

Language Use in Children With Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

(Signed)

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... Nothing we do is complete ...

No statement says all that could be said ...

We lay foundations that will need further development ...

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

Excerpts from Romero's Prayer, attributed to K Untener

PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Publications and Presentations	iv
Table of Contents	vi
Index of Tables	x
Index of Figures.....	xii
Glossary of Abbreviated Terms.....	xiv
Abstract.....	xvi
Chapter 1 Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Language.....	1
1.1. Overview of Thesis	1
1.2. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	7
1.2.1. Introduction.....	7
1.2.2. What is known about ADHD	8
1.2.3. Issues in understanding the nature of ADHD	13
1.2.4. Summary of ADHD	20
1.3. Exploring Language Associated With ADHD.....	20
1.3.1. Introduction.....	20
1.3.2. Definition of terms.....	21
1.3.3. Variations in identified language difficulties.....	28
1.3.4. Ways of evaluating language	29
1.3.5. Limitations of previous work.....	38
1.3.6. Issues in language development and assessment.....	44

1.4. Summary	48
Chapter 2 A Framework for Investigating Language Use	50
2.1. Introduction	50
2.2. Notions about language in children with ADHD	51
2.2.1. Information from previous research	52
2.2.2. The place of Specific Language Impairment	58
2.2.3. A theoretical basis for exploring language use	61
2.3. Describing language use	65
2.3.1. Systemic Functional Linguistics	66
2.3.2. The SFL perspective on language issues in ADHD	73
2.3.3. The SALT programme	81
2.3.4. Descriptions of the texts	83
2.4. Summary	84
Chapter 3 Methods	86
3.1. Introduction	86
3.2. Ethics	87
3.3. Subjects	87
3.3.1. Recruitment	88
3.3.2. Selection criteria	89
3.3.3. Sample	93
3.4. Experimental procedure	95
3.4.1. Setting	95
3.4.2. Data collection	95
3.5. Data	102
3.6. Data analysis	104
3.6.1. Clause structure	106
3.6.2. Thematic structure	107
3.6.3. Imperative mood	112
3.6.4. Quantity and lexico-grammar	114
3.6.5. Spoken language	118
3.6.6. Conventions of written language	119
3.6.7. Description	119

3.7. Statistical methods	119
3.7.1. Quantitative analyses	120
3.7.2. Descriptive outcomes.....	123
3.7.3. Reliability.....	124
3.8. Summary	126
Chapter 4 Results of the Study	127
4.1. Introduction.....	127
4.2. Differences between ADHD and control children.....	128
4.2.1. Comparisons of formal language assessments.....	131
4.2.2. Summary of formal test information	137
4.2.3. Overall comparisons of elicited texts.....	137
4.2.4. The effect of mode of expression and text type.....	145
4.3. Summary of results	151
Chapter 5 Discussion	152
5.1. Introduction.....	152
5.2. The Limits of Formal Testing In ADHD	155
5.3. Interpretations of Thematic Choices.....	156
5.3.1. Revisiting theme	157
5.3.2. ADHD, mode of expression, and text type affect theme	159
5.4. Interpretations of Clause Structure Choices	164
5.4.1. ADHD, mode of expression, and text type affect clause structure.....	164
5.5. Interpretations of Lexico-grammatical Choices.....	167
5.5.1. Understanding grammatical intricacy and type/token ratio.....	167
5.5.2. ADHD and mode of expression affect grammatical intricacy and TTR ..	168
5.6. Interpretations of Behaviour When Children With ADHD Speak	169
5.6.1. Observations of spoken language and associated behaviours	170
5.7. Interpretations of the Use of Written Conventions in Texts.....	172
5.8. Macro Textual Organisation	173
5.9. Length of Texts	173
5.10. Summary of the Discussion	175
5.11. Clinical Applications	176
5.12. Limitations of the Study.....	178

5.13. Directions for Further Research.....	180
5.14. Conclusions.....	182
References.....	184
Appendix A Parent Questionnaire	195
Appendix B Attrition of Initial Participants.....	198
Appendix C ADHD and Control Groups: Age, CELF and TOPL scores	199
Appendix D Method of Estimating Socio-economic Status.....	200
Appendix E Transcription Markers and Text Examples.....	201
E1.1. Transcription markers used for spoken texts	201
E1.2. Text examples from control children.....	201
E1.3. Text examples from children with ADHD.....	204
Appendix F Clause Division	207
F1.1. Examples from control children.....	207
F1.2. Examples from children with ADHD	209
Appendix G Examples of Mazes	211
Appendix H Spelling Errors.....	213
H1.1. Errors made by control children:	213
H1.2. Errors made by children with ADHD:	214
H1.3. Punctuation errors	217
Appendix I Generalised Linear Mixed Model Data	218
Appendix J Formal Test Scores	219
Appendix K Raw Data Tallies for Descriptive Variables.....	221
Appendix L Logistic Regression Outcomes	223

