

Functional Delayed Echolalia in *Please Stand By*: A Case Study of the Main Character

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Abstract

This research analyzes the functional delayed echolalia of Wendy, the main character in the film Please Stand By (2017), using Prizant and Rydell's framework. Echolalia, the repetition of phrases or sentences, serves as a key communication tool for individuals with autism, aiding social interaction and emotional regulation. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, the study identifies and categorizes echolalic phrases from the film. The findings reveal seven types of interactive delayed echolalia (turn-taking, verbal completion, providing information, protest, request, affirmation, and directive) and four types of non-interactive delayed echolalia (non-focused, situational association, self-directive, and rehearsal). These results highlight echolalia's functionality in supporting autistic individuals' communication and self-regulation. By analyzing how echolalia is portrayed in a media context, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of autism communication and promotes greater awareness of its significance in fostering social inclusion.

Keywords: *Functional delayed echolalia, autism, please stand by movie*

A. Introduction

Humans acquire language from an early age, influenced by their environment, experiences, and learning. Spoken language plays a crucial role in childhood development, helping children engage with sounds, words, and sentence structures. However, not all individuals develop language skills seamlessly. Conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can impede communication, often due to neurological differences. Individuals with autism may face difficulties interacting socially and responding contextually, even though they often comprehend what is said to them (Frith, 2008). One notable characteristic of autism is echolalia, the repetition of words, phrases, or sentences previously heard, which serves various communicative functions.

Echolalia, often observed in autistic individuals, provides insights into linguistic structures, including syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. It has two primary types: immediate echolalia, where phrases are repeated right after hearing them, and delayed echolalia, where phrases are repeated after significant time intervals. Delayed echolalia, in particular, plays a functional role in helping autistic individuals communicate, regulate emotions, and interact with their surroundings (Prizant & Rydell, 1984; Filipova et al., 2023). For instance, when an autistic child says, "Are you

hungry?” to indicate their hunger, they repurpose a familiar phrase, allowing them to engage with the situation.

In psychology, echolalia is divided into two types based on the timing; immediate echolalia and delayed echolalia. Immediate echolalia refers to the repetition of words directly after it is heard, meanwhile delayed echolalia is the repetition of words after a time delay. Delayed echolalia can be hours, days, or even years after the speaker hears the words and repeats them again. Both types of echolalia have several purposes to express thought or to ask something that can help other people to be more understand in communication with autism.

Functional delayed echolalia is the behavior commonly experienced by autism. Delayed echolalia is the utterances repeated at a significantly later time (Prizant, B. M. & Rydell, 1984). After hearing the previous words, functional delayed echolalia involves replying by reproducing the statement. Delayed echolalia also might occur out of context in conversation because it is uttered at a significantly later time. Delayed echolalia helps autistic children to interact with the environment, convey information, request or label something, etc (Filipova et al., 2023). When autisms utter words, they have memorized any words previously, and they use the words to express their feeling, opinions, and requests. For example, when they are hungry they might ask “Are you hungry?” they ask it to indicate that they are hungry like how their parents or their keeper offer them food. They do not ask like common people who express their feelings or condition normally. This may help them to engage with the situation even if they say it in a different way.

This study focuses on functional delayed echolalia, which encompasses interactive (e.g., turn-taking, requesting) and non-interactive (e.g., self-stimulatory, rehearsal) categories. These categories, as outlined by Prizant and Rydell, demonstrate how delayed echolalia aids autistic individuals in navigating social interactions and expressing needs. By analyzing these functions within the context of the movie *Please Stand By*, this research explores how delayed echolalia supports communication in real-life scenarios.

Please Stand By, directed by Ben Lewin, tells the story of Wendy, a young autistic woman on a journey to submit her *Star Trek* script for a contest. The movie captures themes of personal growth, familial relationships, and the challenges faced by individuals with autism. Literature and film serve as reflections of real life (Abrams, 2004), making this movie an ideal object for exploring autism-related communication issues. Through Wendy’s character, the film offers a window into the nuanced experiences of autistic individuals, particularly their use of echolalia as a communicative tool.

Previous studies, such as Fitriarningsih’s analysis of delayed echolalia in *Rain Man* (2018) and Humaira & Sudarwati’s study on functional echolalia in film (2021), have laid the groundwork for understanding this phenomenon. However, these studies focus on different objects and contexts, leaving room for further exploration. This research builds on existing findings by analyzing delayed echolalia in *Please Stand By*, aiming to deepen understanding of autism communication and provide insights for educators, caregivers, and researchers.

