

## *Writing in Autism as a Possibility of Enunciation /* **A Escrita no Autismo Como Uma Possibilidade de Enunciação**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In the educational environment, students with autism often present difficulties in participating in group activities, isolation, immature language and fixation on specific themes. It is important to highlight that students with autism have difficulty, or do not understand, metaphors and other forms of non-literal language. Our objective is to analyze the enunciative movements present in a narrative written by an autistic student, confirming the subject's slip in language. To reflect on the subject's relationship with written language, we use as a theoretical reference the concepts of enunciative linguistics by researcher Émile Benveniste (1902-1976), who defines enunciation as the individual act of putting language into operation and configures specific marks of the subject in language. A student diagnosed with autism, 14 years old, without comorbidity, enrolled in the eighth year of Elementary School II at a private school, participated in this study, who is monitored in the Specialized Educational Service room, in the city of Cabo de Santo Agostinho, Pernambuco. The analysis of the written narrative showed that the student presents enunciative movements indicative of the unique handling of written language, marking his subjectivity in the language.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Autism; Enunciation; Teaching; Language; Subjectivity.*

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## RESUMO

No ambiente educacional, estudantes com autismo costumam apresentar dificuldades em participar de atividades em grupo, isolamento, linguagem imatura e fixação em temas específicos. É importante ressaltar que o estudante com autismo tem dificuldades, ou não compreende, metáforas e outras formas de linguagem não literal. O nosso objetivo é analisar os movimentos enunciativos presentes em narrativa escrita por um estudante autista, confirmando o deslize do sujeito na linguagem. Para refletir sobre a relação do sujeito com a linguagem escrita, utilizamos como referencial teórico os conceitos da linguística enunciativa do pesquisador Émile Benveniste (1902-1976), o qual define enunciação como o ato individual de colocar a língua em funcionamento e configuram marcas específicas do sujeito na linguagem. Participou deste estudo um aluno diagnosticado com autismo, 14 anos de idade, sem comorbidade, matriculado no oitavo ano do Ensino Fundamental II de uma escola privada, o qual é acompanhado na sala de Atendimento Educacional Especializado, na cidade de Cabo de Santo Agostinho, Pernambuco. A análise da narrativa escrita apontou que o estudante apresenta movimentos enunciativos indicativos do manuseio singular da linguagem escrita, marcando a sua subjetividade na linguagem.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Autismo; Enunciação; Ensino; Linguagem; Subjetividade.

## 1 Introduction

This paper is part of a discussion on the writing of a student with autism, based on his proximity to writing in the classroom. It is known that in relation to writing, autistic students show deficits in the combination of aspects of syntax, morphology and semantics (Walenski; Tager-Flusberg, Ullman, 2006), and this fact is a reflection of the deviations that these individuals have in the impairment of language levels, since there is a deficit in the understanding and production of words with meanings similar to those used conventionally. This behavior is explained by Barros (2011), from the structural perspective of linguistics, as a specific functioning of autistic language, which is "stuck" in the syntagmatic axis of the language, justifying the autistic's difficulty in sliding through the language chain and attributing other meanings to the words or statements uttered.

We believe that in the autistic student's writing, there are language movements that would give the student access to the symbolic world. The use of the code that writing represents gives the subject the chance to communicate, to talk about their wishes and desires. It is considered that, in autism, writing takes on a subjectivizing role because, in this case, there is a failure in the construction of language networks (Jerusalinsky, 2012), relationships with people and objects, which results in the emergence of automatisms that, in turn, require another to subjectivize them so that the child can enter the symbolic field. Through writing, students with autism "can transmit something of themselves, can recognize themselves, can recognize the other, which can then give access to reciprocity" (Bernardino, 2015, p.105).

In addition, these concerns arose from reflections on the process of monitoring the development and analysis of texts written by students with autism at school, which is an area little explored in linguistic studies. It is still common in research on autism to find considerations about language highlighting echolalia, sound stereotyping and neologisms, not taking into account the socio-historical context and very unique peculiarities of the subjects, as well as elementary school Portuguese language teachers often not knowing how to act in teaching texts and the linguistic system, because they do not understand the relationship between autistic students and language.

