

The Perpetuation of Stereotypes in Croatian Public Discourse: “Autistic” as a Pejorative

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ABSTRACT

The way people are spoken or written about has a critical role in how they are perceived, and this in turn influences how they are positioned within a society – belonging to its core, the majority, or being relegated to the margins, the minority. Various authors have reflected on the role of language in dehumanizing, oppressing, and discriminating certain groups, be it the Jewish citizens during the Nazi regime in Germany, the Tutsi in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, black people in the United States since 1619, women throughout history, or gay and disabled people today, to name a few marginalized groups. In these and other cases, language was the first step in the othering and, consequently, the marginalization of a certain group. The aim of this paper is to explore the language of marginalization in Croatian public discourse, looking at how media workers and public figures contribute to stereotyping people with autism by using the words “autistic” and “autistically” as pejoratives. For this purpose, I analyzed one of the most visited newspaper websites in Croatia in relation to how these words are used. I found that journalists, writers, and politicians use “autistic” and “autistically” as pejoratives when they want to say that an individual, an institution, or a state is “out of touch with reality”, “self-centered”, “unresponsive”. In addition, “autistic” and “autistically” are often used with the intent to insult, thus further imbuing these words with negative connotations. I conclude that raising awareness is needed among media workers and public figures so that they recognize the danger of stereotyping people with autism through the pejorative use of the words “autistic” and “autistically”.

Key words: *autistic, pejorative, stereotypes, marginalization, public discourse*

Introduction

Disabled people have historically been excluded from society and are a marginalized group in many contexts across the world. Since they are also minoritized, the society makes sure they are not as visible as other members, that they are not equally represented in the workplace, in advertisements, in textbooks, in movies, etc. The society's unease with its disabled members is reflected in language as well, as evidenced by the terminological chaos, that is, the words we have used to talk about people with disabilities: handicapped, disabled, challenged, special needs, abnormal, defected, invalid, or, specifically, wheelchair-bound, retarded, crippled, deaf-and-dumb, deaf-mute, hard of hearing, deaf, blind, visually impaired, incapacitated, insane, psychotic, neurodivergent, autistic, and many other terms found in different languages.

In recent years, the terminological chaos has centered on the debate over person-first and identity-first language. To explain, person-first language focuses on the person,

so that the person is first and their disability is not at the forefront, for example, “a person with autism”. On the other hand, since disability is an important part of one's identity, many disabled individuals choose to talk about themselves in terms of identity-first language, for example “an autistic person”, “an autistic”, and this is known as identity-first language. In case of the latter, disabled people reclaim their previously negatively perceived disability; in case of the former, some may not want to be identified primarily based on their disability, so they opt for person-first language. The issue to this day remains unsettled and is ultimately a matter of personal choice. It is for this reason that I shall use both identity-first and person-first language throughout the paper. Finally, the key point to note in the debate is that disabled individuals are those who get to decide how they are to be called and addressed, which is the essence of the principles of self-advocacy, self-representation, and self-determination. As

Bosmajian observed, “[s]elf-determination must include self-definition, the ability and right to name oneself”¹.

In the following part, I focus specifically on autism and autistic identity, especially language-wise, and then explore the connection between language and stereotypes.

Autistic persons

In the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, autistic disorder, Asperger’s disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder have been consolidated into autism spectrum disorder. Autism spectrum disorder is characterized by “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, including deficits in social reciprocity, non-verbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and skills in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships”². It should be noted that this is a medical perspective, a diagnosis, but that some autistic individuals do not see autism as a disability, even though they recognize that there are both advantages and challenges to being autistic³.

While the autistic person is usually portrayed as the famous movie character Rain Man or the protagonist of the book “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time”, the reality is quite different. For many people it is a hidden disability because they have become proficient at using coping and learning strategies to “pass” as non-autistic. In stark contrast with how autistic individuals are generally portrayed – as asocial or antisocial – some autistics see themselves as social learners and social individuals⁴.

Indeed, autistic participants in one study established that it is the society that confers negative meaning on autism and autistic people, but that they, autistics, see their autism as value neutral, at the level of race or hair color, “an important facet of their complicated identities”⁵. When it comes to how autistic individuals refer to themselves, it appears that in English “person with autism” is the least preferred or even offensive in contrast with “autistic” and “autistic person”⁶⁻⁸; there is a concern that person-first language might actually accentuate the stigma.⁹ As explained in one study, autistic participants said that they reject person-first language because “they should not be required to remind people of their humanness”⁵. Hence, some authors suggest that “person on the autism spectrum” is the least polarizing and should be used where a compromise is needed between two politically entrenched ways of talking about autism, but that otherwise identity-first language should be given preference when it comes to autistic individuals¹⁰. Many individuals embrace their autism and do not see it through the medical lens as a disease to be treated or cured and therefore proudly call themselves autistic.

Language and stereotypes

Why does it matter what language is used to refer to specific (marginalized) groups of people? First, according to Rosenfelt and Howe, “language as a form of social be-

havior does both reflect and help to perpetuate deeply held cultural attitudes”¹. In other words, “language both reflects and shapes society. Culture shapes language and then language shapes culture. Little wonder that the words we use to talk to each other, and about each other, are the most important words in our language: they tell us who I am, they tell us who you are, they tell us who ‘they’ are”¹¹. Furthermore, as Jessica Murray observed, “language is a powerful conceptual force, and, as a transmitter of society’s deep biases, it can be a means of conditioning our thoughts”¹. For example, we know that language played a key role in discriminating, dehumanizing, and oppressing Jewish citizens during the Nazi regime in Germany, the Tutsi in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Native Americans and black people since the 16th and 17th century in what is today the United States of America, women throughout history and the world, etc.^{1,12}

In view of disability in particular, often the terms that are used for disabled people bear negative connotations that contribute to their stigmatization¹³, and even affirmative terms may do the same¹⁴, and “the language of disability, and the definitions and symbols that attach to societal lexicon, can be significant disablers”¹⁵. Unsurprisingly, research has shown that almost half of the people with disabilities in Croatia experience some sort of discrimination, and some even experience violence¹⁶.

