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## **Linguistic representation of people with autism spectrum disorder in a contemporary British novel: A case study**

### **Summary**

In today's increasingly inclusive society, where acceptance of neurodiversity and variations from conventional social norms has become a fundamental value, the successful integration of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) into everyday life represents a critical challenge. Over the past decade, significant advancements in medical and psychological research have expanded our understanding of the psychological and physiological manifestations of autism, developed educational approaches for children with ASD, and identified distinctive communication patterns among individuals with autism. Global statistics indicate that approximately 1% of the world's population has some form of autism spectrum disorder, with prevalence rates continuing to rise. Therefore, there is a pressing need for comprehensive, multidisciplinary research in this field.

One of the main aspects of autism spectrum disorder is impaired communication, specifically the absence of fully reciprocal, mutually intelligible dialogue between individuals with ASD and neurotypical counterparts. And while medicine and pedagogy study the behavioral and cognitive traits of autistic people, linguistics can uniquely contribute by analyzing thought processes, linguistic patterns, and perceptual frameworks inherent to ASD cognition. It can also promote understanding by providing practical communication guidelines, based on scientific explanations, in contrast to the ones shown in literature and film. The study's primary objective centers on equipping neurotypical society with scientifically validated insights on how to decode communication dynamics with autistic individuals and establish strategies for meaningful interaction.

To accomplish these objectives, the study employed dual analytical frameworks: (1) interpretive analysis comparing literary representations of autism with empirical scientific data, and (2) contextual analysis to map hierarchical relationships within semantic-cognitive dimensions.

The article uses an interdisciplinary approach to study the communicative characteristics of autistic individuals, drawing on Russian and international research in medicine, education, and linguistics. It reviews theories of effective communication and communication breakdowns, outlining key principles and causes. The practical analysis focuses on how high-functioning autistic individuals are portrayed in literature with the emphasis on conventionalized forms of communication. A case study of a contemporary British novel examines the way literary texts depict autistic communication across linguistic, cognitive, perceptual, behavioral, and physiological levels. It can be argued that fiction could be one of the tools to help neurotypical society learn to communicate with people with ASD.

**Keywords:** ASD, communication, communicative failures, Grice's maxims, fiction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Recently there has been a rise in interest towards people with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in Russia. Rather than stigmatize or isolate them from the socially active part of society, it aims at integrating them, fully or partially, into social interaction. In this connection we can mention positive changes in Russian society: in the sphere of education there have been introduced new laws on social inclusion for people with mental disorders, government provides help for children with orphan diseases, new specialized treatments for them are being developed and etc. But socialization of neurodivergent people with intellectual disabilities and intact speech plays an important role in the process of inclusion.

Socialization is a two-way process: on the one hand, we can deal with the problem by teaching certain skills to children and adults with mental disorders. In this regard we can rely on existing research in the field of medicine, psychology, social adaptation, special education and speech and language pathology.

On the other hand, we can approach the problem by educating the society about the peculiarities of such people and proper ways of interacting with them. Fiction can play a very important role in this process, for instance, though works whose characters are non-typical representatives of society, children and adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In most European countries, social support in this area began to develop much earlier. And in European modern literature there are a number of works

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on this topic, for example, Mark Haddon “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time” (2003), Marty Leimbach “Daniel Isn’t Talking” (2008), Oliver Sacks “An Anthropologist on Mars” (2009), Arabella Carter-Johnson “Iris Grace” (2016), Judith Newman “To Siri with Love: A Mother, Her Autistic Son, and the Kindness of Machines” (2014).

Obviously, in a work of fiction we are dealing with a conventionalized representation (Zelenyaeva, 2015) of the processes of perception, reasoning and the speech of neurodivergent people, but the purpose of these works is most likely not to imitate their way of thinking, but to demonstrate to society what types of difficulties they may encounter in communication and social interaction.

**The purpose** of the article is to consider the author’s conventionalized depiction of an autistic person (on the example of the novel by M. Haddon “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time”), describe their way of thinking, perception features, behavioural reactions and language as presented in the novel in comparison with how those are described in medical discourse. Relying on these observations it will be possible to determine those characteristics which lead to communicative failures and develop recommendations for successful interaction with them by neurotypical members of society.

