

12 A valid person: non-competence as a conversational outcome

Alessandra Fasulo and Francesca Fiore

Putting autism into context

Dealing with a condition such as autism is intimidating if one is not a clinician, especially if the interactions examined are in a therapeutic setting and experts are involved; but we were supported in our research by the significant contributions made in other studies to the understanding of social situations involving people with communicative disabilities, autism-related (see below) or otherwise originated¹. We shall not attempt an explanation of autism as a syndrome, but will touch upon research that has looked at the social situations which constitute the everyday life of people – especially children – diagnosed with autism.

Existing theories accounting for the most common symptoms of the autistic-spectrum disorder have been supported by extended experimental research (see overviews in Frith, 1989; Baron-Cohen et al., 1993, 1989; Sigman and Capps, 1997) but there is also evidence that changing the nature of the tests, for example by introducing objects familiar to the children, can produce better performance (e.g., in Theory of Mind tests: cf. Astington and Gopnik, 1991). Bushwick (2001) suggested that the unusual behaviour of autistic individuals generates impoverished social experiences leading to insufficient social learning. Some aspects of autistic behaviour, like echoing, eye aversion or repetitive movements, are liable to confound observers' expectations, in particular those related to the interaction order and functioning. Wootton (1999), however, has been able to demonstrate how, even in the case of *delayed echoing* (the insertion of strings of talk coming from a distal context), echoing turns are respectful of transition relevance places, thus avoiding or minimizing overlap, and can run in parallel with non-verbal, cooperative activity.² In another study by Local and Wootton (1995) assessing prosodic and formal features of 'pure echoing' (i.e., repetition of proximal others' utterances), it is claimed that

children's skills with repetition make it a favourite tool to manage interactional tasks, so that many instances of echoing, while in a sense not completely apt, can still assume responsive and sequential fitness.

If nobody can be blamed for being puzzled by sudden rushes of irrelevant activity in the middle of a conversation or a game, strategies for familiarising interactants with the nature of the disturbance can make a great impact on their interactional withdrawal. For example, Ochs et al. (2001), in their pioneering ethnography of high-functioning and Asperger autistic children, compared peer interaction in classrooms where the child and his family underwent 'disclosure' about the disturbance to the whole classroom with situations in which the classroom was not informed (in one case not even the school staff). In cases where the classmates were aware of the possibility of anger-reactions, stereotypical movements and expressions, but also aware of the autistic children's intact abilities and interest in social relations, positive inclusion practices (i.e., involvement and support) were more frequent. Conversely, negative inclusion practices such as 'neglect, rejection and scorn' (ibid.: 416) were encountered more frequently by children whose classmates did not know what to expect, how to react or how to interpret their behaviour. Similarly Schuler (2000), when observing children who had been trained to treat the contributions of their autistic classmates as relevant, however odd-seeming, reported a marked increase in the quality and quantity of relevant moves, which resulted in richer experiences of participation.

The impairment of pragmatic skills associated with autism cannot be denied, nor is it useful to disregard the specific sensitivities that affect the functioning of social contacts as we are socialised to expect them. Nevertheless, the study of spontaneous interaction allows us to deconstruct the problem into different areas of performance in which individuals with autism show varying degrees of competence, some of which, for instance, those concerning turn-taking and sequential implication, are more or less intact even in the most severe cases (Local and Wootton, 1995; Wootton, 1999, Ochs and Solomon, 2004). As with Ochs and Solomon's reflection on the concept of *practice* and with Bushwick's reassessment of the role of *social learning*, the study of autism compels us to examine the functioning of social reality *tout court* and the theoretical tools used to investigate it; while looking at autism with interactionist- and ethnomethodologically inspired analytical lenses permits a deeper inquiry into the difficulties of both the affected people and those in their immediate social context.

One of the goals of the present chapter is to show that therapeutic intervention could be strengthened if it were founded on a better

awareness of the nature of talk-in-interaction as a system with its own organisation and features. Competence coincides only partially with analytical descriptions of the way conversation works; lay models of 'good' talk typically underestimate the extent to which 'happy exchanges' (Ochs, 1983) not only tolerate but *require* ellipsis, repetition, irregular syntax, turn fragmentation and partial overlap. When training and instruction programmes are founded on idealised and unrealistic models of conversation, they can lead to leakages in the machinery and a waste of resources.

Research site and data set

The interactions examined below were recorded at a Centre specialising in the treatment of persons of varying ages with autistic disorders. The research focuses on two boys, one thirteen and the other ten years old. The data set includes paper-and-pencil observations of the entire Centre's spaces and activities; audio recordings of interviews with the therapists (at the beginning of the data collection, and with a follow-up when the data were under analysis); examinations of diagnostic tests and reports on the target patients; ten video recordings of their weekly therapy, and observational diaries of any recording session. Literature concerning the theoretical approaches informing the Centre's therapeutic activity was also collected.

The boys, whom we will call Marco and Giulio, have both been diagnosed with high functioning autism. Giulio, the younger one, was described as having higher linguistic skills and a wider vocabulary when compared with a typical child his age, though his speech was somewhat manneristic. His social attitude was assessed as good, whereas Marco was reported to prefer the company of adults and to be more anxious with respect to social contacts and new situations. Marco also had more difficulties with morphology and syntax. In both cases, the reports mention difficulties with the non-literal plane of language.

The boys' therapy hours included a regular sequence of activities³, each occupying from ten to fifteen minutes, comprising: Work (table tasks which could be performed autonomously or with the aid of a therapist); Free Time (devoted to games like puzzles or pretend play); Time for Talking (where the boys sat and talked with their two therapists); Meal (they consumed a snack in the Centre's kitchen); and occasionally Motor Activities, performed in the outdoor space of the building. On reviewing the complete recordings, we realised that the most promising activity for study would be Time for Talking, not simply because of the obvious predominance of conversation, but because

preliminary evidence indicated that participants often found this activity unsatisfactory.