The way autistic people are represented in the media and the stereotypes that surround them are mostly negative¹⁷⁻¹⁹. Consequentially, people on the autistic spectrum feel trapped by these stereotypes²⁰, that is, they feel they are “subjugated, judged, undervalued and erased”⁵. Clearly, the stigma and the stereotypes that autistic persons are subjected to are destructive to their identities and lives⁵. One of the reasons is because being assigned a label may result in actually acquiring the stereotype or the stigma attached to the label²¹, and the label of autism has accumulated stigma²². For example, in a study involving autistic persons, the participants explained that they feel exposed to stigma constantly; they manage it in a variety of ways, such as “reframing to more positive understandings of autism”, reclaiming language, and “using concealment and disclosure strategically”⁵. Regarding the reclamation of language, the participants use the word “autistic” to reclaim it from stigma and to reframe others’ understanding of autism as a method of stigma management²³.

Language reclamation occurs when marginalized groups of people reclaim a word that had previously been used, or is still being used, to demean them and they use it to describe themselves or to refer to themselves, thus taking away its power from the oppressor. In other words, “laying claim to the forbidden, the word as weapon is taken up and taken back by those it seeks to shackle—a self-emancipation that defies hegemonic linguistic ownership and the (ab)use of power”²⁴. Language reclamation is effective as it has been established that “self-labeling with a derogatory label can weaken the label’s stigmatizing force”²⁵.

At this point it is worth highlighting that many issues around autism have to do with framing and with the question of who owns the narrative. Autism is usually described within and from a medical perspective, which results in autistic people being treated as broken and in need of fixing²⁶. Yet, as previously explained, some people on the autism spectrum see autism as a part of who they are, like they would skin color or hair color. To understand their perspective, the society needs to listen to autistic voices and not let non-autistic individuals dominate the discourse about autistic people.

There is an interesting perspective to touch upon at the end of this introduction, and that is how autism metaphors are used in international relations in pejorative meaning. Christian²⁷ posits that using “disability metaphors can reinforce ableist preconceptions of disability”, which is dangerous because “metaphors and other figures of speech can convince an audience that one’s understanding of a phenomenon is the right one.” He illustrates this with an example of how politicians use the word “crippling” in the context of “crippling consequences” when sanctions are imposed on a country. “Crippling gets its meaning from its relation to other words. The persuasiveness that this writing has over audiences is gained, in part, through successfully likening economic sanctions to a pre-existing discourse that stigmatizes ‘cripples’. However, connecting an argument against sanctions with disability also reinforces this stigma, for ‘cripples’ are now associated with an unpopular and possibly harmful economic policy.”

Similarly, states are often described as autistic by foreign policy analysts who use autism metaphors (autism-as-aloneness, autism-as-disease) as “a narrative diagnosis–treatment motif” that involves two or three stages. “First, the analyst diagnoses a state as autistic based on an observation of suboptimal foreign policy-related behaviors. Second, the analyst explains why the state is autistic by pointing out its internal political problems or its cultural particularities. Third, the analyst will explicitly or implicitly make suggestions for solving (i.e. treating) the state’s autism.”

To conclude, “our identities, who and what we are, how others see us, are greatly affected by the names we are called and the words with which we are labelled” as there is “a close nexus between language and self-perception, self-awareness, self-identity, and self-esteem”¹.

The aim of this paper is to explore, through an analysis of articles published on a popular newspaper website, the way words “autistic” and “autistically” are used pejoratively in public discourse in Croatia, that is, what stereotypes about autistic people such figurative uses perpetuate.

Methods

In the first part of the study, I look into the definitions of the words “autism”, “autistic”, and “autistically” in two contemporary dictionaries of the Croatian language. *Hrvatski jezični portal* (HJP)³⁰ is available online and used

frequently as the only general Croatian dictionary accessible online. It is a joint project of the publishing house Znanje and University of Zagreb Computer Center Srce. *Veliki rječnik hrvatskog standardnog jezika* (VRH)³¹, published by *Školska knjiga*, aims to be a comprehensive contemporary authority on the standard Croatian language.

In the second part of the study, I analyze a newspaper site. *Jutarnji list* was selected for analysis based on the fact 1) that it is the most visited newspaper site in Croatia^{28,29}, 2) that its website is easily searchable, 3) that the articles are publicly accessible, and 4) that it is a source of contemporary language use. hrWaC, the Croatian corpus of texts sourced from the Croatian web, was considered as an alternative source, but seeing that the corpus was compiled in 2014, I was concerned that I would be leaving out the last seven years of contemporary language use by opting for the corpus. Nonetheless, the corpus was searched for the lemmas *autističan* (autistic) and *autistično* (autistically) for points of comparison in terms of the incidence of using the said words in pejorative meaning. The paper *Jutarnji list* was searched for the Croatian words *autističan* (autistic, adj. m.), *autistična* (autistic, adj. f.), and *autistično* (autistic, neutral, and autistically) in August and September 2021.