**The objectives** of this study are threefold. First, it aims to summarize the prevailing understanding of the communicative characteristics of high-functioning autistic individuals, drawing on medical and educational research from both Russia and abroad. Second, it seeks to examine the principles of effective communication and the causes of communicative breakdowns from a linguistic perspective, enabling an interdisciplinary comparison of the communication process across linguistics, psycholinguistics, psychology, pedagogy, speech and language pathology, and special education. The practical objective is to analyze how the communicative features of autistic individuals are represented in literary texts, with the goal of enhancing neurotypical society’s understanding of autism and identifying strategies to support successful communication.

To achieve these objectives, the study employed the following research methods: analysis of fictional representations of autistic individuals, compared with scientific data; contextual analysis to identify the hierarchical structure of semantic and cognitive aspects; questionnaire surveys to test the validity of the study’s hypothesis.

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## **2. BACKGROUND: MEDICAL AND LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON ASD**

### **2.1 Medical and diagnostic criteria for ASD**

The foundations of medical diagnosis of autism were laid back in 1979, when Lorna Wing and Judith Gould published the results of their research and formulated a triad of impairments in autism: disorders of social interaction, communication and imagination (Wing & Gould, 1979: 11–29).

In Russian psychiatry, guided by ICD-10 (International Classification of Diseases of the 10<sup>th</sup> revision), with disorders of this type doctors diagnose childhood autism (F.84.0):

A type of general developmental disorder that is determined by the presence of: a) anomalies and developmental delays that manifest in a child under the age of three; b) psychopathological changes in all three areas: equivalent social interactions, communication functions and behaviour that is limited, stereotypical and monotonous. These specific diagnostic features are usually complemented by other non-specific problems, such as phobias, sleep and eating disorders, outbursts of irritation and self-directed aggressiveness (ICD-10).

The American Psychiatric Association also considers “difficulties in communication and interaction” as one of the key symptoms for diagnosing ASD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The third member of the triad – lack of imagination – leads to monotony and stereotypical behavioral reactions, which are a typical sign of autistic behaviour.

### **2.2 Linguistic and communicative features in ASD**

The peculiarities of speech, language and behavior of people with ASD, which are caused by the impairments in the three above-mentioned areas, are considered in some detail in English-language scientific sources, mainly within the framework of experimental and empirical research in the field of psychology and speech and language therapy. Some studies provide a comprehensive description of the communicative difficulties of autistic people associated with the disorders on one or more levels: semantics, pragmatics, phonology, morphology or syntax (Vogindroukas et al., 2022). The researchers note that: “individuals with ASD also present a number of languages untypicalities such as echolalia, pedantic speech, misunderstanding of figurative language and more, due to pragmatic impairment” (Vogindroukas et al., 2022).

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The specifics of linguistic disorders of persons with ASD are revealed in the manual published by the Autism Resource Center in Indiana, USA. They note the following features of people with ASD:

In some cases, complex language structures in their speech may be a repetition of fragments of dialogues heard on TV or in communication with other people. Such mild echolalia may be appropriately or inappropriately used in context. For the majority of people with ASD, the depth of meaning for specific words used may be restricted. They may have difficulty with figurative expressions such as idioms, metaphors, similes and irony (see also Vulchanova et al., 2015). Individuals with ASD may not always recognize in a dialogue or text that certain words may have alternative meanings. They tend to respond to suggestions, instructions, or other information quite literally. It is difficult for them to understand humor in TV shows, movies, cartoons or daily communication. Special questions (When? Why? How?) can cause difficulties for them (see also Goodwin et al., 2012). They understand the basic structure of the sentence, but may have difficulty with complex sentences that include subordinate clauses. They often rely primarily on keywords rather than on the grammatical structure of the message, which may be caused by misunderstanding of this structure. They may not catch the connection of one idea with another in a conversation or text, i.e. they may not connect the content of one sentence with another (Vicker, 2009).

Similar results were obtained by scientists who studied linguistic markers of ASD in narratives used to diagnose children with ASD. The study participants were 18 Spanish-Catalan bilingual children and 18 children with identical verbal IQ (control group). The authors of the article concluded that bilingual autistic children (without intellectual disability) exhibit distinct narrative patterns compared to neurotypical peers: fewer complex clauses, more referential errors, and atypical word choice-without morphosyntactic deficits (Schroeder et al., 2023).

