 'nightmare'?
Mother: "It is a frightening dream"
Alex: "I know now, 'nightmare' is silence. It is when I see silence in my dream."

32.
So, if their memory is so good (actually, sometimes it is very difficult – if not impossible – for them to forget), why can't they answer the simplest questions then? For example, 'What did you do at school today?'

(The best you can get is either 'I don't know' or 'I don't remember')
The answer may lie in the difficulty searching their own memory and retrieving the information they want. Is it a surprise that they are often unable to give a gist of the story, if they have the whole chunks (Gestalt) stored in their memory as single entities?
In order to recall they need to be prompted with specific cues (the 'right triggers'). Events can trigger in a child with autism whole chunks of memory recalled as complete episodes, but when asked to search memory for particular incidents that same child may have extreme difficulty.

33.
The importance of the 'right triggers'

However, if they remember 'perceptions' we have to use their 'language' while asking them questions. The memories of verbal thinkers are triggered by words; those of non-verbal thinkers – by 'non-verbal words'. It means that we speak 'different languages'. If we asked them using 'their language' they might have no problem with remembering, for example:

> By having a key point… triggered, I can 'let the scene run' and I might find a string of things said in a certain order in relation to the order of other things done. I may even be able to repeat these strings, even if I hadn't processed them for meaning. This was how I impressed my primary school teachers that I had understood what they said. If I was asked what they said, in their attempt to prove I 'wasn't listening', I could play back the audiotape, speaking it as them. Those last words are the keywords here. It wasn't that I'd taken this information on as me, with the interpretation and understanding of significance that this entails, I had taken it on as the sources of this information… I have also been able to trigger serial memories by mentally replaying a physical movement or physical impact on me. (Donna Williams)

Autistic children are dependent on the 'right triggers'. The smell, taste, movement, noise, pattern may help them to remember what has happened and answer the question.

34.
'Challenging behaviours' may be caused by 'past' antecedents

Sometimes a word, combination of sounds, certain patterns or movements may trigger the child to remember the situation that has been stored. If these triggers are connected with something unpleasant or painful, a child may throw a violent tantrum which would be interpreted as 'out of the blue. The best trained therapist in the Applied Behaviour Analysis approach would not be able

to find the triggers ('antecedents') as these are 'past antecedents' brought into the present by an unintended trigger. For example;

As soon as Jamie enters the classroom, Matthew hits him. The teacher intervenes:
- *Matthew, why did you hit Jamie? He hasn't done anything to you.*

Matthew provides the explanation:
- He is wearing the same shirt he wore when he threw my homework into the rubbish bin last November.

On the other hand, the same type of memory may be of advantage to a person with autism. they may use it as a compensation for their inability to process information quickly. If they cannot process information at the time it happens, they often respond to the situation 'from memory' when something remembered is triggered.

35.

What we can do to help:

- Identify the preferred channel which will be our 'gate' to reach the child.
- Create 'daily diaries – dictionaries' describing the day events, with keywords representing 'mental images' in the preferred sensory modality, i.e. pictures or photographs of main events of the day (visual); objects/parts of objects to smell (olfactory), touch (tactile), etc. that can trigger remembering and help discuss what has happened during the day. These diaries may become weekly/monthly magazines, and then 'annals' which can be used to go through from time to time in order to create the connection between stored memories and perceptual experiences.
- Teach them a range of strategies for memorizing and retrieving information, such as making stronger connections between 'sensory words' and 'verbal labels'.

36.

Perceptual thinking

Perceptual thinking is quite common in autism. It is literal, in whatever modality it realises. Thoughts bring real sensations.

- Visual
- Auditory
- Tactile
- Kinaesthetic
- Olfactory

Let us briefly discuss different modes of cognitive processes in autism which have been documented in the research literature and personal accounts.

37.

Visual thinking

[2 drawings by Louise – showing the development of events, one – the whole story of Humpty Dumpty in one picture]

For visual thinkers, the ideas are expressed as images that provide concrete basis for understanding. Every thought they have 'is represented by a picture'. We may say that 'visual thinkers' actually see their thoughts. For them, words are like a second language. In order to

understand verbal information (both oral and written) they have to translate it into images (pictures). Temple Grandin, probably the most famous 'visual thinker' in the world, reveals that she has to translate both spoken and written words into full-colour movies, complete with sound, which run 'like a VCR tape' in her head.

Visualisation thinking patterns vary from one person to the other. Some 'visualisers' can easily search the memory pictures like searching slides and are able to control the rate at which pictures 'flash' through their imagination. The others have a great difficulty in controlling the rate and may end up with overloaded images coming all at once. Still others are slow to interpret the information in their 'visual mode': they may have problems with visualizing quickly what is said, or mentally holding visual images together. Besides, the 'quality' of visual thinking may depend on the state the person is in, and even the time of the day. For example, for Temple Grandin, pictures are clearer and with the most detailed images, when she is drifting off to sleep; her language part of the brain is completely shut off at night.

