

Gestalt Language Development & Gestalt Language Processing

Marge Blanc, December 14-17, 2025

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Marge Blanc's Reply to the Lorang et al, 2025:

A Response to Blanc and Colleagues' Viewpoint on Gestalt Language Processing and the Natural Language Acquisition Protocol: Concerns and Common Ground

Blanc et al, 2023:

Using the Natural Language Acquisition Protocol to Support Gestalt Language Development

Part 1: NLA is the Research-based Description of Gestalt Language Development

Hello all, While the latest article might seem to be a truncated version of Venker & Lorang, 2024, it is different in several important ways. The earlier Venker & Lorang 2024 letter to the editor in the Sage Journal, Autism, "Continuing the conversation about echolalia and gestalt language development: A response to Haydock, Harrison, Baldwin, and Leadbitter" preserved the words of the autistic first author, Amanda Haydock by referring to 'gestalt language development, and in that way was respectful to Haddock's lived experience of being a gestalt language processor. The critique was with Natural Language Acquisition (NLA) as a description of Gestalt Language Development, not a critique of Haddock's own lived experience.

The latest article goes much further, and questions the existence of gestalt language processing itself. Emily Lorang, Janine Mathée-Scott, Jennifer Johnson, and Courtney E. Venker assert, for example, that "The Idea of GLP Is Contradicted by Existing Research on How Autistic Children Process Language." Who of us could argue that Autistic children are a homogeneous group, and that 'existing research' referenced in the Lorang et al. article is robust enough to find gestalt language processing (not just gestalt language development) a contradiction? Even if unwilling to accept the research presented by Blanc et al (2023) and Blanc (2005 and 2012), Amanda Haydock herself is among those adult Autistic gestalt language processors who assert "Embracing gestalt language development as a fundamental neurodiversity-affirmative practice."

The trend in the Lorang et al. article continues: "The Conceptual Premise of GLP/NLA Is Fundamentally Flawed." A basic clarification is in order here. Natural Language Acquisition (NLA) is a description of gestalt language development. Our 15 years of research culminated in NLA as a quantifiable way to describe that natural progression from echolalia to complex self-generated language. The 'conceptual premise' of gestalt language development originated long before that, with the work of Barry Prizant (1982, 1983) and others; our work described it. But a description of gestalt language processing belongs to those who use it, not us (or Lorang et al.).

Gestalt language processing is not synonymous with gestalt language development; it is much bigger, and is better described by some of the self-described gestalt language processors among us — not Blanc and colleagues or Lorang and colleagues.

Part 2: What is Gestalt Language Processing?

Hello again, everyone. This is Part 2 of my response. Thank you, Stacey, for this forum and opportunity! In my Part 1, I emphasized that NLA describes gestalt language development as researched in our clinic over the course of 15 years. But it does not begin to describe gestalt language processing, which is much bigger and only described well by GLPs themselves. Here is one of the many examples I read every day, and I hope everyone here will do the same! This is from the writings of Jaime Hoerricks, a self-described GLP and Ph.D. educator. She describes how gestalt language processing was her way into gestalt language development, but is so much more. Her experiences with being 'gaslit' are now what she uses to support her students. Her words regarding what she calls the GLP tendency to return to memories over and over again:

"For a GLP, whose memory is relational, atmospheric, and meaning-dense, ... manipulation does not land as a narrow cognitive error. It strikes at the structure of remembering itself. The field that once carried perception, context, and felt truth together is destabilised. Trust in one's own knowing is not just shaken—it loses its footing.

Seen this way, the need for repeated confirmation is neither a quirk of neurotype nor a lingering symptom of trauma in isolation. It is what happens when a gestalt system, already oriented toward relational meaning, is subjected to sustained epistemic assault. The repetition is not confusion about what happened. It is the system's attempt to reconstruct the ground on which knowing can safely stand again."

We researchers have so much to learn from gestalt language processors themselves. May we be open to that learning!

Part 3: Competence in Gestalt Language Processing

Hello once again, colleagues. This is Marge Blanc with Part 3 of my response to the 'new article.' Part 2 responded to the Lorang et al. claim that "The Conceptual Premise of GLP/NLA Is Fundamentally Flawed," as if GLP and NLA are one-in-the-same. First, I'll reiterate that NLA describes gestalt language development as researched in our clinic, and that gestalt language processing is much bigger. Next, I'll address the claim Lorang et al. make when they state. "GLP/NLA Assumes Autistic Children Do Not Understand Individual Words in Their Delayed Echoes, Which Presumes Incompetence and Is Inconsistent With Neurodiversity." Couched as a critique of Blanc et al. (who, please remember, wrote about gestalt language development, not about gestalt language processing), the critique is to a much larger group of people, those who self-

identify as gestalt language processors (e.g. Jaime Hoerricks, mentioned earlier), and who recognize this in themselves, often as they recognize it in their children.