Many foreign studies of autism appeared as early as the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and are relevant up to the present day (Clayton & Fatemi, 2008; Frith & Houston, 2000; Kanner, 1943; Treffert, 2006).

Recent studies in Russia have begun to explore the communicative characteristics of children with ASD, particularly in relation to their learning opportunities during various stages of preschool and school education (Leonova, 2020; Panasenkova, 2022). However, many of these studies focus primarily on the formal linguistic features of autistic speech, which do not fully account for the underlying causes of communication breakdowns addressed in this research. To better understand these

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causes and develop effective recommendations, it is essential to integrate the existing data with communication theory.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: COMMUNICATION AND GRICE'S MAXIMS

Taratukhina defines **communication** as “a specific act of information exchange, the process of transmitting emotional and intellectual content” (Taratukhina, 2016: 462). Based on this definition, communication involving the transmission of emotional content is likely to encounter difficulties when one of the participants is an autistic person.

In this study, our primary focus is on effective communication – where all participants achieve their intended goals in some way. The concept of successful communication has been examined by many linguists from various perspectives, often depending on the type of discourse under investigation (e.g. Kuranova, 2016; Lenecz, 2016; Van Dijk, 1981). The conditions for successful communication, frequently cited in the literature, were originally formulated by Grice and summarized in his “Cooperative Principle”. He explains that conversations are cooperative efforts where participants share a common purpose or direction, whether clearly defined or evolving during the exchange. At each stage, speakers are expected to make contributions appropriate to the accepted purpose of the interaction. This principle guides how people communicate effectively by assuming that each participant’s utterance is relevant and timely within the context of the conversation (Grice, 1975: 41–58). Next, Grice formulates the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. However, the scholar notes that these maxims can sometimes be violated without hindering successful communication, and at times, they may even conflict with one another. It is possible that non-compliance with Gricean maxims contributes to communication failures in individuals with ASD. This non-compliance may stem from an initial reluctance to engage in communication. A characteristic feature of autistic individuals, related to their social cognition and profiles, is a reduced need for communication, which can lead to disregard for the Cooperative Principle and its associated maxims.

Developing this idea, it is logical to assume that individuals with ASD do not only disregard this principle themselves, but also do not expect others to follow it. The whole theory of communicative implicatures relies on the assumption that “the talker will in general ... proceed in the manner that these principles prescribe”

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(Grice, 1975: 47). That is, in order to correctly interpret an indirect speech act or an ambiguous utterance, the listener must assume that the speaker adheres to the Cooperative Principle and generally observes its maxims. This allows the listener to reject interpretations that contradict the maxims and select the most plausible meaning through logical reasoning or syllogistic inference. However, this complex logical reasoning is often difficult for individuals with ASD. Because they tend to interpret words and expressions literally, they struggle to grasp conversational implicatures. Grice notes that in typical communication, “the speaker thinks (and would expect the hearer to think that the speaker thinks) that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out or grasp intuitively” that the speaker means something beyond the literal expression (Grice, 1975: 50). The challenge arises in interactions with neurodivergent individuals, where the speaker cannot reliably expect this shared understanding.

When examining communication through the lens of communicative failures, we can refer to the definition by Ermakova and Zemskaya (1993), who describe communicative failures as the non-fulfilment or incomplete realization of the speaker’s communicative intention due to various causes. They identify three types of communicative failures based on their origins: those stemming from the structure of the language, those arising from differences between speakers, and those caused by pragmatic factors (Ermakova & Zemskaya, 1993: 30). All three types of failures may occur in communication involving autistic individuals.

Many researchers are engaged in studying the causes of communication failures not only in the field of linguistics but also in psychology and psycholinguistics. Studies focusing on communication failures, grounded in data from individual languages, have been conducted through various perspectives and theoretical frameworks.

An analysis of various classifications of the causes of communication failures reveals that the primary distinction is between linguistic and non-linguistic causes. The latter can be further divided into cultural, physiological, and psychological categories. According to Potemkin (1994), Teplyakova (1998), and Vechkina (2010), cultural causes include differences in national character and mentality, violations of ethical norms, the influence of stereotypes, differing understandings of politeness, variations in space and time perception, misinterpretation of nonverbal communication, differences in values, mismatches between cultural and linguistic norms, divergent communication strategies, and differences in humor perception. Physiological causes encompass auditory, visual, and speech impairments. Psychological causes may involve the formation of an inaccurate image of the communication partner and differences in the social backgrounds of communicants, such as age, gender, profession, place of residence, and level of language competence.