The data analyzed was collected from a narrative written by a 14-year-old autistic student, enrolled in the eighth grade of elementary school II at a private school in the municipality of Cabo de Santo Agostinho, who participates in the Specialized Educational Assistance room. We considered the specific and unique aspects of the text produced, based on Émile Benveniste's theory of enunciation (2005; 2006). We argue that the enunciative movements presented in the autistic student's text can be understood as language phenomena that indicate the singular mode of functioning, since we take enunciation as the individual act of putting language into operation.

## 2 The Autistic Subject's Relationship with Writing

Studies in the fields of psychiatry and neurology, published in the American Psychiatric Association (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) in 2014, configure autism as a neurodevelopmental disorder that makes up a spectrum alongside Asperger's Syndrome, Invasive Developmental Disorder and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. In common, all the categories involved in Autism Spectrum Disorder are characterized above all by difficulties in social interaction, motor and language stereotypes. The latter includes aspects related to mutism, vocalizations, babbling, random cries, neologisms, echolalia and specificities in writing (Cavalcanti and Rocha, 2001; Fernandes, 1995, 1996, 2003; Ferrari, 2007; Kanner, 1966; Silva, 2012).

At school, autistic students often show isolation and difficulty participating in group activities; immature language and difficulty understanding non-literal or subjective information, such as inferences, ironies and jokes, due to the extreme literalness with which they understand information. (Ney and Hubner 2022). Matos (2012) explains that students with ASD generally show deficits at the pragmatic level. This particularity is called "pragmatic dysfunction", a term used to

define the lack of ability to understand an expression in different situations, taking into account the context.

This discussion is emphasized in the context of autism, where autistic individuals may experience a block when faced with a written activity if the statement requires them to understand the figurative meaning of the language, such as metaphors and ironies. They may also find it difficult to start and finish a subject and have limited interests, only wanting to write about them, and writing is then represented as a sense of subjectivity that goes beyond communication. Authors such as Bialer (2015) and Maleval (2017) describe the experiences of autistic people who have used writing to relate their experiences. These works highlight the subjective nature of writing for these individuals, since this practice gave them the opportunity to reorganize themselves psychically and express their feelings and anxieties.

In addition, Maleval (2017, p. 219) describes that "the autistic person is commonly interested in written signs or drawings because they are reassuring objects that allow a certain escape from solitude, without facing the presence of the Other". This statement provides further food for thought when it comes to written text, which can be a suitable medium for students with autism to express themselves. Students with ASD generally learn to read very early (ASSUMPÇÃO JR, 1997), but they write with slow and clumsy movements, due to difficulties related to fine motor skills and spatial relationships. They find it difficult to develop a plot for abstract subjects; they do better by writing a process step by step.

This highlights the importance of stimulating writing through textual production for these students, because in this case, the process of knowledge goes far beyond formal education. It is, therefore, a possibility for the subject to express themselves. In this way, "[...] writing is constituted as a place of enunciation of the subject, insofar as he also makes his way through the process of inscription in language, given from the bond with the other" (Milmann, 2017, p.480). Thus, writing allows the subject with autism to reorder their position in relation to the subjective space (Bastos, 2012). Therefore, the possible particularities found in the autistic subject's writing, affirms their presence in the linguistic universe, going beyond formal academic content or the development of an isolated skill, to be a complex and broad construction, which will be a source for the resumption of the autistic student's subjective structuring.

Bearing in mind that students with ASD have particularities when it comes to expressing themselves in their texts, and because they have difficulties reading between the lines and understanding concepts, the teacher needs to take on the role of the other in reading these texts

so that they can support favorable learning outcomes. Therefore, we believe that pedagogical practice in the common education system should reflect a welcoming stance towards a student with ASD, paying attention to textual productions, where the teacher and student engage in a dialog, with the text being a possibility for them to encounter discursive practices and always intending to overcome difficulties, with the teacher playing the role of interlocutor.