38.
Not all autistic people think in pictures!

However, it is important to remember that not all autistic individuals are 'visual' in their thought-production process. E.g.:

> "I learned sound pattern and the feel of words in my mouth and sound patterns in my ears… but without gestural signing to link experiences to the blah-blah… the interpretation was lost. Unlike Temple, I do NOT think in pictures. I imagine primarily in feel, movement, kinaesthetic and via acoustics made by the object when struck. I 'visualise' like a blind person" (Donna Williams)

Some autistic persons may use different modality (language), and 'think' 'auditorily' (in 'sound pictures').

39.
'Kinaesthetic thoughts' seem to be quite common:

> "I mentally built my own staircases, on which I tried climbing mentally… The sensation is *a totally physical experience* of feeling my legs better as it works against gravity. Perhaps that feeling got stabilised in my memory and led me to do the climbing in my own mind." (Tito)

40.
Obsessive thoughts
However, such 'thoughts' might become obsessive. The person cannot stop 'thinking them'. When they once brought calmness, they may turn into frustrations. When a person is left to his own devices and seems to do nothing, in fact, his obsessive thinking may be 'on' (whether visual/ auditory/ kinaesthetic, etc.) The ABC (antecedent – behaviour –consequences) approach is useless here because 'antecedent' – 'thinking' is 'invisible'.)

> "Frustrations. And more frustrations. I did not know how to stop climbing although the monotonous climbing made me mentally tired. I did not know how to suppress

my frustrations. It is a problem which I face even today. And I knew nothing other than scream" (Tito).

41.
Perceptual thinking
- It is literal, in whatever modality it realizes. Thoughts bring real sensations
- It is spatial
- It moves from specific images to generalizations and concepts

Spatial thinking [illustration]

42.
What we can do to help:
- Autistic children learn better with concrete information (visual, auditory, tactile, etc.)
- Let them use their ways to explore the world. In many ways 'autistic perception' is superior to that of non-autistics.
- In the case of 'obsessive thoughts', it is important to distract them from their 'internal mental exercises' by external activities.
- Choose the methods of instruction to match the person's 'inner language'. not all autistic individuals are visual thinkers!

43.
In order to communicate successfully we need:
- Shared experiences
- **Shared tool of communication (language)**

44.
Definitions
Language is a system of symbols (words) and methods (rules) of combination of these symbols used by a section or group of people.

Main functions:
- Communicative
- Cognitive

Language is a system of signs that serves as a means of communication and a means of formulating and expressing thoughts. It is conventional to identify signs in this definition as words. The error of mistaking the acoustic/written manifestation of language (reflected in speech) for language itself leads to the misconception that the language is necessarily verbal. However, though conventional, verbal (linguistic) words are not the only signs that satisfy the criteria of language. It is logical, therefore, to distinguish two types of language - verbal (consisting of words) and non-verbal (consisting of non-verbal symbols).
As autistic people think in 'sensory words' we may hypothesize that autistic children (or at least some of them) 'speak' (even those who are mute) a different language. Verbal language is sort of foreign language for them. And as they do not learn it naturally earlier in their lives, then we have to help master their second language with the support of their 'first language' if we want to share a means of communication with them.

So, what language do they speak? And can we talk about any language at all in the case of non-verbal people? The answer is affirmative. They do possess their own language system, external and internal speech. Before we can teach them a 'foreign language' we have to learn theirs first in order to get the ability to 'interpret/translate' their messages at the initial stages of our communication with them.

45.
Language is a tool of communication

In order to communicate successfully
- We have to speak the same language
- Sometimes we have to adjust our language in accordance with peculiarities of each of our communicative partners.

46.
For example:
We would discuss the picture of the 'Mona Lisa' differently with a blind person, a child, and a foreigner who has just started learning your language.

[a picture of 'Mona Lisa']
- a blind person
- a child
- a foreigner who has just started learning your language.

In each of these cases we adjust our language in accordance with the peculiarities of each of our communicative partners. It makes the communication possible and hopefully, successful.

47.
Strange as it seems, we do not bother to do the same when communicating with autistic people.
We know they have difficulties (differences?) in certain areas, but do we always adjust our communication style to theirs?
And do we speak the same language?

48.
Jim Sinclair (a high-functioning person with autism):
"You are trying to relate as parent to child, using your own understanding of normal children, your own feelings about parenthood, your own experiences and intuitions about relationships. And the child doesn't respond in any way you can recognize as being a part of that system. That does not mean the child is incapable of relating *at all*. It only means you're assuming a shared understanding of signals and meanings, that the child in fact does not share.
49.
It is if you try to have an intimate conversation with someone who has no comprehension of your language. of course the person won't understand what you are talking about, won't respond in the way you expect, and may well find the whole interaction confusing and unpleasant" (Jim Sinclair)

50.
When the child starts to talk, his speech is characterized with specific 'autistic' features as if the child was speaking a foreign language. they seem to acquire language intellectually as an adult would have to learn, say, Russian or Japanese.

"[Verbal] language has a different usage for an autistic person than it has for a non-autistic person" (O'Neill)

51.