All of the cases where these words were used to refer to otherwise neurotypical individuals or institutions and states (hence, in their figurative meaning) were noted and translated from Croatian into English.

A discourse analysis was then carried out, investigating the intended meaning of the words in question and the context in which they appear.

Results

A look into the definitions in two dictionaries of contemporary Croatian language revealed the following. In HJP³⁰, the noun “autism” is defined as “1. *pat.* a severe mental disorder, appears in early childhood, it is characterized by the inability to speak and to establish relationships with people and by a limited way of behavior; ‘blindness of mind’ 2. *pren.* running away from reality, closedness within oneself (running away from reality and the surroundings and surrendering to imagination as a way to satisfy needs and desires) 3. *pol. pren.* lack of desire to understand certain political or social problems”. “Pat.” stands for pathology, “pren.” is “allegorical meaning”, and “pol.” means “politics”. The definition of the noun “autistic” is “1. *pat.* one who suffers from autism (1) 2. *razg.* one who closes within themselves, who does not want to listen to others, understand their problem etc., one who lives in a world of their own”. “Razg.” refers to “colloquial use”.

In VRH³¹, the noun “autism” is “1. *pat.* a severe mental disorder that appears in early childhood when the mental life of a person detaches itself from the outside world and withdraws into its inner world [autism gene; life with autism] 2. *proš, pren* showing a certain closedness in understanding the other [puberty autism] → introversion – *podr*

[autism of the political elite]”. *Pat* is short from “pathology”, *proš* stands for “extended meaning”, *pren* means “allegorical meaning”, and *podr* is “derogatory”. The noun “autistic” is defined as “1. one suffering from autism [Autistics don’t like to hug.] 2. *Pren*, *razg* one which shows autism (2) [He is really politically autistic. ; Scientists must not be autistic.]”. The adjective “autistic” has two separate entries, one “which refers to autism and autistics [autistic phase; autistic prose; autistic behavior of the government]” and another meaning “as an autistic, the autistic way [The government is being autistic.]”.

Regarding the second part of the study, the analysis of the newspaper site, the search returned 467 results, and out of these, in 44 articles (9.42%) the words “autistic” and

“autistically” were used in their pejorative meaning. This is less than the 20% incidence of such use found in hrWaC (of 2 685 total occurrences). Note that hrWaC includes not only the edited content found on newspaper sites, but forums and blogs as well, which indicates that the pejorative use of the words “autistic” and “autistically” is widespread among the general public, not just journalists and public figures. The earliest result in *Jutarnji list* is from 27 May 2006 and the most recent one is from 14 September 2021.

For clarity, the results are presented in a table (Table 1). In the first column is the number of the example, in the second the name of the author, the date of publication, and the link to the article. Note that in some examples there are two names – the first of the author and the second of

TABLE 1
PASSAGES FROM *JUTARNJI LIST* IN WHICH THE WORDS “AUTISTIC” AND “AUTISTICALLY” ARE USED PEJORATIVELY

No	Author and date	Croatian (original)	English (translated)
1	Ivanka Toma 14 September 2021	Samodopadni ili autistični i dalje gundaju i međusobno se glodu...	Self-satisfied or autistic , they continue to grumble and gnaw at each other... (On SDP politicians)
2	Klara Rožman (Miran Kurspahić) 12 February 2021	...Ministarstvo kulture se odlučilo autistično ignorantski ponašati prema nezavisnoj sceni i samostalnim umjetnicima...	...the Ministry of Culture decided to be autistically ignorant of the indie scene and the artists...
3	Robert Matteoni 31 August 2020	(Naslov) HNL klub kojeg su suci u zadnje dvije godine možda i najviše zakinuli i njegovi autistični vladari... ...ali ti autistični vladari iz Vitorije propovijedaju misu o razumijevanju.	(Headline) HNLClub Which the Judges May Have Mistreated the Most in the Last Two Years and Its Autistic Leadership ...but these autistic leaders from Vitoria preach a mass of understanding.
4	Nino Đula 25 April 2020	...no problem je pretendirati na sam vrh državnog vodstva, a djelovati tako nezainteresirano, sporedno, pospano i autistično.	... but the problem is to aspire to the very top of state leadership and act so disinterested, irrelevant, sleepy, and autistic . (On politician Davor Bernardić)
5	Viktor Vresnik 23 March 2020	Boris Johnson [se] ... prema izbijanju pandemije postavio toliko politički autistično...	Boris Johnson ... has took such a politically autistic stance toward the pandemic...
6	Boris Vlašić (Mile Kekin) 27 October 2018	...nemoguće je, barem meni, napraviti romantično autistično djelce koje će hermetično propitkivati ljubav...	...it is impossible, at least for me, to create a romantic autistic piece that will hermetically question love...
7	Ivo Goldstein 11 August 2018	Kao drugo, autistično ponašanje nanosi nam neizmjernu štetu...	Second, our autistic behavior has caused immense damage... (On football cheering song that celebrates Croatia as the champion, even though it factually is not.)
8	Gojko Drljača 6 January 2018	Kao ministar u Vladi Ive Sanadera autistično je u stranci dizao popriličan novac...	As a minister in the government of Ivo Sanader, he autistically took quite an amount of money from the party...
9	Boris Vlašić 29 November 2017	...u svako imalo ozbilnijem slučaju se ponaša kao da je potpuno autistična i kao da ne razumije da postoje situacije u kojima je potrebno hitno reagirati...	...in any more serious case it acts as if it is completely autistic and as if it does not understand that there are situations that require an urgent reaction... (On the Croatian state)
10	Dražen Antolić 9 October 2017	Točno u stilu kako autistično HNS funkcionira otkako mu je predsjednik Davor Šuker – pred novinarima pustite sve rampe.	Exactly in the style of how the autistic HNS has been functioning since Davor Šuker is the president – lower all ramps in front of the press.

