

When Delay is a Category Error: Gestalt Processing and the Misreading of Autistic Development

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ABSTRACT

Developmental delay in autism is often treated as a neutral descriptive category; however, its application depends on underlying assumptions about developmental sequence, timing, and what counts as evidence of competence. This paper argues that some phenomena classified as developmental delay may instead reflect a mismatch between analytic developmental models and gestalt-organized cognitive-linguistic processing. Drawing on psycholinguistic theory, critiques of common objections to Natural Language Acquisition framework (NLA), and conceptual analysis of literature on echolalia and gestalt language processing (GLP), this article examines how autistic developmental trajectories may be misread when decontextualized, segmented, and output-based criteria are treated as universal markers of progress. A structured conceptual review was conducted using a targeted corpus of writings on gestalt psychology, the concept of ‘gestalt’ within psycholinguistics, GLP, echolalia, developmental interpretation, and critical responses to NLA-related frameworks. Across these sources, recurrent patterns suggest that delayed segmentation, context-bound language, and reliance on stored gestalts are frequently interpreted as deficits rather than as indicators of an alternative developmental architecture. The paper proposes that, in some cases, developmental delay in autism is better understood as a category error produced by applying analytic expectations to gestalt-organized minds. Clinical implications include the need for greater caution in neuropsychological assessment, more precise differentiation between difference and delay, and increased attention to context, relational meaning, and internally organized competence in autistic language development.

Keywords: Autism, Gestalt Language Processing, Developmental Delay, Psycholinguistics, Neuropsychological Assessment, Echolalia, Natural Language Acquisition Framework, Cognitive Architecture.

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Abbreviations

- GLP — Gestalt Language Processing
- NLA — The Natural Language Acquisition framework
- PTMF — The Power Threat Meaning Framework

Introduction

Developmental delay is often presented in autism discourse as though it were a neutral clinical description—a simple notation that a child has not yet reached an expected milestone within an expected timeframe. Yet delay is never merely observed. It is inferred. It depends on prior assumptions

about what development ought to look like, in what order it ought to unfold, and which outward behaviors count as valid evidence that development is taking place at all. In this sense, developmental delay is not a theory-free category but an interpretive judgement shaped by the developmental model through which a child is being read.

In autism, those models have historically been organized around analytic assumptions about language and cognition. Development is often expected to proceed from part to whole: from isolated words to combinations, from segmented units to flexible generativity, from

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decontextualized performance to generalizable skill. Within such frameworks, language that is scripted, context-bound, affectively mediated, or delayed in its segmentation is readily treated as evidence of immaturity, lag, or deficit. Likewise, a child whose competence is not easily demonstrated through isolated verbal output, standardized assessment tasks, or conventional milestone sequences may be classified as delayed even where meaningful organization is already present. The problem, in such cases, may not lie wholly in the child's development, but in the narrowness of the developmental template being applied.

Work on GLP offers an alternative frame for understanding this mismatch. Peters' early account of language learning strategies challenged the assumption that all learners acquire language by assembling discrete parts into larger structures, raising instead the possibility that some begin with larger, meaningful wholes that are only later segmented and recombined [1]. Prizant's foundational work extended this insight into autism, describing gestalt language and gestalt processing not as random repetition but as patterned, communicative behavior that becomes more coherent when understood at the level of wholes rather than fragments [2,3]. More recent texts within the NLA literature have continued to develop this view, proposing that echolalia, scripting, and delayed segmentation may reflect a distinct developmental pathway rather than a mere interruption of a normative one [4-6]. Although these claims remain contested, the existence of such a pathway raises an important interpretive question: when developmental expectations are built around analytic sequencing, how often is gestalt-organized development being misread as delay?

This question matters not only at the level of theory but at the level of practice.

Neuropsychological and developmental interpretations shape referral pathways, intervention targets, educational placements, and the broader meanings attached to autistic lives. If delayed segmentation, context-dependent expression, or reliance on stored language are treated only as signs of deficit, then clinicians may overlook evidence of internally organized competence that does not yet appear in analytically preferred form. Recent work in psycholinguistics and multimodal interaction further complicates narrowly verbal or decontextualized accounts of communication, suggesting that meaning in face to-face exchange is distributed across relational, sensory, and temporal channels rather than confined to isolated lexical production alone [7,8]. A strictly analytic developmental lens may therefore fail not only linguistically, but interactionally.

The issue is also interpretive in a deeper sense. Categories such as delay do not simply describe a developmental reality; they participate in shaping it by determining what is noticed, what is valued, and what is targeted for correction. As Boyle argues in relation to the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF), interpretive systems are inseparable from relations of power [9]. When one developmental architecture is treated as normative, another may be rendered visible only through deficit language. In autism, this raises the possibility that at least some instances of so-called developmental delay may be better understood not as slowed acquisition within a universal sequence, but as

a category error produced by applying analytic expectations to gestalt-organized minds.