### 3 Conceptions of Written Enunciation

In order to reflect on the subject's relationship with writing, we will base ourselves on Émile Benveniste's Enunciative Linguistics, which defines enunciation as a particular act of using language. It is worth noting that Benveniste did not reflect directly on the notion of teaching writing throughout his studies. However, we believe that based on his reflections on language, language and the speaking subject who lives in society, it is possible to infer notions which authorize a basic theoretical path for reflecting on writing. We sought out Benveniste because, in his studies, he produced a unique way of thinking about important concepts, prioritizing a subjective way of studying language.

We believe that this singularity, in which the expression of man in and through language is privileged, allows us to see the student as a textual producer, occupying his place as the subject of language. According to Endruweit (2004), writing ceases to be a transposition of the oral and at the same time abandons its function as an aid to memory, with writing being rehabilitated and becoming autonomous as an internal appropriation, structured and subject to the language system. And it is this structure that brings it closer to linguistics and Enunciation Theory. So we can reflect that the structure of language does not cease to constitute a system even if it considers enunciation. It is important to understand this statement for the written manifestation, because the discussion we are highlighting here is the acceptance that the subject who writes, leaves marks of their experiences, and it is pertinent to understand the product of enunciation as the consequence of the use of language.

Returning to Endruweit (2004) when he states that going further, it is possible to see in writing, also an act of approximation of a subject marked in the enunciation produced, also in writing the speaker is a parameter, it is a necessary condition for the enunciative act. Therefore, understanding language before enunciation only as the possibility of language (PLG II, 81) means that writing, pure form, is at one moment only the letter, the semiotic representation. After the

enunciation, the fullness of this writing, the semanticization and transformation into discourse, this movement is the work of the subject in language who, in writing, records what cannot be said, only shown.

In addition, writing from this enunciative perspective is conceived as a possibility of exercising the historical necessity of meaning for the subject, recording possible social relations, providing specific and unique conditions for enunciation. This is necessary work, due to the high-level abstractions that distance it from the automated relationship with speech, and which is placed on the subject in and through the writing process. In this vein, we can say that the subject, by appropriating language and converting it into writing, an image of language, transmutes their experience of language into written signs, socially (com)shared among the members of a given society, of a given culture, in such a way as to enunciate in and through writing. These relations of meaning that make up Benveniste's theoretical formulation become visible when he states that:

[...] Every acquisition of writing involves a series of abstractions. There is a sudden conversion of language into an image of language. For man in a state of nature, this is something prodigious and extremely difficult. Language, in fact, is an activity, a behavior in which one is always in a situation of dialogue. The transition to writing is a complete turnaround that takes a long time to accomplish. The speaker must let go of this representation of spoken language as exteriorization and communication (BENVENISTE, 2006 p. 130, student's note).

As Rodrigues, Augustine and Araújo (2020) state, when writing is mobilized in the exercise of language, in the exercise of signification, it projects the subject who says, who exercises language, who enunciates, constituting a way of bearing witness to their identity. To this extent, writing, as an image of language, not only constitutes its abstraction, but is also a place where the problem of meaning can be scrutinized, since, as Benveniste teaches:

[...] the problem of meaning is the problem of language itself, and since language appears to me as a landscape that moves (it is the place of transformations) and since it is made up of different elements (verbs, names, etc.), meaning comes down to looking for the way of signifying proper to each of the elements in question (BENVENISTE, 2006, p. 194, emphasis added).

As stated by the linguist, writing, like language, (com)carries the two modes of significance, the semiotic mode and the semantic mode, because it is up to the subject, in exercising this linguistic form, to "recognize" the written and socially placed graphemes and "understand" the significance evoked by them. Therefore, to reflect on writing as the product of an enunciative act

from this perspective is to situate oneself in the dimension of historicity in order to deal with each experience of the subject in the actualization of language in discourse as a human register in language, since to think of language outside of its use is to exclude the human and the historical. According to Silva (2018), studying written text using this approach seems to be a development predicted by Benveniste at the end of "The formal apparatus of enunciation", when he highlights spoken enunciation and written enunciation as complex forms of discourse, which can be analyzed based on the outline of a formal framework of enunciation as a general phenomenon. It is in this view that Knack (2012) defends oral and written texts as specific phenomena situated within enunciation, conceived as a general phenomenon. It is then in this articulation of the formal apparatus for the practice of texts that we conceive of each written production as a unique enunciative manifestation, with specific linguistic characteristics that mark the speaker's relationship with his enunciation and the specific way in which he implants the speaker before him.

