

Abstract

Children with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) present difficulties in various areas of development, such as social-emotional reciprocity, language and communication, sensory regulation, etc. Figurative language is a central tool in enriching the spoken and written language as well as in creating a high linguistic level among skilled speakers. The ASD population presents difficulties in the more complex areas of language, and studies have found differences in the understanding of figurative language among children with ASD compared to their typically developing peers. Another core difficulty among children with ASD is social functioning. Due to deficits in the social domain, individuals with ASD exhibit difficulties in social understanding, appropriate use of gestures and social skills, maintaining friendships, and engaging in social play. The literature review shows that there are no studies that have examined the relationship between the ability to understand social situations (as a separate ability) and the ability to understand figurative language, especially irony and idioms. The aim of this study is to explore this relationship. Therefore, the hypotheses of the present study are that (1) children with typical development will outperform the ASD group in irony and idiom understanding; (2) a positive correlation will be found between social situation understanding and figurative language understanding (idioms and irony) among children with typical development as well as among children diagnosed with ASD; (3) Social situation understanding and the group (as a binary variable) will contribute to explaining the differences in irony understanding alongside ToM (Theory of Mind) ability.

58 subjects, aged 8-11, participated in the current study. The study group included 28 children diagnosed with high-functioning ASD, and the control group included 30 children with typical development. All subjects answered vocabulary tests (WISC- Wechsler Intelligent Scale) and non-verbal intelligence (Raven) (as background variables), a Hinting test to test ToM ability, a social comprehension test (CSCS- Children's Social Comprehension Scale), an irony comprehension test and an idiom comprehension test. Moreover, the parents of the children in the ASD group filled out the SCQ (Social Communication Questionnaire) in order to validate the diagnosis of autism.

The results of the study showed that the first hypothesis was confirmed. That is, children with typical development obtained higher scores in tests of irony understanding, idioms understanding, social situations understanding and ToM, compared to children with ASD. The second research hypothesis was partially confirmed. A significant high positive correlation was found between social situations understanding and figurative language understanding (idioms and irony) among participants with typical development as well as among participants diagnosed with ASD. However, when controlling the vocabulary index, the correlations weakened, and the correlation between social situations understanding and idioms understanding among children with ASD was not significant. The third research hypothesis was not confirmed. It was found that in the model for predicting idiom understanding, none of the variables predicts significantly. In the model of predicting irony understanding, a significant unique contribution to the prediction model was found for both the research groups and ToM.

The conclusions of the present study are (1) that there are significant differences in figurative language understanding as well as in social situations understanding, between children diagnosed with ASD and between children with typical development, in favor of the latter; (2) There is a significant strong positive correlation between social situations understanding and figurative language understanding, among both study groups. However, when vocabulary was controlled, these correlations weakened; (3) The factors that contribute to the prediction of irony and idioms

understanding are vocabulary, ToM as well as the research group to which the participants belonged. Unlike what was expected, it was not found that the ability to understand social situations significantly contributed to irony understanding or idioms understanding.