The aim of this paper is to examine that possibility. Drawing on foundational and contemporary literature on GLP, psycholinguistic work on wholes and structure, and critical analysis of common objections to NLA-related frameworks, this paper argues that some developmental phenomena commonly interpreted as delay in autism may be more coherently understood as manifestations of an alternative cognitive-linguistic architecture. Rather than denying the existence of genuine support needs or developmental difficulties, the paper calls for greater interpretive precision in distinguishing delay from difference, especially where autistic development may be organized around gestalt rather than analytic pathways.

Materials and Methods

Materials (Targeted Corpus)

Because this article is a conceptual analysis rather than an empirical study, the term materials refer to the body of texts selected for structured review. A targeted corpus was assembled to examine how developmental delay in autism is described, inferred, and contested when viewed through the lens of gestalt-organized language development. The corpus was purposively rather than exhaustively selected. Its aim was not to provide a systematic review of all literature related to autism, language delay, or NLA, but to gather conceptually relevant sources that illuminate the interpretive assumptions underlying the classification of delay and the alternative explanations offered by gestalt-based frameworks.

The corpus included five overlapping source categories. First, foundational texts on whole to-part language acquisition and autism-specific gestalt processing were included to establish the historical and theoretical lineage of the argument. These included Peters' early work on language learning strategies and the possibility that larger patterned units may precede segmentable parts, as well as Prizant's seminal papers describing gestalt language and communicative organization in autistic children [1-3]. These sources were treated as primary conceptual anchors for the claim that atypical developmental sequences may nonetheless be internally coherent.

Second, contemporary clinical and practitioner-oriented works on gestalt language development and NLA were included to represent current formulations of the framework and its use in neurodiversity-affirming support contexts. These included Blanc's book length articulation of NLA as a developmental pathway from echolalia toward self-generated language [8], Blanc, Blackwell, and Elias' more recent discussion of the NLA protocol in clinical practice, and Battye's synthesis of GLP supports for autistic and other neurodivergent children [4-6]. These texts were not treated as uncontested empirical proof, but as influential interpretive frameworks shaping contemporary understandings of gestalt development.

Third, the corpus included interdisciplinary scholarship relevant to the broader theoretical plausibility of gestalt-organized processing. This included work connecting gestalt theory

to linguistic structure, as well as research on multimodal meaning making in face-to-face interaction, which complicates narrowly verbal or decontextualized accounts of communicative competence [7,8,10]. Vygotsky's work on the relationship between thought and language was also included as a classical conceptual reference, particularly where the paper considers the possibility that meaning may be organized prior to or differently from immediately available segmented speech [11].

Fourth, the corpus included critical and interpretive sources concerned with how psychological and developmental categories are shaped by power. These included Boyle's discussion of power within the PTMF and the subsequent scoping review of PTMF-related empirical literature by Gallagher, Regan, and O'Reilly [9,12]. These sources were used not as primary developmental models, but as interpretive supports for the argument that categories such as delay are not purely descriptive and may function differently depending on the normative assumptions embedded in the assessment context.

Fifth, the corpus included a small number of author-generated texts that synthesize, critique, and extend the above literatures in relation to autistic gestalt processing. These included prior conceptual writings on psycholinguistic evidence for gestalt meaning, critiques of recurring objections to NLA-related claims, and a recent peer-reviewed auto theoretical analysis of scripting and GLP in pathologizing contexts [13-15]. These sources were included not as stand-alone authority, but as part of the paper's declared analytic lineage, particularly where they consolidate dispersed debates that are not yet well represented in conventional academic indexing.

Taken together, this targeted corpus was selected to support a focused conceptual question: whether some developmental phenomena commonly classified as delay in autism may be more coherently understood as evidence of a different cognitive-linguistic architecture. The corpus therefore privileges theoretical lineage, clinical framing, interdisciplinary plausibility, and interpretive critique over comprehensiveness, consistent with the aims of a short conceptual paper rather than a formal systematic review.

Methods (Comparative Conceptual Analysis)

This paper employed a comparative conceptual analysis rather than an experimental or quantitative method. The selected corpus was read as a set of interacting frameworks rather than as a collection of findings to be aggregated. The analytic task was to examine how developmental delay is inferred within autism-related discourse, to identify the assumptions that support those inferences, and to compare those assumptions with descriptions of gestalt-organized language development and multimodal meaning-making. The purpose of the analysis was not to adjudicate all empirical claims associated with NLA, but to test whether some phenomena commonly classified as developmental delay may be more coherently explained as differences in developmental architecture.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. In the first stage, the corpus was reviewed for explicit and implicit criteria by

which developmental delay is typically inferred in autism and language development contexts. Particular attention was given to assumptions about sequence, timing, and evidence of competence—for example, the expectation that language develops from isolated parts toward larger combinations, that segmentation precedes flexible generativity, and that decontextualized verbal output functions as a reliable indicator of underlying cognitive or linguistic maturity. These assumptions were treated as interpretive commitments rather than neutral observations.