Specific peculiarities of 'autistic verbal language':

- Echolalia
- Pronoun reversal
- Extreme literalness
- Metaphorical language

Echolalia is a parrot-like repetition of another person's spoken words. There are usually distinguished two types of echolalia: *Immediate echolalia*, or repetition of words and phrases just heard, and *delayed echolalia*, or repetitions of words and phrases heard in the past.
An echolalic utterance is usually equivalent to a single unit (word-Gestalt) for a situation or event.
But why do they do it? What are the functions of echolalia? Is there any communicative purpose in it?
Many autistic individuals testify that echolalia may be both communicative and non-communicative.
Let us consider communicative and non-communicative echolalia.
Non-communicative function:

- A lot of autistic people will produce sounds, words or phrases to themselves, just in order to get some auditory and/or tactile pleasure. In this case, these sounds, words or phrases have no meaning at all. They are not linguistic units, they are 'auditory/tactile toys' ('sensory-linguistic toys') to play with.

Communicative functions:

- Immediate echolalia is seldom completely non-communicative. It can be interpreted as 'I don't understand'. It increases when children are confused and cannot work out what is going on around them.
- Echolalia can be a means to 'win time' (in the case of delayed processing) or to 'get the meaning' from what has been said as some people understand speech better if they repeat the message. Repeating things other people say helps to clarify the meaning in an autistic person's mind as it aids cognitive process: an autistic child will repeat a question someone asks her to be able to hear the words in her own voice - to take an external stimulus inward, accept it and prepare a reply. For example, Donna Williams states that she could comprehend only about five to ten percent of what was said to her unless she repeated it to herself. Immediate echolalia in this case is a strategy to 'translate' verbal words into meaningful inner language (whether visual, kinaesthetic, olfactory, etc.) Thus, while repeating the sentence, either loudly or silently (silent echolalia), they elicit pictures, tactile, olfactory, etc. images (whatever their 'inner' language is) in their mind. It is a kind of 'reverse thinking'. Using this strategy, they gradually can develop skills to speak meaningfully without any noticeable delay. However, acquiring these 'immediate translation' skills sometimes takes years and a lot of practice.
- Echolalia can be interpreted as a request, for instance, when a child wants a biscuit he says, 'Do you want a biscuit?'

Pronoun reversal

The difficulty seems to root from the deictic nature of pronouns, i.e. to serve to refer to roles in conversational situations and not to 'label' people 'for ever'.

The same problem arises with other deictic words such as ‘this - that’, ‘here - there’, ‘yesterday - today - tomorrow’, etc. which label objects, people, situations for certain time and then ‘jump’ onto other objects, people and situations. For an autistic child it is difficult to grasp why ‘today’ will become ‘yesterday’ tomorrow, or why the toy is ‘here’ for him but ‘there’ for mummy, etc. As we have seen, autistic children have difficulty in understanding that one and the same thing (or person) can have several ‘names’ attached to them.

Extreme literalness

Autistic children have a great difficulty in understanding pragmatics of language, i.e. they use and interpret language literally - what the words mean and not what the speaker’s intention is. For example, the child knocked over your favourite vase and to your ‘Thank you very much’ replies ‘You are welcome’. Sarcasm, irony and humour are often beyond their understanding (though they do have their own sense of humour). For them, semantics is important, and they cannot see why you use the words meaning one thing to express something else.

> Alex was very twitchy during his snack in the kitchen. He was ‘kicking the air’ and giggling. Accidentally he touched a caretaker who was making a cup of tea. The caretaker (unfamiliar with autism) was irritated (‘Couldn’t this boy see other people around him?’) and snapped: “You kick me again and…” He was not able to finish his threat because Alex followed his instruction ‘to the letter’ – he kicked him.

Some autistic children seem to have difficulty to accept synonyms. They cannot grasp that two or more different words can refer to the same thing, or that one and the same word can have different meanings in different contexts. It is hard for them to understand that words that have the same pronunciation may have different spellings, or vice versa, the words that are spelled differently can sound the same.

The literal understanding of verbal language can be accounted for from the perspective of their way of language acquisition - one verbal word - one ‘inner image’ (whether visual, kinaesthetic, olfactory, etc.), something they can refer to in their mental ‘vocabulary’. We may explain this phenomenon by the origin of ‘autistic words’ and the way they form concepts.

‘Metaphorical’ language

This term was coined by Kanner. To autistic people certain words may have some private meanings different from their common definitions. These definitions make sense only if you know their origin. Kanner provides a good example of ‘autistic metaphors’ while describing one of his patients, a seven-year old autistic boy. The boy’s seemingly meaningless announcement, “Annette and Cecile make purple”, got its explanation when the original situation was revealed. The boy had five bottles of paint which he named after the Dionne quintuplets - Annette was blue and Cecil was red. To successfully ‘interpret’ the meaning of such ‘metaphorical’ expressions, one has to know the origin of these ‘words’ that is not always possible.

52.

What language are they speaking?

We assume that language is necessarily verbal (i.e., containing of words). That is why, we say that children are verbal if they can talk (no matter whether their verbal outcome is just a combination of echolalic phrases) and that they are non-verbal if they cannot produce verbal output.

