

On some passions of autistic children: compensating functional language with technology (a semiotic prospective)

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Abstract:

The present paper shall attempt to describe, analyze and elaborate some of the communicational deficits of the children with Autism Disorders Spectrum Syndrome (ASD), seen from the semiotic viewpoint. The focus shall be on the visual capacities, [such as described in: (Grandin, 2008)] of the children with Autism, as well as on their ability to compensate their brain dysfunctionalities through technology. In the mentioned context, semiotics should attempt at disclosing the meaning of their “own world”, to the extent of rendering it passionate. I shall intend by “passions” the repetitive requests, complaints, their emotionality etc., as intermediated by other tools (and/or media), that can be exemplified as one of the ways of “reducing” their sensory-motor deficits. In conclusion, the semiotics of passions, such as described by Greimas and Fontanille(1993) shall attempt deducing semantic units which are applicable for such children’s own “intended physiological context of behavior”. The results of “actions” performed by such individuals shall represent their own way of establishing a meta-communicative process. The deduced semantic units in terms of such children’s behavior are changeable, therefore an object to intersubjective processes of transformation.

Keywords: *passions, autistic, semiotics, behavior*

Introduction

Treating Autism and/or Autism Spectrum Disorder Syndrome (ASD) out of the semiotic viewpoint is a complex task. Such a complexity does not emerge from the semiotic method only as one of the methodological possibilities, but as obvious, from other related fields, as well. What I intend by this is that the problem belongs to a wide range of other treatable fields (eg. medicine, biology, psychology and social sciences) [such as, for instance, observed in: (Siegel, 2003)] . This is above all due to the “spectrum” concept, which is itself complex, multi-dimensional and may

belong either to a theoretical explication (through determined paradigms), or to its practical applicability through determined empirical data gained as a result. One has to remark in addition that the phenomenon is also inter- and trans-disciplinary, as besides its symptoms, noticeability, and/or behavioral deficits in terms of such individuals, the matter can be a subject to various disciplines, in the shape as we have stated above.

Otherwise, as it is hoped, the present paper shall attempt to describe, analyze and elaborate some of the communicational deficits in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder Syndrome, seen from the semiotic point of view. The focus shall be on the visual capacities of the children with autism, as well as on their ability to compensate determined brain dysfunctionalities, through technology as one of such possibilities (such as: computers, smartphones, etc.), so as to intend an uninterrupted communicational process. The mentioned “compensation” is above all of a psychological nature, caused by an organic disability of the mentioned subjects. In such grounds, it is to emphasize that the twofold viewing of the problematics [either behavioral, such as in: (Bogdashina, 2005), for instance, and/or neuro-biological and genetic, such as described in: (Roubertoux, 2015)] , represents another complexity in the theoretical frame. As should be obvious, there is a remarkable difference either from the aspect of causes or from the aspect of consequences of such kinds of an individual’s behavioral manifestations. Or better expressed: the first one of such mentioned fields analyzes and tries to reduce the consequences, whereas the second one, attempts at disclosing the causes of the phenomenon.

Otherwise, semiotics, as should be understandable, should not seek for a cause and/or consequence of the deficits we are about to discuss, but it should instead, identify them in the sense as they are diagnosed as well as attempt to foresee the context of a possible meaningfulness that should consequently result in a determined semantic micro-universe.

In the mentioned context, semiotics should as well attempt at disclosing the meaning of “their world” (specifically, through their presumably “physiologically intended actions”), to the extent that such actions may render themselves passionate. I shall intend by “passions” of an autistic child the repetitive requests, complaints and several outbursts of emotionality (some of which may represent so called “tantrums” and/or “meltdowns”), which may and/or are usually intermediated by various objects or subjects, such as for instance: other tools (and/or media) and/or therapists. Such other tools as well as other intermediation devices may be explained as one of the ways of their own “reducing” their sensory-motor