In the second stage, descriptions of gestalt-organized processing were examined for recurrent features that might be misclassified under analytic developmental models. These included reliance on larger stored utterances or scripts, delayed segmentation, context-bound or affectively mediated language, asynchronous emergence across domains, and evidence of meaningful organization that is not immediately legible through standardized or part-based measures. Foundational and contemporary sources were compared to assess whether these features represented a consistent alternative developmental pathway rather than isolated anomalies or purely idiosyncratic behaviors.

In the third stage, the analysis compared the two sets of assumptions directly. The question in each case was not simply whether a child appeared "late" by a conventional milestone sequence, but whether the observed behavior necessarily indicated absent or slowed development, or whether it could instead reflect a mismatch between the developmental model being applied and the organizational logic of the learner. Where critiques of NLA or gestalt language development were considered, the analysis focused on whether those critiques challenged the existence of the observed phenomena themselves, or whether they primarily reasserted analytic norms as the default standard by which development should be judged.

Throughout, the paper treated "developmental delay" as a theory-laden category whose meaning depends on what is counted as evidence, what sequence is presumed normative, and which forms of competence are rendered visible within the assessment frame. This approach was informed in part by critical interpretive work within the PTMF literature, which emphasizes that psychological categories are shaped by relations of power as well as by empirical observation [9,12]. In the present paper, that insight is applied cautiously and specifically: not to reject developmental assessment altogether, but to examine whether the category of delay may in some cases be functioning as a misclassification when analytic developmental expectations are imposed on gestalt-organised minds.

As a short conceptual paper, this analysis does not claim the scope or methodological force of a systematic review, meta-analysis, or outcome study. It does not attempt to establish prevalence, causation, or universal applicability. Rather, it offers a structured theoretical reappraisal of a specific interpretive problem: whether some developmental phenomena in autism are being read as delay because the dominant developmental model is insufficiently sensitive to alternative cognitive-linguistic architectures.

Results / Observations

Delay is Often Inferred through Analytic Developmental Expectations

Across the targeted corpus, a consistent pattern emerged: developmental delay in autism is frequently inferred not only from the timing of observable behaviors, but from the degree to which those behaviors conform to an analytic model of development. In this model, language and cognition are expected to progress from smaller units to larger ones, from isolated words to combinations, from segmented forms to flexible generativity, and from context-bound expression to decontextualized performance. Although these expectations are often treated as self-evident markers of maturation, the reviewed texts suggest that they are better understood as features of a particular developmental architecture rather than universally applicable indicators of competence.

Peters' early work on language learning strategies offers an important starting point for this distinction. By questioning whether language acquisition necessarily proceeds through the accumulation of discrete parts, Peters proposed that some learners may acquire larger, patterned wholes prior to segmenting those wholes into smaller reusable units [1]. This does not eliminate sequence; rather, it alters its direction. What appears "late" when measured against a part-to-whole model may, under a whole-to-part model, represent an entirely different but internally coherent route of development. The implication is significant: if the developmental template assumes that parts must appear first, then a learner whose organization begins with wholes will predictably be read as delayed even when meaningful acquisition is underway.

Prizant's early work on autism extends this challenge directly into clinical interpretation. In both his 1982 and 1983 papers, behaviors such as echolalia and gestalt language use are not treated as random repetition or communicative failure, but as patterned, functional, and developmentally meaningful forms of expression [2,3]. Under analytic assumptions, such language is often classified as immature because it does not yet display the segmented novelty or flexible recombination that clinicians are trained to recognize as advanced. However, Prizant's descriptions suggest that the apparent deficit may lie partly in the observer's framework. If language is being organized and stored in larger, affectively or contextually meaningful units, then delayed segmentation does not necessarily indicate absent development. It may instead indicate that development is occurring in a different order than the one presumed normative.

This same pattern is visible in more recent clinical formulations of gestalt language development. Blanc and Blanc et al. describe a developmental pathway in which echolalia, scripting, mitigated gestalts, and eventual recombination are understood as successive manifestations of an unfolding process rather than as static signs of impairment [4,5]. Battye, writing for a contemporary practitioner audience, likewise presents GLP as a meaningful developmental profile that may be obscured when clinicians privilege decontextualized, single-word, or analytically segmented output as the primary evidence of competence [6]. Across these sources, the same interpretive

tension recurs: behaviors often labelled delayed in standard developmental discourse may be reclassified as developmentally significant once the organizing unit shifts from isolated parts to larger wholes.

The corpus also suggests that analytic expectations extend beyond language form into the conditions under which competence is expected to appear. Standardized and clinical interpretations frequently privilege decontextualized performance, rapid retrieval, and the production of novel language in response to externally imposed prompts. Yet work on multimodal interaction indicates that meaning in face-to-face communication is distributed across gesture, timing, sensory context, co-regulation, and shared situational cues rather than located solely in isolated verbal output [7]. When competence is measured primarily through decontextualized verbal production, learners whose understanding is relationally or contextually organized may appear less developed than they are. In such cases, what is being marked as delay may reflect not a lack of internal organization, but a mismatch between the assessment frame and the learner's route to expression.