The young patients whom we observed, recorded from the moment of their arrival in the afternoon, appeared at ease in the environment and happy to see their therapists. They also seemed to enjoy the routines predisposed in the Centre: they usually started out with Work, taking out notebooks and boxes from the shelves of the Work room, eagerly pursuing each task. Interaction with the therapists was open, and questions were asked and answered by both parties in the unfolding of the tasks and during passage from one task to the next. During the time dedicated to conversation, though, we observed this fluency and involvement to be reduced: both children expressed impatience toward one of the therapists, and in one case Marco protested, at the end of the allotted time, that he 'had not spoken' yet (though he had in fact participated in the conversation). We realised that the highly structured environment did not work so well when the task was a strictly conversational one, and decided on a selective analysis of Time for Talking interactions.

Time for Talking, talking for what?

The need to dedicate a separate time and space to conversation arises from the need to develop the specific social skills associated with verbal interaction. When asked about the meaning of this activity, one of the two therapists interviewed said 'it is a methodology to develop theory of mind'. Specifying the objectives, she declared that it serves to 'guide the interest in others', 'widen the topics of patients' interaction', and 'make them aware of their problem and work on what makes them different with respect both to normality and to the other children' (such as the non-speaking children also attending the Centre). In the final interview, carried out a few months after the recordings, the therapists reported a significant increase in the two children's competence compared to what they knew we had observed, this being demonstrated by more frequent initiatives by the more withdrawn patient to communicate his personal experience, and the establishment of a solid personal friendship between the two boys. The second therapist,⁴ Luigi, also alluded to the fact that during the time we were collecting our data the interactions were sometimes 'a bit conventional'.

The encounters examined below show how the various objectives of the colloquia collided with each other to the detriment of increased participation and interactive agency, these being often hampered by an insistence on linguistic appropriateness and the tendency to favour

particular topics. We will focus on how a preoccupation with linguistic appropriateness runs counter to the inner logic of spontaneous talk-in-interaction, which not only warrants orderly exchanges but provides for participants' mutual recognition as 'valid persons'. For analytical purposes the different sections below deal separately with aspects that are co-present in most of the excerpts.

Disregarding tellability

The dimension of tellability, both in the sense of orientation to new information and of newsworthiness, is often disregarded during Time for Talking. This is a consequence of consistent attempts to concentrate on a restricted range of topics and to elicit talk regarding widely known matters, matters so elementary as to render difficult any interpretation of what is actually being asked for.

Extract 1

AQ: Please note the 'Extract' in other chapters are in courier font. Please advice if we can change courier font.

- 1 Anna: Let's talk a little bit about family
 2 Giulio: Oh. Mar[co's
 3 Anna: [Yes. =>here for example.< Marco,
 4 ((to M)) >look<
 5 >let's do- let's hear Giulio for a second. <
 6 (1.0)
 7 Anna: → What? is a fa↓mi[ly ((didactic tone))
 8 Giulio: [It's a]l- ↑they are- they are =
 9 ↑they are, uh <Mum, and Dad.>
 10 Anna: A:h. (0.2) >so< it's Mum and Dad,
 11 then who else is there, in the fa:[mily.
 12 Giulio: [And me:
 13 Anna: And G[ju:lio.
 14 Giulio: [Giu:lio]. = ((rolling head))
 15 Anna: → = And this is a family, isn't it?
 16 → it's some people who stay <to↓gether.>
 17 Giulio: Uh.
 18 (1.0)
 19 Giulio: But Lina too.
 20 (1.5)
 21 Anna: So. ↑Lina is your cou↓sin.
 22 Giulio: Uh. but she's a relative of mi:ne.
 23 ((pointing to himself))
 24 Anna: Ye:s. [she's] ([])
 25 Giulio: [A-] [it's] a lo:ng family we have = it's [lo:ng.
 26 ((looks to A then L, opens arms for 'long'))
 27 Luigi: [((nods smiling to G.))
 28 Anna: → >Everybody's = family< is lar:ge.

The conversation begins, after a brief exchange on the logistics of the encounter, with the main therapist, Anna, announcing the first topic of the day (line 1), which one of the children (Giulio) interprets as pertaining to a specific family ('Marco's'). But after seeming to agree with the interpretation, the therapist goes on, selects Giulio as the speaker, and asks him to define what 'a family' is. Anna starts out with the typical intonation pattern of didactic interrogation; Giulio apparently grasps the nature of the question and begins answering in overlap (line 8). Yet the readiness to react does not imply an easy answer: he starts out with 'all' but stops and lists two categorical members, 'Mum and Dad'. The answer is accepted but leads to the prompt to go on. Giulio then adds himself to the list of family members, taking the interrogation to refer to his own family. The therapist wraps up at this point by recycling her former question and providing a general definition ('people who stay together'). Giulio approves and waits: he seems to interpret the preceding sequence as a preface whose purpose is to ascertain whether the meaning of the word 'family' is known to him, so he utters an acknowledgment token and waits for more to come (line 17). Since nothing is added by Anna, he continues his last course of action and adds another family member to the list, for whom the therapist provides the kinship term 'cousin'. Giulio sees this as a correction, so he claims that his cousin Lina counts as family too, and comments on the unusual size of his family (lines 22, 25–6). While the second therapist, Luigi, who had been addressed with a glance, smiles at the comment, Anna again generalises and corrects the non-idiomatic adjective Giulio had used ('long'), saying 'Everybody's family is large.'