By examining Wendy’s use of delayed echolalia, this study seeks to highlight its functional role in communication and emotional regulation. It also aims to promote awareness of how echolalia contributes to the lived experiences of autistic individuals, fostering greater empathy and understanding in society.

This study can be useful for everyone who is interested in analyzing autism issues, especially delayed echolalia. For the students, it can be the references for their research that have

the same topic and analyze another object of a movie or even a real autistic person. This study gives a deep comprehension of how autistic people communicate by describing the method used by autism, particularly functional delayed echolalia theory. This study explores the role of echolalia in giving an accurate understanding of autism in communication.

B. Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to analyze functional delayed echolalia in the movie *Please Stand By*. The qualitative approach allows the researchers to explore the meanings behind repeated phrases and their functions in communication, as experienced by the autistic protagonist, Wendy. The primary data source is the movie *Please Stand By*, focusing on Wendy's dialogue and her interactions with other characters. Secondary data, including academic literature on echolalia and autism, were reviewed to contextualize findings. Data were collected in three steps: first, multiple viewings of the film to understand the narrative and identify instances of delayed echolalia. Second: documenting phrases that exhibit characteristics of interactive or non-interactive delayed echolalia. Third: Rewatching the movie to confirm and refine data selection, ensuring accuracy and consistency. Data analysis takes the following steps

- The researchers categorized phrases based on Prizant and Rydell's framework, identifying interactive (e.g., turn-taking, requesting) and non-interactive (e.g., rehearsal, self-directive) types of delayed echolalia.
- Each phrase was analyzed for its functional role in communication, emotional regulation, or social interaction. Contextual factors, such as the tone of speech and situational cues, were considered to enhance interpretation.
- To ensure reliability, the findings were cross-checked with autism-related literature and reviewed by peers for consistency.

By refining the data selection process and integrating theoretical and contextual analysis, this method provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the role of delayed echolalia in autistic communication.

C. Findings and Analysis

The result of this research found that there are seven out of nine types of interactive delayed echolalia were found in the movie. They are turn-taking, verbal completion, providing information, protest, request, affirmation, and directive. For the non-interactive delayed echolalia, it is found that there are four out of five types namely non-focused, situation association, self-directive, and rehearsal. Each of the results will be explained below.

1. Interactive Delayed Echolalia

1.1. Turn-Taking

Scottie : So next week, your sister is coming to visit, how are you feeling about it?

Wendy : (Wendy is muttering)

Scottie : Out loud thinking please

Wendy : I'm feeling somewhat a little bit nervous

This finding shows the conversation between Wendy and Scottie, Wendy's caretaker. Scottie tells her that her sister will come to visit and asks her about her feelings. Wendy's response by muttering shows her hesitation in expressing her feelings. Scottie encourages her to say it louder and to invite her to be included in the conversation. Wendy eventually says it louder even though the structure of her sentence is quite difficult to understand, but she still speaks on the same topic. The communication between Wendy and Scottie indicates the type of turn-taking.

1.2. Verbal Completion

Scottie : What do you have to be? You have to be very....

Wendy : Calm

In this context, Wendy is upset because she does not want to learn about names and places. Scottie encourages her by reminding her of the words that she used to calm her down. Scottie mentions a sentence but she leaves it unfinished so Wendy can complete the sentence. Wendy immediately remembers the word and completes the sentence. This conversation is verbal completion because Scottie begins the sentence and Wendy fills the sentence.

1.3. Providing Information

Coworker : What was Dr. Leonard McCoy's daughter's name?

Wendy : Joana

Wendy and the coworker is playing a game and the coworker asks a question about Star Trek, and Wendy answers the question. The coworker asked the specific information about the topic, and Wendy eventually remembered the answer because Star Trek is her favorite TV Series and she has watched it many times. Her willingness to share her knowledge demonstrates providing information.

1.4. Affirmation

Ticket agent : But you be careful, okay?

Wendy : I am careful. I don't walk when the sign says, "don't walk", and I only crossed market street one time.

This conversation is affirmation because Wendy agrees with the ticket agent. Wendy has to wait in the bus station for a night, so she asks permission from the ticket agent to stay there. Then the ticket agent advises her to be careful showing the ticket agent's care. Wendy affirms that she is going to be careful by repeating her words and adding some words that she remembered when she crossed the street. The additional words are perhaps unnecessary to say, nevertheless, it is the way for her to assure the ticket agent that she is going to be okay.

1.5. Request

Audrey : Wendy you can't, you can't take care of the baby

Wendy : How do you know? How do you now I can't?

Audrey : Wendy...

