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The autistic pseudosignifier: Imaginary dialectization of signs in the clinic of autism

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Abstract

Specificities in language and speech development are a defining feature of autism. Several psychoanalysts have hypothesized that these specificities originate in a unique mode of access to language that exclusively relies on signs rather than signifiers. Compared to the flexibility and dynamism of a language made of signifiers, a language made of signs is rigid, cumbersome, and poor in its capacity to encode complex concepts. This article investigates the supplementary methods that autistic subjects adopt to compensate for these setbacks, methods that enable them to encode complex concepts into their vocabulary using iconic signs. These methods are then developed into a psychoanalytic theory on the use of iconic signs in the strengthening of autistic language in the context of art therapy. A variety of case studies are then used to illustrate how newly gained access to a level of conceptual complexity can also bring dramatic changes to their lives.

Keywords

autism, concepts, Lacanian psychoanalysis, language, semiotics

Language specificities in autism

Specificities in language and speech development are a defining feature characterizing individuals who are diagnosed today on the autism spectrum (ASD) as well as one of the major determinants in their prognosis (Mawhood et al., 2000). It is estimated that about 40% of the individuals diagnosed according to this scale do not use spoken words to communicate (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Those who do develop language proficiency commonly use language in a literal or concrete way that is lacking in generativity and limited in flexibility (Hobson, 2012). This affects their ability to

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comprehend, engage with, and adjust to the perspective of other people and limits their ability to construct stable conceptual frameworks that transcend the immediate context of experience (Erard, 1985, p. 112). When it comes to the understanding of symbolism, these difficulties give rise to marked disadvantages that are especially noticeable in symbolic play (Herrera et al., 2006; Hobson et al., 2009), particularly when attempting to encode general concepts (e.g., "flock"), ambiguities (e.g., "it") and abstractions (e.g., "time") into their vocabulary (de Marchena et al., 2015; Grandin, 2006; Plaisted, 2001).

A variety of alternative and augmentative language and communication aid systems for autistic people have been developed in the past; among them, the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) has been the most notable. PECS is part of the Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) framework and is based on predetermined conditioning schemes that attach signs to referents using various reward systems. It aims to teach autistic children that iconic signs can be used for communication, such as in articulating responses to requests or for commenting on the environment; that signs can also be discriminated from one another according to their desirability and then used to form requests such as "I want the ball" (Ganz et al., 2012).

PECS, however, does not provide autistic subjects with the capacity to encode abstract, ambiguous, or general concepts. Rather, it focuses on the acquiring of rigid relationships between iconic signs and referents: it teaches the child a predetermined objective knowledge and, in this sense, disregards the unique ways autistic children think as well as the unique solutions they find for their own problems. Most importantly, it does not concern itself with the subjective effects that are a major goal of psychoanalysis: those effects, beyond pedagogy, that are at the level of one's body, identity, and situatedness in the humanized world.

This article investigates unique modes of encoding that do grant autistic subjects access to this level of conceptual complexity. Toward that end, an etiological description of the role that language plays in autism is presented in the context of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic teaching. On the basis of clinical evidence, a theory of the dialectization of iconic signs is developed that is premised on the synthesis of nonconcrete, idiosyncratic images and that, ultimately, can provide a method of tackling the symbolization difficulties reported by autistic subjects. This theory is then associated with a unique psychoanalytic position in regard to the treatment of autism that aims to enrich one's vocabulary and have an effect on one's subjective position.

Alienation in language

"Alienation" is a prominent term in 20th-century political and social theory that indicates a separation, disruption, or fragmentation of what originally belongs together (Wood, 1998). Alongside many of his contemporaries, Lacan implemented this term at several points in his teaching: first, in his account of the subject's alienation in the mirror stage (Lacan, 1966/2006, pp. 75–81);[1] second, in his account of the alienation in the Other (Lacan, 1964/2001, pp. 203–229); finally, in relation to what he refers to as the object cause of desire (Lacan, 1964/2001, p. 258). These correspond with Lacan's three registers of the psyche: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. This paper will focus on

symbolic alienation to develop the psychoanalytic understanding of the autistic mode of access to language.

In order to demonstrate the role of alienation in the etiology of autism, I will attempt to provide an intuitive illustration of the fissuring effect that the entry into language has on the subject. Human babies are born as organically inadequate organisms that utterly depend on their caretakers to survive (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 77). Even if, according to a common assumption, the fetus's instinctual needs are always immediately satisfied in the womb, after a baby is born, there necessarily comes a moment where the baby's needs are not satisfied. For instance, the baby is hungry in the middle of the night, but the caregiver has not woken up to feed it. This supposed moment of nonsatisfaction introduces a lack into the baby's psychic economy, which compels the baby to cry. The cry, according to Lacan, prior to any function it may have in conveying a message, is already by itself an "appeal to the Other" (Lacan, 1955–1956/1997, p. 287, 1960–1961/2017, p. 85). Through the cry, the baby's first demands are articulated in their mother's tongue and addressed to the Other in order for the latter to quench the unbearable tension roused by their unfulfilled instinctual needs.

The (big) Other, is one of Lacan's most complex concepts. Lacan uses this term to refer to the radical alterity, or other-ness, essentially associated with the function of language in the psyche. Lacan even goes as far as equating the Other with the function of symbolization (see also: the symbolic register) in its particular manifestation for each subject. Thus, the Other is considered to be a locus, outside one's conscious control: a locus where units of meaning determine one's psychic reality on a symbolic level (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 40). For the sake of the discussion in this section, the Other is to be understood as the locus of language that precedes the existence of the subject and is introduced to it in its entry into language or, more particularly, as the locus of the language shared by subjects in culture.