Generalisation of patients' experience has been noted by Antaki, Leudar and Barnes (2004) as a didactic move contrastive to the uptaking of personal sides in received accounts, thus constituting an opportunity for conflict if the patient has a different agenda. Here, too, the move seals off pursuit of personal issues and ignores the humoristic nuance of Giulio's turn, conveyed by both tone and gestures. This exchange, like others in this collection, illustrates a tendency to clear conversation of idiosyncratic content in favour of generic knowledge and school-like correctness of expression (Fiore, 2003).

The interpretation of a 'simple' conversational task reveals confusion between lexical competence and conversation. Sheer knowledge about something does not automatically make it a good conversational topic: on the contrary, in the logic of conversation, that which is obvious is precisely what is *not* an appropriate object of talk. It makes the issue of relevance prominent and creates an expectation for the speaker who raises the obvious to display an awareness that that is what they are

doing. Giulio's series of moves shows that not only does he perform competently, he also expects his competence to be assumed by the interaction partner. That is why he does not consider the question about family as self-sufficient. Anna, however, treats the boy's pieces of talk as mere samples of speech to be checked for correctness and determinedly stays on a general level in spite of the trouble she has making it generative of dialogue.

A similar example involves a dialogue between Anna and Marco, one day when Giulio was absent, about Marco's imminent passage to high school.

Extract 2

- 1 Luigi: What school did you choose?
 2 Marco: The school (s-) (.) school Filippini (.)
 3 school Santa Lucia Filippini
 4 Anna: → Mh. That's how it's called?
 5 Marco: Yes ((nods))
 6 Anna: → And what school is it?
 7 → what does one do in this scho[ol]?
 8 Marco: [Santa Lucia
 9 FiliPPI:ni ((raises head and looks at A))
 10 Anna: What does one do in the school Santa Lucia
 11 Filippini?
 12 Marco: What it's done in other = other school::s
 13 they make me wr[↑]ite,
 14 Anna: They [make you wri]-
 15 Marco: [Make me ho:mework
 16 Anna: Do ho:mework,

The school topic was selected by Anna, and follows on from Marco's statement, at the end of the previous session, that he was going to change school. After Marco appropriately answers to Luigi about the new school, giving its name and even self-repairing to complete the information (lines 2–3), Anna produces two contributions which run against the norm which favours pursuit of new knowledge. The first is a request for confirmation of the name of the school (line 4), in a form that indexes not mishearing but rather doubt about the correctness of the name just given. To this Marco simply adds confirmation, verbally and non-verbally. This repair sequence not only interrupts the flow of conversation, as with all exposed corrections (Jefferson, 1987), but also endangers its basis by inferring that anything said could in principle be incorrect. (Why cast doubt on information which, in addition to Marco's being its more entitled owner, is given in a complete way?) The second question is also problematic: she presents it in two formulations,

with a self-repair apparently heading towards clarity: 'What kind of school is that? What does one do in that school?' As with the question about what a family is, here also is a tricky assumption of simplicity, making the question in fact difficult to answer. Firstly, Marco has not been there yet; and secondly, just as with family, school is school. In his reply Marco is able to show the idle character of the question, answering that they do there what they do in every other school, and then providing a couple of items of common school activities, writing and homework. Anna repeats each item keeping the 'list intonation', as if asking for more, and in repeating the second item she corrects the form (in Italian the correct form is 'make me *do* homework'). Such uptakes appear to indicate that she is not interested in the school particularly, but rather wishes Marco to provide evidence of his capacity to enumerate school activities and to do so correctly.

Both questions are conservative, in the sense that they do not aim to obtain new information but to keep Marco on well-established matters that can be assessed. Such questioning about well-known issues challenges the child's status as a competent speaker while systematically erasing the position of uninformed recipient on the part of the questioner.

Mismatches on 'granularity'

When children introduce a topic of their own, they can be asked questions that appear non-congruent as to their level of specificity. We can call this a 'granularity' problem, following Schegloff (2000). By this word he refers to 'the terms in which the world is observed, noticed, and experienced by members of society in the range of settings in which they live their lives' (2000: 718). As an analytical tack to interaction, granularity is a cue to the 'order of relevance' speakers regard as appropriate to the domain of experience they are talking about.

On speculative grounds, we can state that granularity varies with the degree of expertise in a given domain (and in this sense is probably a useful technique for self-positioning), but also that expectations on the level of granularity mirror an appraisal of interlocutors' general competence and of their interests in perceiving reality. The questions we will discuss, of which a series is shown in extract 3 below, are occurrences of poor expectations concerning the granularity of an ongoing narrative.

Marco has been trying for a while to introduce a narrative about a live shark exhibition he visited with his parents. At the onset of the narrative, he is asked about aspects of the experience which are at best collateral to the points of interest Marco found in it.

Extract 3

- 1 Anna: = Sharks. where? (0.2) in the sea?
 2 Marco: No, Sunday staying in Rome.
 3 Anna In [Ro:m]e. ((to M., nodding))
 4 (1.0) ((Anna looks at Giulio but he is soothing his lips with an handkerchief))
 5 Anna: At an <↓exhibition.> ((to G.))
 6 Marco: At an exhibition where you saw () of sharks.
 7 [...]
 8 Anna: → Listen, but were they dead or alive?
 9 Marco: Oh::: I've seen the- the tank they are not dead
 10 Anna Ah they were in the tank
 11 Marco: Yes.
 12 Anna: → How many were they?
 13 Marco: U- uh, sharks are two.
 14 Anna: → Two. (.) but how bi?g were they?
 15 (1.2) ((Marco looks down then to Anna))
 16 Marco: Uh:::
 17 Anna: This big? ((extending arms))
 18 (0.8) ((Anna stays in the position))
 19 Marco: Uh it did not look like a hammer shark uh:::
 20 it was not uh sword shark it wasn't °sword°
 21 Anna: → Listen Marco.
 22 → was it THis:? big this shark
 23 or was it bigger?
 24 Marco: The shark and I don't know
 25 (0.8)
 26 It was a shark with monster-teeth