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Many researchers have studied the principles of successful communication (Bara, 2010; Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Tomasello, 2003; Turner, 1991). Successful dialogue requires clearly defined pragmatic goals, which enable interlocutors to maintain a coherent and consistent conversation. Communication failures often arise when the illocutionary force of an utterance is misunderstood, preventing the pragmatic meaning from being accurately interpreted. It is important to note that, in the examples examined in this study, the success of speech acts largely depends on personal factors, with the social context playing a secondary role.

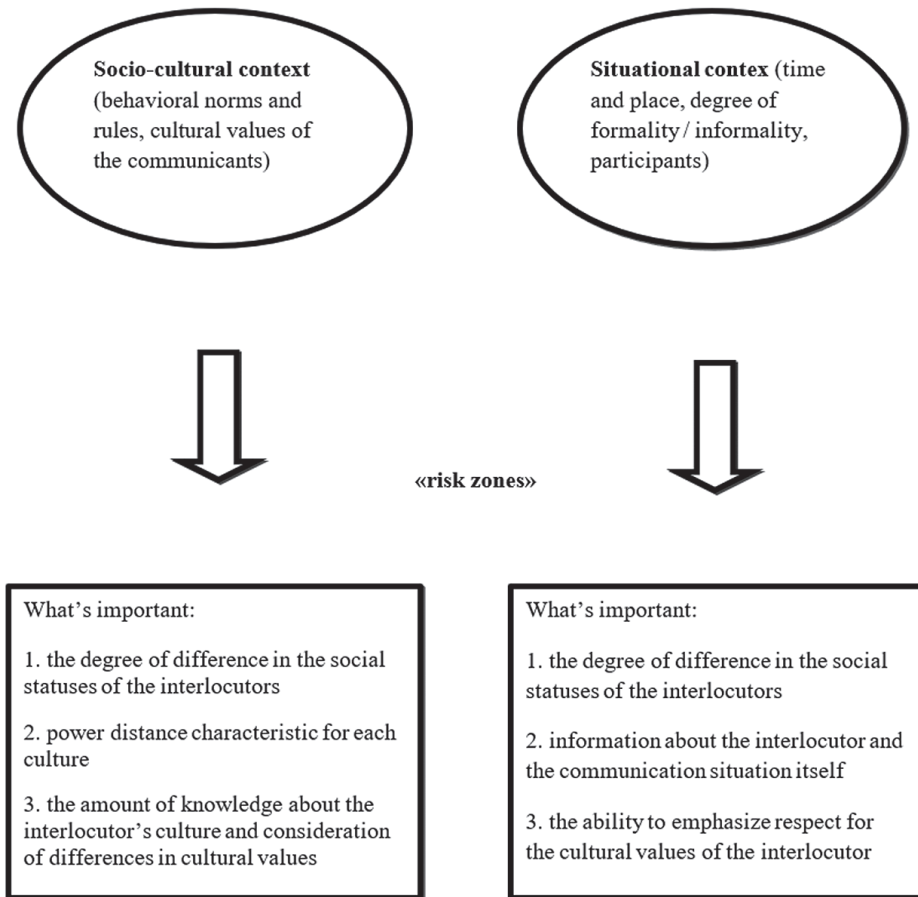
A communicative failure can also result from misinterpreting the speaker's actions, such as facial expressions, gestures, and other extralinguistic cues. This often becomes evident when the listener asks the speaker to repeat their statement. Additionally, communicative failure is apparent when the recipient responds inappropriately to the speaker's message, indicating a misunderstanding of the illocutionary force and a failure to achieve the communication goal. Thus, communicative mismatches may arise from both external situational factors and internal personal characteristics. Fundamentally, communicative failure is marked by a breakdown in information transfer caused by semantic issues as well as the specific structuring of the dialogue.

There are several non-linguistic causes of communicative failures, many of which can simultaneously fall into two or more categories. These include misinterpretation of nonverbal communication, misunderstanding of indirect speech, and failure to grasp implicatures. Additionally, the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic characteristics of communicants can contribute to communication breakdowns. When identifying the main types of communicative failures in this category, it is important to establish specific "risk zones" that may arise in intercultural communication. This should be based on a communicative situation model that accounts for its intercultural nature (see Fig. 1).