As the original experience of the world of autistic children is sensory-based, their original internal language (as a tool of formulation and expressing thoughts) is consisted of the sensory-perceptual (multi-dimensional) images. This ‘language’ becomes central to their intellectual and emotional development.

Autistic children, like non-autistic ones, learn through interactions with the world, but this interaction is qualitatively different. They learn their language(s) through interaction with objects and people on the sensory level. That is why, their ‘words’ have nothing to do with conventional names for things and events, we use to describe the function of these things and events. Their ‘words’ are literal, they store sensations produced by objects through interaction, and they ‘name’ them accordingly. One sense (sometimes several) becomes dominant for storing memories, developing ‘language’, and constructing thoughts.

53.
Non-verbal languages:
- Visual language
- Auditory language
- Tactile language
- Kinaesthetic language
- Smell language
- Taste language

Despite all the differences, the one thing in common for all these languages is that they are non-verbal and ‘sensory-based’. Here we may talk about visual, auditory, tactile, kinaesthetic, olfactory, gustatory languages.

54.
Visual language: They use visual images.
[Pictures]

55.
Auditory language:
Children remember objects and events by ‘sound pictures’. If the object is ‘silent’, they may tap it to recognise it by the sound it produces.
No wonder, spoken words are often perceived as mere sounds. It is difficult to sense or feel a ball, for example, in the auditory frame BALL. They do not recognize the thing if given its verbal (conventional) name, however, they may identify it with the sound it produces while bouncing, the smell or the feel on the hand.

56.
Tactile language:
Children ‘speaking’ tactile language recognize things by touching them, feeling textures and surfaces with their hands, bare feet, their cheeks, or putting them in their mouth. Through touch they get the information about size and form of things, but not about their function or purpose. They store the information for later reference and may find similar objects (for instance, a plastic cup and a glass cup) to be completely different ‘words’ in their vocabulary because they ‘feel’ different.

57.

Kinaesthetic language:

Children learn about things through the physical movements of their body. Each thing or event is identified by certain pattern of body movements. They know places and distances by the amount and pattern of the movement of the body. They may bite objects and even people if they store the information by the way it feels when bitten.

58.

Smell language:

Objects and people are identified by smell.

Taste language:

Children lick objects and people to feel the taste they give on the tongue.

Each child may use one or several 'languages' to make sense about the world.

Given the perceptual problems they experience (fragmentation, hyper- or hyposensitivities, etc.), one or several systems may become inconsistent and/or meaningless, and they have to use the remaining ones to check the information they are flooded with.

59.

Translation

They have to translate verbal speech into their languages:

> "The linking of words with sensory experience means that if I hear the word 'shoe', I link this with the sound it makes being thwacked on the floor… If I hear 'picture', I re-experience running my fingers around its frame, the cold of its glass and the sound it makes being tapped… If I hear the word 'biscuit', I re-experience the crunch and the feeling of it as I ate it…" (Donna Williams).

60.

Though, even if we become 'bilingual' and can understand their language(s), still there could be translation problems, as there are no direct 'word-for-word' translations in the qualitatively different systems we use.

Translation problems:

In order to communicate their thoughts

- They have to 'select' particular images and place them in order
- Then they have to 'translate' these images
- To be able to hold the images together in the memory while verbalising them

The same is true the other way round, i.e. when they have to respond to verbal instructions.

As they have poor auditory short-term memory, they have difficulty in remembering instructions consisting of three or more steps. That is why, 'visual thinkers', for instance, often have difficulty with long verbal information, and prefer written texts, or the instructions given in 'visual steps' – pictures, photographs, etc. In this case, it is much easier for them to 'translate' the message from 'auditory' into 'visual' code.

61.

Perceptual thinkers have trouble with words that cannot be constructed into a mental picture and often have problems learning abstract things that cannot be thought about in 'mental images'. To understand abstract concepts they use, for example, visual images:

> The words 'know' and 'feel' were like 'it' and 'of' and 'by' – you couldn't see them or touch them, so the meaning wasn't significant. People cannot show you a 'know' and you cannot see what 'feel' looks like. I learned to use the words 'know' and 'feel' like a blind person uses the word 'see' and a deaf person uses the word 'hear'. Sometimes I could grasp these unseeable, untouchable concepts, but without inner pictures they would drift away again like wispy clouds. (Williams)

62.
Social experiences present even greater challenge as they cannot be represented with 'sensory-based mental images'.

How can you 'translate' social experiences into 'sensory concepts'?

63.
Now that we know that autistic individuals have problems with information presented verbally, there is a great emphasis on using pictures to help them comprehend information. However, not all autistic people are 'visual thinkers'. That is why, it is important to choose the methods of instruction to match the child's mental language.

Each child has unique sensory-perceptual profile and has acquired (voluntary or involuntary) compensations and strategies to recognize things and make sense of the world. One and the same child may use different systems at different times depending on many factors that can influence the 'perceptual quality', such as stress, fatigue, 'environmental sensory pollution' (bright light, noise) etc.
At the early stages of our work with a child, we should not dictate what mode of communication the child must use. We have to find the mode that is most natural to him, i.e. most close to his inner system, and on the basis of this communication system (shared with the child) we may introduce the conventional communicative rules and means and teach conventional concepts. In other words, we have to find out what language each child 'speaks' and introduce verbal language on the basis of their 'native tongue'.