Taken together, these sources suggest that developmental delay in autism is often inferred through an analytic template that assumes segmented, decontextualized, and visibly generative performance as the normative standard. This does not mean that all such inferences are false, nor that developmental difficulties are merely artefacts of interpretation. It does, however, indicate that the category of delay is not being applied from a neutral observational position. It is being applied through a model—and where that model is insufficiently sensitive to whole-to-part, context-dependent, or multimodally organized development, the risk of misclassification increases.

Gestalt-organized Development May Appear Delayed While Remaining Coherent

A second pattern across the corpus is that developmental profiles associated with gestaltorganised language and cognition may appear delayed when judged by analytic milestones while remaining internally coherent when understood on their own terms. This distinction is central to the present argument. The issue is not whether observable differences exist—they clearly do—but whether those differences necessarily signify absent or slowed development, or whether they may instead reflect an alternative route by which language, meaning, and communicative flexibility emerge.

Foundational and contemporary descriptions of gestalt language development converge on several recurrent features: the storage and use of larger utterance units, reliance on scripts or echolalic forms, delayed segmentation into smaller reusable parts, strong contextual and affective anchoring of language, and uneven or asynchronous emergence across domains [2-6]. Within an analytic developmental model, each of these features may be interpreted as evidence that the learner has not yet mastered more advanced skills. However, when taken together, they describe not an absence of organization but a different organizing principle. Meaning appears to be held first in larger, relationally saturated forms, with later access to segmentation and recombination

occurring as a secondary process rather than the primary route of acquisition.

Peters' question—whether the whole may precede the parts—remains especially instructive here [1]. If the learner's initial unit of acquisition is a larger patterned sequence rather than a single word, then the developmental timeline will not map neatly onto conventional milestone expectations. A child may demonstrate recognition, intentionality, affective precision, and situational appropriateness through repeated or partially mitigated gestalts long before producing the kinds of discrete, decontextualized utterances that standard developmental frameworks tend to reward. Under those conditions, a clinician or educator working from an analytic template may interpret the learner as linguistically “behind,” while the learner is in fact demonstrating complex pattern retention, relational mapping, and context-sensitive meaning within a different developmental logic.

This alternative logic is supported not only by autism-specific clinical literature but also by broader theoretical work on language and perception. Buffart and Jacobs, drawing on gestalt theory, argue that linguistic structure itself may be organized at levels above the isolated unit, reinforcing the possibility that wholes are not merely aggregates but primary structures of meaning [10]. Similarly, Benetti et al. emphasize that face-to-face interaction is inherently multimodal, with communicative meaning distributed across timing, movement, gaze, and embodied co-presence [7]. These findings do not “prove” GLP as a singular mechanism, but they do challenge the assumption that segmented verbal output is the only—or even the most developmentally valid—site at which competence becomes visible. If meaning is often multimodal and distributed, then delayed access to analytically segmented speech may coexist with substantial communicative organization that remains under-recognized in conventional assessment settings.

The corpus also indicates that coherence in gestalt-organized development is often most visible when attention shifts from isolated products to developmental patterns. Echolalia, for example, is frequently misread as mere repetition when viewed at the level of surface form. Yet across the literature, echolalic utterances are described as capable of carrying communicative intent, emotional regulation, memory traces, interactional timing, and emergent transformation over time [2-4]. The same utterance may function initially as a stored whole, later as a mitigated form, and eventually as a source of recombined generativity. What appears static in a single observation may reveal developmental progression when tracked longitudinally or interpreted through a whole-to-part framework. In this sense, the apparent delay may arise less from the learner's lack of growth than from the observer's insistence on the wrong unit of analysis.

This point has practical implications for how developmental “readiness” is understood. In analytic models, readiness is often indexed by the spontaneous production of isolated, flexible, and novel units under externally structured conditions. In a gestalt-organized profile, however, readiness may be better reflected in

the stability, relevance, and transformation of larger patterns over time. A learner who reliably deploys stored gestalts in affectively precise or situationally meaningful ways may be demonstrating developmental organization even when they cannot yet decompose those gestalts into smaller, clinician-recognisable components. To read such a learner as simply delayed is to treat the absence of one form of evidence as proof of the absence of development itself.

Taken together, the reviewed sources suggest that gestalt-organized development can be both different and coherent. Its apparent lateness may be an artefact of comparison to a model that assumes parts must precede wholes, segmentation must precede meaning, and decontextualized novelty must precede communicative legitimacy. Where those assumptions dominate, a learner may be judged as delayed not because development is absent, but because it is arriving through a route the prevailing framework was not designed to see.

