



# Functional Categories of Immediate Echolalia

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## What Is Immediate Echolalia?

Immediate echolalia refers to replicated utterances that are produced or echoed immediately or almost immediately after they are heard. Many individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may repeat utterances as a temporary step prior to or while they are developing fluent generative or creative spoken language. Some individuals may not move beyond this step and may use it along with delayed echolalia and nonverbal communication as their primary means of communication on a lifelong basis. Others, although they have developed functional or fluent language skills, will return to the use of echolalia when they experience stress or anxiety. Extensive echolalia is still a classic sign of difficulty with formulating creative verbal expression within a given set of circumstances. It frequently reflects problems with comprehension either in terms of orienting to and understanding oral language in general or in selective circumstances.

## How Is Immediate Echolalia Used By Individuals With ASD?

An article by Barry Prizant and Judith Duchan entitled *The Functions of Immediate Echolalia in Autistic Children* (pp. 241-249) which appeared in the 1981 issue of the *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders* is still the most comprehensive descriptor of the subject. The article contains a simplified version of their description, with examples generated by this author but reviewed by Dr. Prizant. A primary goal of this article is to provide information regarding various purposeful and non-purposeful uses of immediate echolalia. It is not intended to serve as a guide for clinical evaluation or classification of data. The original article and other more recent articles and book chapters on echolalia should be consulted when information is needed to guide evaluation practices. This article is a companion to another entitled *Functional Categories of Delayed Echolalia*.

For purposes of clarity and brevity, the term "echolalic speaker" is used in the examples instead of the phrase "the person who uses echolalic speech." No disrespect is intended by the use of non-people-first language.

Functional Categories of Immediate Echolalia		
Interactive Scenarios, that is, communication directed to another person		
Category	Description	Example
Turn taking/ interactive	Utterances used as turn -taking fillers in an alternating verbal exchange. It can also provide thinking and/or processing time for the person with ASD who has some verbal skills. For the individual who lacks spontaneous verbal skills, echoing does allow participation in a back and forth interaction, even if it is adult lead.	Adult speaker: "Where did you go Sunday?"  Echolalic speaker: He repeats, "Where did you go Sunday?" and gives a quick look to the adult.  Adult speaker: "Did you go to Grandma's house?"

		<p>Echolalic speaker: Says, "Did you go to Grandma's house?" And he again gives a quick look at the speaker. Looking at the speaker is not an essential part of the sequence but it adds clarity to this text example.</p> <p>The person with ASD who has some spontaneous verbal skills might eventually add, "No Grandma's house; go zoo." He needed stalling time to understand and formulate an answer.</p>
Declarative/ interactive	Utterances labeling objects, actions, or location (accompanied by demonstrative gestures).	<p>Adult speaker: As he checks the nearly empty cookie jar, he says, "I better buy some cookies."</p> <p>Echolalic speaker: As he also touches the cookie jar, he says, "I better buy some cookies." No verbal response or action is required from the adult speaker. The child does not attempt to take a cookie out of the jar.</p>
Yes answer/ interactive	Utterances used to request objects or others' actions. Usually involves mitigated echolalia. (Non-mitigated responses are similar to yes answer/interactive examples cited in previous category.	<p>Adult speaker: "Do you want some juice?"</p> <p>Echolalic speaker: "Do you want some juice?" He looks at the pitcher and continues to hold out his hand and waits for a glass of juice. In effect, he has indicated, "Yes, I want some juice."</p>
Request/ interactive	Utterances used to request objects or others' actions. Usually involves mitigated echolalia. (Non-mitigated responses are similar to yes answer/interactive examples cited in previous category.	<p>Mitigated responses (some changes in what was said):</p> <p>Example 1</p> <p>Adult speaker: "Do you want to watch TV?"</p> <p>Echolalic speaker: "<b>Yes</b>, you</p>

		<p>want to watch TV, <b>please.</b>"</p> <p>Example 2 Adult speaker: "Can you give it to me?"</p> <p>Echolalic speaker: "<b>Yes, Jason</b> can give it to me?"</p> <p>Example 3 Adult speaker: "Do you want some crackers?"</p> <p>Echolalic speaker: "Do you want some <b>pretzels?</b>"</p>
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### Noninteractive: Scenarios, that is, messages for personal use

Category	Description	Example
Nonfocused/ personal	Utterances produced with no apparent interactive communicative intent; often spoken during states of high arousal (e.g., fear, frustration, pain). Does not appear to be attempt at self regulation	<p>Adult speaker: "What's wrong? Why are you screaming?"</p> <p>Echolalic speaker: He continues to walk and flap his hands; intermittently he screams and slaps his own face, and says to himself "What's wrong? Why are you screaming?" He repeats "What's wrong? Why are your screaming?" and slaps his face again.</p>
Rehearsal/ personal	Utterances used as a processing aid, followed by utterance or action indicating comprehension of echoed utterance.	<p>Adult speaker: "Give this to Jim." (Hands over the notebook.)</p> <p>Echolalic speaker: He turns around, starts pacing, and softly says "Give this to Jim" several times. The pacing stops and he walks over to Jim and gives the notebook to him.</p>
Self-regulatory/ personal	Utterances which serve to regulate one's own actions. Produced in synchrony with motor activity.	<p>Adult speaker: "Don't jump on the bed."</p> <p>Echolalic speaker: He repeats</p>

		"Don't jump on the bed" several times to himself as he gradually decreases the jumping, ceases the action, and finally gets off the bed.
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## How Does One Decrease Echolalia?

The answer is simple, although the process of programming or intervention is not. The obvious solution is to teach the child more receptive and expressive language through one or a combination of methods available. Echolalia serves a function for the child as the information in this article suggests. Extinction is not a preferred active strategy. Absence of echolalic behavior would diminish a child's communicative repertoire during the interim while he still lacks sufficient spontaneous spoken language. Consequently, out of necessity with a restricted communicative repertoire, more messages might be expressed behaviorally. It is important to know that typically diminishment of echolalia will automatically occur as the child learns more language. Echolalia may occupy some portion of a given child's/adult's communicative repertoire for a lifetime, however.

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Vicker, B. (2009). *Functional categories of immediate echolalia*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana Resource Center Autism.