In Lacan's (1964/2001) engagement with alienation in his 11th seminar, we see that when vocalizing its first demands in an appeal to the Other, the baby is "alienated" on three corresponding levels:

1. The baby translates something of their most intimate instinctual dynamic—the original vivacity of their body—into a linguistic utterance that can never fully encapsulate it.
2. The baby does so by relying on an alien language that predates their existence and belongs to the Other.
3. By appealing to the Other with the cry, the baby retroactively constitutes the Other as the place from which their needs can be answered.

Every subject's clinical structure—being by definition a subject of language (*parelêtre*)—can be determined by their subjugation to the "alienation in language." Specifically, the subject's clinical structure and its corresponding clinical phenomena (i.e., symptoms) are determined by a spontaneous supplementary reaction that comes to treat the trauma of alienation.[2] Correspondingly, Freud (1894) considers repression to be a spontaneous reaction that determines the neurotic clinical structure and its corresponding neurotic symptoms (p. 46). In a similar vein, I argue that the fundamental etiological determinant

of autism is a particular reaction to the alienation in language which results in the rejection of the domain of signifiers (Lefort & Lefort, 2003, pp. 14, 27, 52–56; Maleval, 2009, pp. 81–90, 2019).[3] This unique autistic rejection is causative rather than consequential and has been developed in great length elsewhere (Brenner, 2020). However, this causative factor has to be nuanced by stressing that it is not the case that the rejection of alienation gives rise to autism, which is then treated in psychoanalysis. It is that this rejection and its corresponding autistic phenomena that are the autistic way to treat the trauma of alienation. In this sense, it is this particular mode of treatment for the alienation in language which is autism by itself.

For that reason, one of the most well-known Lacanian psychoanalytic observations regarding autism specifies it by the refusal of the appeal to the Other (Lefort & Lefort, 2003, p. 14). One can identify this refusal quite early in a child's lack of eye contact with their caregiver, the absence of crying even in cases where the child is hungry, as well as in the preference for indirect or idiosyncratic forms of expression that avoid the subjective factor in speech (Brenner, 2020, p. 193; Esposito & Venuti, 2008; Maleval, 2009, pp. 88, 96; Senju & Johnson, 2009). All of these demonstrate that the Other has been expelled from being the place from which the baby's needs will be answered. However, at this point, another distinction in our understanding of the notion of the Other in Lacan's psychoanalysis should be clarified. While the Other is indeed considered to be the locus where units of meaning determine one's psychic reality, it is now important to stress that Lacan (1962–1963/2014) explicitly determines these units to be "signifiers" and the Other as the "locus of signifiers" (p. 23). The Lacanian understanding of the Other as the locus of signifiers focuses the discussion on the "lack of the Other" in autism on the subject's relationship with language. Accordingly, it gives another twist of the screw to our understanding the psychoanalytic etiology of autism in psycholinguistic terms. We now see that the causal factor in autism is not the refusal of language as a whole, but the refusal to adopt signifiers from the Other, namely, the rejection of the domain of the signifiers shared by subjects in a particular culture (Brenner, 2020, pp. 214–216).

The rejection of the domain of signifiers does not necessarily imply that autistic subjects are "exiled from language" (Maleval, 2012, p. 37). Borrowing a term coined by Lacan (1989), it is clear that many autistic subjects are "rather verbose" (p. 20). But this verbosity is dependent not on the use of signifiers but on other elementary linguistic units: signs (Maleval, 2009, pp. 95, 185). It is through the sign that autistic subjects can "give birth" to language and thus gain more freedom and satisfaction in their lives (Evans & Dubowski, 2001; Lefort & Lefort, 1994).

Autistic sign language

In order to better understand the role that the subject's relationship with language plays in autism, we will take a short excursion into Lacan's linguistic distinction between the signifier and the sign.[4] This distinction provides further grounding for what has so far been described as the autistic concrete and idiosyncratic use of language (Hobson, 2012; Tustin, 1969; Volden & Lord, 1991), difficulties in symbol formation (Baron-Cohen, 1987; Hammes & Langdell, 1981; Segal, 1957), and the obstacles in achieving some degree of self–object differentiation (Mayes & Cohen, 1994; Volkmar, 2000).

Lacan's understanding of the signifier and the sign can be viewed as a "generous" augmentation of selected parts from Charles Sanders Peirce's (1977) "sign theory" or "semiotics" and Ferdinand de Saussure's (1959) "general linguistics." Starting with Peirce (1977), his definition of the sign goes as follows: "I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its object, and so determines an effect upon a person" (p. 80). In this excerpt, we identify three distinct elements composing the sign. The first is the *sensory form of the sign*, which could be anything serving to represent something else like a written word, an image, or even the sight or smell of smoke.[5] The second is the *referent*, which is whatever the sensory form of the sign represents. For Peirce, the referent would not be a real object in the world but something more akin to a concept that provides an approximate knowledge of an object in the world. The third is the *person*, a vantage point from which the process of interpretation takes place and the connection between the sensory form of the sign and the referent is made.