Common Critiques Frequently Rely on Hidden Analytic Assumptions

A third pattern across the corpus is that many critiques of NLA and related gestalt language frameworks do not primarily challenge the existence of the observed phenomena themselves, but instead challenge the legitimacy of interpreting those phenomena outside an analytic developmental model. This distinction is important. The present paper does not argue that all critiques are invalid, nor that NLA-related claims should be exempt from empirical scrutiny. Rather, the pattern that emerges is that many objections function by reasserting analytic developmental norms as the default standard against which all language development must be judged. In such cases, what is presented as methodological caution may also serve as an unexamined defense of a particular cognitive architecture.

One recurring assumption concerns the status of echolalia and scripted language. Within conventional developmental discourse, repeated utterances are often treated as derivative rather than generative, and therefore as less developmentally significant than novel, segmented speech. Yet this hierarchy is itself theory-laden. Prizant's early work described echolalia as communicatively functional and developmentally meaningful, while later NLA-oriented texts treat stored gestalts not as inert repetitions but as organized units that may support regulation, relational participation, and later recombination [2-5]. To dismiss such language as non-generative simply because it does not initially appear in analytically novel form is to assume in advance that generativity can only be recognized at the level of segmented production. The critique, in this sense, often presupposes the very conclusion it claims to establish.

A related assumption concerns developmental sequence. Critics frequently object that delayed segmentation, persistent scripting, or context-bound expression should not be treated as evidence of an alternative developmental pathway without stronger empirical validation. This caution is reasonable at one level. However, the analytic pattern identified in the corpus suggests that such critiques often move quickly from “this pathway is not yet fully validated” to “therefore these features should

continue to be interpreted primarily as deficit.” The latter does not follow automatically from the former. Where a learner’s behavior is internally patterned, communicatively functional, and longitudinally transformable, the absence of a fully settled model does not justify collapsing difference back into delay by default. As argued elsewhere in the author’s prior synthesis of psycholinguistic and clinical debates, the central question is not merely whether the framework has been perfectly standardized, but what assumptions are being smuggled in when its alternatives are rejected [14,15].

The same issue appears in how evidence is defined. Across critical debates, evidence is often implicitly restricted to forms that are easily captured through standardized measurement: discrete verbal output, early segmentation, rapid response, or generalization across decontextualized tasks. By contrast, evidence that is longitudinal, contextual, relational, or transformation-based is more readily discounted as anecdotal or insufficiently rigorous. Yet this evidentiary hierarchy mirrors the developmental hierarchy already described. It privileges what is easiest to measure within analytic frameworks and treats other forms of organization as epistemically secondary. The result is a circular structure: analytic criteria define valid evidence, valid evidence confirms analytic models, and any developmental profile that does not conform to those criteria is treated as weakly evidenced or merely delayed. In this context, critiques may appear to be defending scientific caution while in practice protecting the dominance of a single interpretive template.

Interdisciplinary sources in the corpus further complicate this narrowing of evidence. Work in gestalt theory and language structure suggests that wholes may function as meaningful units in their own right rather than as temporary approximations awaiting decomposition [10]. Research on multimodal interaction likewise indicates that communicative competence often emerges through distributed relational channels rather than through isolated verbal output alone [7]. These lines of work do not validate every claim made under the banner of NLA, but they do weaken the assumption that analytic segmentation is the only scientifically credible route to demonstrating development. Where critics ignore such possibilities, they risk treating one methodological preference as if it were a universal law of cognition.

This pattern does not mean that all objections to NLA or gestalt language development are reducible to bias. Some critiques raise legitimate concerns about overgeneralization, insufficient empirical precision, and the need for clearer operational definitions. Those concerns should remain in view. However, the corpus suggests that another layer is often present beneath them: a hidden commitment to analytic developmental norms as the baseline against which all atypical language must be interpreted. When that commitment remains unexamined, the debate can become less about whether observed developmental phenomena are real and more about whether the field is willing to recognize a form of coherence that its dominant models were not built to detect.

Taken together, these observations suggest that critiques of gestalt-based frameworks may sometimes function less as

neutral evaluations of evidence than as boundary-setting mechanisms for what counts as evidence in the first place. In that context, the repeated classification of autistic development as delayed may reflect not only unresolved empirical questions, but a deeper reluctance to concede that another cognitive-linguistic architecture may be present.

Discussion

Developmental Delay as Possible Category Error

The central argument of this paper is not that developmental delay is a meaningless concept, nor that autistic children never experience genuine developmental difficulties. Rather, the argument is narrower and more precise: in at least some cases, developmental delay in autism may be functioning as a category error. That is, a developmental profile may be interpreted as evidence of slowed or absent acquisition when it is more coherently understood as the manifestation of a different cognitive-linguistic architecture. The problem, in such cases, is not that development is not occurring, but that the prevailing framework recognizes development only when it appears in analytically preferred form.