In answer to inquiries on whether the sharks were dead or alive, their number and size (lines 8, 12 and 14), the therapist picks on a layer of factuality seemingly distant from the more experiential or specialistic level of detail that would make the exhibition a 'tellable'. The boy answers the first question with a protest, 'Oh::: [. . .] they were not dead', as if the possibility that the sharks were dead would make the event much less remarkable. When asked about size, he starts on a comparison with other types of sharks and big fish (hammerhead shark, swordfish), offering a substantial cue to the order of knowledge he regards as appropriate. The therapist rejects the option of going into a comparative assessment and with an explicit repair of the conversational trend ('Listen Marco') she suggests another way of measuring, based on local gesturing resources. Marco's disappointment is visible in various signs of disengagement: repetition of the topicalised item and refusal to give the answer ('and I don't know'), the turn beginning 'and' being typical of both resignation and rebuttal. Once again he tries to get into a

detailed description ('a shark with monster teeth') but in what immediately follows (not reported here) the conversation will be confined, with the involvement of the other child, to the construction of an analogical representation of sharks' length.

As with the ones discussed before, questions of this type do not stem from an interest in the topic of conversation. In fact, not only does the questioner often know the answer already, and the questions are uttered in that artificial tone typical of interaction with incompetent speakers, but they do not address – in fact often do not even wait for – the aspects of the recounted experience that were striking or tellable for the children. By taking control away from the child of the way the story gets told, the entitlement to the experience and the recognition of competence (both conversational and relative to the domain the story is about) are also stripped. Similar moves deflate story-telling of its intrinsic motivation and do not enrich the relationship, besides wasting opportunities for children's exercise in complex linguistic activities. The last extract of the chapter, showing a late reprise of this story, will provide further evidence of the waste of potentialities implied by granularity mismatches.

Sequential threats

Already visible in the former examples is a disregard for the *sequential orientation* of the young patients' talk. By sequential orientation we mean the position of upcoming turns relative to a certain communicative act which they project. Meaning has been shown to be produced incrementally, setting forth the conditions for locating events within spatio-temporal coordinates.⁵ This often requires introductory talk – a *preface* – which is also a way to negotiate listeners' availability and/or success in establishing common ground (Sacks, 1992). If no problem arises with the coordinates, the preface is not opened up but met by continuers as an encouragement to proceed with the sequence. In the following interaction, this structure is compromised by repeated interrogation on preliminary information:

Extract 4

- 1 Marco: And:: I have:: videotape ItaliaUno* ((TV channel))
 2 I have seen the sunset of dawn
 3 Anna: The su:nse:t of d[awn ()
 4 Marco: [A movie
 5 Anna: From sunset to dawn?
 6 Marco: A film. that I recorded.
 7 Anna: Did you record it?
 8 Marco: Y|es:

- 9 Anna: >And you are able< to re[cord movies?
 10 Marco: [Mum did it]=
 11 = it's va:mp:ires' stuff.
 12 Rosario: No! that was Litt:le Cree:ps.

After Marco starts talking about a movie he has seen, Anna repeats its title with interrogative intonation, and Marco explains what kind of TV programme it was, namely a movie. But her next turn shows that she was actually pointing to trouble with the title-form, as she substitutes a repair request with the offer of a changed wording (not 'the sunset of dawn' but 'from sunset to dawn'). Marco ignores this and expands his previous turn, specifying that it was a recorded movie, but again he meets a repair request from the therapist addressing the expansion ('Did you record it?'). His positive answer is not accepted, and Anna directly challenges his ability to perform the action he has just attributed to himself (this was already implied in the emphasis on 'you' of the former question). Marco complies briefly and in a low tone of voice, saying that it was his mother who did it, and with a rush through goes on talking about the topic of the movie ('vampires' stuff'). This aggressive kind of repair reminds us of the type of question that Garfinkel asked his students to pose to their interactional partners, a challenge to basic interactional trust (Garfinkel, 1963); here, they are not aimed at achieving intersubjectivity but at exerting control on the formal correctness or veracity of the preceding utterances. But because the repair-requests are addressed to turns establishing premises in order to develop a further point (something we could call 'revising the premises') they are an even more serious threat to intersubjectivity than correction/repair in itself, because the meaning that every utterance gets from its position relative to what is projected is misconstrued. To paraphrase, we could say that it is the speaker's 'project' to be unacknowledged, denying him the very resource for meaning-making in conversation. Again, the boy's minimal responses and his rush through at the end of the extract, latching his answer to the subject of the movie he wanted to talk about, is evidence that such moves are indeed perceived as a disturbance in the communicative process. In support of the claim that such moves are disruptive of intersubjectivity and perceived as such by their recipients, we will look at an example in which misunderstandings follow upon questions that are disrespectful of sequential orientation.

Misunderstandings caused by expected sequential relevance

In many of the examples shown, including the last one, the children react with impatience to ill-posed questions, as shown by the quickness

with which they try to get rid of the conversational obstacles in order to pursue their sequential point. Sometimes, though, they lend pertinence to therapists' intervention and make sense of them in ways which are compatible with their sequential emergence. Such sense-making operations produce misunderstanding as to the nature of these moves.

In extract 5, Giulio mentions a Christmas tree as one of the items his father has reserved at the general store, and goes on to talk about the toys that are going to be his presents. But Luigi, the second therapist, halts him on this path and redirects him to the Christmas tree. The misunderstanding occurs in lines 6–7 and is triggered by a possible double interpretation of the Italian form 'com'è' which can mean both a request for description ('how is') and a request for reasons ('how come')?