needs and /or deficits [which are described in: (Emmons, P.G.; Andersen, 2005)]. Thus in conclusion, the semiotics of passions, as a theoretical paradigm [in the way as described in: (Greimas & Fontanille, 1993)], shall attempt at deducing semantic units which are applicable in frames of such children's "own physiological behavioral context". The results of such "actions" by the side of the children shall represent their own way of establishing a meta-communicational process. In the context as presented above, the impossibility of establishing of an idealistic communication process [such as foreseen in: (Shannon & Weaver, 1948); and/or in: (Eco, 1968), specifically speaking, in regard to interpersonal communication] shall attempt at such individuals activities' demonstrating a basic semiotic function, (in the shape of obtaining a meaning out of a given form), so as to contribute to a specific sort of a process of semiosis to discuss and define later in this text. My aim is "extracting" as much as possible meaningful units out of such children's prospective of viewing and comprehending external reality, which would contribute to an awareness and a possibility of interaction within their way of communicating possibilities. Besides, as it is hoped that shall be seen, semiotics in general should also treat interpretative values of certain behavioral models, which finally would overcome such a disability of essential perception and cognition processes: thus in addition, also rendering such kinds of activities meaningful. The twofold modelling of the semiotic method at this instance, (either ontological or epistemological), to my view, would render such children's passions meaningful for the rest of the world. The first one [such as for instance described in: (Deely, 2009)] shall concern the establishing of "basic semiotic functions"based on semiotic relations, even if they are conceptualized in the metaphorical sense of the word, whereas the second one, shall concern the "world of possibilities" [see also: (Eco, 1994)], in relation to the interpretability of such individual's behavior. Only after elaborating these two possibilities, semiotics shall contribute to deducing semanticity [thus following: (Greimas & Fontanille, 1993)] , as its final goal in the context of the present paper.

On some of the noticeable deficits of a child on the spectrum

If one has initially to present a determined methodology in terms of a "theoretical" solving of a problematics, then, it should be logical to state that the elaboration of the concept and/or phenomenon under analysis has to be clarified. Concretely speaking, there have been several definitions of the syndrome, which to my view have to be explicated in this contribution.

This is necessary for the following purposes: first, because of the “relation” establishment as a semiotic tool towards its models, and second, because of the necessity of an ‘intermediator’ at this instance. It should be understood in conclusion that here, the various techniques and methods towards re-establishing a communication process (either intended in its purely communicational or in its semiotic context, specifically) shall not be elaborated in details[as for instance, I have attempted to show elsewhere, see: (Hoxha, 2014); (Hoxha, 2015)]. On the contrary, I intend by a child’s ‘physiological actions’ his/her own way of re-establishing a meta-communicational process. Or by other words: I intend such individuals’ own interaction with the rest of the world, by the aforementioned term. It is for the sake of the existence of a determined meta-communication process (which is able to decompose into different semiotic units explicable through *a signs’ behavior*) that semiotics, among other significantly related fields, should be a part of a methodological discourse in relation to the ASD phenomenon. If the theoretical background is such as we have attempted to explain, then one should emphasize at least some of the behavioral manifestations of the children on the spectrum.

It also has to be noted that symptoms include a wide range of behavioral deficits, which are visible, recognizable either for the significant others, or for the rest of the ‘subjects’ interacting with the child. As otherwise described by scholars who produce determined definitions of the Syndrome, [see: (Sicile-Kira, 2014); (Mash, Eric J., Wolfe, 2004)], one can note that they are principally based on the behavioral deficits, or better expressed: on the impossibility and/or incapacity of such children to perform determined functions, compared to “normal social contexts”, and/or to neuro-typical individuals. As it is otherwise observed:

Autistic disorder or autism is a severe developmental disorder characterized by abnormalities in social functioning language and communication, and unusual behavior and interests. It includes every aspect of the child’s interaction with his or her world, involves many parts of the brain, and undermines the traits that make us human – our social responsiveness, ability to communicate, and feelings for other people. (Mash, Eric J., Wolfe 2004: 284)

It is for the mentioned consequences of a child’s behavior that such sort of behavior is seen as “abnormal”, or as I have named it elsewhere, *exceptional* [see my quoted article, above]. It should be noted in addition that, if the matter is treated philosophically then, the dichotomy and/or the distinction between “normality” and “abnormality” would not represent a

significant relevance [also in the way as mentioned in: (Delleuze & Guattari, 1987)] . It is so, because of the heterogeneous nature of the multiplicity of behavior: therefore it semiotically refers to a continuous and transformable signs' processing, whereby a signification process may also be unreliable. It is in such foreseen philosophical and ontological context specifically, that the problematics can be analyzed in the shape of a transformable "rhizome" into different assemblages, thus changing shapes from one sort of modelling into another.