INDEX OF TABLES

Table 1.1	Criteria for the diagnosis of ADHD (inattentive type).....	11
Table 1.2	Criteria for the diagnosis of ADHD (hyperactive/impulsive type).....	12
Table 1.3	Criteria for the diagnosis of ADHD (combined type).....	12
Table 2.1	Example of Theme (source: Butt <i>et al.</i> 2000).....	76
Table 3.1	Background information for paired children with ADHD and control children.....	89
Table 3.2	Variables within overarching categories.....	106
Table 3.3	Examples of simple topical theme in spoken and written texts of controls.....	108
Table 3.4	Examples of multiple theme (textual and topical) in spoken and written texts of controls.....	109
Table 3.5	Examples of multiple theme (interpersonal and topical) in spoken and written texts.....	110
Table 3.6	An example of multiple theme (textual, interpersonal, and topical) in spoken and written texts of children with ADHD.....	110
Table 3.7	Examples of marked theme in spoken and written texts.....	111
Table 3.8	An example of predicated theme in a written text.....	112
Table 3.9	Examples of imperative mood in spoken procedural texts.....	113
Table 3.10	Examples of imperative mood in written procedural texts.....	113
Table 4.1	Observed differences between ADHD and control groups in use of language features (‘●’ indicates observed difference).....	130
Table 4.2	Observed differences between ADHD and control groups in use of language features (‘●’ indicates observed difference); group effects only.....	131
Table 4.3	Comparisons of CELF total, receptive, and expressive language, and TOPL median scores for children with ADHD and control children.....	132
Table 4.4	Comparison between children with ADHD and control children for descriptive variables.....	138
Table 4.5	Overall comparisons between children with ADHD and control children for measures of quantity.....	139
Table 4.6	Odds ratios for observed group main effect differences.....	143
Table 4.7	Odds ratios for observed group main effect differences in spoken only and written only.....	144
Table 4.8	Odds ratios for interactions between group and mode of expression.....	146
Table 4.9	Odds ratios for interactions between group and text type.....	147
Table 4.10	Odds ratios for the interaction between group and text type for number of mazes.....	148
Table 4.11	Odds ratios for interactions between group, mode, and text type.....	149

Table 4.12	Summary of odds ratios derived from logistic regression for suitable variables	150
Table B1	Attrition of Initial Participants	198
Table C1	Summary statistics for age and two formal test outcomes (CELF; TOPL)	199
Table D1	Index of Education and Occupation	200
Table D2	Index of relative socioeconomic disadvantage	200
Table G1	Examples of mazes in spoken story retell texts of control children.....	211
Table G2	Examples of mazes in spoken recount texts of control children.....	212
Table G3	Examples of mazes in spoken procedural texts of control children.....	212
Table G4	Examples of mazes in spoken story retell texts of children with ADHD .	212
Table G5	Examples of mazes in spoken recount texts of children with ADHD.....	212
Table G6	Examples of mazes in spoken procedural texts of children with ADHD .	212
Table J1	Formal test scores and comparisons.....	219
Table J2	Breakdown of mean CELF-3 results.....	220
Table J3	Breakdown of median CELF-3 results.....	220
Table K1	Raw counts for variables of associated behaviour for both modes, and each text type. Categorical variables; N = 11	221
Table K2	Raw counts for variables of macro textual organisation for both modes, and each text type. Categorical variables; N = 11	222
Table L1	Outcomes of logistic regression showing degrees of freedom, deviance, and p-values	223