This distinction matters because the category of delay carries significant interpretive and practical weight. Once a child is understood as delayed, their language is more likely to be viewed through a remedial lens, their communicative behavior is more likely to be reduced to deficit markers, and intervention is more likely to prioritise the rapid emergence of segmented, decontextualized, and externally legible output. Yet the findings reviewed here suggest that some autistic developmental profiles do not fail to develop so much as they develop according to a different sequence, through different units of organization, and under different conditions of visibility. If larger patterned wholes function as the initial carriers of meaning, if segmentation is secondary rather than primary, and if competence is often expressed through contextually or relationally organized forms before it appears in isolated verbal products, then a strictly analytic developmental template may misidentify difference as delay.

The phrase category error is especially useful because it clarifies the nature of the problem. The issue is not merely that clinicians may be “too negative” or insufficiently flexible in tone. The issue is structural. A category error occurs when a phenomenon is placed in the wrong conceptual class because the framework used to interpret it is misaligned with the phenomenon itself. In the present context, the error lies in assuming that deviations from analytic developmental sequence necessarily indicate incomplete or impaired development. That assumption may hold in some cases. However, where a learner’s profile demonstrates patterned storage, context-sensitive deployment, delayed but progressive transformation of gestalts, or communicative competence distributed across multimodal and relational channels, the inference of delay may be less an observation than a misclassification.

This interpretation is strengthened by the historical and interdisciplinary sources in the corpus. Peters opened the possibility that some language learners begin with larger units

rather than smaller ones, undermining the universality of part-to-whole developmental assumptions [1]. Prizant's early autism-specific work showed that echolalic and gestalt forms can be communicatively purposeful and developmentally meaningful rather than merely repetitive or pathological [2,3]. Contemporary NLA-related texts extend that lineage, proposing that what appears static at the level of isolated observation may reveal transformation and increasing flexibility when tracked longitudinally and interpreted through a whole-to-part lens [4-6]. These sources do not prove that every instance of atypical language reflects a gestalt architecture, but they do establish that a coherent alternative to the dominant developmental model exists and warrants serious consideration.

The argument also has implications beyond language. If developmental delay is partly inferred through what a system can recognize, then the issue is not confined to milestone charts or speech samples. It extends to broader neuropsychological assumptions about what competence looks like, when it becomes visible, and which forms of performance are treated as valid evidence of underlying organization. Research on multimodal interaction suggests that meaning often emerges through embodied, temporal, and relational channels that standardized or decontextualized tasks may fail to capture [7]. In this light, the repeated classification of autistic development as delayed may sometimes reflect a narrower problem of epistemic fit: the tools of observation are calibrated to one architecture and therefore systematically under-read another.

This is where the interpretive caution offered by PTMF becomes relevant. Boyle argues that psychological categories are never separable from the power relations that organize what is considered normal, intelligible, and in need of correction [9]. Applied cautiously here, that insight suggests that delay is not simply a developmental descriptor but a socially and clinically consequential naming practice. When one developmental sequence is treated as normative, alternative sequences are at risk of being rendered visible only through deficit language. The concern is not that all developmental assessment is invalid, but that the authority of the category can obscure its own assumptions. Once named as delayed, the learner may be acted upon as though the interpretive question has already been settled.

For this reason, the present paper proposes a narrower but clinically important reappraisal: in autism, developmental delay should be treated less as a default classification and more as a hypothesis requiring careful differentiation from architectural difference. This is especially important in cases where the learner demonstrates patterned echolalia, context-dependent communicative precision, strong affective or relational language use, delayed but evident transformation of stored utterances, or competence that appears more clearly in longitudinal and situated contexts than in isolated testing environments. In such cases, the question should not only be "What has not yet appeared?" but also "What form of organization is already present, and what assumptions are preventing it from being recognized?"

This reframing does not eliminate the reality of support needs. A child may be both gestalt-organized and significantly disabled. They may require intensive support, accommodation, and

specialized teaching. Nor does the argument depend on accepting every formulation associated with NLA as settled science. The claim is more modest and more disruptive at once: where a developmental model is insufficiently sensitive to whole-to-part, contextually anchored, or multimodally distributed organization, its use may generate false positives for delay. In those cases, the field is not simply observing developmental difference. It is helping to produce deficit through misclassification.

Understood this way, the question is no longer whether autism "really" involves delay in some abstract universal sense. The question is whether the developmental architecture being measured matches the architecture of the mind being measured. Where that fit fails, delay may name not the child's deficiency, but the framework's inability to perceive them accurately.

Clinical Implications for Neuropsychological Assessment and Intervention

If developmental delay in autism can, in some cases, reflect a misclassification rather than a straightforward description of slowed acquisition, then the clinical implications are substantial. Neuropsychological assessment, developmental interpretation, and intervention planning all depend on assumptions about what counts as evidence of competence. Where those assumptions remain narrowly analytic, clinicians risk underestimating the developmental organization already present in gestalt-oriented learners and, in turn, designing supports that target the wrong problem. The practical consequence is not merely theoretical imprecision; it is the possibility of iatrogenic harm through interventions built on an inaccurate account of the learner's underlying architecture.