In regard to the mentioned context, I shall not raise the question of the mentioned dichotomy at this instance. One can justify this as well by the "discursive and epistemological level of analysis" [the paraphrasing is mine, see: (Greimas & Fontanille, 1993)] of determined semiotic preconditions. It thus allows interpretative and predictable "actions" of such individuals, in the case of the semiotic treatment of the phenomenon. It is for such and similar reasons that, including the context we are discussing, one can allow more than one semiotic interpretation. This is after all aimed at an overall comprehension of such individuals own *depicting and conceptualizing the interaction with others and significant others*.

Otherwise, it should be clear that the behavior of an autistic child looks strange, somehow different, to the rest of the world. What I intend by this is the lack of theory of mind. Such sort of behavior and/or communication with others can be described as atypical. The "atypicality", or as otherwise named 'abnormality" (and/or neurodiversity) is noticeable and visible in some of the issues I shall emphasize in the following lines of the present paper. Even though an autistic child might possess "internal speech behavior" [see: (Bogdashina, 2005)], i.e. implicit comprehension of speech (and/or, as shall still be explained, might possess some of his/her receptive abilities), the child might not possess explicit speech. The explicit speech ability in autistic children is case sensitive. There cannot be a general view on the extent of their speaking abilities. Each case is individual. This last issue, as hopefully shall be seen, explains as well the heterogeneous behavioral kinds in terms of such subjects, most of which are individual, and render themselves difficult to define. One issue at least can be asserted: the mentioned kind of communication is inter-subjective, and/or it becomes subjectivized. It is this kind of viewing the phenomenon that makes the issue semiotically treatable, among naturally, other related issues.

As otherwise explained in Piaget (1969), the child has to possess "symbolic representational function" [see: (Piaget, 1969)] , after the age

of 16 or 18 months. Or by other words: if a failure of the speech component is demonstrated, and/or an ability of finger pointing to subjects and/or objects by the side of the child, approximately by the mentioned age, one concludes that some mental processes have delayed. In support to the mentioned component (i.e. the explicit verbal expressivity), as only one of the recognizable deficits of an individual possessing neurodiversity, I shall quote Piaget. As he otherwise observes:

At the end of the sensory-motor period, at about one and half to two years, there appears a function that is fundamental to the development of later behavioral patterns. It consists on the ability to represent something (a signified something, object, event, conceptual scheme, etc.,) by means of a “signifier”, which is differential and which serves only a representative purpose: language, mental image, symbolic gesture, and so on. Following H. Head and the specialists in aphasia we generally refer to this function that gives raise to representation as “symbolic”. However, since linguists distinguish between “symbols” and “signs”, we would do better adopt their term “semiotic function” to designate those activities having to do with differentiated signifiers as a whole. (Piaget 1969, n.p.)

As one can notice, Piaget’s explication here, regards normal and/or a normative sort of children’s developing abilities acquisition. Naturally now, the situation is clearer: an autistic child delays at certain stages of development, which may belong to various developmental spheres: such as, the emotional sphere, perception and cognition spheres. Let us now number some of the visible symptoms and/or deficits of an autistic child. First, a child on the spectrum may have atypical behavior. What I intend by this, is the following: repetitive and stereotypical actions, such as: movements of the head back and forth; proprioceptive integrational problems, such as: hitting one thing only, and /or playing with one and only toy in the strangest of ways. Second, an autistic child takes same food repetitively and persuasively, such as: bread only, or junk food and similar food only. Third, an autistic child, may not take notice of the presence of his/or parents. He/she continues performing his/her own *rituals* constantly. Fourth, an autistic child may not speak, and/or even his/her nonverbal communication may look strange. Instead of calling upon a subject using verbal expressivity, an autistic child may take one’s hand, so as to show what he wants to do or take. A partial or total lack of fulfilling orders may be noticed. Fifth, such a child has a social avoidance problem, i.e. not wishing to play or interact with peers of his/her age. Sixth, a child with autism may not hold an eye contact, as a conscious way of a nonverbal sort of communication. The process of a-socialization and/or de-