Working with language in written texts in the classroom must be inclusive and requires an effective look and commitment on the part of Portuguese language teachers when they set out as linguists to describe the text in operation, from a point of view that takes meaning into account. As Toldo (2021) states, it is language in use and language organized into texts that enable us to get to know the speaker who lives and acts in society; who speaks to another man. Thus, it is not enough to know what each of the units of language that make up an utterance means; it is necessary to understand what relationships these units of the linguistic system maintain with other units in a given situation of use.

#### 4 Methodology

The research in this paper is characterized as a qualitative case study, which is not concerned with numerical representativeness, but rather with a deeper understanding of a social group, an organization, etc. For Minayo (2001), qualitative research works with the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and attitudes, which corresponds to a deeper space of relationships, processes and phenomena that cannot be reduced to the operationalization of variables.

Initially applied in Anthropology and Sociology studies, as a counterpoint to the dominant quantitative research, qualitative research has expanded its field of action to other sciences, such as Linguistics, more specifically to the field of language acquisition. We will base our research on

Silva's (2009) considerations on enunciative-based language acquisition and on Émile Benveniste's enunciative theory, which does not have a single model for research analysis, because as the enunciation itself is unique and unrepeatable, the corpus determines the enunciative perspective of analysis.

### 3.1 Collection and analysis procedure

The text analyzed originated from a narrative written by a 14-year-old autistic student during a school activity. The participant was instructed to choose freely between two themes proposed by the researcher: i) Desert island or ii) An encounter with a superhero. The first theme was chosen and the student was asked to produce a text without using an eraser and without a set space limit (written lines).

It's worth pointing out that there was no intervention by the researcher from the regular classroom or the ESA professional in the construction of this narrative; he followed the students' writing process and was the only person who spoke to them during the construction of the texts.