A first implication is that clinicians should exercise greater caution in equating segmented, decontextualized, or rapidly retrievable verbal output with developmental maturity. Such forms of output may indeed reflect one important route to competence, but they should not be treated as universally definitive. For learners whose language is organized in larger units, whose meaning is strongly context-bound, or whose access to segmented forms emerges later, the absence of analytic performance at a given moment may not indicate absence of understanding. Assessment therefore benefits from a broader evidentiary frame—one that includes longitudinal observation, contextual responsiveness, patterned use of stored language, mitigated transformations over time, and the learner's capacity to participate meaningfully within relational and multimodal environments. In practice, this means that the question "Can the child produce isolated novel language on demand?" should not eclipse the equally important question "What forms of organized meaning are already available under conditions of safety, familiarity, and shared context?"

A second implication concerns the interpretation of echolalia and scripting. Across the literature reviewed here, these behaviors are repeatedly described as potentially functional, communicative, regulatory, and developmentally significant rather than merely repetitive [2-5]. Clinical practice that treats echolalia primarily as a symptom to be extinguished or bypassed risks interrupting the learner's existing route to meaning. By contrast, practice that recognizes stored gestalts as viable units of organization

can support development by working with rather than against the learner's architecture. This does not require romanticizing all scripting or assuming that every repeated utterance is richly communicative. It does require abandoning the reflexive assumption that repetition is inherently less meaningful than segmented novelty. In assessment and intervention alike, the task is not to decide whether scripted language "counts" as real language, but to determine what it is doing, how it is functioning, and what developmental transformations may already be underway within it.

A third implication concerns the design of interventions. Where a learner is misclassified as simply delayed within an analytic model, intervention may prioritize forced segmentation, premature demands for decontextualized production, or heavy emphasis on compliance with externally defined markers of progress. Such approaches may produce superficially measurable outputs while undermining regulation, communicative trust, and the learner's own route to integration. Contemporary practitioner-oriented GLP literature argues instead for supports that are meaning-rich, relationally attuned, and sensitive to the developmental role of stored language, modelling, and mitigable gestalts [5,6]. From a neuropsychological perspective, this suggests that intervention should be organized less around the elimination of "immature" forms and more around expanding access to flexibility, recombination, and self-generated expression through pathways that preserve coherence rather than rupture it.

A fourth implication is that assessment itself should become more multimodal and ecologically valid. Benetti et al. highlight that face-to-face communication is not reducible to verbal tokens alone; it unfolds through embodied timing, gesture, sensory cues, and co-regulated interaction [7]. This is especially relevant for autistic learners whose communicative competence may be distributed across channels that standardized or decontextualized tasks under-sample. Neuropsychological and developmental evaluations that rely heavily on isolated prompts, rapid response expectations, or context-stripped performance may therefore systematically underestimate competence in learners whose processing depends on relational anchoring or delayed access. Incorporating richer observational contexts, caregiver narratives, classroom-based examples, and dynamic interactional assessment may help reduce this distortion. In practical terms, clinicians should ask not only what a learner can do under testing conditions, but what becomes visible when the communicative field is widened.

Finally, this paper suggests a broader shift in clinical stance: developmental delay in autism should be treated as a provisional interpretive hypothesis rather than an unquestioned endpoint. Especially in cases where gestalt-organized features are present, the classification of delay should prompt a second-order question about model fit. Is the observed difficulty best understood as slowed acquisition within the expected sequence, or as evidence that the expected sequence may not adequately describe the learner's route? This shift does not weaken clinical rigour. On the contrary, it strengthens it by requiring greater precision in the distinction between difference and deficit. It also creates space for a more ethically responsible practice, one in which

clinicians are less likely to mistake architectural mismatch for developmental failure.

Taken together, these implications point toward a practical reorientation in neuropsychological work with autistic learners: from correction of apparent absence toward recognition of present organization, from premature remediation of surface forms toward support for deeper coherence, and from the presumption of universal analytic development toward a more plural understanding of how language and cognition may unfold. Where that reorientation occurs, the goal of assessment and intervention is no longer to force the learner into the only developmental sequence the system knows how to reward. It becomes, instead, the more demanding and more humane task of discovering what kind of developmental sequence is already underway.

Limitations and Future Empirical Directions

Several limitations should be stated clearly. First, this is a short conceptual paper rather than an empirical study, systematic review, or meta-analysis. The targeted corpus was purposively selected to illuminate a specific interpretive question—namely, whether some developmental phenomena commonly classified as delay in autism may be better understood as manifestations of an alternative cognitive-linguistic architecture. As such, the paper does not establish prevalence, causation, or outcome efficacy. It does not claim that gestalt-organized development has been conclusively operationalized across all contexts, nor that all features associated with NLA or GLP have been validated to the same degree. The argument offered here is therefore theoretical and interpretive rather than definitive in a positivist sense.