contextualization is more than evident in autistic children. It is for these reasons that a child on the spectrum is easily noticeable to the rest of the world [among other related issues, as it is as well explained in:(Sicile-Kira, 2014)]. One has to remark here that notwithstanding the fact that individuals with autism do not adapt themselves to various new kinds of social realities (in the sense of exposing themselves to such other way of newly faced “social contexts”); they do not exclude constructing their own social reality. The difference in addition is obvious: their acquisition process is different, their adaption process much slower, therefore visible and recognizable. In conclusion this sort of their own interaction with what neuro-typicals do (or generally, in view of their own flow of living),regarding a given social reality to which they may be exposed, is different and exceptional. It is for this reason that one can state the following: if there is a lack of capacity and/or an absence of a full cognition process within an autistic child (a fact which cannot be taken as a general phenomenon, but only at separate individual cases), then perception processes may overcome normal provisions. Or another example: if autism is primarily conceptualized as a neuro-biological problem, then one can easily notice that an individual on the spectrum has a full body balance, clear movements, physical integration, etc. What can be noticed in conclusion is the action component, mostly performed consciously, due to an organic disability. It thus justifies the heterogeneous nature of the problem instead of the comparative one, and/or of a dichotomous one. Such a multiplicity of a phenomenon enables a transformation process, at least at various semiotic contexts.

On some semiotic preconditions of autism: what does “compensation” mean?

I shall use the term “compensation” in the metaphorical and/or connotative sense of the word. This is not only due to the indispensable organic and/or neurological provenience of this phenomenon, but also to the semiotic preconditions that may be established due to its existence. By the mentioned term I intend “substitution” of different actions of doing within other actions and/or actors [presumably in the Greimasian sense of the word, see; (Greimas, 1973)], which may be and/or are due to the individual’s will and interests. As much as this is due to semiotic relations explicated by Greimas, that much it is due to his “modal functions” and “modalities”. In conclusion therefore, not only that the matter should be regarded from the ontological point of view, but as well it regards the

epistemological view in semiotics. As can be seen, this view shall regard two aspects principally: the psychological and the semiotic one, simultaneously. To my view in conclusion, it is only in such mentioned circumstances, that one can use semiotic applicative methods in regard to rendering various meaning components in terms of the autism phenomenon. To sum up then: if a child is expected to offer a counter-response, and counter-stimulus after determined kind of stimulating him/her (either verbally, nonverbally: using visual sort of communication, tactile kind of stimulation, degustation stimulations, etc.), he /she might counter-respond in a different way: ether using his/her visual capacities, or by becoming anxious so as to show vivid unequivocalness of the processed signs used by his/her receptive abilities. It implicates of course a sort of tensitivity, or as semiotics would express itself: a sort of a “conflictual situation” among parties concerned. This is above all due to the compensating component at this instance, which emerges as a consequence of an inadequate brain information processing. This is the point which shall be regarded here as a *lack of meaning*. Naturally, the matter can be justified in the following way: parents raising an autistic child, after a certain period of experience with him/her are fully aware of the initial impossibility to comprehend their requests, complaints, or other emotionally minded reactions. Not only that such children’s reactions frequently are not clear, different, but they can even represent a “noise” and/or a point of interruption in the frames of the overall communication process. Semiotically speaking then, we have two parties concerned: parents and their children. Psychologically speaking however, an anxious situation is created, out of the incapacity to understand each other. I shall name such a stage, in Greimasian sense of the word, a “lack of meaning”. As should be obvious finally, an autistic child lacks uniting form with meaning, and/or: rightfully conceptualizing objects and subjects found in their surroundings. Or by other words: in the semiotic sense of the word, he/shedoes not hold a semiotic function. As should be obvious, intermediating this sort of communication is more than required.

An attempt to establish semiotic relations

In the Greimasian sense of the word however, like we stated, a tensitivity component [see: (Greimas & Fontanille, 1993) is noticed. Usually it occurs that parents ask assistance at this instance: in most of the cases, from occupational therapists. Depending on the level of the mental development of the child, (which are matters which shall not explicitly be discussed in

this contribution) a therapy is assigned. Working with an occupational therapists, speech therapist, etc., intermediates the process of communication. This should not only regard a one-way sort of communication, and/or signs' processing. The acquisition process at this stage is mutual: by both sides, either parents or children.