64.
Sensory-perceptual assessment for Communication Profile:

- To adjust the environment to the needs of the individual in order to protect the person from painful stimuli and reduce the confusion caused by possible distortions
- To identify the optimum rate of incoming information the person can cope with
- To identify the interaction style to be used with the person
- To identify the preferred communication channel used by the person

65.
Sensory-perceptual assessment for Communication Profile:

- To adjust the environment to the needs of the individual in order to protect the person from painful stimuli and reduce the confusion caused by possible distortions

> "It is impossible for children to learn if they are bombarded with confusing, irritating stimuli they are unable to screen out" (Temple Grandin)

As each child has his own ways to perceive and interpret information it is important to take into account his sensory-perceptual profile. One child may experience pain from the sounds we cannot hear, the other may see a 60-cycle flicker of the fluorescent lamp that causes perceptual distortions and even pain, etc. If we want the child to develop communication skills, we must create the environment where he feels safe and motivated.
Imagine the situation: Your arm is broken and the pain is intolerable, besides the sound of siren comes into your ears and makes it almost impossible to hear anything. To make things worse, everything is jumping around you - colours, things, people, - disappearing and re-appearing again, and at the top of that, someone (with very good intentions, of course) insists "Hello. How are you? Say 'Good morning' and I'll give you a crisp", while exaggerating facial expressions (i.e. pulling faces). How would you feel? Brrr. Would you be motivated to communicate or would you try to find a quite place and 'heal your wounds'?
Autistic children are often bombarded with sensory (often painful) stimuli. They are vulnerable to distractions from the environment and have difficulty filtering out background stimuli. The first thing to do is to find out which of the stimuli disturb the child and create a 'sensory umbrella' in order to protect him from the 'sensory rain'. The problem is, each child has his own sensory experiences and what is safe for one child is harmful for the other.

66.

- To identify the optimum rate of incoming information the person can cope with

The threshold for processing is different in different children.

67.
The usefulness of verbal language for an autistic child will depend on the degree to which he shares meaning of the verbal words with people from whom he learns the language.
We can teach them to speak (use) a verbal language and even think in it, first only 'outside of their world' (as if they are tourists who come to the country to practice the language of this country). Some of them (with early intervention) may even forget their own language and use only a 'foreign' one (like a small child who was brought to a foreign country and acquired the language of this country).
To start, we have to identify their language and speak to them through *their* words. To teach them to verbalise their thoughts, we have to 'hear' their thoughts, i.e. interpret them from whatever language they use, and 'wrap them up' into words. This way they are more likely to connect words with meanings (experiences). It is necessary to avoid long introductions as context through words is likely to confuse them and definitely does not help comprehension.

A minimal speech approach

Is beneficial for the children who have no or little understanding of verbal language. this strategy is used in combination with other non-verbal communication systems (objects, photos, etc.) depending on the child's 'inner language'

- The consistent use of only one or two concrete words that are strictly relevant to the situation
- Connecting words exactly with the situation at the time the child attends to it.

68.

- To identify the interaction style to be used with the person

Direct vs. indirect communication

Those communicating with autistic people have to change the way they themselves communicate in order to help a person with ASD understand and communicate. The interaction style we use with each particular person depends on their perceptual and communication profile. For example, for Temple Grandin, more 'intrusive' style was beneficial as her sensory perceptual problems were mild, whereas for somebody with severe sensory distortions a different approach is needed:

69.

Directly confrontational approach

Some autistic children need intensive direct treatment that makes them aware of the presence of others and does not let them to 'slip' into their world. For example:

> The teachers…knew how much to intrude into my world to snap me out of my daydreams and make me pay attention. Too much intrusion would cause tantrums, but without intervention there would be no progress. Autistic children will remain in their own little worlds if left to their own devices. I would tune out, shut off my ears, and daydream…I would also become completely absorbed in spinning a penny or studying the wood-grain pattern on my desktop. During these times the rest of the world disappeared, but then my speech teacher would gently grab my chin to pull me back into the real world. (Grandin)

70.

Indirectly-confrontational approach

Others can often make better meaning out of what they hear or see by looking or listening peripherally (such as out of the corner of her eye or by looking at or listening to something else). In this case it is a kind of indirectly-confrontational approach. For example:

> The best way I could have been able to listen to someone was for them to speak to themselves about me loud or about someone like me, which would have inspired me to show I could relate to what was being said. In doing so, indirect contact, such as looking out of a window whilst talking, would have been best. This, however, would only work once one has achieved the ability for some co-operation. In this case, this seeming indifference would actually demonstrate awareness and sensitivity to the child's problems of coping with directness. (Williams)

Indirectly-confrontational communication can mean that if something needs explaining or showing, the person explaining or showing can do so as if out loud to themselves, addressing the wall or the floor, or one's shoes, or the objects relating to the demonstration. The person with a problem of overload should be allowed, similarly, address and interact with you through speaking out loud with you 'in mind'. In this case the child will be less overloaded and more able to understand what is happening. Gradually, bridges can be built from indirectly to more directly confrontational interaction and communication.

