Language Use in Children With Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Margaret Mathers
Grad Dip (Ling); Dip. Sp Thy (Cumberland)

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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)
Numerous people have supported and contributed to the production of this thesis.

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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

The following journal articles and conference presentations resulted from work on this thesis.

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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
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.