Except this sort of professionally assisting the child, which as I have mentioned, I shall not elaborate here in details, there is a phenomenon called a "comfort zone". Each autistic child seeks to find his/her comfort zone. It is the place, the time, and/or moments when an autistic child is quiet, and/or closed in his/her "shell". It is this "stage" and/or "situation" which I am interested in. One may ask: why? Because of the following: first, one can then notice what are the interests of the child, and second, it is then, that the child is doing what he/she wishes to do. Or by other words: if anything different were exposed to him/her, an outburst of emotionality is what might occur. If such sorts of "unwanted stimulations" and/or "external requests" are contemporarily witnessed by the child (in the sense that everything comes from everywhere), then the child might experience *sensory overload*. The two concepts mentioned are in a relation of contradictoriness in the Greimasian sense of the word.

Let us now try to elaborate some other matters related to the "comfort zone" of an autistic child.

The mentioned repetitive activities, ritual-like actions, which may last for hours are what temporarily "calms" an autistic child. If one looks in details, each repetition is similar, but not identic. It thus proves the individual's *wanting-to-do*, *whishing-to-express*, etc. The phenomenon, as may be presumed, is explicated in terms of its semiotic comprehension: as can be concluded from the *modalization* process we are attempting to discuss. There is no question in the fact that such an individual cannot express his/her will, interest, request, and/or complaint the way neuro-typicals do. Let us attempt at exemplifying some presumably *predictable* "actions". Playing with one and single toy only, constantly and repetitively, and returning it back to his /her co-communicators, may mean: "give it back to me". An instant screaming unexpectedly does not mean becoming aggressive. It may mean: "I want to go out", etc. It is for these reasons that I call such a child's reactions *modalities*, or simply: ways of expression (either in the metaphorical or in the proper sense of the word), most of which are initially not clear to the co-communicator, and/or to the receiver of the message. There is no exactness in their transmission of messages, at this instance as can be seen: therefore, they look unequivocal. Being unequivocal eventually, does not mean at all incomprehensible.

Owing to the fact that many of such actions gradually become comprehensive, either based on matters that can be individually selected by the receptors of various messages, or on the probability of the receptor's predicting abilities, they all, cannot be said to remain meaningless. On the contrary, they *become* passionate: or in later stages, are carried out by "impassionate subjects" [see: (Greimas & Fontanille, 1993)], represented by the individuals on the spectrum themselves. By being "impassionate" thus, the individuals on the spectrum seek to use other tools so as to remain into their "comfort zone". Watching movies, nursery songs, etc., on a smartphone or a computer shows an attempt of their expressivity; an attempt, which understandably in the mentioned context is repetitive, therefore, transformable. Each repetition therefore is a new point of their expression attempts. It looks like as if *communicating with the device, instead of a proper sort of communication*. Specifically speaking, like we said, the nursery songs, the specific games used in smartphones used repetitively in determined period of times, show a clear message by the *impassioned subject*, at this instance: intermediated by technological tools, which I shall name here "knowable subjects" [see: (Greimas & Fontanille, 1993)]. The "knowable subject" in conclusion, and/or the "active subject" deduce and/or derive the meaning expressed by the child. Owing to the predictability and/or imprecision of the deduced meaning(s), one concludes that final semantic units in autistic children regard their developmental nature in growth: therefore, they find themselves in a stage of their "becoming", and/or a constant transformability process.

Otherwise, *becoming* in the semiotic sense of the word holds a crucial importance here: either in its ontological comprehension [in the sense as used in: (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)], or in its epistemological comprehension [in the sense as used in: (Greimas & Fontanille, 1993)]. Ontologically then, each such "rhizome", originating from the earlier mentioned disabilities, transforms itself gradually into new sorts of "lines" and "assemblages". Finally then, instead of language, one sees speech acts, images, technological games, aimed at one and only purpose in frames of nonverbal children with autism: wishing to express themselves in a way that others could understand them.

Conclusion: the process of semiosis itself

I shall intend by a process of semiosis a uniting of form and meaning as a basic semiotic function, in the frames of the present text. Besides, as we have seen, at different developmental stages of an autistic child, such a

semiotic function may be conceptualized in the metaphorical sense of the word; or better expressed, within the unequivocalness of the processed signs. In conclusion therefore, by the mentioned term in the frames of the ASD phenomenon, I intend meanings emerging from the child's behaviors which are transformable, changeable during his/her growth and psychological development.

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