Extract 5

- 1 Giulio: My Daddy (has ha-) you know what he reserved?
 2 at the store he bought me a Christmas tree.
 3 Anna: Ih:: how nice.
 4 Giulio: He bough- he reserved me the STRATOcoce and
 5 the rest of Dragonball VEGEtuva
 6 Luigi And how is/how come this Christmas tree?
 7 Giulio: And because he liked it.
 8 Luigi: No but how is it made
 9 Giulio: It's big ours yes. ((shows size by raising hand))
 10 ((to M)) look I got the Ci Seventeen ((type of toy
 11 in the series)) the android
 12 Luigi: Stop ((leaning hand toward G to stop him)) ((taking L's hand and
 pushing it back))
 13 Giulio: And another Vegeta, the [Stratococe
 14 Luigi: [Ask him if he had done
 15 the Christmas tree as well
 ((takes G.'s hands and points it to M))
 16 Giulio: Did you do: the Christmas tree:?

The question in line 6 is prone to misunderstanding *vis-à-vis* expected competence for at least two reasons: in terms of content, because it is a request for a description of a widely known item (Christmas trees before decoration are basically all similar except for their size); and sequentially, because the child's discourse-trajectory was already past the tree and into the issue of toys when the therapist asked the question. So since the tree was not the point of the child's turn, the question would be legitimate only as a clarification request, and not as topic-expansion, and this is exactly what Giulio makes of it. He answers to the (semantically possible) question 'How come?' – i.e., 'Why?' – and explains that

his father bought the tree because he liked it. The answer is quick and has a conclusive tone and, as in Marco's turn before, bears a sign of impatience in that it begins with the conjunction 'e' (and). The turn is directed to closing the clarification sequence and going on, but the therapist repairs this understanding and explains 'No but how it is made'. Again, Giulio complies quickly without leaving any opening for the expansion of the topic; nevertheless the answer is apt and, as we were saying, it probably picks on the one possible dimension on which to evaluate a bare Christmas tree ('It's big'). In the continuation of the sequence, Giulio tries to go on with the toy topic, this time looking at his friend and trying to ignore the therapist's vocal and gestural attempts to stop him, but at last, after a brief non-verbal duel with the hands (lines 12–15), he has to give up.

As in many other cases in these sessions, the therapists' actions are informed by their policy of valuing certain topics over others. The Christmas tree relates to one of the therapists' preferred topics, the family, whereas monsters, video games and horror stories are discouraged because they are part of the children's 'stereotypia' and thus symptomatic of their disturbance. Of course, they are also stereotypical of children in a more general sense. It could perhaps be possible to exploit the motivating force of children's best-liked topics in order to direct them into subjects of general interest, without undermining the basic methods of meaning-making.

Let us look at another occurrence of misunderstanding, this time involving Marco. The extract is taken from the same session. After the Christmas tree topic has reached a dead end, Marco has been allowed to introduce his own topic, the shark exhibition we are already familiar with. As illustrated in the comments on extract 3, he successfully bypasses the battery of questions with which his opening is met and gets into describing the different properties of the animals he has seen. The misunderstanding concerns the utterance in line 3, where the therapist responds to the information about the Jackstar shark's teeth with the objection that she does not know him. Marco's best guess is that she somehow expects to be familiar with that individual shark (line 4).

Extract 6

- 1 Marco: Jackstar is a shark which has ro- round teeth
 2 ((makes a round move with his index finger))
 3 Anna: I don't ↑know him
 4 Marco: It's not a name.
 5 Anna: Is it a race?
 6 Marco: It's a race of sharks.

The misunderstanding seems to be caused by Anna's rejection of the role of uninformed recipient; she reacts with the typical line she uses when the children bring up their 'stereotypical' subjects, i.e., 'I don't know it'. This time, though, the topic had already overcome censorship and Marco had been encouraged to tell Giulio, the other boy, about this experience. At this point, then, the objection is misplaced, and Marco makes a guess at its sense, reacting as if she did not understand that he was using a categorical name, and by implication affirming that she was *not supposed* to know Jackstar sharks (indeed, this was precisely the piece of new knowledge he was handing over to her). Anna, after a pause, decides to go along with this and asks for confirmation of another candidate interpretation of 'Jackstar' ('Is it a race?').

The misunderstandings shown above are evidence that both children expect their therapists to act in accordance with the normative requirements of mundane conversation; they trust them to do so, and expect to be credited with full speakership by having their communicative plans respected and the newsworthiness of their contributions acknowledged. They can be misled by acts which do less than this, and in trying to come up with answers to the 'why this now?' query lying at the basis of conversational sense-making, they tend to upgrade the acts they receive.

Reaching alignment

The last example illustrates an exchange in which therapist's uptakes of the patient's turns appear oriented by a more 'natural' attitude, one that corresponds more closely to what is observed in symmetric mundane conversation. The 'Time for Talking' session has been just called to a close, but Marco works at its margin to deliver another shark story. Anna accepts this and intervenes straightforwardly and economically, almost only asking for genuine clarifications, providing acknowledging expansions, uttering continuers, or silently waiting during Marco's enthusiastic account.⁶

Marco's account incorporates a clear orientation to intersubjectivity, visible in his efforts at clear pronunciation, mimicry of the shapes of central aspects of the description, and emphasis on the relevant points. He gains agency turn after turn, becoming responsible for the content of his talk and giving feedback to the contribution of the others.

