Keynote Speaker

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Title

Neurodiversity and Pragmatics: A New Conceptual and Methodological Lens for Understanding Language Use in Autism?

Abstract

It is routinely assumed that autistic and other neurodivergent people have a deficit with social communication, especially when it comes to figurative language and to implied meanings. However, in the past thirty years the way linguists and psychologists study the communicative abilities of autistic people has evolved from a deficit-, to a difficulty-, and finally to a difference-based view. The latter proposes that what – to the eyes of neurotypical people – may appear as a deficient understanding of figurative language may in fact be a different understanding, characterised by unconventionality and creativity and different sensitivities to context. Take for example, a metaphor like 'Josh was a volcano'. The "correct" interpretation according to neurotypical participants to research would be that Josh felt angry. But this approach excludes alternative, and potentially more imaginative, understandings. An autistic person might understand the metaphor as indicating Josh's creative state. "Josh was a volcano" could mean that he was exploding with ideas and energy. In this presentation I will review the evidence in favour of the neurodiversity view from the perspective of pragmatics. We will see a wealth of findings which suggest that people with different mindsets have a different set of norms for language use, as well as evidence that challenge the neurodiversity view. Independently of what the eventual verdict on neurodiversity might be, it does put forward a new conception of autism and it suggests fruitful methodological changes to how language research is conducted.