This type of model situates the communication process within two types of context: socio-cultural and situational. Such a distinction is essential, as each context provides communicants with different types of information through its respective channels. The situational context is defined as the set of elements that constitute a communicative situation, such as time and place, the degree of formality or informality, participants, and other relevant factors.

The socio-cultural context encompasses the norms and rules of behavior specific to the situation and based on the values of the culture in which the communication occurs. Social roles and statuses of the interlocutors are expressed differently depending on the context. From the perspective of the socio-cultural context, two factors are

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**Figure 1.** A model of intercultural communicative situation

particularly important: the degree of difference between the social statuses of the interlocutors and the characteristics of power distance within each culture.

From the perspective of the situational context, differences in social status may vary in significance depending on the specific situation. Cultural identity guides participants on how to behave, taking into account the similarities or differences in social roles as well as the norms of politeness inherent to their culture.

Background knowledge and the value systems of the interlocutors are also crucial components of the communication process model. When related to different types of context, the following distinctions emerge: within the socio-cultural context, greater emphasis is placed on understanding the interlocutor's culture and respecting differences in cultural values. In contrast, the situational context requires knowledge

about the interlocutor and the specifics of the communicative situation – such as whether the interaction is formal or informal and the degree of status differences. In addition, the success of communication often depends on the speaker's ability to demonstrate respect for the cultural values of their interlocutor.

Purely linguistic causes of communication failures have been studied by linguists such as Potemkin (1994: 56), Teplyakova (1998: 67), and Vechkina (2010: 40–46). This category of failures includes violations of orthoepic norms (such as incorrect accent or stress), issues related to polysemy and paronymy, the use of nonce-words, borrowings, highly specialized terms, jargon, and professional language, as well as inaccurate understanding of lexical meanings. Additionally, failures may arise from elliptical syntactic constructions, syntactic ambiguity, and referential ambiguity.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs an interdisciplinary methodology, drawing on research from linguistics, medicine, psychology, and education to analyze the communicative characteristics of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The research design integrates three main methods. First, interpretive analysis is used to compare the literary representation of ASD in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* with empirical findings from medical and linguistic literature. Second, contextual analysis is applied to identify and map the hierarchical structure of semantic and cognitive features as depicted in the novel. Third, a questionnaire survey was conducted via a specialized online forum dedicated to the discussion of autistic children ([https://dzen.ru/zapiski\\_oshaleloj\\_materi](https://dzen.ru/zapiski_oshaleloj_materi)). A total of 54 participants completed the survey, with 45 respondents affirmatively answering the question, "Does the main character of the novel resemble a person with ASD?" Respondents were also invited to provide brief comments to elaborate on their answers. For example, one participant noted, "Perhaps the book is especially interesting to me because we have Asperger's in our family, and so much of what is written feels as if it's about us." In their comments, respondents often shared personal stories and highlighted challenges related to ASD diagnosis in Russia. This multi-method approach enables a comprehensive examination of how ASD is portrayed across linguistic, cognitive, perceptual, behavioral, and physiological dimensions, and provides a foundation for developing practical recommendations to enhance communication between neurotypical society and individuals with ASD.

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## 5. ANALYSIS: LINGUISTIC REPRESENTATION OF ASD IN THE NOVEL "THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME"

This particular book was chosen as the corpus material for this study because compared to other novels featuring autistic persons it provides a comprehensive description of their communicative behaviour. The book received critical acclaim, winning the Boeke Prize in South Africa (modeled after the British Booker Prize) and the Whitbread Book Award. The story is narrated in the first person by Christopher Boone, a fifteen-year-old autistic teenager who attends a mainstream school but studies in a separate classroom with a tutor. Christopher is articulate and intellectually gifted, particularly in mathematics and physics, and is preparing to take the A-level exam, the highest level in mathematics for English secondary schools.

Upon its publication, the novel was widely regarded as providing an accurate insight into the mind of a person with ASD. At the time, it was commonly believed that individuals with certain forms of ASD could possess exceptional talents in scientific or artistic fields. However, in 2009, Mark Haddon admitted on his blog that he was not an expert on autism.