Peirce (1982) classifies three distinct types of signs—the index, the symbol, and the icon. The *index* is a sign that refers to an object through a necessary causal relationship or physical connection. This relationship could be the way a weathercock points in the direction of the wind or the way smoke is a sign of fire. The *symbol* is a sign that refers to an object by virtue of some observed or general social convention. This means that a symbol does not entail any necessary resemblance or natural link with its object and, thus, necessitates the appropriation of the intersubjective cultural context that grounds their relationship. The *icon* is a sign that refers to an object by virtue of its resemblance or similarity to one of its visual qualities (color, tone, brightness, etc.). This could be the way a portrait is associated with the person it depicts, or the way the figure on a bathroom door might resemble the male/female form (Peirce, 1982, pp. 53–56).

In his engagement with the sign, Lacan (1955–1956/1997) diverges from Peirce's sign theory when he relegates the sign to the level of a signifying unit that embodies a direct biunivocal relationship between a *sensory form* and a *referent* (p. 167). According to this understanding, a language that is composed of signs would be comprised of constant relationships between words and objects. The subject would then be thought to encounter objects in the world and associate them with signs, thus gaining knowledge and extending the scope of its potential future experiences. Conceiving of language as being composed of signs *à la* Lacan could be referred to as a "naive" understanding of language as a system that describes all the arrangements of things in the world and all the facts in the world.

However, Lacan insists that a "natural language"—that is, any human language that evolves through its use and repetition without being deliberately engineered (Lyons, 1991, pp. 68–70)—cannot be conceived in this way. Drawing from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Lacan (1955–1956/1997) states that a natural language is better accounted for on the basis of the functioning of signifiers (p. 167).

One of de Saussure's (1959) contributions to semiotics is his definition of linguistic signs as being bilateral, namely, as consisting of two linguistic elements: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is a *phonological element* (sound-image): a basic vocal expression like "ba," "du," "ah," and so forth. The signified is a *meaningful concept*. De Saussure argues that there is no natural relationship between the signifier and the signified and emphasizes that this relationship is arbitrary and predetermined by convention

only (pp. 68–69). De Saussure adds that, by themselves, signifiers do not signify anything and do not refer to any object or concept. However, when several signifiers are opposed one against the other, the signified is produced. Human beings listen to signifiers and, when they perceive signifiers as a complex of oppositions, they conceive of the signified. This might be the most crucial characteristic of language according to de Saussure: the fact that it does not convey meaning through constant relationships between words and referents in the world but that meaning is solely engendered through the arbitrary relationships between signifiers.

Lacan was first introduced to the work of de Saussure in 1931 under the influence of Édouard Pichon and is known to have made several alterations in his theory (Roudinesco, 2014).[6] Most of all, he is known to have placed great weight on the function of the signifier in his psychoanalysis and separate it from the sign. The locus of signifiers, termed by Lacan as the Other, is the place where the oppositional formations of signifiers are kept at a particular cultural and historical time. This means that Lacan views language as a dynamic field of interacting signifiers, interchangeably engendering meanings according to different laws which govern their internal grammar. This perspective on language depicts it as being dynamic as well as open to contextualization and change; a language that is quite distinct from a rigid and cumbersome sign language.

When comparing Lacan's conception of the signifier and the sign, we see that they are distinct on several levels:

1. In terms of *referentiality*, the signifier can only refer to other signifiers. In contrast, the sign necessarily has a referent to which it is permanently linked.
2. In terms of *intersubjectivity*, the relationships between signifiers are acquired from the Other: the set of signifiers shared by subjects in culture. Comparatively, the sign is always adopted personally, its validity is self-determined and not necessarily shared with other people.
3. In terms of *fluidity*, the relationship between signifiers is contextual and changes in different situations as well as along the historical development of a language. On the other hand, a sign is permanently linked to its specific referent under the specific circumstances in which it was established—it always stands for the same thing (Evans & Dubowski, 2001, pp. 24–25). This means there is no fluidity in the meaning a sign conveys.
4. In terms of *complexity*, the fluidity in the relationships between signifiers makes them excellent vehicles for encoding general concepts, ambiguities, and abstractions. Conversely, the rigid relationship between the sign and its referent hampers its capacity to express meaning that is not precise and related to a particular object in the world.

Building on the distinction Lacan makes between the signifier and the sign, several Lacanian scholars have developed the hypothesis that the specificities in language and speech development characterizing autism can be accounted for by asserting that the autistic mode of access to language chiefly relies on signs (Brenner, 2020, p. 233; Maleval, 2009, pp. 95, 185). In this sense, one could imagine "autistic sign language" as a two-dimensional matrix composed of sequences of signs, in which sensory forms and

referents are permanently linked. Autistic subjects sometimes call it a "factual language," explaining that it is commonly devoid of the subjective factor of speech, lacking intonation and depleted of affect (Maleval, 2009, pp. 76, 85, 119). Others describe it as a technical "code language," akin to a computer language, emphasizing their appreciation of its clarity and precision at the price of foregoing the intuitive and contextual nature of a natural language (Grandin, 2006, pp. 22, 27). Most importantly for the sake of our discussion, the semiotic perspective on autistic sign language will provide a fertile ground for the explication of the particular difficulties autistic subjects have when encoding general concepts, ambiguities, and abstractions into their vocabulary as well as their overcoming of these difficulties.