Extract 7

- 1 Anna: All right. now we go in the other room =
 2 [(Marco claps one hand on the other twice)]

- 3 Anna: [= and we go do the (evaluat[ion] ((to G.))
4 Marco: [NO:! wait,
5 [First I have to do [so:meting. (.)
6 a <fish.> ((raises hand as in asking to talk))
7 Anna: Yeah.
8 (0.3)
9 Marco: The stomach, (.) the stomach of a <↓shark>
10 because he has teeth <points> ((staccato mode he mimes
something round with his hands));
11 Anna: Has POI?Nted? teeth ((taps fingers with folded hands as in jaws
movement))
12 Marco: The shark,
13 Anna: → What's the stomach got to do with it?
14 Marco: () in the <skeen,>
15 Anna: → The? skeleton?
16 Marco: No the <SKEt>. = the scren . =
17 = where they show the: = the sharks that ()
18 Anna: → Ah in the <screen?>
19 Marco: Yes:: ((nodding))
20 Anna: → There were some videos = fi- some fi[l:ms.
21 Marco: [LISten,
22 sharks EAAt >turtles.<
23 Anna: → Yes.
24 → (0.8)
25 Marco: Because sharks break them the:, she:,
26 <sh-e-lls> of:: tu = >turtle.<
27 Anna The ↓shell.
28 Marco: The sh-
29 Giulio: The ↑sh:ell.
30 Marco: Y::es. the shark ate the turtle.
31 Anna: → Mh.
32 Marco: Oh::, even dolphins they can beat.
33 Anna: → Yes ((nodding))
34 → (0.6)
35 Marco: Everyone.
36 Anna: → Even the men.
37 (.)
38 Marco: Even men.

Marco overlaps with Anna's announcement of the end of the activity to communicate that he *has* to do something, automatically raising his hand to ask for speaking rights. The permission is accorded and he starts the telling in a hurry, beginning with something about the sharks' stomach that involves their particular teeth. Anna corrects the expression (line 11) and at Marco's reprise asks again about the role of stomach. Despite these turns of hers interrupting to some extent the unfolding of the account, they are, compared to her other contributions analysed

above, more oriented to intersubjectivity. The first question could be an understanding-check, while the second, about the stomach (line 13), reveals that she is keeping track of the content of preceding turns.

To explain about the stomach, Marco has to mention the video he has seen, but has trouble with the word 'screen'. Anna's candidate-repair (line 15) is met by the child with an effort to come up with the right words, which implies first some repetitions and then a switch to a paraphrase, which is also the best strategy with hearing troubles in general (Schegloff, 1979). Anna's repair requests are not taken by Marco with the dismay we observed in other examples, but instead with efforts toward clarification. Also, his interpretation of the repairs as relevant and originated by genuine lack of understanding is not denied in the therapist's following turns, which on the contrary respond with a 'change of state token' (line 18) and an understanding check (line 20) in demonstration of the success of Marco's repair moves. After the collaborative construction of the information regarding the source of Marco's knowledge (videos), he explains that sharks eat turtles. Anna says 'yes' and waits. Expansion on the information follows about sharks being able to break turtles' shells. Anna replies, repeating one of the words that Marco had trouble with ('shell'), and Marco tries again to say it, but stops in between and looks at the other boy, who cooperates and says it for him (line 29). Marco continues with a 'yes': he confirms their interpretation and starts heading for a conclusion of the shark-eats-turtles concept, in a different phrasal format that expresses wonder for the fact. This is a story of big sea animals, with their different powers, fighting against each other, so the conclusion is built by adding other very powerful shark victims, dolphins. Anna receives this again with an affirmative uptake, verbal and non-verbal, and waits. Marco offers a remark of general value ('everyone practically') to which Anna appends her own piece of knowledge ('even men'), which Marco repeats approvingly.

This narrative evolves as a 'happy exchange', we daresay, with an ending that finds the two participants aligned in a joint conclusion (lines 35–8).⁷ Outside the cage of the didactic framework, the listener in this exchange accompanies the speaker toward the point of his contribution, which gradually comes out from the initial confusion. Motivated to share his wonder for the apprehended knowledge, Marco is able to convey both content and evaluation, and, encouraged by continuers, confirmations and pauses, can proceed to an appropriate exit. The repairs are kept to what is necessary and do not test competence; either Anna shows not to understand what Marco is talking about or offers candidates after Marco's word-search, a situation which ordinarily calls

for listeners to join in (Goodwin, 1981; see also Giulio's identical reaction in line 29). It is possible to observe Marco's consolidation of agency turn after turn: starting with the 'LISTen' (line 21), which recruits the recipient into the listener position; going on to the confirmation with which he accepts the item offered to his word-search, showing that he owns the contents the others are contributing to (lines 19 and 30); and continuing until the repetition by which he approves of Anna's own information about sharks beating men (line 38). Marco's turns lengthen and become consequential to one another once Anna has reassured him that he can talk despite the allotted conversational time having ended.

Same people, same day, same room, but the full assumption of the listener's stance has fostered the complementary speaker's role, and permitted both interactants to meet in an area of personal interest, enriched by evaluation and by cooperative co-construction.

Discussion

General educational objectives like correctness of speech, as well as therapy-specific ones like the controlling of conversational topics, have been observed throughout the extracts to conflict with the stated aim of improving children's social skills. The general strategy of the therapists appears based on the core assumption that talk must be elicited by continuous questioning. Especially when such prompts are given in ways which presuppose former knowledge of the information asked for – for instance a didactic tone of voice – and are followed by evaluation in third position (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975), the whole meaning of the interaction shifts from dialogue to interrogation, with a substantial impoverishment of the role of the interrogated participant and of the quality of the relationship. The therapists appear also unaware of the disruptive effect of opening repair sequences within an on-going production.

In previous work on classroom interaction it was observed how the organisational constraints of a classroom, the moral mission of the institution embodied in its tradition of practices, and commonsense assumptions about talk converged to produce an environment in which the natural resources of conversation were to a great extent suppressed (Fasulo and Girardet, 2002). Educational training aiming at enhancing the quality of classroom interaction often involves changing teachers' discursive moves, for instance having them abolish evaluation in third position, and producing contingent queries, suspending – for the sake of participation – correction of misspellings and the like (Orsolini and

Pontecorvo, 1992). Conversational actions are in fact context-creative and, like sharks, can beat all other attempts at context definition: in our sessions, for example, children were often told to tell things to each other (see for example Extract 5, lines 14–15) but the constant uptakes, in the form of questions, repair requests or corrections coming from the therapists, made quite unlikely the selection of the peer as addressee.