Haddon employed specific artistic techniques and narrative forms to convey the perspective and worldview of a high-functioning autistic person, revealing Christopher's reasoning processes, behavioral peculiarities, and physiological traits. The novel includes internal monologues that illustrate Christopher's unique thought patterns and mindset, as well as dialogues accompanied by his mental commentary, which reveal his distinctive perception of people and reality. Notably, the text incorporates visual elements – such as pictures and diagrams – that symbolize the dominance of visual thinking in autistic individuals. This innovative narrative approach uses images to represent the way Christopher's autistic brain processes information, highlighting the gap between verbal and visual cognition.

This article examines certain features of autistic language as portrayed through first-person narration in fiction. It also explores the types of reactions autistic individuals exhibit during interactions with others – including behavioral responses, interpretations of others' actions and thoughts – and their distinctive way of thinking, such as constructing sequences of mental images.

As part of the study, a survey was conducted among parents of children with ASD in an online forum. Participants were asked to read the novel under analysis and assess how closely their children's behavior resembled that of the main character.

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The majority of respondents (90%) reported significant similarities or even complete alignment in various behavioral and communicative aspects.

The novel presents several storylines through shifting perspectives: from the autistic protagonist's point of view, from the perspectives of his loved ones (revealing internal conflicts), and through third-person narration that depicts how others respond to the autistic character – both appropriately, to model positive interactions, and inappropriately, to highlight common misunderstandings.

The analysis of the linguistic portrayal of individuals with ASD and their communicative traits in fiction is conducted through a detailed description of the main character's mental and linguistic peculiarities, as well as the communicative failures that arise from them.

### 5.1 Speech and language

In the novel, the main character's language is presented in a fictionalized form, both as spoken dialogue with others and as internal monologue. The peculiarities of language in the author's interpretation can be identified at the lexical, syntactic and stylistic levels. A significant portion of the protagonist's utterances – approximately 50% – consists of specialized vocabulary drawn from scientific fields such as mathematics, physics, astronomy, and biology, for example:

*And all I could see would be stars. And stars are the places where the molecules that life is made of were constructed billions of years ago. For example, all the iron in your blood which stops you from being anemic was made in a star.*

Christopher explains many processes in the human body and natural phenomena using a scientific prose style, often through definitions and formulas. These explanations would be more suitable for scientific publications and textbooks rather than everyday speech, for example:

*Mrs. Alexander said, "It's a kind of cake. It has four pink and yellow squares in the middle and it has marzipan icing round the edge." And I said, "Is it a long cake with a square cross section which is divided into equally sized, alternately coloured squares?"*

At the syntactic level it can be noted that Christopher's speech often consists of short simple sentences, for example:

*It was 7 minutes after midnight. The dog was lying on the grass in the middle of the lawn in front of Mrs. Shears's house. Its eyes were closed.*

The speech of individuals with ASD is often characterized by a linear presentation of thoughts, with few or no ellipses or interruptions. In the main character's speech,

only the function words “yes” and “no” are used independently, without further explanation. Parallel syntactic constructions are also common in Christopher’s speech, apparently, they make it easier for him to process events, for example:

*Then I detected in the utility room.*

*Then I detected in the dining room.*

*Then I detected in the living room, where I found the missing wheel from my Airfix Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6 model under the sofa.*

*Then I thought I heard Father coming through the front door and I jumped.*

The language of the main character abounds in various syntactic structures. Complex sentences with subordinate clauses demonstrate his well-developed reasoning abilities:

*Then I went upstairs, but I didn’t do any detecting in my own room because I reasoned that Father wouldn’t hide something from me in my own room unless he was being very clever and doing what is called a Double Bluff like in a real murder mystery novel, so I decided to look in my own room only if I couldn’t find the book anywhere else.*

Additionally, he uses simple constructions with the subjunctive mood to express projections of his future behavior. However, Subjunctive II constructions – typically used to describe unreal or hypothetical situations – are notably absent from his speech, probably because such concepts are difficult for Christopher to grasp (which reflects the third element of the ASD triad).

