Social and Academic Interactions between Autistic University Students and their Non-autistic Lecturers and Colleagues:
A Rhetorical Genre Studies Investigation

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Theory

"Theories help us to organize and understand data. When we discover a useful conceptual framework, so much more of what we have observed 'makes sense'". (Freedman, 2006, p. 101)

Double Empathy Problem
(Milton, 2012; 2018)

- Response to Theory of Mind

- Communication difficulties arise from mismatch in neurotype and 'mutual incomprehension'

- Successful communication needs to be bi-directional, reciprocal, and mutual

- Both autistic and nonautistic ways of communicating are equally valid and both groups are equally responsible for successful communications

Social Cognition and Action

- Highly complex form of human experience and behaviour

- Dependent on our social constructions of the world

- Milton's work emphasizes different constructions of reality between autistic and non-autistic experiences of life

- Rhetorical Genre Studies provides a lens to make sense of these differences and how they relate to different ways of being social

Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS)

Rhetoric

- "the use of language to
    - accomplish something" (Swales, 1990, p. 6)
    - "to achieve a . . . purpose " (St. Amant, 2013, p. 35)

- "a mode of altering reality" (Bitzer, 1968, p. 4)

Autism as a rhetorical way of being

"Autism is a rhetoric; a way of being in the world through language, a rhetoric we may not have encountered or recognized frequently in the past nor value highly in academic contexts, but a rhetoric nonetheless." (Heilker & Yergeau, 2011, p. 487)

Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS)

Genre

- Traditional approaches used by literature scholars: text types characterized by regularities in textual features (neither the actions of the speakers/writers nor the social context are considered)

- Genre as social action; as a typified response to a recurrent social situation (Miller, 1984) *AND* the situation itself (Bawarshi, 2000; Paré & Smart, 1994)

- Genres as *relatively* stable types of utterances (Bakhtin, 1986 published in English)

RGS as a fresh lens for understanding social interactions and autism…

- Recognition of rhetorical situations (Bitzer, 1968)

- Perception of social needs (Bawarshi, 2000; Miller, 1984)

- Uptake (Freadman, 1994)

- Timing/kairos (Artemeva, 2004; Miller, 1992; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002)

- Typification (Schutz, 1967; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973)
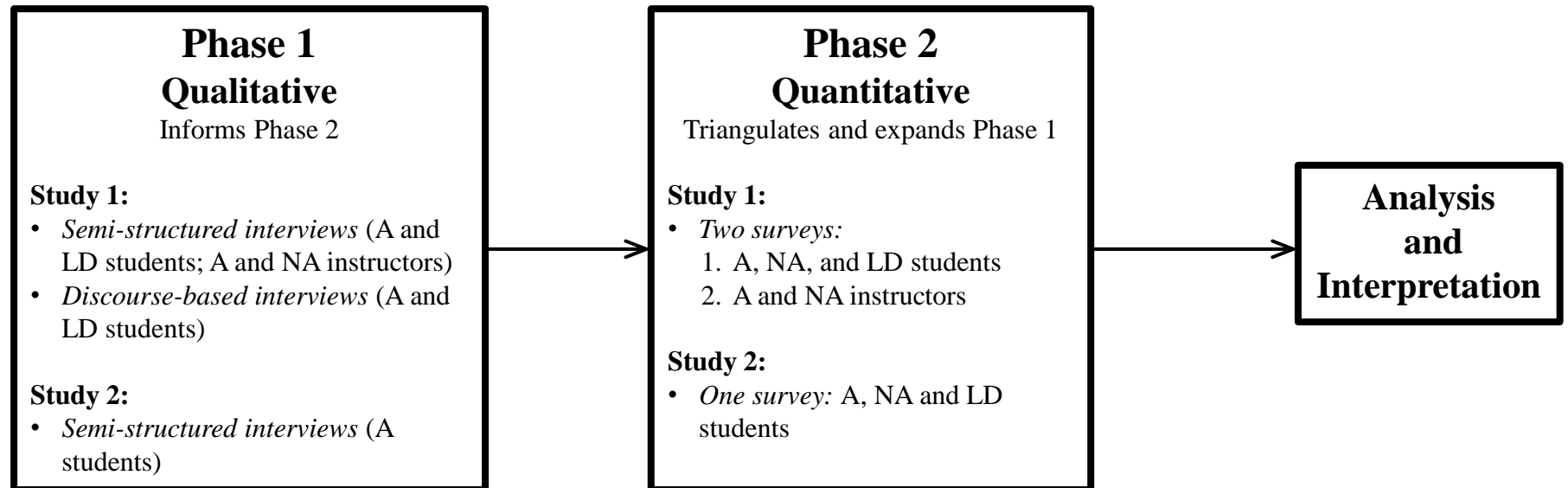
Typification and Habitualization
(Schutz, 1967; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973)