The dialogue analysed was threatened on a number of levels fundamental to spontaneous talk-in-interaction: *tellability*, that is, orientation to contents which have some kind of import for at least one participant; *granularity*, the recognition of the level of detail the other can operate at; and *sequential orientation*, the assignment of meaning to turns relative to their position and characterised by unawareness of the disruptive consequences of opening so many repair sequences within an on-going production.

Such features are by no means sheer technicalities: they imply full recognition of the speakers' position, through trust in the fact that they know what they are doing, and respect for the communication project that can be read in their sequential construction. Acknowledgment of interactional positions and trust on communicative competence are, in turn, at the bases of social order and shared reality (cf. Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1967; Luhmann 1968; Todorov, 1995).

In interacting with people who can, for reasons of age or disability, be attributed communicative impairments, it is common to withdraw interactional trust. Foreigner-talk and baby-talk can be reinterpreted as a means to layer the situated identity engaged in the interaction and give over to the other only a diminished *persona*; in a former study on family interaction we described the practice of 'backstage talk' as a safety device with which adults or older members accompanied exchanges with the younger ones, so not to be fully interacting with dubious partners (Fatigante et al., 1998). Apparently, routine contact with people who have communicative disabilities or undeveloped competences does not automatically lead to normalisation of interaction, but can, on the contrary, routinise artificial tones, impersonal topics and simplified contributions.⁸ This could be another source of explanation, different from contradictory objectives, for the artificiality in both tone and content of the examples discussed. However, familiarity with the functioning of talk-in-interaction and with the research findings on pragmatic skills in autism could support the endorsement of a different approach to conversational exchanges. For example, relying on the demonstrated competence on turn-taking and sequential construction, narrative and longer sequences could be allowed to develop instead of

privileging the adjacency-pair format. Appreciating the importance of uninformed reciprocity would allow the potential of children's pre-existing interests to be exploited instead of censoring them, through relevant questions and use of mechanisms such as the continuers, pauses, 'mirroring repetition' (Lumbelli, 1992) and change-of-state tokens, which all signal attention and interest. Awareness of the context-creative property of conversational moves would lead to avoiding of the discursive features of didactic interrogation. Taken together, the strategies just mentioned may warrant that recognition which, beside and outside therapeutic issues, are a fundamental requirement of well-being in common life.

APPENDIX

Original Italian versions of extracts:

Extract 1

- 1 Anna: Parliamo un <pochino>, della famiglia.
 2 Giulio: Ah. di Ma:r[co].
 3 Anna: [Si] =>ecco ad esempio.< Marco,
 4 ((a M)) >guarda<
 5 >facciamo- sentiamo un attimo >Giulio-<.
 6 (1.0)
 7 Anna: → Che? cos'è una fa|mi[:glia]? ((t. didattico))
 8 Giulio: [E' tu]t- ↑sono- sono =
 9 ↑sono, eh <mamma, e papà.>
 10 Anna: O:h. (0.2) >allora< sono mamma e papà,
 11 e poi chi altro c'è, nella fa[mi:glia].
 12 Giulio: [E i:o]
 13 Anna: E G[iu:lio].
 14 Giulio: [Giu:lio]. = ((dondolando il capo))
 15 Anna: → =E questa è una famiglia, no?
 16 → sono delle persone che stanno <in↓sieme>.
 17 Giulio: Eh.
 18 (1.0)
 19 Giulio: Ma pure Lina.
 20 (1.5)
 21 Anna: Allora. ↑Lina è tua cu↓gi:na.
 22 Giulio: Eh. ma è familiare ↓mi:o.
 23 ((indicando se stesso))
 24 Anna: S:i. [è] ([])
 25 Giulio: [A-] [è' na] famiglia, lu:nga. la no:stra = è [lu:nga].
 26 ((guarda A e poi L; allarga le braccia))
 27 Luigi: [((annuisce sorridendo verso G.))]
 28 Anna: → La >famiglia = di tutti< è gra:nde.

Extract 2

- 1 Luigi: Che scuola hai scelto?
 2 Marco: La scuola: (s-) (.) scuola Filippi:ni. (.)
 3 scuola Santa Lucia Filippi:ni
 4 Anna: → Mh. Si chiama così?
 5 Marco: Sì ((annuisce))
 6 Anna: → E che scuola è?:
 7 → cosa si fa in questa scuol[a?]
 8 Marco: [Santa Lucia
 9 FiliPPI:ni ((alza la testa e guarda A))
 10 Anna: Che cosa si fa nella scuola Santa Lucia
 11 Filippini?
 12 Marco: Quello che fa: che fa altre = altre scole::
 13 me fa scr(ivere,
 14 Anna: Ti [fanno scr]-
 15 Marco: [Mi fanno] co:mpiti
 16 Anna: Fare i co:mpiti,

Extract 3

- 1 Anna: = Gli squali. dove? (0.2) nel mare?
 2 Marco: No domenica stando a Roma
 3 Anna A [Ro:m]a. ((a M., annuendo))
 4 (1.0) ((Anna guarda G, ma lui è intento ad umettarsi le labbra con un fazzoletto))
 5 Anna: A una <↓mostra.> ((a G.))
 6 Marco: A una mostra che si vedevano () degli squali
 7 [...]
 8 Anna: → Senti ma erano vivi o morti?
 9 Marco: Oh::: ho visto la- la vasca non sono morti
 10 Anna Ah nella vasca stavano
 11 Marco: Sì
 12 Anna: → Quanti erano?
 13 Marco: E- eh, squali sono due.
 14 Anna: → Due. (.) ma quanto erano gra?ndi?
 15 (1.2) ((Marco guarda in basso e poi Anna))
 16 Marco: Eh::
 17 Anna: Così? ((allargando le braccia))
 18 (0.8) ((Anna rimane nella stessa posizione))
 19 Marco: Eh non somiglia allo squalo martello ohh::
 20 squalo di: ah spada non e:ra °spada°
 21 Anna: → Ascolta Marco.
 22 → era grande coSI'?:? questo squalo
 23 o era più grande?
 24 Marco: Lo squalo e non lo so
 25 (0.8)
 26 Uno squalo coi denti a mostro