So, what do autistic subjects say about encoding complex concepts? In terms of general concepts, autistic mnemonist and mathematician Solomon Cherechevski testifies that he could never truly grasp the fact that the general concepts like "pig" [Russian: *svinya*] and "sow" [Russian: *khavronya*] designate the same animal (Luria, 1987, p. 118). Williams (1998) adds that a "cow" stops being a cow for her when it is addressed as a part of a "flock" (p. 43). As will shortly be demonstrated, for autistic advocate and writer, Temple Grandin (2006), the concept "dog" makes no sense without her recounting in her mind all the dogs that she has seen in her life (p. 12). A similar phenomenon manifests in the autistic preference for memorizing proper names rather than common names (Mottron et al., 1996).

Some words in language are deictic or indexical, meaning they remain ambiguous when not referring to a specific situational context of particular messages. This makes these words difficult to encode when exclusively relying on signs. Accordingly, Grandin (2006) describes how adjectives such as "over" and "under"; verbs like "jumping"; and pronouns such as "the" and "it" had no meaning for her when expressed in isolation (p. 15).

The same goes for abstract concepts. Grandin recounts how abstract concepts that have no concrete referent in the world remain unapproachable for her. As will soon be further elaborated, she explains that concepts such as "peace" and "honesty" as well as idioms such as "thy will be done" were hard to incorporate into her vocabulary (p. 17). Cherechevski adds that his natural propensity for mathematics left him helpless when trying to encode abstract mathematical concepts like "infinity" and "nothing" (as cited in Luria, 1987, pp. 131–133).

These examples and many more emphasize a certain level of conceptual poverty that characterizes autistic sign language in comparison to a language composed of signifiers (Burnett & Jellema, 2013).

Pseudo-Concepts in autism

Many autistic subjects and case studies of autistic clients attest to the fact that the conceptual poverty that characterizes autistic sign language is not ineluctable. These demonstrate that, by using their memorizing skills and the manipulation of signs, autistic subjects are able to encode and understand complex concepts. This section will focus on the case of Temple Grandin, whose extraordinary memorizing skills and particular talent in manipulating mental imagery enable her to encode general, ambiguous, and abstract

concepts into her vocabulary using *iconic signs*. It is on the basis of Grandin's (2006) detailed description of this process that a psychoanalytic theory of the dialectization of signs will be developed and provided with clinical support.

According to Maleval (2012), "the autistic child particularly appreciates icons . . . which schematically represent the entity, person, event or attribute" (p. 40). This appreciation is widely elaborated in Temple Grandin's (2006) book *Thinking in Pictures*, in a section where she describes how she enjoys studying images in a photographic way (p. 13). Using her remarkable memorizing skills, she can "photocopy" a written page or a piece of art and later take the images she memorized and rearrange them in her mind to create new images. She says that this works like a computer graphic editor, placing the images she remembers on a computer screen, superimposing them, rotating them in three-dimensional space, redrawing them, and even playing and replaying them like a movie (pp. 12, 15). Grandin adds that her capacity to "think in pictures" is like an internet image search engine such as Google images. The more pictures she collects into her database, the more complex her imaginary constructions become and, at a certain point, like a jigsaw puzzle, they assemble into "picture categories" that are akin to "word categories" that form concepts (pp. 31–32).

This is how Grandin (2006) describes her capacity to encode general concepts into her vocabulary like the word "dogs":

> My concept of dogs is inextricably linked to every dog I've ever known. It's as if I have a card catalogue of dogs I have seen, complete with pictures, which continually grows as I add more examples to my video library. If I think about Great Danes, the first memory that pops into my head is Dansk, the Great Dane owned by the headmaster at my high school. The next Great Dane I visualize is Helga, who was Dansk's replacement. The next is my aunt's dog in Arizona, and my final image comes from an advertisement for Fitwell seat covers that featured that kind of dog. My memories usually appear in my imagination in strict chronological order, and the images I visualize are always specific. There is no generic, generalized Great Dane. (p. 12)

Grandin emphasizes that, in comparison to nonautistic subjects, who are able to conceive of vague generalized pictures or semispecific pictures in their minds when they think about the word "dog," in her case, she conceives of a set of the specific pictures of all the dogs she has ever seen.

Most children who enter language by using signifiers overgeneralize at lexical, morphological, and syntaxial levels (Ambridge et al., 2013). Their acquisition of concepts is characterized by a movement from the general to the particular. Accordingly, for example, a nonautistic child would begin by identifying all birds as "chicken," only later learning to distinguish between a "chicken" and a "duck." On the contrary, many studies suggest that autistic children have difficulties generalizing (de Marchena et al., 2015; Plaisted, 2001). Correspondingly, the process Grandin (2006) implements to enter language starts with the specific and works toward generalization: "My thinking pattern always starts with specifics and works toward generalization in an associational and consequential way" (p. 16). As the aforementioned example of the word "dogs" illustrates, Grandin constructs a visual configuration composed of a catalogue of associated particular images; this configuration functions as a general concept that she can then use

in order to understand the world and interact with others. In this case, the common name designating the species "dog" is encoded into Grandin's vocabulary by opposing a multiplicity of pictorial proper names, each referring to an image of a particular dog.

In a most compelling paragraph, Grandin explains how she is able to encode abstract concepts:

> I visualized concepts such as peace or honesty with symbolic images. I thought of peace as a dove, an Indian peace pipe, or TV or newsreel footage of the signing of a peace agreement. Honesty was represented by an image of placing one's hand on the Bible in court. A news report describing a person returning a wallet with all the money in it provided a picture of honest behavior. (p. 17)

In the same way she encodes even more complex idioms, by breaking them down into a specific configuration of images. For instance, the "power of glory" is constructed by interposing the image of a semicircular rainbow and an electrical tower.