Second, the paper does not claim that all autistic developmental differences are best understood through a gestalt framework. Autism is heterogeneous, and many autistic children have genuine developmental delays, co-occurring intellectual disability, language disorder, apraxia, trauma-related dysregulation, or other factors that may shape developmental presentation in ways not reducible to gestalt processing. Likewise, the presence of echolalia, scripting, or context-bound language does not automatically establish a gestalt-organized architecture, nor should such features be romanticized or presumed to indicate hidden competence in every instance. The present argument is narrower: where developmental interpretation relies heavily on analytic assumptions, and where a learner's profile shows signs consistent with whole-to-part organization, there is a meaningful risk that delay may be over-inferred or misapplied.

Third, the current literature remains uneven. Foundational texts by Peters and Prizant, along with later clinical formulations by Blanc, Blanc et al., and Battye, provide a coherent developmental lineage, but the empirical base remains less mature than many clinicians would prefer for high-confidence generalization [1-6]. At the same time, critiques of NLA and related frameworks often focus on this incompleteness without adequately addressing the possibility that dominant analytic models are themselves historically contingent and under-theorized in relation to alternative developmental architectures. Future work should therefore move beyond the binary of uncritical endorsement

versus wholesale dismissal. What is needed is more precise empirical investigation into the conditions under which gestalt-organized development can be reliably identified, differentiated from other profiles, and tracked longitudinally without collapsing it prematurely into deficit categories.

Several directions for future research follow from this. Longitudinal studies are needed that examine whether learners identified as gestalt-oriented show developmental transformations that are poorly captured by standard milestone frameworks but become visible through changes in mitigated gestalts, contextual flexibility, and later segmentation. Comparative studies could also examine how autistic learners perform under different assessment conditions—for example, decontextualized standardized tasks versus dynamic, relational, and multimodal observation—to determine whether competence appears differently depending on the evaluative frame. More psycholinguistically informed research is needed to clarify whether whole-to-part developmental pathways can be operationalized in ways that are both clinically useful and empirically tractable. Finally, interdisciplinary work linking autism, language development, sensory integration, and multimodal communication may help move the field beyond narrowly verbal or part-based models of competence.

There is also a methodological implication for scholarship itself. If the phenomenon under consideration is one that may be under-recognized precisely because existing tools privilege the wrong forms of evidence, then future research must be careful not to reproduce the interpretive problem it seeks to study. Measures that rely exclusively on early segmentation, decontextualized novelty, or rapid isolated response may continue to generate false negatives for gestalt-organized competence. Research design therefore matters not only for validity but for ontology: the methods chosen may help determine whether a developmental architecture becomes visible at all.

In that sense, the most important future direction may be conceptual as much as empirical. The field does not only need more data; it also needs better questions. Rather than asking only whether autistic children meet milestones derived from analytic developmental assumptions, researchers and clinicians may need to ask how those assumptions shape what is counted as evidence in the first place. The present paper does not resolve that problem, but it argues that the question can no longer be treated as peripheral. If developmental delay is sometimes a misclassification produced by model mismatch, then refining the model is not an optional theoretical exercise. It is a necessary condition for more accurate, more ethical, and more scientifically credible work.

Conclusion

Developmental delay in autism is often treated as a self-evident clinical fact, but this paper has argued that it is more accurately understood as an interpretive category whose meaning depends on the developmental architecture presumed by the observer. When analytic developmental models are treated as universal, autistic learners whose language and cognition are organized around larger wholes, delayed segmentation, contextual

anchoring, or multimodal coherence may be read as simply late, incomplete, or deficient. In at least some cases, this may constitute not a neutral description of developmental status, but a category error: the misclassification of architectural difference as developmental failure.

The significance of this argument is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it suggests that the dominant language of developmental delay may obscure the existence of alternative pathways that are internally patterned and longitudinally coherent, even when they do not conform to standard analytic milestones. Practically, it raises the possibility that assessment and intervention can produce avoidable harm when they treat absence of analytically preferred evidence as proof of absence itself. The question for clinicians is therefore not only whether a child is meeting expected milestones, but whether the model used to define those milestones is capable of recognizing the kind of organization already present.

This paper does not deny the reality of support needs, nor does it claim that every atypical developmental profile in autism is best explained through gestalt processing. It makes a narrower and more urgent claim: where developmental frameworks are insufficiently sensitive to whole-to-part, context-dependent, or multimodally distributed competence, the category of delay may be over-applied in ways that distort both scientific understanding and clinical response. In those cases, what requires revision is not the child's route to meaning, but the field's assumptions about how meaning is allowed to appear.

If the developmental architecture being measured does not match the architecture of the mind being measured, then the diagnosis of delay may reveal less about the learner than about the limits of the framework itself. The task before the field is not to abandon developmental assessment, but to make it more precise, more plural, and more accountable to forms of coherence it has too often been trained not to see.

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