TABLE 1
CONTINUED

No	Author and date	Croatian (original)	English (translated)
11	Goran Penić 22 June 2017	(Naslov) Pad autističnog vođe desnice koji je srušio svoju Vladu i sebe Autistični vođa desnice, posve netaleantiran za visoku politiku...	(Headline) The fall of the autistic leader of the right who took down his government and himself Autistic leader of the right, completely untalented for high politics... (On politician Tomislav Karamarko)
12	Zdravko Milinović 4 March 2017	Pomalo autistično, vjerovao je i nadao se da bi nekako mogao opstati i nastaviti svoj ‘projekt Podravka’.	Somewhat autistically , he believed and hoped that he might survive and continue his “Podravka Project”. (On politician Zvonimir Mršić)
13	Nikola Patković (Ivan Vrdoljak) 2 September 2016	Ne znam je li to uhljebljanje, ali malo izgleda autistično.	I don’t know whether this is favoritism, but it does seem somewhat autistic . (Spoken by Ivan Vrdoljak about the fact that four ministers in the government come from a small town.)
14	Inoslav Bešker 7 June 2016	(Naslov) Hrvatska se autistično zatvorila u sebe, svijet kao da joj više ne postoji Hrvatska – pa i ova novinska – autistično se zatvorila u vlastito dvorište...	(Headline) Croatia has autistically closed within itself, the world outside does not seem to exist Croatia – even that of journalists – has autistically closed itself within its own yard...
15	Gojko Drljača 4 May 2016	...dok će autistično zanemarivanje očigledne činjenice...	...while the autistic disregard for the obvious fact...
16	Jelena Lovrić 9 April 2016	Slično je pomanjkanje osjećaja za socijalnu realnost pokazao i kad je poskupljenje dopunskog zdravstvenog osiguranja autistično bagatelizirao...	He showed a similar lack of sense of social reality when he autistically trivialized the increase in the price of additional health insurance... (On politician Željko Reiner)
17	Gojko Drljača 10 March 2016	...te da autistično prestanu komunicirati s ostatkom svijeta?	...and autistically stop communicating with the rest of the world?
18	(Andrija Hebrang) 30 December 2015	To nikada nisam radio autistično, bez komunikacije s navedenim skupinama, i zato su reforme uspjevale.	I have never done this autistically , without communicating with these groups, and that is why the reforms have been successful.
19	Jagna Pogačnik 23 December 2015	...njezino pismo nimalo ne koketira s čitateljima, vrlo je osobno, na trenutke autistično...	...her writing does not flirt with readers at all, it is very personal, autistic at times... (On the book of Irena Matijašević)
20	Dobroslav Šilobrić (Igor Štagljar) 18 September 2015	(Naslov) Igor Štagljar: Naša je znanost autistična. Klanovi ometaju razvitak čiste znanosti Tvrdim, opet i još uvijek, da je hrvatska znanost - autistična.	(Headline) Igor Štagljar: Our science is autistic . Clans hinder the development of pure science I claim, again and always, that Croatian science is autistic .
21	Jelena Lovrić 14 September 2015	Socijalno potpuno autistično ponašanje banaka stvara oko premijera Milanovića auru borca za socijalna prava.	Socially completely autistic behavior of the banks is creating an aura around Milanović of a fighter for social rights.
22	Viktor Vresnik 26 April 2015	...dopustili da nas autistična politika izgura iz prve runde širenja EU...	...we allowed for autistic politics to push us out of the first round of EU enlargement...
23	Gojko Drljača 8 April 2015	Idemo na trenutak zaboraviti na to koliko je autistično naljutiti moćnu Angelu Merkel...	Let us for a moment forget how autistic it is to make the powerful Angela Merkel angry...
24	Jelena Lovrić 16 August 2014	Odluka Ustavnog suda o povratku povlaštenih mirovina teško je posvađana s dobrim ukusom, socijalno je autistična i za hrvatsku javnost sigurno maksimalno iritantna.	The decision of the Constitutional Court on the reactivation of special pensions has nothing to do with good taste, and it is socially autistic and certainly maximally irritating for the Croatian public.

