

## **Contrasting linguistic profiles of children with SLI and autism: A case against the shared aetiology view**

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Reports of an aetiological overlap between autism and SLI, in terms of both their genetic underpinnings and linguistic abilities, have been both supported (e.g. Tager-Flusberg, 2006) and disputed (e.g. Whitehouse, Barry & Bishop, 2008). Experimental research directly comparing syntactic knowledge of these populations is sparse, however. The heterogeneity of language abilities in the population with autism alone presents an additional challenge, with a sizeable proportion of children with autism showing no language impairment, in contrast to the large numbers of children who show significant grammatical impairments, reminiscent of those observed in SLI.

In this paper, we compare the performance of children and adolescents with ALI (Autism plus Language Impairment) to age-matched group of children with ALN (autism with normal language) and age- and language-matched children with SLI, in addition to a group of matched typical controls, on tasks assessing comprehension of passives, reflexive and personal pronouns, and subject-to-subject raising.

Our results show that children with SLI follow a typical pattern in their acquisition of the above structures, though they are considerably delayed. Their knowledge of binding and coreference is in line with that of younger typical controls. They also demonstrate a better comprehension of actional passives than psychological passives, and a better comprehension of unraised as opposed to raised sentences, again in line with the patterns reported in young typical children. In contrast, children with ALI show poor comprehension of both actional and psychological passives, short and long, poor comprehension of reflexive as opposed to personal pronouns, and poor comprehension of raised but not unraised structures. Children with ALN show difficulties only with raised structures.

The severe difficulties with grammatical structures tested in our sample of children with ALI signal a profound syntactic impairment in this population. The patterns observed in SLI reveal a delay rather than a particular deficiency in the development of these structures, closely following their development in young typical controls. Rather than an overlap, the observed patterns indicate very distinct linguistic profiles in autism and SLI.