*And if he never gave it back to me I would be able to remember most of what I had written, so I would put it all into the second secret book and if there were bits I wanted to check to make sure I had remembered them correctly I could come into his room when he was out and check.*

One notable feature of the main character’s speech is the frequent absence of linking words or conjunctions. Most sentences describing successive actions simply begin with “then”, as illustrated in the examples above. In fact, the word “then” appears 489 times throughout the novel.

Christopher also exhibits peculiarities in his perception of grammatical structures, which affects how he responds – or sometimes fails to respond – to the interlocutor’s questions. He tends to recognize questions that are grammatically well-formed. This pattern is evident in the original English version of the book. In the Russian translation, where interrogative sentences do not rely on a fixed word order, autistic individuals appear to rely more on intonation to identify questions, for example:

*He said: "I've talked to your father, and he says you didn't hit a policeman on purpose."*

*I didn't answer anything because it wasn't a question.*

This example illustrates that Christopher disregards the Gricean Cooperative Principle. Although the statement is not technically a question, the speaker implies that Christopher should understand the pragmatic purpose behind the utterance. The speaker expects him to confirm or deny the statement, and perhaps provide an explanation. However, Christopher fails to grasp this intention, resulting in a communication breakdown.

At the stylistic level, Christopher's language is marked by the absence of stylistically nuanced vocabulary. He often describes people, animals, and various objects using specifying epithets, for example:

*He had curly black fur, but if you got closer, you could see that the skin was shining through it – pale yellow, like a chicken.*

Christopher's language lacks evaluative epithets and metaphors. Even the comparisons he makes are not truly metaphorical; instead, they refer to concrete visual images.

*Dreadlocks is when you never wash your hair and it looks like old rope.*

He struggles to describe a person's emotional state because there are no clear visual cues that distinguish one emotion from another. As a result, his descriptions focus on listing specific small details, such as color, shape, and size. For example:

*She was wearing pyjamas and a housecoat. Her toenails were painted bright pink and she had no shoes on.*

*The sergeant behind the desk had very hairy hands and he had bitten his nails so much that they had bled.*

Christopher sometimes evaluates people based on whether they like dogs: if someone loves dogs, he considers them a good person; if they do not, he assumes they are bad.

## 5.2 Perceptual features

In the novel, the author constructs a system to depict how a character with ASD perceives the surrounding world. For Christopher, visualization is the primary mode of perception. He easily processes information that can be represented as a clear visual image and requires only logical comprehension, for example:

*I know all the countries of the world and their capital cities and every prime number up to 7,057.*

However, dynamic visual cues, such as facial expressions and gestures, which are typically linked to recognizing an interlocutor's emotional state, are difficult for Christopher to interpret, for example:

*I got Siobhan to draw lots of these faces and then write down next to them exactly what they meant. I kept the piece of paper in my pocket and took it out when I didn't understand what someone was saying. But it was very difficult to decide which of the diagrams was most like the face they were making because people's faces move very quickly.*

He is able to recognize only basic emotions like sadness and happiness through emoticon-like images; other emotions or subtle variations remain indistinguishable to him.

At the same time, Christopher's visual perception exhibits unique characteristics. He categorizes colors as either annoying or tolerable, disliking yellow and brown in particular. This preference even influences his eating habits – for instance, he tints brown gravy with red food coloring to avoid looking at colors he finds unpleasant. Furthermore, objects painted in two colors pose perceptual challenges for him and can even lead to avoidance or refusal to interact with such objects, for example:

*The box, which was a brown thing inside a red thing, which made my head feel funny so I didn't look.*

Christopher's visual perception is influenced by spatial characteristics. He feels calmer and more comfortable in smaller spaces with regular, geometric shapes, for example:

*It was nice in the police cell. It was almost a perfect cube, 2 meters long by 2 meters wide by 2 meters high. It contained approximately 8 cubic meters of air. And I like really little spaces, so long as there is no one else in them with me. Sometimes when I want to be on my own I get into the airing cupboard outside the bathroom and slide in beside the boiler and pull the door closed behind me and sit there and think for hours and it makes me feel very calm.*

His spatial perception is also linked to what he considers the correct arrangement of objects within a given space, for example:

*And sometimes Mrs. Shears stayed overnight at our house and I liked it when she did because she made things tidy and she arranged the jars and pans and tins in order of their height on the shelves in the kitchen and she always made their labels face outward. And she put the knives and forks and spoons in the correct compartments in the cutlery drawer.*

