# Literal misunderstandings

We often think that what we say is clearly understood, when it is actually fraught with misunderstanding. Take for example:

* A child at school asking for pudding without having eaten his dinner. You say, ‘But you haven’t even touched your dinner’ and the child then touches the dinner with his finger and looks to you for the approval for dessert.
* A pupil standing in front of the teacher while she tries to settle the class – in a loud voice she says ‘SIT DOWN!’. The pupil sits down on the floor – perfect obedience. He did not get the unspoken message of ‘at your desk’.
* The adult looked at the child coming towards her and said, ‘Oh dear, you have your shoes on the wrong feet’. To which the child replied with confusion, ‘No, these are my feet’.

We often use common phrases such as, ‘there’s a frog in my throat’, ‘give me a ring’, ‘the penny dropped’, ‘it’s a piece of cake’, etc. Try to picture them as a literal recipient and you can see why a child can be confused. Don’t avoid them, but when used, provide an explanation to support the pupils’ growing knowledge of idioms.

Now think about the very blunt, literal comments made by pupils on the autism spectrum. When I was called a ‘gender confused old woman’ by a child, I could have been offended. He was annoyed at me. My response was, ‘I am an old woman but I’m not gender confused.’ When a young child poked at the varicose veins on the legs of a stranger while on a school trip and said, ‘I don’t like the blue things on your legs’, she was merely making a comment on what she saw. Of course, the accompanying teacher helped her to apologise and tried to explain the inappropriateness of the remark but it was not said as a malicious remark.

**Be confident in explaining literal things you say and in explaining the meaning to your pupils. Be alert to comments made by the children and consider the context. Rather than be offended and reprimanding them, use the opportunity as a teaching moment to explain why others may be insulted or annoyed.**