TABLE 1
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No	Author and date	Croatian (original)	English (translated)
25	Boris Dežulović 30 December 2013	(Naslov) Prije pola godine tu su malu, autističnu Zapadnu Koreju priključili Europskoj uniji Štoviše, prije pola godine tu su malu, autističnu Zapadnu Koreju priključili Europskoj uniji...	(Headline) Half a year ago the small, autistic Western Korea was ascended to the European Union In fact, half a year ago, the small, autistic Western Korea was ascended to the European Union...
26	Hina (Tomislav Karamar- ko) 29 April 2013	Karamarko optužio Vladu da se ponaša autistično Ova se Vlada ponaša autistično, ne zanima ih ničije mišljenje...	Karamarko accuses government of acting autistically This government is acting autistically , they are not interested in anyone's opinion...
27	Jelena Lovrić 4 January 2013	(Naslov) Trebalo biti autističan i politički glup pa povećati plaće državnoj oligarhiji! Trebalo zaista biti komunikacijski potpuno autističan ili politički bezobziran i glup...	(Headline) One needs to be autistic and politically dumb to increase salaries for the state oligarchy One needs to be really autistic communica- tion-wise or politically reckless and dumb to... (On the Croatian government at the time)
28	Slobodan Mufić 26 January 2012	...nervozne geste, psovke i autistično sjedenje na klupi sigurno nije ni slika koju Ivano želi poslati auditoriju	...nervous gestures, foul language, and autistic sitting on the bench is surely not the picture Ivano would want to send (On handball player Ivano Balić)
29	Sanja Simić 6 May 2011	... kad se sklonost ljudi nepoštivanju promet- nih znakova spoji s birokracijom koja autistično provodi zakon...	...when the tendency of people to disregard traffic signs is combined with the bureaucracy that autistically enforces the law...
30	Nikolina Šajn 20 November 2010	Teorija autističnosti U svojoj je knjizi optužio novu irsku klasu skorojevića i političare koji je servisiraju da žive autistično, bez ikakva dodira sa stvarnošću.	Autism theory In his book, he accused the new Irish class of parvenus and politicians who service the class of living autistically , without any contact with reality. (On the book by David McWilliams)
31	Jelena Lovrić 3 November 2010	Premijerka po funkciji mora biti optimistična, ali ne smije biti nerealna i autistična.	The Prime Minister must be optimistic by default, but she cannot be unrealistic and autistic .
32	Jelena Lovrić 17 April 2010	Ponašanje HDZ-ovih šefova naspram povijesne predsjednikove poruke mira i pomirbe je autistično, nepromišljeno, neod- govorno.	The behavior of HDZ leaders toward the president's historical message of peace and reconciliation is autistic , reckless, irrespon- sible.
33	Jelena Veljača 27 December 2009	...bili smo dovoljno autistično nakačeni jedno na drugo da smo mogli otkantati baš sve socijalne elemente jednog prosječnog građanskog vjenčanja.	...we were autistically hooked on each other enough so we could reject absolutely every social element of an average civil wedding.
34	Ante Tomić 22 August 2009	Njihovo sljepilo za prilike u kojima narod živi, neosjetljivost za tuđe patnje i autistična isključenost iz stvarnosti postali su već gotovo poslovični...	Their blindness to the circumstances in which people live, their insensitivity to other people's suffering and autistic exclusion from reality have become almost proverbial... (On the Catholic church)
35	Miljenko Jergović 7 May 2009	... koje će, pomalo autistično, ispisivati svoje drukčije uratke, uglavnom usmjerene protiv srpskoga fašizma...	...who will, somewhat autistically , write their different texts, mostly directed against Serbian fascism... (On the work of Andrija Tunjić)
36	Davor Butković 25 April 2009	...ponašali smo se jednako autistično kao i Slovenci, što je i Zagrebu i Ljubljani donijelo negativni imidž.	...we acted just as autistic as Slovenians, which impacted the image of Zagreb and Ljubljana in a negative way.
37	Jelena Lovrić 19 February 2009	Odbio je sve prijedloge, autistično prečuo sva požurivanja.	He rejected all proposals, autistically disregarded all urges to react. (On politician Ivo Sanader)

TABLE 1
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No	Author and date	Croatian (original)	English (translated)
38	Branka Žužić (Opposing politicians from SDP) 19 May 2008	Za potop životnog standarda hrvatskih građana ... kriva je nesposobna, bahata i autistična Sanaderova Vlada.	The fall of the Croatian citizens' living standard ... is to be blamed on incompetent, arrogant, and autistic Sanader government.
39	11 April 2008	Država se nastavlja ponašati autistično, kao da se sve to događa negdje na drugom kraju svijeta...	The state keeps acting autistically , as if all of it was happening somewhere on the other side of the world...
40	Josip Novakovich 8 December 2007	Pisanje je komunikacija i premda ima onih koji se pišući ponašaju autistično i u svojim tekstovima razgovaraju jedino sami sa sobom...	Writing is communication, and although there are those who act autistically when writing and talk only to themselves in their texts...
41	Sanja Simić 1 September 2007	Bilo je neizbježno da ona i princ Charles sve više počnu predstavljati ono odnarođeno, društveno autistično i nezgrapno u kraljevskoj obitelji.	It was inevitable that she and Prince Charles would increasingly come to present the detached, the socially autistic , and the clumsy in the Royal Family.
42	Jasna Čurković-Kelava 13 June 2007	...da za to ne tražimo novac i da nas nadležni autistično odbijaju.	...that we are not asking for money in return and that the authorities autistically reject us.
43	Tomislav Čadež 12 January 2007	...otvoren je prema partnerima, a istodobno nekako autistično zagledan u sebe.	...he is opened toward partners, yet at the same time, somehow autistically focused on himself. (On actor Krešimir Mikić)
44	Nino Đula 27 May 2006	Pored svega toga, čelni ljudi HTV-a autistično se hvale kako su, po nekim brojkama bez velikoga značenja, baš oni najbolja javna televizija u Europi.	In addition to all of that, the leading people of HRT autistically boast that they are, according to some rather irrelevant figures, the best public television network in Europe.

the actual person who uttered the words that the journalist reported. The third column provides the original passage in Croatian, shortened with ellipsis when needed. The fourth column contains the translated version of the utterance. In certain cases, both in column three and four, it is indicated in the examples whether they appeared as headlines, and in the fourth column, to whom the words were directed if it is not obvious from the passage itself. Finally, the words “autistic” and “autistically” in the fourth column are marked in bold.