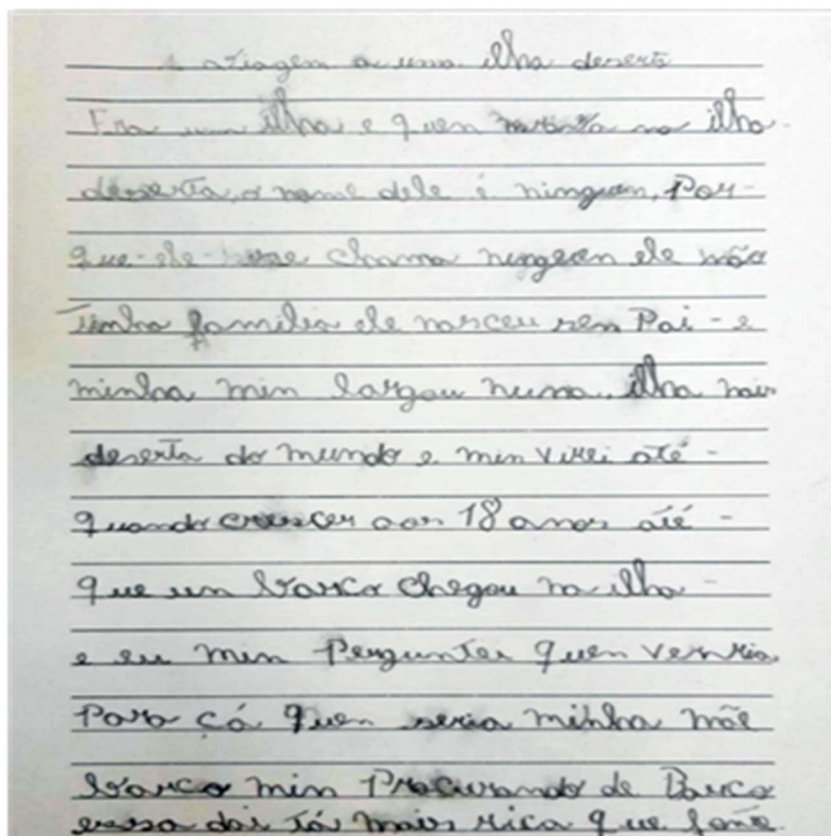
### 3.2 Data analysis

In this paper, we highlight written production as a means for autistic students to enter language, as opposed to the traditional clinical discourse found in diagnostic manuals, which point to decontextualized, resistant and repetitive writing.

Supported by Benveniste's (2005; 2006) enunciative considerations, we argue that the particularities present in the autistic subject's written text may suggest engagement in language, composing a particular way for this subject to enunciate and constitute themselves in language. Let's take a look at the student's text below (Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Student's text





Source: Text written by the autistic student in the AEE classroom

We notice that the author of the text respects the formal patterns of a narrative: there is a sequence of events with the presence of a character and a narrator who are surrounded by a defined space, time and linear plot. By using the common opening expression of children's stories "Era uma Ilha" (It was an island), recalling "Era uma vez" (Once upon a time), the student, the subject of the utterance, reveals an approach to storytelling, as well as demonstrating, in a pragmatic context, the opening of the communication channel with his interlocutor: the person who requested the text. This contradicts what Assumpção Jr. (1997) says about the difficulty autistic students have in developing a plot with an abstract theme.

In the text, the repetition of the words "nobody", "island", "boat" and "source" stood out, composing the subject's universe of experiences on the pirate theme and perhaps revealing the feeling of autistic loneliness reported in specialized literature, since the terms "nobody", "island" and "boat" in particular refer to a state of isolation or aimless wandering. The enunciative movement that establishes the "I" in language can be perceived by a listener/researcher who is not focused on grammar and spelling rules.

The term "island", present right from the title, invites the other/reader, the subject's interlocutor, to share his feeling of loneliness, since it calls for a "trip to a desert island", this trip being a journey to a place or "I" that is (un)known, deserted, unpopulated, alone: the island. In other words, the island is none other than the writer himself, perceived through the linking of other terms used in the text, such as nobody. Let's take a look at the following excerpt:

"[...] his name is nobody. Because his name is nobody, he had no family, he was born without a father, and my father left me on a deserted island in the world, and I stayed there until I was 18."

The term nobody also refers to loneliness, to someone alone, without a family, "a nobody", without a name, marked by the absence of father and mother, when the latter is "erased" in the passage "and my mother left me". The separation from the other is also present in the spaces between the lines left on the paper, completely taken over by written language. However, the subject, the author of the text, takes the sense of travel, adventure and isolation from the theme to construct his text, indicating his subjective relationship with the proposed theme. Bialer (2015) and Maleval (2017) have already reported that some autistic people use writing to relate their personal experiences.

In the excerpt "[...] a boat arrived on the island and I asked myself who was coming here, who would my mother be, looking for me by boat.", there is a subject (the island) who encounters a still unknown other (the boat) that removes him from autistic solitude. The enunciative movements showed us that the student handles written language in a unique way, referring to himself in the discourse, marking his subjective presence in language. He doesn't shy away from the topic, but talks about himself to the other, opposing what is exposed in the literature: autistic people have a decontextualized, resistant and repetitive language.

### **Final considerations**

We believe that the analysis of the text has shown us that, even though they all have the same disorder, this student handles written language differently from one another, marking the subjective movements in language. In addition, the aspects presented in the autistic subject's narrative are opposed to what is exposed in the diagnostic manuals, such as decontextualized, resistant and repetitive language, with a coherence and cohesion of ideas despite the escape from the tem, at times, marking the subject's enunciation. Therefore, it is necessary to promote

reflections on the teaching of the Portuguese language to autistic students, based on the enunciative perspective, with regard to textual production, so that it enables the student's independence in their writing process, as well as fostering discussion about the place of autistic students in the school environment.

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