Grandin (2006) adds that the encoding of complex concepts into her language not only gives rise to a quantitative effect of an accumulation of signs but also has a qualitative effect that is meaningful, all-encompassing, and affects her subjective position. Particularly, she says that whenever she revises a concept in such a way, it is like "getting a new version of software for the computer" (p. 11). These "software updates" also characterize moments of subjective transition and major change in her life, like graduating from high school and enrolling in a college. She can encode these moments of personal growth and change in her life by associating them with an image of herself going through a particular door. "Each door or gate enabled me to move on to the next level," she says, testifying to the transformative power of her linguistic-imaginary inventions (p. 18). The next section will delve further into the nature of these subjective effects in psychoanalytic terms.

The inventive supplementary constructions mentioned above are referred to by Maleval (2009) as "pseudo-concepts" (pp. 210–211). "Pseudo" literally means: supposed or purporting to be but not really so; false; not genuine; or resembling or imitating. Correspondingly, Grandin (2006) admits that the power of her pseudoconcepts is limited. For instance, when a text has no concrete meaning, like the text in philosophy books, Grandin is unable to convert it into pictures and it remains incomprehensible for her (p. 15). She adds that there are many other concepts that she has not been able to encode using visual corollaries, particularly notions pertaining to "getting along with people" (p. 20).

Grandin's (2006) method for encoding pseudoconcepts is distinct from the linguistic skills acquired through other facilitative methods such as PECS. First, encoding pseudoconcepts does not have anything to do with attaching a sign to a referent. On the contrary, it is a sophisticated process in which a sign that lacks a referent is encoded into one's vocabulary. Second, Grandin's method itself is idiosyncratic in the sense that the encoding of pseudoconcepts is done by interposing iconic signs that she relates to specific events in her life, which have a particular meaning for her. Accordingly, a system based on Grandin's method cannot offer predetermined schemes for encoding pseudoconcepts and, correspondingly, cannot predict in advance what signs would be useful for each and every subject. This necessitates adopting a case-by-case framework.

Third, the method does not rely on semantics—what Lacan would refer to as the "signified"—but instead imitates the way signifiers function in the process of signification. Grandin concerns herself neither with matching dictionary definitions nor with the symbolic form of the icons she chooses; she fabricates oppositional formations of signs that are not necessarily semantically related to one another. Moreover, one of the most remarkable features of Grandin's (2006) method is its capacity to affect her position as a subject. These are therapeutic effects beyond the level of pedagogy and are disregarded by language and communication aid systems that rely on the applied behavior analysis (ABA) model.

Finally, Grandin's (2006) account focuses on the construction of pseudoconcepts using iconic signs. This method of encoding is common to autistic subjects who are considered to be "visual thinkers," that is, individuals who think in photographically specific imagery. However, Grandin emphasizes that there are different types of specialized thinking that can be said to characterize autistic subjects. Other than visual thinkers, there are also "music and math thinkers" who think in patterns, identifying repetitions and relationships between sounds and numbers instead of photographic images. There are also "verbal logic thinkers" who think in word details. These are autistic subjects who are word specialists, excelling in studying languages, statistics, and other forms of organized knowledge (pp. 28–29). Therefore, we see that while autism is considered as a single clinical structure, it has many shades which depend on the particular use of signs and implemented by each subject. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that each of these types of autistic thinkers could develop different methods capable of constructing pseudoconcepts in a way homologous to the one presented by Grandin (2006).

Lacanian perspective: Imaginary dialectization of signs

This section will develop Grandin's (2006) particular method for encoding complex concepts using iconic signs into a psychoanalytic theory of autism. It will focus on the way that signs can be manipulated in the creation of pseudoconcepts using Lacan's theory of the master signifier and its "dialectization" during an analysis.[7] By doing so, the following section will offer a theory of the "imaginary dialectization of signs" as a possible course of treatment for autism.

One of the prototypical forms of intervention in a Lacanian analysis concerns what Lacan calls "master signifiers." As noted earlier, Lacan (1955–1956/1997) relies on the linguistic theory of signifiers to expound on various functions of the psyche (p. 167). In the late 1960s and 1970s, he added that among these signifiers, there are some qualitative distinctions; one of them being the distinction between what he calls a "master signifier," which he denoted as *S1*, and the rest of the signifying chain, which he calls "binary signifiers" and denotes as *S2*. Binary signifiers are just "regular" signifiers that take part in the process of signification through their relationships with other signifiers. Master signifiers are privileged signifiers that are disproportionately important in relation to binary signifiers. They are usually signifiers that have the utmost value for the subject and their validity is commonly accepted without debate (Bracher, 1994, p. 112). Master signifiers receive their privileged position in the discourse of the subject because they come as an answer to those aspects of discourse where libidinal elements cause a fundamental

distortion, that is, the places where discourse is unable to "say it all." This is why master signifiers have an important role in the distribution and arrangement of affects in the libidinal economy of the subject (Hook & Vanheule, 2016, p. 6).

According to Fink (1997), master signifiers are often recognized in analysis by the fact that the client repeatedly comes back to them (p. 77). They could be terms like "death," "embarrassment," "narcissism," or any other term that always seems to halt the subject's speech: to close down meaning-making and stop the chain of association, instead of opening things up (p. 135).