For those who cannot tolerate ‘directness’ yet, traditional praise and reward (applaud, loud praise, etc.) may turn into punishment, and the person learns to avoid it at any cost, often by withdrawal and seeming loss of the skills.

71.
The transition from indirectly-confrontational to direct communication should be gradual:

- Start from minimal speech

to

- Speaking aloud to oneself (or to the wall) occasionally mentioning the child’s name

to

- Speaking in the direction of the child

and only then to

- Talking face to face.

72.

- To identify the preferred communication channel used by the person

73.
If, for whatever reasons, a child does not develop a verbal language, we have to introduce an augmentative and/or alternative language in order to arm him with a tool to communicate, and, what is equally important, a tool to assist cognitive operations.
To communicate successfully children have to have a communication tool. We should introduce them to systems of communication as soon as possible.

Selecting communication systems

Decisions for selection of a particular communication system should be based on a child’s inner language, his sensory perceptual profile and the communicative means the child already uses to express different communicative functions.

74.
The inner vocabulary can be visual/ auditory/ tactile/ kinaesthetic/ olfactory/ gustatory images, or their combinations.

Most autistic children seem to ‘speak’ either visual or auditory, or tactile or kinaesthetic ‘language’.

It is important to find out ‘what language the child speak’. If we use one system for all children in the classroom, for some it might work for others it might not.

For example, using pictures with an ‘auditory’ type of child won’t help. It does not mean that you should ‘speak several languages’ but it does mean that you should know the peculiarities of each child’s language in order to teach him a ‘foreign’ one. The aim is to teach them the language they can use to be understood everywhere and by everybody, and not only in structured settings and by very few people.

75.
While using whatever ‘communicative tool’ has been chosen, commenting by the adult might be useful. The aim of commenting of what the child is doing at the moment is to connect verbal expressions with whatever the child is experiencing at the moment, i.e., to connect verbal

language with the child's inner experiences.
If the 'right' system has been chosen, there is a hope that a child will learn to code (label) their experiences and thus will be able to develop 'verbal cognitive structures'.

We will discuss possible communication systems which can be used with autistic children.

76.

Visual Systems:

Visual systems are very helpful for autistic visual thinkers both to understand and to express themselves.

- E.g., PECS
- Visual timetables
- Photos, pictures, drawings, picture diagram-cards, written words

Decision which visual system to use depends on the child's level of understanding of a symbolic/verbal language.

Different types of pictures may be more or less meaningful for a child. One must experiment to see what works best. For example, some children find photographs easy to understand, for others photos are too literal, and represent only the object that is on the photo and no other object. Children who react this way to photographs are more likely to be successful with drawings.

77.

Whatever visual system is used, it is important to combine it with a written word, that may lead to development of understanding written language.
One must remember, however, that existing visual systems are limited and cannot allow the person to make complex sentences and express complex ideas, so they have to be combined with other communication means such as, for instance, written language or signing.
Another limitation of visual systems is: the person should always carry them with him, and if the access to them is difficult (especially, with 'object-system') it may result in frustration.

78.

Like with any other approach in autism, PECS does not work for every child:

> At around the age of nine, I began to recognize pictures far more, although not line drawings because that's all they looked like – lines. I didn't interpret them and when I finally did it usually wasn't what they were trying to represent. The PECS symbol for play that involves two figures with hands throwing a ball between them was, to me, a spider… The picture for dinner looks like a face with a black eye. (Williams)

79.

Communication via objects

Those children (both non-verbal and echolalic) who, for whatever reason, do not understand a spoken language, will benefit from teaching them to communicate via objects - the closest substitute of their inner language.
For 'visualisers' who do not understand symbols, or pictures, or signs, the closest to their 'native language' would be a concrete, visible, spatial external language, i.e. language of objects.
80.

The advantage of this mode of communication is that it may cover several 'languages' as it is not only visual but also tactile (when touched), kinaesthetic (when moved), auditory (when tapped), olfactory (when smelt).

- If you teach the child the names of some objects, give him these objects to feel (or smell, or tap to produce a sound). They can learn the 'meaning' of objects through texture, colour, sound, smell.

81.
It is important to remember:

- Objects can be communicatively loaded, and the child might get the wrong message from the 'written language of objects';

It is important to recognise the risks of using objects for communication with an autistic individual. Objects can be 'communicatively loaded' (without our knowledge) for these children. They already 'speak' this language. For instance, if a child is given a bag, he knows that it is time to go home, etc. Thus, the child might get the wrong message from the ''written language of objects" as described by Peeters (2000) when an autistic boy became very frustrated when he saw the folding chair in the corridor (and 'read' that it meant they were going to the beach, but was taken to school instead). It took his mother some time to do a good detective job to understand the associations the boy had made and the reason for his frustration.