A short compilation of thoughts offered by self-identified GLPs and parents of children they identify as GLPs reveals how 'presuming incompetence' is not a descriptor that fits those besides Blanc et al. who honor lived gestalt experience. Rather, opening our minds to the possibility of gestalt competence is at the core of attuning and learning from others. That is one of the far-reaching values of the broader lens adult Autistics have allowed us to share. Let us all open our minds to the far-reaches of gestalt competence

A question was posed at a recent event, asking if the concept of gestalt processing applies not only to language, but also to how a GLP processes experiences, emotions, and meaning. The answers included some key concepts, compiled here with minor redacting, and approved by the contributors for sharing. They began with words of encouragement: 'Don't let people who have no experience with a Gestalt Language Processing child, get to you with their "advice". Our children are developing well, just differently!' Others addressed GLP more broadly: 'Everything (my child) picks up seems to be the whole thing first, then they break it down over time.' '(My child) interacts with everything as a whole first.' An adult GLP offered this about themselves: 'This is why they say we have rigid routines. They are not; they are routines that have not been mitigated.' And another: 'This is my experience as an adult GLP!' Another self-described adult GLP added 'In Gestalt Processing, everything is a gestalt, and speech is just a part of it.' And finally: 'I was and still am a GLP...with each memory I recall, I can see it, smell it, hear it, feel it.'

Once the group knew I was going to share their comments, one Autistic person who identifies as a GLP wished to be identified, and added: "...this approach works for us precisely because it treats gestalt processing as a legitimate cognitive style, not a symptom to be extinguished...Many of the 'deficits' we're labelled with, (are) downstream effects of being taught through methods that don't match our logic...That isn't evidence of a broken learner or a lesser person; it's evidence of a mismatch between the method and the mind." M. Barbosa added, "...I genuinely feel this: NLA gave us something far bigger than a framework for speech. We need our own tools, and that's where my energy is going."

Please, colleagues, return to the comments included in our Blanc et al. article and read what adult Autistic GLPs had to say about gestalt processing. Then please re-read the wisdom others offered you here. It is not our place, any of us, to ignore them any longer.

Part 4: How NLA Research Describes Gestalt Language Development1

Hello, all. The last of this series, Part 4, will return to the Blanc et al., 2023 article, the subject of the Lorang et al., 2025 critique and their five 'concerns.' But before leaving the topic of gestalt language processing as lived experience, quotes from the GLP educator, Jaime Hoerricks are

added here, as they were just published today: "There is, at this point, an entire industry devoted to keeping gestalt language processing out of the literature—or at least safely contained at its edges. GLP is dismissed as anecdotal, mischaracterised as confusion, absorbed into other frameworks that flatten it beyond recognition, or argued away entirely. Autistic GLPs and our families are rarely treated as epistemic contributors. Those who support us are framed as misguided, sentimental, or unrigorous. Lived coherence is weighed against authorised theory and found inadmissible, not because it lacks structure, but because it threatens existing ones." https://open.substack.com/pub/outside/p/when-time-refuses-sequence-living?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email

Rather than endorsing gestalt language processing as described by gestalt language processors themselves (e.g. Amanda Haydock and those quoted in Blanc et al.), Lorang et al. 2025 state their first ‘concern’ as, "The Idea of GLP Is Contradicted by Existing Research on How Autistic Children Process Language." Their argument is because of "existing research evidence showing that autistic children process spoken utterances incrementally (i.e., word-by-word), not as larger ‘chunks.’" We turn now to the cited research about processing and considering if it truly contradicts the ‘idea of GLP.’ The processing research in Venker et al., 2019, describes ‘incremental processing’ in 20 young Autistic children who often predicted the noun in short sentences when hearing an associated verb. Success varied, and correlated with the childrens’ performance on receptive language testing. This ‘word-by-word’ processing of some Autistic children is hardly contradictory to the ‘idea of GLP’ as reported by self-identified Gestalt Language Processors and described by the parents of innumerable others. Not surprisingly, Venker et al. 2019 included a revealing caveat: “We fully acknowledge that our results cannot speak to the extent to which prediction occurs during language processing in everyday life...there is little empirical evidence that prediction is necessary for language processing.”

To ignore Autistic and other GLP testimony about ‘language processing in everyday life’ in favor of touting ‘incremental processing’ that ‘cannot speak to the extent to which prediction...is necessary for language processing’ is problematic. It might be called ‘naysaying,’ a style of arguing against lived experience and longitudinal research about the very topic Lorang et al. 2025 wish to understand — by citing something researchers themselves failed to see as necessarily relevant. Instead of addressing the actual topic of GLP ‘in everyday life,’ Lorang et al. 2025 published a list of concerns and cautions about NLA, even though NLA research found gestalt processors to develop language naturally when researchers followed their lead. In the name of scrutiny, Lorang et al. ignored the results of Blanc’s 15 years of following children's lead from echolalia to complex self-generated grammar.