Before delving into the qualitative discourse analysis of the results in the following section, here is the relevant quantitative data. Of 44 passages, in 30 of them it was *Jutarnji list*'s journalist who used the words “autistic” and “autistically” pejoratively, whereas in other cases it was politicians (7, 13, 18, 26, 38), writers (25, 34, 35, 40), artists (2, 6, 33), a scientist (20), and a principal (42). In most cases, the words “autistic” and “autistically” are used to refer to politicians (1, 4, 5, 8, 11, 12, 16, 30, 31, 32, 37), the government (2, 13, 15, 23, 26, 27, 38) and the state (or state politics) (9, 14, 22, 25, 36, 39). The word “autistic” used pejoratively appeared in the headline five times, and “autistically” one time. In almost all 44 examples, the aim was to demean. The exceptions are an artist talking about a potential music piece (6), a book critic referring to the author's style (19), a columnist talking about the intensity of her relationship (33), and a journalist describing an actor's style (43). These four are neutral to positive contexts, unlike the remaining forty which are highly negative.

Discussion and Conclusion

Compared to the definition of autism from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th edition², Croatian dictionaries provide definitions of autism that are grossly misleading and factually incorrect: “**inability to speak and to establish relationships** with people”, “when the mental life of a person **detaches itself from the outside world** and withdraw into its inner world” (my emphasis). Both dictionaries, however, recognize the “allegorical meanings” of “autism” and “autistic”, which come down to stereotypical characteristics of autistic people: “closedness within oneself”, “lack of desire to understand”, “closedness in understanding the other”. In VRH, one of such figurative meanings is marked as “derogatory”, with the example, “autism of the political elite”. As for the definitions of the noun “autistic”, these too include “allegorical meanings”: “one who closes within themselves, who does not want to listen to others, understand the problems of others”. VRH has the following example that illustrate the point: “**Scientists must not be autistic**” (my emphasis). In its literal sense, VRH provides the definition of an autistic as “one suffering from autism” and offers a stereotypical example: “**Autistics don't like to hug**” (my emphasis).

The two dictionaries obviously recognize that speakers use “autistic” beyond its literal meaning, yet only in one case and in one dictionary (VRH) is such use marked as derogatory. This is unsurprising as clearly there is little awareness of how damaging the use of “autistic” in the pejorative sense is. The first problem, however, are the phan-

tasmagorical definitions of autism and autistics that are grossly out of line with the contemporary understanding of autism and of what it means to be autistic. Furthermore, the lexicographers’ choice of examples is unfortunate and sets up an overall negative context of use, perpetuating thus stereotypes about people on the autism spectrum. While lexicographers cannot avoid the fact that “autistic” is used in a figurative sense, they can mark it as derogatory. In addition, lexicographers can be careful in selecting examples for the literal use of the word, and they most certainly can update their definitions in line with the latest findings (and potentially not only from the medical perspective).

As for the analysis of the newspaper site, I first discuss quantitative data. It appears that people from various professions use the “autistic” and “autistically” pejoratively: journalists, politicians, writers, artists. It seems to be a particular favorite of two journalists whose combined use accounts for ten instances. In most cases, the said words are used to refer to politics, that is, politicians, governments, and states. There are also instances when these words are given prominence by being placed in the headline.

To go in qualitative depth, let us first look at the immediate surrounding of the words “autistic” and “autistically”, that is, the immediate company these words keep. “Autistic” appears alongside these words: self-satisfied, disinterested, irrelevant, sleepy, romantic, untalented, personal, irritating, small, reckless, dumb, unrealistic, irresponsible, exclusion, incompetent, arrogant, detached, clumsy. Excluding the words romantic and personal, which were used to describe art (a music piece and a book), it is obvious that “autistic” appears in quite negative contexts, often as one in a series of words intended to be derogatory. This is best illustrated by examples 1, 4, and 32.

- (1) Self-satisfied or autistic, they continue to grumble and gnaw at each other...
- (4) ... but the problem is to aspire to the very top of state leadership and act so disinterested, irrelevant, sleepy, and autistic.
- (32) The behavior of HDZ leaders toward the president’s historical message of peace and reconciliation is autistic, reckless, irresponsible.

“Autistically” modifies the following words: ignorant, trivialize, stop communicating, enforce, hooked on each other, disregard, reject, focus, boast. Even when paired with a positive word, like “boast”, the context indicates that the intended message is derogatory.

To go into qualitative depth further, in the following part let us look at how the derogatory use of the words “autistic” and “autistically” might contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes. For this purpose, I have grouped certain examples under stereotypes that they perpetuate.

Autistics are out of touch with reality

One of the more common stereotypes about autistic people is that they are oblivious to the world around them.

The following examples illustrate that what the authors intended to say is that someone or something was unaware of the world around them, evidenced by the words in bold that act as additional clarification for the reader.

- (24) The decision of the Constitutional Court on the reactivation of special pensions has nothing to do with good taste, and it is socially autistic and certainly maximally irritating for the Croatian public.
- (30) In his book, he accused the new Irish class of parvenues and politicians who service the class of living autistically, without any contact with reality.
- (34) Their blindness to the circumstances in which people live, their insensitivity to other people’s suffering and autistic exclusion from reality have become almost proverbial...
- (39) The state keeps acting autistically, as if all of it was happening somewhere on the other side of the world...

