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Greetings, dear readers!

We are excited that you are about to embark on the journey you will discover in *Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum: the Journey from Echolalia to Self-generated Language*. You will find that this book was written just for you, even though it was written more than 10 years ago. Some of the terminology has changed since then, so please forgive the out-dated references. Autistic people have educated us well, and we are enthusiastically embracing their wisdom. We now acknowledge the gender bias of the past, the antiquated references to autism, and other remnants from the past. We apologize, and ask your forgiveness.

But Natural Language Acquisition (NLA) has not changed. In fact, it resonates with more and more people every day as the story of natural gestalt language development is spreading worldwide. Gestalt language processing starts with echolalia and results in a full grammar system. It happens in every language we have studied so far throughout the world. There are now courses, webinars, and materials in over 30 languages and countries, and the stories we get to hear every day from parents, adult gestalt language processors, and professionals just like you continue to amplify the ones in our original research.

As you read the stories of the nine individuals included within these pages, you may recognize your own child, client, student — or yourself. These nine stories were chosen to illustrate some of the variety among the 85 individuals we documented during the course of our research. Their case examples highlight the fact that gestalt language development follows a well-documented course, but is a very individual process. Your child is unique, and their communication journey is their own.

As you may know, the NLA book was published in 2012, the result of 15 years of longitudinal clinical research in our clinic, Communication Development Center in Madison, Wisconsin. The research actually began in 1995, while I was an Associate Clinical Professor (called 'Clinical Instructor' at the time), teaching a Clinical Observation class, and supervising graduate students in our Speech and Hearing Clinic. One of our first clients was an autistic boy who communicated with echolalia, and, I discovered, used a gestalt language processing style in developing language. In three years time, he moved through the NLA Stages to advanced self-generated grammar. His case study was the subject of my first article on gestalt language

development, published in 2005 in the *Autism Asperger's Digest* as "Finding the Words: to Tell the Whole Story." Part of my regular series for nearly 10 years, that article was where the term 'Natural Language Acquisition' was born. Barry Prizant and Ann Peters, the researchers who inspired me to undertake my longitudinal research, referred to Dylan's as the 'gestalt' style, differentiating it from the better-known 'analytic' language development style. It was Barry Prizant's 1983 article, "Language Acquisition and Communicative Behavior in Autism: Toward an Understanding of the "Whole of It" that inspired me to begin this research!

Our research was qualitative and empirical in nature, meaning that it was all based on continuous observation, including regular language sampling. I used the language sampling and scoring protocol developed by Laura Lee and Susan Cantor for grammar development, and adapted it to include the pre-grammar stages of echolalia/gestalt language (Stage 1), mitigated echolalia/gestalt language (Stage 2), and isolated single words (Stage 3) which were proposed by Barry Prizant and verified in my first study and our subsequent longitudinal research.

NLA research was empirical, qualitative, and clinical in nature, conducted to observe how children actually develop grammar systems when they begin their journey with language gestalts. Over the years, we followed and supported 85 clients who began with echolalia or mitigated echolalia, and used a gestalt language processing style to develop self-generated language. Most were autistic, some were not, but the pattern was the same for all of them. A few details about our clients' progress might illustrate the importance of that research, and why it has resonated so well since:

* All 85 progressed from at least one stage to the next while they were in the clinic (some moved or left the clinic when they were seen at school). Because of the overlap among the whole group of 85, the NLA Stages were well verified through rigorous empirical evidence (language sampling over time)!

* The vast majority (more than 80%) progressed from Stage 1 or 2 to at least a solid Stage 4. Of those who developed grammar, all but the oldest client (Benjamin) reached Stage 5 (advanced grammar) or 6 (a full grammar system). You can read a detailed accounting of Benjamin's journey in the book, significant because at age 10, he was the oldest individual documented as he begun his journey at Stages 1 and 2 to achieving self-generated grammar. He was called 'Bevin' in the book, but reclaimed his own name in my recent presentations.

In summary, our 15 years of empirical research was based on my prior empirical research published in 2005, about the child, Dylan, whose language development was followed with rigorous language sampling as it naturally developed from Stage 1 to Stage 5/6 grammar over a three year period. Barry Prizant had first proposed gestalt language development as a 'theory.' With our three-year study, that theory was validated, and our new 'theory' was that Dylan's success would be repeated by a large group of children over time. As you now know, it was! So gestalt language development/NLA is no longer just a theory! It is empirically research-based!! The 'practice' (or "evidence-based practice") is research-based because it came from the research itself! It was not a theory to be tested in lab; there was no experimental design. Everything about NLA is from longitudinal, qualitative research!

This research process resulted in a clear picture of natural language development from echolalia to a self-generated full grammar system. This is why it ‘works,’ so-to-speak — and why it resonates with parents and professionals so naturally and quickly! Every day for the last 12 years, we have heard from parents and self-described adult gestalt language processors who say versions of “I knew it! This perfectly describes my own language development!” As one of the SLPs who provided one of the peer-reviews of the book wrote: “...I find parents so in touch with their kids that I give them the theory and they give me examples.” And if you have never read Barry Prizant’s review of the NLA book, here it is. It, too, was written more than a decade ago, so please forgive the now-antiquated terminology.

"Natural Language Acquisition on the Autism Spectrum: The Journey from Echolalia to Self-Generated Language is a wonderful resource that provides the most comprehensive consideration of echolalia and language characteristics of persons with autism to date."

"In this seminal work, Marge Blanc, an experienced clinician and clinical researcher, brings us back to a crucial understanding of language characteristics and language acquisition in ASD based on her deep understanding of language development from a social-pragmatic, child-centered perspective. Unfortunately, too many educators and therapists hold on to outdated and disproven perceptions of echolalia and gestalt language and attempt to 'treat' echolalia with a lack of knowledge of the historical context and research basis of our understanding of language development in ASD."

"By looking at echolalia only through a behavioral lens of pathology rather than through a developmental perspective based on research on autism and typical development, such practices may actually be hindering functional language development. It is hoped that this important work will help educators, therapists and parents move to more contemporary understandings and practices."

"This book is a 'must-read' for all who care about supporting social communication for persons with ASD based on research and sound clinical practice."

Barry M. Prizant, Ph.D., CCC-SLP
Adjunct Professor
Brown University

Now, dear reader, please read this book that was meant for you — then please stay in touch, and tell us your story! Thank you!

*Marge Blanc, M. A., CCC-SLP
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