- These are derived from human knowledge and understanding of activities based on situations *perceived as similar* and interpreted as having previously occurred.

- Any frequently repeated activity turns into a typified "pattern, which can then be reproduced *with an economy of effort*" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 70, emphasis added); that is, the activity becomes *habitualized*.

Research Question

How do autistic university students report their experiences of communicating with nonautistic and autistic interlocutors (instructors, staff, and colleagues) at university?

Exploratory Sequential Design
(Cresswell, 2015)

Phase 1
Qualitative
Informs Phase 2

Study 1:
- *Semi-structured interviews* (A and LD students; A and NA instructors)
- *Discourse-based interviews* (A and LD students)

Study 2:
- *Semi-structured interviews* (A students)

Phase 2
Quantitative
Triangulates and expands Phase 1

Study 1:
- *Two surveys:*
  1. A, NA, and LD students
  2. A and NA instructors

Study 2:
- *One survey:* A, NA and LD students

Analysis and Interpretation

Findings

Recognition of rhetorical situations

- **Student:** I don't appreciate some of the social cues and other aspects of socialization that other people will tend to appreciate naturally

- **NA Instructor:** Well, for B it's always the opposite, where he's doesn't realize a response isn't needed.

Recognition of social needs

- **Student:** I thought I had clear understanding of what I was supposed to do, but I didn't.

- **A Instructor: …** people … saying things like, "It's cold in here!" and I'm like, "Yeah, well, I'm not really sure where I'm meant to go with this conversation".

Findings (2)

Performance of uptakes

- **Student:** I have to look at the situation and be like, okay. These are the cues, this is what I'm observing, these are the *responses* that are appropriate. These are the *responses* that are ideal. That might sound to some people that interactions with me could be disingenuous, and that's not the case. It's that it's taught me to … engage with a social situation critically. And... carefully.

- **A Instructor:** He had a tendency while I was talking to him, to just spin on his chair. And I knew that he was listening to me, and he was able to provide the appropriate responses when that was necessary. But I imagine that anyone else dealing with that would just go, "This kid just doesn't care about what I'm saying."

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Findings (3)

Timing/kairos

- **Student:** I can't find a place where I can kind of jump in. And when there is a place where I can jump in, the discussion has already moved on somewhere else.
- **NA Instructor:** That delay in terms of response … can be long.

Typification

- **Student and NA Instructor:** "There has to be a formula in terms of when you communicate with others" and I go, "There is no formula".
- **NA Instructor:** His paper isn't like a paper at all. In the end, it will always trail off to bullet points, literal bullet points of...what should come next.

Early Findings

RGS Constructs	Autistic (A)	Nonautistic (NA)	Learning disabled (LD)
Recognition of rhetorical situations	Different from NA	Different from A/Similar to LD	Different from A/Similar to NA
Recognition of social needs/exigence	Different from NA	Different from A/Similar to LD	Different from A/Similar to NA
Uptake	Different from NA	Different from A	Different from NA and A
Timing	Different from NA	Different from A	Different from NA and ? A
Typification	Different from NA	Different from A	?

Some final considerations…

- RGS is a useful framework to theorize the interface between and among autistic and non-autistic students and faculty at universities
- Dialogic, transformative pedagogy rather than remedial approach to writing, taking into account the Double Empathy problem (e.g., Universal Design for Learning, Autistic-led experiential learning)

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