Wendy : I'm ready to go home now Audrey, I wanna go home. I'm ready to go home now.

Wendi is asking her sister to go home from the group home. She has been thinking about this before because she does not like living in the house. Audrey's statement shows that she will not take her home because she thinks Wendy is not ready yet. Wendy repeatedly mentions that she wants to go home to express her requests and needs. The repetition emphasizes that Wendy clearly wants to go home to express her desire and her feelings.

1.6. Protest

Audrey : But I don't want to take you out of here when you are doing so good. It's not that I don't want to, it's that it's not a good time. Don't you like it here?

Wendy : No, I have to eat pizza on Thursday even if I don't want to, I can't watch TV when I want to, I can't write when I want to. So I am ready to go home with you now Audrey.

Audrey thinks that Wendy is happy living in the house so she does not want to take her home. Wendy argues with her sister to express his disagreement and protest. Wendy lists some activities that she always does but she does not like, it is to explain that she does not like living there. Wendy's reply by saying "no" shows her protest and disagreement. This conversation is a protest because Wendy disagrees and protests with her sister.

1.7. Directive

Wendy : Scottie, will you read my movie scripts for me please?

Scottie : Sure

Wendy : Will you read it as soon as possible please?

Scottie : Are movie scripts supposed to be this long?

Wendy : Yes, it's because an epic saga, it should be long and highly detailed thorough.

Wendy has already done writing her movie scripts and she asks Scottie to read them. Wendy asks her politely by saying "please" in every question she says. Wendy repeats saying "please" which indicates that it is the word she usually uses to ask someone to do something. Scottie's response shows that she is willing to read the script but is a little surprised because it is very long. Wendy explains it more to influence Scottie to read the movie scripts.

2. Non-interactive Delayed Echolalia

2.1. Non-focused

Wendy : Buses go to Los Angeles. I could take a bus to Los Angeles. How much will a bus to Los Angeles cost? Probably the same as the 321 bus, because it is also a bus. How long will it take to get there? I don't know. What if forget where I am? What if I have to pee? Please stand by, please stand by, please stand by.

This happens before Wendy runs away from the group home to submit her movie script for the contest. Wendy is talking without another person talking with her. She talks about bus costs, the time when the bus leaves, and how she handles every problem on the trip. This shows that she is frustrated and worried about planning to run away from group home. However, she remembers the words that she usually says when she gets panic saying "Please stand by" to control her emotions.

2.2. Rehearsal

Wendy : Do you know how hard it is to write something? Do you know how hard it is to write something? Do you know how hard it is to write something?

When Wendy arrives at the place where she submits her movie scripts, the worker does not accept her writing. Wendy is disappointed and she turns back on the worker, then she is muttering by practicing her words to express her anger to the worker. The repetition of the sentence reveals that she is preparing her words before she says them to the worker directly. In short, the repetition shows that she is practicing her language which is called rehearsal.

2.3. Situation Association

Wendy : We are not allowed to cross market street under any circumstances.

Wendy is walking to the bus station with her dog. She is afraid to cross the street, then she repeats the words she has learned before if she is going to cross the street. The sentence suggests that she is trying to associate with the situation she faces in the street. It helps her to control herself and cross the street savingly.

2.4. Self-Directive

Wendy : Your completed, properly formatted, printed script. Must be received by Paramount Pictures by 5.00 PM on February 16th.

Wendy is talking to herself by saying the words that she has heard on television about the information of the movie script submission. Wendy repeats the word again for herself to help her plan to submit the movie scripts. The sentence helps her to take action on what she is going to do in order for her movie script submitted on time.

D. Conclusion

The study has examined the functional delayed echolalia uttered by Wendy, the main character of the Please Stand By movie by applying the interactive and non-interactive delayed echolalia theory. The result of the research found seven interactive delayed echolalia namely turn-taking, verbal completion, providing information, protest, request, affirmation, and directive. There are also four non-interactive delayed echolalia found namely non-focused, situation association, self-directive, and rehearsal. The analysis of the research gives a deep understanding of the meaning of repetition words uttered by Wendy. It is not only words that are sometimes out of context of the situation, but it has an implied meaning to help other people when interacting with autism. Each of the types of functional delayed echolalia found how Wendy interacts with other people socially and how she expresses her feelings and thoughts.

The results of the study give a very helpful insight into understanding how autistic individuals use language to navigate their social and emotional worlds. This may just happen in the movie, however, it reflects real life and helps people to understand deeply how autism expresses their feelings and opinions. For further research, perhaps can analyze the functional delayed echolalia of an autistic individual in real life that has more accurate data.

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