Autistics do not know how

This could be a subset of the previous stereotype, and it is based on the stereotype that autistics are so detached from the world that they lack the needed knowledge or skills in certain social situations. In (12), a politician is described as being naïve, and in (23) the author refers to how the government is imprudent in making a certain decision. One could easily imagine the word “stupid” replacing the word “autistic” in this line.

- (12) Somewhat autistically, he believed and hoped that he might survive and continue his “Podravka Project”.
- (23) Let us a for a moment forget how autistic it is to make the powerful Angela Merkel angry...

Autistics are self-centered

Since the stereotype about people on the autism spectrum is that they are not looking outwards, they must be looking inwards, so another common stereotype is that they are focused solely on themselves. The authors of the following examples used “autistic” and “autistically” to say that someone is interested in themselves alone and ignores the world around them.

- (14) Croatia has autistically closed within itself, the world outside does not seem to exist
- (26) This government is acting autistically, they are not interested in anyone’s opinion...
- (40) Writing is communication, and although there are those who act autistically when writing and talk only to themselves in their texts...
- (43) ...he is opened toward partners, yet at the same time, somehow autistically focused on himself.

Autistics are socially clumsy and are bad at communicating

There is a stereotype that autistic people lack social competences and that they have serious difficulties communicating their ideas to those around them. This is evidenced by the following examples in which the authors wanted to say that someone does not communicate well or at all or that they are not handling a social situation well because of their lack of social competences.

- (16) He showed a similar lack of sense of social reality when he autistically trivialized the increase in the price of additional health insurance...
- (17) ...and autistically stop communicating with the rest of the world?
- (18) I have never done this autistically, without communicating with these groups, and that is why the reforms have been successful.
- (21) Socially completely autistic behavior of the banks is creating an aura around Milanović of a fighter for social rights.

Autistics are unresponsive

Autistics might be perceived as if closed to the information from “outside”, which renders them unresponsive as they are busy “doing their own thing”. The examples below show that the authors intended to say that someone or something was unresponsive or slow to react when a reaction was needed.

- (2) ...the Ministry of Culture decided to be autistically ignorant of the indie scene and the artists...
- (9) ...in any more serious case it acts as if it is completely autistic and as if it does not understand that there are situations that require an urgent reaction...
- (37) He rejected all proposals, autistically disregarded all urges to react.
- (42) ...that we are not asking for money in return and that the authorities autistically reject us.

There were instances of the use of “autistic” and “autistically” in which it was not clear what the intended meaning of these words was and where one can only speculate what the author wanted to say. For example:

- (8) As a minister in the government of Ivo Sanader, he autistically took quite an amount of money from the party...

What does it mean to autistically take money?

- (22) ...we allowed for autistic politics to push us out of the first round of EU enlargement...

Does this mean that the politics was isolationistic or that it was unresponsive or perhaps something else?

At the end of this qualitative analysis, due attention needs to be given to the following example in particular:

- (26) This government is acting autistically, they are not interested in anyone’s opinion...

This was uttered by the Croatian opposition leader at the time, Tomislav Karamarko, a public figure whose words echoed throughout Croatia. This utterance provoked a strong reaction of the parents of autistic children as well as the ombudswoman for people with disabilities. Vesna Golemac, president of the Parents’ Council at the Split Center for Autism, requested a public apology and said that she, as a parent of an autistic child, found his statement offensive, and that other parents of autistic children feel the same³².

Anka Slonjšak, ombudswoman for people with disabilities, issued a statement in which she highlighted that “equating perceived undesirable and negative behaviors with the characteristics of autism, which as a specific condition is part of human diversity, violates the human dignity of people with autism” and continued to say that “persons living with some of the autism spectrum disorders each witness in their own way and with their individual characteristics the richness of human diversity, and inaccurate and simplistic labeling of such persons as ‘living in a world of their own’ amplifies the harmful consequences of such stereotypical attitudes”³³.

Finally, other parents of autistic children, gathered in the “Group of parents of children with disabilities”, also reacted to the statement via an open letter to Karamarko on Facebook, saying, “In the context in which you used the words autism and autistic, you used them to insult the members of the government. In our rich Croatian language you have a wide range of words you can use to describe one’s state without having to insult people who did not deserve such insults”³⁴.

These reactions illustrate that the pejorative use of “autistic” and “autistically” in Croatian does not go unnoticed and that it is objectionable to parents of autistic children (and to the ombudswoman for people with disabilities). Furthermore, such use is equally unacceptable to the members of the “Initiative for autism, neurodivergent persons, self-representation, and inclusion”³⁵, which has recently, unrelated to the specific case, issued a statement on the pejorative use of “autistic” and “autistically”. They find such use “offensive and discriminatory in relation to the group of people it refers to”, “feeding the culture of prejudice and discrimination”, which makes it difficult for autistic adults and children to exercise their rights and find a place in the society in which they “do not want to feel wrong or inadequate”.

The analysis above has shown that when not used for actually autistic people, “autistic” and “autistically” are used mostly in relation to politicians, governments, and states, and in those contexts always in a derogatory sense. It has been shown that journalists, politicians, writers, and others use the said words pejoratively and in ways that perpetuate several stereotypes about people on the autism spectrum.