According to Bailly (2009), one of the main features of an analysis is to bring to light the master signifiers in the unconscious (p. 64). Fink (1997) articulates this in a more nuanced way when he argues that one goal of analysis is to "dialectize" master signifiers (p. 77). In this process, the analyst's interventions aim to "clear the blockage" imposed by the master signifier in the client's discourse (Hook & Vanheule, 2016, p. 7). The term "dialectization" is used by Lacan to refer to the way in which the symbolic opposition of two terms can affirm a third term (Miller, 1996, p. 245). In this sense, dialectization is to be understood as a symbolic effect that goes beyond the constancy and fixation of one master signifier producing a movement in the signifying chain (Fink, 1999, p. 43).[8]

Fink (1997) adds that this is achieved by bringing master signifiers into relation with other binary signifiers. In other words, by insisting that the patient might elaborate more around the dead ends and introducing possible alternate avenues for elaboration, to turn these dead ends into pathways (p. 78). This can be represented by the famous Lacanian formula *S1—>S2*. This formula states that, on the one hand, *S1* is positioned at the beginning of a signifying chain, giving rise to the articulation of *S2*. However, on the other hand, in terms of the signifying process, *S2* retroactively determines *S1* and, more particularly, the position of the subject in relation to *S1* (Hook & Vanheule, 2016, p. 6).

Lacan (1966/2006) argues that "the signifier represents the subject to another signifier" (p. 694). In this sense, when the master signifier is linked with a new set of signifiers, a shift in the subject's position in relation to this signifier can happen as well. Hook and Vanheule (2016) call this a "movement from the subjugation [to the *S1*] to subjectivization [of the *S1*]" (p. 8). In other words, when a master-signifier is dialectized, the subject assumes a new position in relation to its discourse. Instead of repetitively circling the total opacity of the master signifier, the client articulates something of the inane hold that the signifying process has on their own subjective co-ordinates. This kind of articulation has a subjective effect and its cultivation is part and parcel of the treatment of neurosis.[9]

Grandin's (2006) construction of pseudoconcepts can be said to be structurally homologous to the dialectization of master signifiers described by Fink (1999). However, it is not reducible to the clinic of neurosis—because instead of dialectizing a master signifier, Grandin (2006) dialectizes a multiplicity of iconic signs. As stated earlier, the sign is a linguistic unit that embodies a rigid biunivocal relationship between a *sensory form* and a *referent*. When one encounters a sign that lacks a referent it becomes very difficult to encode it into one's vocabulary. This is the problem autistic subjects face when attempting to encode general, ambiguous, and abstract concepts. Grandin's solution to this problem is to establish a relationship between a multiplicity of iconic signs in order to produce an iconic category that functions as the referent for the original sensory form.

This iconic category produces an effect in which the meaning of the whole matrix of interposed signs exceeds the particular meanings of its parts. Or, in other words, it produces a new concept that is more than the qualitative accumulation of the signs that compose it.

Grandin (2006) could be said to interpret a set of images as a metaphor rather than a sequence of literal representations (Arendell, 2015, p. 73). In compliance with Evans and Dubowski (2001), we might argue that in doing so she develops a level of "representational insight" that leads to a sensitivity to symbolization (p. 59). Therefore, I suggest referring to it as the *imaginary dialectization of signs*. Compared to the *symbolic dialectization* of the master signifier, this unique form of linguistic manipulation is *imaginary*, first, because it is achieved through the use of iconic signs and, second, because it imitates the functioning of signifiers in the process of signification: imitation being an imaginary compensatory strategy implemented in psychotic stabilization (Lacan, 1955–1956/1997, p. 251).

The effects of the imaginary dialectization of signs correspond with what Maleval (2021) describes as the "thawing of the master signifier" in autism (p. 176). Recall that master signifiers have an important role in organizing the libidinal economy of the subject. Accordingly, Maleval (2021) argues that a "retained" alienation in autism blocks the operationality of the master signifier and thus freezes the subject's affective life (p. 78). In comparison, I argue that, rather than "thawing" and reinstating the master signifier, the dialectization of signs offers a substitute for its libidinal function. In this sense, it gives rise to particular alterations on the level of drive functioning, where the "aimless" movement of the drive circuit is circumvented by a "rim" that locally organizes its trajectory (Brenner, 2020, 2022). In doing so, the imaginary dialectization of signs can be said to treat the disjunction between affect and language in autism (Maleval, 2009, p. 216), providing the subject with an opportunity to expand their affective vocabulary in a safe and nonthreatening way. One could argue that it demonstrates the way art can sometimes dialectize what cannot be encoded in symbolic representation and, in this sense, could also be referred to as a unique form of sublimation (Freud, 1910, pp. 15, 29).[10]

The clinic of the pseudosignifier

Fink (1997) explicitly addresses the dialectization of master signifiers in autism when he comments that "autism might be seen as a case in which there is one or only a very few master signifiers that are virtually impossible to dialectize" (p. 78). In contrast, we see now that it is not the scarcity of master signifiers that characterizes autism but rather the autistic subject's sole recourse to the sign. What we discover in Grandin's (2006) account is that through the imaginary dialectization of signs, autistic subjects can in fact encode general, ambiguous, and abstract pseudoconcepts into their vocabulary, giving rise to a substantial effect on their subjective position that is commonly associated with the function of the master signifier.