- Objects may have different meaning for autistic children;

We should not assume that they will understand the objects in the same way as we do. We should be aware of the different 'meanings' objects may have for autistic children in contrast to our interpretation of them. Thus, for us communicative value of objects is conceptualised according to the common stock of knowledge and experiences (that we have *learnt* in our culture), whereas for them it is not the concepts but rather the sensations/experiences the objects elicit. For example, when we show someone a watch (or tap at the watch) the message is 'read' as 'it is time to go'. If a child has no concept of time yet, for him it would be the sound of tapping (or visual image of the thing) that should be interpreted. It is our job to teach them how to 'translate' the message. If we want to 'speak' the same language of objects, we have to teach them 'our meanings' of objects.

- The use of objects should reflect the level of literalness the child has;

Another danger of using the language of objects is the level of literalness the child has. Some children have very 'literal language', i.e. one thing - one 'word'. For instance, a child would know that a plate is a plate if it is the same plate he used to eat from. For him there is no such thing as 'a plate' (a concept of a plate) but always 'the plate'. He cannot yet generalise objects. In this case we have to start to work with the same objects all the time, but gradually introducing 'synonyms' for one and the same 'word' (representations for objects), for example, small (toy) objects with the same communicative and semantic meaning. For instance, if we talk about cars, we will use toy cars (not match boxes), toy spoons for spoons, etc. Once the language of objects has been successfully learned we will introduce more symbolic use of objects, gradually moving towards photographs, pictures, symbols.

- There are synonyms in the language of objects in autism which can be different to those in our

understanding.

Another thing to remember is that there are ‘synonyms’ in the language of objects in autism, which can be different from our understanding of it. If two things, no matter how different (for us) they are, elicit the same mental image for a child, these things will mean the same for him. For example, if two different things are made of the same material and visually/auditorily, etc. bring the same sensory image, a child might be confused which one is for what.

82.

Kinaesthetic language

Sign language vs. mime-signing

Advantages of sign language for autistic children:
- Signing is both a visual and a kinaesthetic system of communication. It means it can be helpful for those who learn about the world through visual or kinaesthetic systems (i.e., whose inner language is ‘kinaesthetic’). In this case, a child understands the meaning of words through movements of his hands and the whole body
- Signs can be taught through physical prompt and shaping that is beneficial for children with executive function problems (but not with tactile hypersensitivity!).
- Sign language is very ‘portable’ and does not need any equipment, communication books or objects
- Sign language is a linguistic system and may stimulate acquisition of a verbal language.

The disadvantages of sign language:
- it is not understood by many people.
- autistic people tend to process any language literally, sign language included. That is why, we need to modify the sign language for the use with autistic individuals, to avoid misunderstanding of sign words and phrases. For example, for Donna Williams, signing the squeezing of cow teats to ask for milk, seems pointless, as for her, with only a literal level of processing, this would be more likely interpreted as, ‘do you want to see a cow milked?’ As one does not see cow teats when milk is being poured into a cup.
- sign language is not successful with all autistic individuals.

Sign language might be difficult for those who do not understand verbal language and are poor visualisers, though whose inner images are based on kinaesthesia. In this case, signs should be modified to closer match these inner images (miming).
Many autistic individuals, even without having been taught, use mime-signs (they are not always conventional signs). Some autistic individuals (with ‘kinaesthetic language’) use signs as a supportive means of translations of verbal words (both receptive and expressive), as they often make better sense of what has been said through the movements. Thus, when they listen or speak they might aid their understanding and expression by using physical or mental signs in order to make better connections. For autistic children with ‘kinaesthetic inner language’, verbal language can be taught through action songs and rhymes. Being used as one simple single action per word, mimes can make linear sentences.
Another advantage of using mime is that it is much more easily understood by non-autistic people, so it can be used in a wider variety of environments than conventional sign language.

‘Kinaesthetic language’ helps the child to make connections between spoken words and body reactions, it is sort of ‘body mapping’

83.

If the child ‘speaks kinaesthetic’:

- Label the mime with the word, for the child to connect the experience of the movement with its ‘verbal label’. If you teach a child the word ‘jump’, make him jump; if you teach him the word ‘run’, etc.
- If you give the child the directions or instructions, help him to ‘translate’ them into the ‘body language’, for instance, you say ‘go to the left’, then turn him to the left; or you say ‘pick up your things and put them on the chair’, let him imitate the actions.

84.

- Talk to your child about what you are doing. Encourage him to imitate (i.e., to ‘translate into kinaesthetic’). If the child has problems with imitation, help him to ‘form’ the movement. Some children were taught to draw and to write by holding their hands and guiding them to draw shapes, figures, letters.)

85.

Tactile language

For some children touch is the most reliable sense. They often find it easier to recognize objects through ‘feel’.

86.

Tactile language

If visual, auditory, kinaesthetic systems do not work for a child, ‘tactile language’ could be tried. For some children (those with severe sensory-perceptual problems and usually non-verbal) touch is often the most reliable sense. They often find it easier to recognise objects through ‘feel’. In this case a tactile system should be favoured.