When using the words “autistic” to demean, what the speakers and writers actually want to say is that someone or something is “out of touch with reality”, “lacking knowl-

edge”, “being self-centered”, “being socially clumsy”, “being unresponsive”. Not only is such use dangerously stereotyping autistic people, it is also normalizing the use of “autistic” as a pejorative. Indeed, the figurative use is normalized to the extent that it has found its way into the dictionaries, yet without the proper marking of the fact that it is pejorative or derogatory. Pejorative, derogatory use perpetuates stereotypes, which leads to stigmatization and ultimately marginalization. If the language use around us is imprinting on our minds that autistics are ignorant, detached, incompetent, how likely is it that we will grow a positive attitude about people on the autism spectrum?

The paradox is that autistic individuals and their families are embracing the word “autistic” at the same time that public figures are using it as an insult. A parallel can be drawn here with the words *peder* and *gej* in Croatian (Engl. ‘faggot’ and ‘gay’), which some gay men in Croatia have reclaimed and use them to refer to or define themselves; at the same time, some members of the public use them as insults. When one uses *peder* to insult another person, they send a message that being gay is bad. Similarly, when one uses “autistic” to demean another person, they send a message that being autistic is not only bad, but that all autistic people are alike – detached from the “real” world and unresponsive.

One might argue that those who utter the word “autistic” as an insult may not be doing so with intent to hurt autistic individuals, but that is a moot point. As Bosmajian explains, “linguistic assaults often are used by persons who show no visible evil intent. While their motivations may not be to deprecate, the effects of what they say are damaging”¹.

Based on the discussion above, I would recommend that public figures, politicians, journalists, and others, rethink their use of the word “autistic”. Especially when it comes to journalism, as Maggio wisely observed, “verifying that people language is fair and accurate should be as commonplace as checking for spelling, grammar, usage, and style”¹¹.

However, it must be noted that in raising awareness, pointing out an error in utterance might result not in a corrective action, but in a defensive stance. This is because “a person’s language is an extension of himself or herself and to attack that language is to attack the person”¹. Education and training thus once again prove critical in correcting social injustices because only through a thorough

understanding of what inclusive language is about can we understand the power of language in defining people and avoid pointless discussions about “political correctness”. Ultimately, the point is “that if we can minimize the use of the language of oppression we can reduce the degradation and subjugation of human beings”¹.

At this point, I would like to reflect on the limitations of this study. First and foremost, while this paper aimed at exploring the pejorative use of the words “autistic” and “autistically”, hypothesizing that it contributes to the marginalization of autistic individuals by perpetuating stereotypes, the research failed to include autistic individuals from Croatia as participants and their perspective on the matter. This goes against the contemporary movement for self-advocacy and self-representation, that is, acknowledging the rights of people with disabilities to speak of and for themselves. This should be amended in future research.

Second, the study is based on examples from one media source, *Jutarnji list*, which may come across as targeting a particular newspaper site. However, examples from other frequently visited sites would be very much alike. Nonetheless, in future research it might be a good idea to have several sites represented to avoid the appearance of bias.

Finally, the theoretical part of the paper that describes contemporary issues around autistic people’s identities and preferred language is based primarily on research from English-speaking countries and not Croatia. This is because no such research exists in Croatia, yet I do consider it a limitation and a call for autistic individuals in Croatia to be heard.

Despite these limitations, I believe the findings of this study are relevant for the wider community of researchers, lexicographers, media workers, politicians, and others.

To conclude, autism is unquestionably a part of one’s identity. When a word that autistic people use to describe themselves is at the same time used by others pejoratively, to demean, people on the autism spectrum are anything but empowered – they are marginalized. Ultimately, one’s way of being should not be an insult.

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PERPETUIRANJE STEREOTIPA U HRVATSKOME JAVNOM DISKURSU: UPORABA RIJEČI AUTISTIČAN U PEJORATIVNOME ZNAČENJU

SAŽETAK

Način na koji se o ljudima govori i piše ima ključnu ulogu u tome kako se te ljude percipira, a to zatim utječe na pozicioniranje tih ljudi u društvu – pripadaju li jezgri društva, većini, ili ih se udaljuje na margine, u manjinu. Različiti su autori pisali o ulozu jezika u dehumanizaciji, potlačivanju i diskriminaciji pojedinih skupina, bez obzira na to je li riječ o Židovima tijekom nacističkoga režima u Njemačkoj, Tutsijima u ruandskome genocidu 1994., crncima u Sjedinjenim Američkim Državama od 1619., ženama kroz povijest ili gej i osobama s invaliditetom danas, da navedemo samo nekoliko marginaliziranih skupina. U tim je i drugim slučajevima jezik bio prvi korak u otuđivanju i zatim marginalizaciji određene skupine. Cilj je ovoga rada istražiti jezik marginalizacije u hrvatskome javnom diskursu ispitujući kako novinari i javne osobe pridonose stereotipizaciji autističnih osoba uporabom riječi *autističan*, *autistična*, *autistično* u pejorativnome značenju. Analizirao sam stoga uporabu navedenih riječi na jednome od najposjećenijih novinskih portala u Hrvatskoj. Rezultati pokazuju da se novinari, pisci i političari koriste riječima *autističan*, *autistična* i *autistično* u pejorativnome značenju kad žele reći da je osoba, institucija ili država „izvan doticaja sa stvarnošću”, „usmjerena samo na sebe”, „neresponzivna”. Nadalje, te se riječi često upotrebljavaju kao uvrede, što pridonosi daljnjem bojenju tih riječi negativnim konotacijama. Zaključujem da je potrebno podizati razinu svijesti među novinarima i javnim osobama kako bi prepoznali opasnost od stereotipiziranja osoba s autizmom uporabom riječi *autističan*, *autistična* i *autistično* u pejorativnome značenju.