Clearly, the autistic pseudoconcept fulfills some of the functions of the Lacanian signifier. However, can we say that the autistic subject, by dialectizing the sign, is able to gain access to the level of the signifier? There is an ongoing debate regarding the autistic disposition towards the use of signs instead of signifiers. Inherent to this debate

is a question: Do we see in autism the "primacy of the sign" or do autistic subjects demonstrate a "sole recourse to the sign"? In recent years, Maleval has softened his approach regarding the autistic sole recourse to the sign. For instance, Maleval (2018) argues that autistic subjects do have a passive and reduced mode of access to the domain of signifiers in addition to their recourse to the sign. He adds that some autistic subjects develop an expressive language that can progressively "mobilize the signifier" (Maleval, 2021, p. 182). The autistic dialectized sign might indeed personify a mode of reduced access to the functions of the signifier. However, as I have stressed in the past, even if the sign incorporates some of these functions, this does not necessarily make it one (Brenner, 2020, p. 222). Recall that a signifying chain is composed of phonological elements that by themselves signify nothing, while the autistic pseudoconcept is a construct made of a multiplicity of signs, each referring to a particular image. In this sense, instead of determining the pseudoconcept as a fully fledged signifier, I suggest referring to it as a *pseudosignifier*: a unique construction, reserved to the work of autistic subjects with signs. For autistic subjects who reject the Other as the locus of signifiers, it becomes a supplementary construction that marks out a space for an ancillary "synthetic Other" composed of signs and pseudosignifiers (Maleval, 2009).

From a Lacanian perspective, even though the prefix "pseudo" might literally mean "fiction," it does not lose its relation to truth. For Lacan (1959–1960/1992), "'fictitious' does not mean illusory or deceptive as such." On the contrary, according to Lacan, "every truth has the structure of fiction" (p. 12). Correspondingly, in terms of the pseudosignifier, it is not so much its falsity that is at stake, but rather its meaningful effects and the dramatic change it introduces into one's life.

So far, we have attributed the meaningful effects of the pseudosignifier to the construction of concepts. However, one must note that the dialectization of the sign does not only provide an intellectual gain. As noted earlier, akin to the dialectization of the master signifier, the dialectization of the sign also affects one's subjective position. In the more psychodynamic clinical setting, this type of dialectization will commonly take the form of artistic creation in the context of art therapy.

For instance, in their work with autistic subjects, art therapists Evans and Dubowski (2001) argue that visual art can facilitate the creation of a sign system that can form the basis of further language development. They add that, through their engagement with images, autistic children can form a language and develop the vocabulary of that language (p. 36). In their model of interactive art therapy, Evans and Dubowski use art as a means of linguistic expression that gives a particular form to that which is being experienced, expressed, and communicated in the therapy room. They state that "like language, art has its own structures and mechanisms for creating, shaping and concretizing 'meaning'" (p. 58). In practice, Evans and Dubowski encourage playful drawing experiments that help establish mechanisms for encoding complex representations, which are in turn necessary for the development of symbolic systems that enable the expression of more complex abstract concepts. Evans and Dubowski focus on the maintenance of the transference[11] and the introduction of materials and activities that enable the development of the dynamics that condition the capacity for symbolization (p. 101).

Martin (2009) proposes a practical framework of art therapy for autistic subjects that allows for the development of flexible thinking and the ability to encode abstract concepts

Figure 1. "Birthday party" composed of a cup, a cupcake with a candle, a cake with candles, and an ice cream cone. From *Art as an early intervention tool for children with autism* (p. 70), by N. Martin, 2009, Copyright 2009 by Jessica Kingsley Publishers. Reprinted with permission.

into their vocabulary. He states that "art is both literally and figuratively a useful 'drawing board' for the mind's pictures" (p. 67). He provides a clear schematic for the creative process in a clinical setting and elaborates its steps (p. 68). Martin adds that abstract representation can be developed through artistic projects that aim to create personal symbols that represent the child's interests or feelings. When facilitating the development of these complex artistic representations, Martin notes the child's favorite themes and materials as well as the length of their playtime; he then rates their activity along a continuum from least independent to most independent (p. 69). By supporting the child's independent inventions in the transference, a nonfigurative or abstract representation can sometimes be created using elements of art such as color, composition, scale, placement, and so forth. Martin then compels the child to assign associations with the abstract elements (e.g., blue is cold, jagged line is frustrated, etc.) until a title is attached to the piece. Correspondingly, in his work with a 3-year-old autistic child, the child molded several figures out of clay, each referring to an object recalled from memory. When asked to name these objects, the child calls them: cup, cupcake with candle, cake with candles, ice cream cone (see Figure 1, left to right). As Evans (1998) suggests, in naming a scribble as something, children open up both a possibility for the interpretation of other new things and the ability to see relationships between them. She adds that this can compel them to create symbols that form the scaffolding for the future development of their linguistic skills (p. 21). Thus, in a case presented by Martin (2009), after naming some clay figures, a child goes on to compile them into a montage that he names "birthday party." By doing so, he encodes the concept into his vocabulary and consolidates the anxiety that arose when recalling the memory of his birthday party (p. 70).

In a similar vein, Emery (2004) describes how, in the context of art therapy, a 6-year-old autistic child first draws a picture of his favorite restaurant—a McDonald's sign with big arches. Then the child draws a picture of the exterior of the restaurant including its playhouse. Following the second drawing, the therapist asks the child how he gets there, and the child responds that his mother drives him. The therapist then asks the child to draw this picture. After some struggles the child draws a picture of a car and a picture of his mother and himself. He goes on to put the three pictures side by side and draws a ground line across the bottom of all three pages. At this moment, the child is able to contextualize several images for the first time. In reviewing this case, Gazeas (2012) suggests that this signifies significant growth in his therapy, which finally leads him, in the end of his therapy, to gift his therapist with a booklet including drawings of his favorite restaurants.