Extract 4

- 1 Marco: E:: ho:: >videocassetta italiauno
 2 ho visto<.il tra:monto dell'alba:
 3 Anna: Il tramo:nto: dell'a[lba ()
 4 Marco: [Un film.
 5 Anna: Dal tramonto all'alba?
 6 Marco: Un film. che ho registrato.
 7 Anna: L'hai registrato?
 8 Marco: S↑i:
 9 Anna: >E sei capace di< re[gistrare il film?]
 10 Marco: [E' stata mamma] =
 11 =è cose di va:mp̄i:ri
 12 Rosario: No: quello è pi:cco:li Bri:vi:di.

Extract 5

- 1 Giulio: Mio papà (ha avut-) lo sai che m'ha prenotato?
 2 alla Standa m'ha comprato un albero di Nata?le.
 3 Anna: Ih:: che bello.
 4 Giulio: m'ha comp- m'ha prenotato lo STRATOcoce e
 5 il resto di Dragonball VEGEtuva
 6 Luigi E com'è quest'albero di Natale?
 7 Giulio: E perché gli piaceva.
 8 Luigi: No ma com'è fatto
 9 Giulio: E' grande il nostro sì. ((mostra grandezza sollevando la mano))
 10 ((a M)) Guarda io ho avuto il Ci diciassette
 11 l'androide
 12 Luigi Basta ((allunga la mano verso G per fermarlo)) ((prendendo la
 mano di L e spingendola via))
 13 Giulio: E un altro Vegeta, lo [Stratococe
 14 Luigi: [Chiedigli se lui l'ha fatto
 15 l'albero di Natale
 ((prende la mano di G e indica M))
 16 Giulio: Tu'hai fa:tto l'albero di Nata:le?

Extract 6

- 1 Marco: Jackstar è uno squalo che ha i de- denti rotondi.
 2 ((fa una rotazione dell'indice))
 3 Anna: Non lo con↑osco
 4 Marco: Non è un nome.
 5 Anna: È una razza?
 6 Marco: È una razza di squali.

Extract 7

- 1 Anna: Va bene. allora adesso andiamo di là =
 2 [((Marco batte una mano sull'altra))

- 3 Anna: [= e andiamo a fare la (valutaz[ione]) ((a G.))
 4 Marco: [NO:! aspetta,
 5 Pri(ma) devo fare una [co:sa. (.)
 6 un <pesce.> ((alza la mano per la parola))
 7 Anna: Eh.
 8 (0.3)
 9 Marco: Lo stomaco, (.) lo stomaco di uno <squalo>
 10 siccome ha i denti <punti> ((scandisce e mima con entrambe le
 mani qualcosa di tondo))
 11 Anna: Ha i denti a PU?nta? ((batte le dita a mani giunte come
 nell'unione di mascelle))
 12 Marco: Lo squalo,
 13 Anna: → Lo stomaco che c'entra?
 14 Marco: () nello <schemmo,>
 15 Anna: → Lo? (.) scheletro?
 16 Marco: No. lo <SCHEtto>. = lo schemmio . =
 17 = dove fanno vedere gli: = gli squali quelli ()
 18 Anna: → Ah nello <schermo?>
 19 Marco: Si:: ((annuendo))
 20 Anna: → C'erano dei video = fi- dei fil[ma:ti.
 21 Marco: [SEnti,
 22 gli squali MAngiano le >tartarughe.<
 23 Anna: → Si.
 24 → (0.8)
 25 Marco: E perchè i squali li rompe i:, gu:,
 26 <gu-s-ci> di::, ta => tartaruga<.
 27 Anna Il ↓guscio.
 28 Marco: Il gu-
 29 Giulio: Il ↑gu:scio.
 30 Marco: S::i. La mangiava lo squalo = alla tartaruga.
 31 Anna: → Mh
 32 Marco: Oh::, Anche i delfini battono.
 33 Anna: → Si. ((annuendo))
 34 → (0.6)
 35 Marco: Tutti.
 36 Anna: → Pure gli uomini.
 37 (.)
 38 Marco: Pure uomini.

NOTES

1. See studies collected in Goodwin (2003).
2. The child studied in Local and Wootton (1993) and Wootton (1999) was aged 11.4 and was diagnosed with severe autism, with an estimated linguistic age of 2-2 $\frac{1}{2}$.
3. The Centre is inspired by the theories and procedures developed by Theo Peeters (1998), who proposed a treatment exploiting the tendency of

individuals with autism to build their understanding of their surroundings, and to figure out appropriate action, using associations between concrete aspects of the world. The treatment sets up highly structured settings and tasks in order to enhance patients' operational skills and self-efficacy. However, the conversational techniques analysed are not directly related to the author's approach.

4. We refer here to a first and second therapist because Anna, whom we designate as first, is the one playing a major role in the colloquia, although in principle they have each been assigned a patient and have equal responsibility. She is also the one speaking the most during the joint interviews.
5. Cf. Labov and Waletzky's (1967) *Orientation* section found at the beginning of elicited narratives.
6. On therapists' interventions *vis-à-vis* children's initiatives see Fiore (2003).
7. These are not the very last lines of the sequence, though, because they go briefly into scuba divers as victims of the attacks.
8. Sella, personal communication.