Turning now to the Blanc et al. 2023 article, it actually shares a basic premise with Lorang et al. 2025. That premise is the foundation of child-led practices: attunement with the child and honoring their communication, including echolalia. That beginning point can naturally lead to several observations that differentiate early-stage gestalt language development (GLD) from both analytic language development (ALD) and later-stage GLD. Lorang et al. recommend

acknowledging echolalia. But what might they recommend next? Their list of ‘concerns’ does not go that far. But Blanc et al., 2023 does. The examples in Blanc et al. are illustrative, as they not only show the linguistic ‘chunking’ characteristic of early gestalt language development, but also how acknowledging those gestalts/echolalia dispels one of the ‘concerns’ of Lorang et al. Acknowledging whole gestalts obviously includes their verbs. Modeling natural language obviously also includes verbs. Stage 2 acknowledgement includes their verbs, and Stage 2 models obviously include them as well. A cursory look at any NLA material confirms this. Only Stage 3 acknowledgement of single, referential words avoids verbs, because as with all stages, our job is to attune to the child who has led us there. There are now innumerable practitioners who have seen Stage 3 in many children, and recognize that it may be no longer than a moment-in-time, crucial for natural grammar development, but potentially very brief. Stage 4 grammar can naturally emerge in hours, days, or weeks. And as we follow the child's lead into Stage 4-6 grammar, we follow Developmental Sentence Scoring and the natural progression of all grammar, including, obviously, the development of verb forms. Again, a cursory look at any NLA material confirms this.

The following is extracted from the Blanc et al. 2023 article to provide an example of the natural process we observe and match in our support of gestalt language development. "Stage 1 of NLA is the processing of language gestalts, heard in one situation and then used after a delay to communicate in another situation. For example, a child may be at a soccer game with their family when they hear the announcer shout, “Messisgottheballandrunsacrossloookathimgohesgettingreadyandhescoresgoaaal” (“Messi’s got the ball and runs across...Look at him go! He’s getting ready, and he scores! Goaaal!”). In this example, the child is processing the entire situational gestalt including the soundtrack or ‘string’ of language that is acquired as a language gestalt. At Stage 2, gestalts are then segmented or mitigated, and the segments can be mixed with other segments to form new utterances (e.g., “Messisgottheball..andgoaaal!”). The language from Stage 2 is further mitigated into single words at Stage 3 (e.g., “Messi” and “bus”), and words are combined in the same ways that analytic processors create two-word phrases (e.g., “Messi + ball” and “bus + school”). Stage 3 words are ‘referential’—meaning that they refer directly to a person, entity, quality, or location. At Stage 4, single words are combined grammatically to create simple phrases and sentences such as, “I saw Messi.” Stage 4 includes basic grammar, and Stage 5 includes more advanced grammar, which then evolves into a complete grammar system by the end of Stage 6."

A responsive clinician who understands both analytic and gestalt language development considers the language development level of each child when following their lead. Haydock et al. 2023 called this "presuming developmental competence." "The linguistic differences of autistic children can be viewed not as symptoms, but as part of an intrinsic, dynamic developmental system that evolves over time, a trajectory that can lead to important developmental sequelae...Presuming developmental competence, as an ethos, advances the use of therapeutic strategies that map onto how gestalt language develops and promote that natural development to occur. For instance, informed approaches promote exposure to gestalts that have inherent

situational and emotional salience as – unlike rote-learned utterances – these linguistic forms will likely stick, be used contextually and have potential to develop into more creative and complex forms."

We invite anyone who is wanting to better understand gestalt language processing and gestalt language development to contact us, as our world-wide community welcomes parents, clinicians, educators, researchers, and anyone who is just beginning to recognize themselves in our book, articles, and webinars. Jaime Hoerricks is one such person, a self-described GLP and Ph.D. educator who recounted how she was 'stuck' at Stage 3 until she realized the truth of the NLA research for herself. She now addresses educational issues for GLPs, and reflections on Autism and GLP almost daily on her substack. In one recent article, she endorsed the format we chose for sharing our research. Rather than subscribe to the peer-reviewed article format, we chose a peer-reviewed book addressing parents first, and clinicians second. Hoerricks commented about NLA: "This is what evidence looks like when it arises from care rather than control. It is meticulous and longitudinal—replicable in spirit, and in beautifully individual ways, by the families and clinics who have since followed its path. It is science conducted within relationship, not against it. And because it was published first in a magazine for parents and educators, and later in a book written to be accessible to those same communities rather than confined to a journal for specialists, the academy dismissed it as anecdote— when in truth, it remains one of the most sustained and empirically grounded accounts of natural language acquisition ever produced for autistic learners. Beginning with the publication of that book, it was 'peer-reviewed'—not by the academy's gatekeepers, but by clinical peers and parents who had lived the process themselves."

"The work stands. It has always stood. And more 'peers' have continued to emerge from all over the world to review it—including, in full disclosure, myself. My review is written not in the margins of journals, but in the way I have lived and practised this work—in my own communication, in my books and articles, and in the classrooms where I teach. These are the peers who truly matter. What Marge Blanc offered was not an alternative to research, but its restoration—proof that language, like life, can only be understood in context, and that the deepest truths about human development arise not from laboratories, but from places where someone is listening." https://open.substack.com/pub/outside/p/published-is-published-on-the-visibility?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email

Please share!

Thank you, Marge