Commonly, when asked to draw a picture of a tree, an autistic child will draw a particular tree that they encountered in the past. These cases exemplify the use of art materials in a concrete rather than a symbolic way (Segal, 1957). Similarly, in a case study presented by Rees (1995), a 30-year-old autistic adult draws a collection of elements but is unable to come up with a single title to describe them. Thus, a single drawing that includes the figures of Santa Claus and a dog is called "Santa Claus and dog." When the opposition of two terms does not affirm a third term—as seen in this case—we cannot say that this artistic creation involves dialectization.

In terms of working with autistic adults in the context of art therapy, Elkis-Abuhoff (2008) presents a case of an 18-year-old person named Emma diagnosed with Asperger syndrome who comes to therapy complaining of difficulty in school and socializing with her peers. Elkis-Abuhoff describes how, through her work with collages, progress in Emma's therapy could be noted. He describes how Emma was initially only able to draw collages that included nonhuman elements that did not touch each other. As the therapy progressed, Emma was able to add new elements into the collages, particularly human elements, and that helped her express her feelings and to connect with other people. Elkis-Abuhoff describes a dramatic change in Emma's position in society and a drastic increase in her involvement with her peers at school. Finally, he remarks that, through her work with the collages, Emma could open a "new channel of communication that had been previously unavailable and unknown to [her]" (p. 269). He adds that the exploration of the notions raised through her work with images and their elaboration in her therapy enabled Emma to "incorporate the exercise outcomes into her identity, changing her perceptions and behaviors" (p. 269).

When addressed through the psychoanalytic framework developed in this article, the aforementioned clinical case studies can be described as exemplifying the imaginary dialectization of signs using figurative iconic representations. By attaching a common name to constructs composed of a multiplicity of pictorial proper names, the clients presented in these case studies experience the creation of pseudosignifiers. In doing so, they encode complex concepts into their vocabulary but also address affective factors in their therapy, bringing forth important changes in their position as subjects in the world. In other words, they supplement their initial refusal of the alienation in language. This enables them to safely deposit intimate aspects from their affective life in a semantic domain that can be shared with others.

In previous publications, I have identified several modalities of the implementation of the sign in the clinic of autism for its protective, dynamic, and social gains (Brenner, 2020, pp. 259–261; 2021, 2022). If it is indeed the case that the dialectization of signs has substantial clinical effects, the work with iconic signs in the context of art therapy can be added to the list of the different modalities of the implementation of the sign in the clinic of autism. This modality necessitates a distinct psychoanalytic position in the treatment of autism. By adopting this position, the analyst facilitates the production of pseudosignifiers by identifying points of stoppage in the subject's conceptual encoding and assists in the dialectization of signs. As is seen in the examples provided by Elkis-Abuhoff (2008), Emery (2004), Evans (1998), Evans and Dubowski (2001), Martin (2009), and Rees (1995), this approach, when implemented in the context of art therapy, can address communication difficulties and assist in developing symbolic systems that provide the means for encoding complex concepts into one's vocabulary. It is by developing a mastery in the dialectization of signs that art therapy can provide autistic subjects with the conceptual complexity that enables a sense of autonomy that can provide a link to the outer world, leading to other substantial subjective effects and impacting their lives (Martin, 2009). It is not the acquisition of relationships between signs and referent, but rather the mastery of the dialectization of signs and the synthesis of pseudosignifiers that is the aim of this psychoanalytic orientation. In this, it differentiates itself from other more pedagogical approaches, such as PECS, that aim to teach language to autistic children. However, most of all, it is unique in claiming that this mastery can be gained only through the particular inventions brought about and cultivated in the transference on a case-by-case basis.

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Notes

1. On alienation in the mirror stage in autism see Brenner (2021).
2. Comparatively, Bruno Bettelheim (1967) suggests that autism originates in a "spontaneous reaction" to a moment of extreme helplessness that presents itself in a completely unpredictable and life-threatening manner from which there is no escape (pp. 63–69).
3. Maleval (2019, 2021) speaks of a "retained" or "partial" alienation, which blocks the operationality of the master signifier.
4. For a full elaboration of Lacan's distinction between the function of the signifier and the sign, see Brenner (2020, pp. 223–235).

5. Peirce uses the same term to refer to the sign as a sensory form and the sign as a higher order structure entailing a multiplicity of elements: sensory form, referent, interpretant.
6. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1992) argue that Lacan made five alterations in de Saussure's notion of the sign: he reversed the position of signified and signifier; he abbreviated the signified and signifier; he removed the arrows on the side of the ellipsis diagram; he removed the ellipsis around the signifier and the signified; most importantly, he put an emphasis on the bar separating the signifier and the signified.
7. Lacan's particular use of the term "dialectization" (French: *dialectisation*) will be elaborated in this section.
8. See more on Lacan's (1966/2006) "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious" (pp. 646–670).
9. It is important to stress that, in the Lacanian orientation, the treatment of neurosis, perversion, and psychosis takes different directions. An analyst would not take the same position in their work with a neurotic client as they would with a client suffering from psychosis. The same goes for autism.
10. This symbolic limitation is described by Lacan (1966/2006) as the "scant reality" that is at the core of the surrealistic dissatisfaction with symbolic representation (p. 77).
11. Evans and Dubowski (2001) describe transference in terms of the development of the therapeutic relationship and the establishing of attunement and a working alliance.

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