INDEX OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1.	Content and expression in examples of semiotic systems (Eggins, 1994, p18). Reproduced by kind permission of Continuum International Publishers.	68
Figure 2.2.	Levels or strata of language (Eggins, 1994, p21). Reproduced by kind permission of Continuum International Publishers.	68
Figure 2.3	Theme (adapted from Eggins, 1994, p274). Reproduced by kind permission of Continuum International Publishers.	78
Figure 3.1	Control child's (C17) use of clauses and a clause complex (shown bracketed) for spoken story retell.	107
Figure 3.2	Example of TTR as calculated by SALT RV8 from written story retell text of child with ADHD (S11).	115
Figure 3.3	Example of TTR as calculated by SALT RV8 from written procedural text of child with ADHD (S11).	116
Figure 3.4	Example of the calculation of grammatical intricacy in the spoken story retell text of control child (C09).	117
Figure 3.5	Example of the calculation of grammatical intricacy in the written procedural text of child with ADHD (S03).	117
Figure 4.1	Comparison of CELF-3 total language standard scores for children with ADHD and control children.	134
Figure 4.2	Comparison of CELF-3 receptive language standard scores	134
Figure 4.3	Comparison of CELF-3 expressive language standard scores	135
Figure 4.4	Comparison of CELF-3 subtest standard scores	135
Figure 4.5	Comparisons of TOPL language quotients	136
Figure 4.6	Comparison between children with ADHD and control children for the total number of utterances/clauses in the analysis set.	140
Figure 4.7	Comparison between children with ADHD and control children for the total number of words in the analysis set.	140
Figure 5.1	Examples of marked theme in spoken stories by children with ADHD	162
Figure E1	Control child's (C18) spoken story retell.	201
Figure E2	Control child's (C04) spoken recount.	202
Figure E3	Control child's (C03) spoken procedure.	202
Figure E4	Control child's (C16) written story retell.	203
Figure E5	Control child's (C05) written recount.	203
Figure E6	Control child's (C24) written procedure.	204
Figure E7	Child with ADHD (S29) spoken story retell.	204
Figure E8	Child with ADHD (S04) spoken recount.	205
Figure E9	Child with ADHD (S03) spoken procedure.	205
Figure E10	Child with ADHD (S03) written story retell.	206
Figure E11	Child with ADHD (S11) written recount.	206
Figure E12	Child with ADHD (S23) written procedure.	206
Figure F1	Control child's (C17) spoken story retell.	207
Figure F2	Control child's (C04) written story retell.	208
Figure F3	Control child's (C06) spoken procedure.	209

Figure F4	Child with ADHD (S13) spoken story retell.....	209
Figure F5	Child with ADHD (S11) written story retell.....	210
Figure F6	Child with ADHD (S23) spoken procedure	210

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATED TERMS

ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; used in this thesis to cover all subtypes

CELF

Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (Semel, 1987; Semel, 1995; Semel, 1998); a standardised test of language

DSM

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, 1987, 1994); contains checklist often used to diagnose ADHD

ELS

Expressive Language Score; one of the composite scores on the CELF related to expressive language ability

GI

Grammatical Intricacy; a way of quantifying complexity by calculating the proportion of clauses in a text that occur in clause complexes

LI

Language Impairment; a generic and self explanatory term referring to problems with language

OR

Odds Ratio; a statistical term meaning the likelihood of the occurrence of a particular event

RLS

Receptive Language Score; one of the composite scores on the CELF related to receptive language ability

SALT

Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts; a programme for analysing and managing information from the analysis of discourse

SFL

Systemic Functional Linguistics; a sociolinguistic approach to the study of language

SLI

Specific Language Impairment; impairment in either the comprehension or expression of language, or both, that has no obvious cause

TLS

Total Language Score; in the CELF, this is the composite score derived from adding the receptive and the expressive language scores

TOPL

Test of Pragmatic Language (Phelps-Terasaki & Phelps-Gunn, 1992)

TTR

Type/token ratio; a measure of lexical diversity derived from the proportion of total words in a text that are new words

ABSTRACT

Questions continue to be raised about the language abilities of children who have a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Recent conceptualisations of ADHD and also of language difficulties have acknowledged that aspects of context may contribute to the manifestations of these complex conditions. In the past, investigations of the language of children who had a diagnosis of ADHD appear to have been hampered by reliance on models of language impairment that emphasised formally measured language abilities and largely disregarded the role of context.

This thesis describes a study designed to test the hypothesis that important differences in language use exist between children who have a diagnosis of ADHD and their peers without ADHD, when specific language impairment has been excluded. A second goal of the study was to investigate the impact of aspects of context, specifically text type and mode of expression, on the language use of these children.

The study was community-based. Attempts were made to match the children for age (eight to twelve years), gender, level of education, and socio-economic status. Two standardised language tests were administered to each child, and only children who had achieved results within the normal range were accepted into the study. The sample

group consisted of eleven children who had a previous diagnosis of ADHD, and eleven control children. Discourse analysis based on a Systemic Functional Linguistics approach was used to describe spoken and written samples from three different examples of text type that were created by each child. Comparisons were made for multiple variables, and any observed differences were examined using a combination of quantitative and descriptive techniques.

The results showed differences between the groups for clause structure, thematic structure, macro textual organisation, lexico-grammar, behaviours surrounding spoken language, and conventions of written language. There were differences noted in the way the text type and the mode of expression appeared to affect the outcomes. The differences were discussed and interpreted as evidence of a greater degree of difficulty shown by the children with ADHD with regard to the organisation and complexity of their texts.

Clinical implications suggest that careful linguistic analysis of spoken as well as written language of children with ADHD may be warranted even in the absence of the diagnosis of specific language impairment. Such analyses may not only identify potentially problematic areas with respect to language use within everyday contexts, but may also highlight areas where particular intervention may be beneficial.