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Italian Personal Pronoun and Name Use in Parental Speech: ASD versus Typically Developing Children

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Abstract

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often experience difficulty using and interpreting pronouns. While prior work examined referential language primarily in English (overt-subject), less is known about “pro-drop” languages where subject pronouns are optional. This study investigates personal pronoun and name use in Italian parental speech to autistic children compared with typically developing (TD) peers. Transcripts from 10-minute mother–child free-play were analyzed across 70 dyads. We found that mothers of autistic children used the first-person pronoun *io* (I) as well as the child’s name, significantly more frequently than mothers of TD children. However, there was no consistent preference for using names versus the second-person pronoun *tu* (you) to address the child. Within ASD group, autism severity did not predict pronoun or name use. Increased usage of (optional) subject pronouns and names might reflect a compensatory strategy in parental speech to autistic children, to enhance clarity and avoid referential ambiguity.