- They can be taught to read by giving them plastic or wooden letters to feel.
- They can learn about many activities by feeling objects involved in these activities.
- To make their life more predictable, we may give them some objects to feel in advance to prepare them for future events, for example, a spoon or a plate before a meal, a towel before bath-time, etc.

If you teach the child the names of some objects, give him to feel these objects (or smell, or tap to produce a sound). Use his ‘language’ to translate the meaning of the word.

87.

Written communication

Recent research has shown that speech and writing ‘can reside in different hemispheres’, suggesting that written and spoken language can develop independently of one another. Sometimes teaching individuals with autism to read and write can bring a real ‘breakthrough’ in communication with them. Many autistic individuals find their ‘voices’ in their writings. Written communication (hand-written or typed) is indirect and that is why it can reduce information-processing overload. Making the connection between feelings and expression is easier through written than spoken language:

However, a warning should be made. Quite often the main strategy used to teach them writing is to make them copy written words and texts. The activity becomes really meaningless as in this case they copy not texts but meaningless patterns; it is sort of 'written echolalia'.

88.
Whatever 'language system' is selected, it should be taught as *a tool for communication* and not as meaningless noises they are asked to produce.

89.
Teaching communication

There are many different approaches to address communication problems experienced by autistic people. Here we will briefly discuss the most widely used ones.

- Social skills approach

Drama, role play and social skills groups are useful to develop 'art of conversation' (turn-taking, topic maintenance, language pragmatics).

- Social stories

90.
Rules
Introducing rules of behaviours in different situations:
Autistic individuals find following the rules very useful as the rules help them 'act' in situations they might not fully understand.

> "I have rules for everything. If there are no rules specified… then I invent my own rules. I do this so that I have guidelines enabling me to navigate my way through the process of daily living" (Wendy Lawson)

91.
Teaching 'accessories' of communication

- Eye contact

For many people with autism, eye contact does not come naturally. It often brings overload and stress. This is true for those who experience visual hypersensitivity, fragmentation and distortion. It is these people who have acquired the strategy to 'work in mono', using one channel at a time. No matter how unusual it may seem to us, not looking in the eye, does not mean they are not listening. Quite the contrary:

> "I can concentrate better not having to keep eye contact at the same time. I tell people, 'You have a choice. Do you want a conversation or do you want eye contact?' You will not get both unless I am comfortable with you and I do not have to concentrate so much on eye contact." (Bovee Undated)

Teaching eye contact should be very gradual, never forced. When a person becomes comfortable with you, he would glance at you from time to time, and eventually will learn to 'keep his eyes' on your face. They have to learn how and why to give eye contact.

- Gestures
- Emotions
- Facial expressions
- Body language
- Use of interpersonal space

Because of the perceptual problems many autistic children (with visual-perceptual problems and mono-processing) find facial expressions and body language meaningless, overwhelming or even threatening.
It is important to remember that the difficulty to understand and express emotions does not mean that autistic people lack emotions! They do have emotions but, first, they often cannot 'label' and understand it, and secondly, they do not know how (and why) to 'translate' their experiences to other people. They have to learn explicitly to recognise, name, understand the meaning of emotions and what to do about it. It is important to teach that emotions can have particular facial and bodily expressions and to explain what they are.

Autistic children use their interpersonal space differently from other people; they may get too close to strangers or they may prefer greater distance between themselves and people they interact with. Autistic children with sensory distortions and hypersensitivities (whether they are visual, auditory, tactile, or olfactory) often find it too threatening and even painful if they are approached by others, especially if the approach is unexpected and direct. They should always control it in order to feel safe.

93.
To teach or not to teach?
Given all the differences in perception and thinking styles in autism, it is very difficult for autistic people to respond to the world we (non-autistics) expect them to. We can teach them to see the world our way and monitor their behaviour accordingly. It will take time and effort to help them learn things they have no equipment to learn spontaneously and intuitively. They can be taught to perform if they are given the right cues and triggers. But. (There is a very important 'but'.) To make the process easier for them (and for us), we have to begin to learn to see and understand things from their perspective (though very unconventional - we often call it 'idiosyncratic'). We have to use all our imagination ('not-impaired' in non-autistic people by the definition) to place ourselves in their shoes.
We have to adapt to them as they have to adapt to us. We have to learn their ways to perceive, interpret, communicate as they learn our ways. We could live together if only we accept our differences. This world is still autism-unfriendly no matter how much we talk about support of autistic people. All this talk is 'empty' because we often use 'empty' words that bring a lot of misunderstanding in our communication with autistic people.

And one more thing. Why do we always think that it is us who have to teach autistic people? If we want to 'grow together', we have to learn from them.

94.
"The role of professionals should be to help people use their natural processes to learn and grow.
This might mean helping people develop strategies for dealing with sensory oversensitivities… It might mean teaching self-monitoring and self-management of

behavior and emotions. Probably it always means learning and teaching translation skills to enable people with different communication systems to communicate with each other." (Jim Sinclair)

95.
More information in:
Olga Bogdashina *Communication Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Do we speak the same language?* (2004) Jessica Kingsley Publishers.