Additionally, his perception of time is structured around a specific order of actions, such as a daily routine, for example:

*And that is one of the other reasons why I don't like France, because when people are on holiday they don't have a timetable and I had to get Mother and Father to tell me every morning exactly what we were going to do that day to make me feel better.*

*Because time is not like space. And when you put something down somewhere, like a protractor or a biscuit, you can have a map in your head to tell you where you have left it. But even if you don't have a map, it will still be there because a map is a representation of things that actually exist so you can find the protractor or the biscuit again. And a timetable is a map of time, except that if you don't have a timetable time is not there like the landing and the garden and the route to school. And this means that time is a mystery, and not even a thing... And this is why I like timetables, because they make sure you don't get lost in time.*

The main character also analyzes the world around him through olfactory perception, for example:

*And Mr. Jeavons smells of soap and wears brown shoes that have approximately 60 tiny circular holes in each of them. ... He smelled of body odor and old biscuits and of popcorn, which is what you smell of if you haven't washed for a very long time, like Jason at school smells because his family is poor. ... he smelled of something I do not know the name of which Father often smells of when he comes home from work.*

His auditory perception is closely linked to his visual processing; he transforms sounds into mental images, and even words appear to him as printed text, for example:

*Often I can see what someone is saying written out like it is being printed on a computer screen, especially if they are in another room. But this was not on a computer screen. I could see it written really large, like it was on a big advert on the side of a bus.*

However, he experiences significant difficulties with language perception. When an interlocutor uses slang, vernacular expressions, metaphors, or other figurative language, Christopher is unable to form corresponding mental images and therefore struggles to understand what is being said, for example:

*I do not like proper novels. In proper novels people say things like, "I am veined with iron, with silver and with streaks of common mud. I cannot contract into the firm fist which those clench who do not depend on stimulus." What does this mean? I do not know.*

*But she smoked cigarettes and she said lots of things I didn't understand, e.g., "I'm going to hit the hay," and "It's brass monkeys out there," and "Let's rustle up some tucker." And I didn't like when she said things like that because I didn't know what she meant.*

The boy prefers animals to people, finding them easier to understand and interact with since they do not use language, for example:

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*I like dogs. You always know what a dog is thinking. It has four moods. Happy, sad, cross and concentrating. Also, dogs are faithful and they do not tell lies because they cannot talk. ... I also said that I cared about dogs because they were faithful and honest, and some dogs were cleverer and more interesting than some people.*

Christopher's visual perception of people has another distinctive feature: he pays little attention to faces and shows little interest in the facial expressions of others, most likely because these are dynamic visual images, for example:

*And I don't know what some hardness of eye means, and I'm not interested in faces.*

In his visual perception of the world around him, Christopher lacks a signifying, generalizing function, which makes it more difficult for him to process and interpret his surroundings, for example:

*But if I am standing in a field in the countryside I notice everything. There are 19 cows in the field, 15 of which are black and white and 4 of which are brown and white. There is a village in the distance which has 31 visible houses and a church with a square tower and not a spire... And there were 31 more things in this list of things I noticed but Siobhan said I didn't need to write them all down. And it means that it is very tiring if I am in a new place because I see all these things, and if someone asked me afterward what the cows looked like, I could ask which one, and I could do a drawing of them at home and say that a particular cow had patterns on it like this.*

It is also very difficult to accept anything new for Christopher, for example:

*I do not like strangers because I do not like people I have never met before. They are hard to understand. It is like being in France, which is where we went on holiday sometimes when Mother was alive, to camp. And I hated it because if you went into a shop or a restaurant or on a beach you couldn't understand what anyone was saying, which was frightening. It takes me a long time to get used to people I do not know. For example, when there is a new member of staff at school I do not talk to them for weeks and weeks. I just watch them until I know that they are safe. Then I ask them questions about themselves, like whether they have pets and what is their favorite color and what do they know about the Apollo space missions and I get them to draw a plan of their house and I ask them what kind of car they drive, so I get to know them. Then I don't mind if I am in the same room as them and don't have to watch them all the time.*

Tactile perception in individuals with ASD is often highly sensitive; they generally dislike being touched and are strongly averse to violations of personal boundaries, for example:

*I don't like it when people grab me. And I flicked out the saw blade and I held it tightly in the pocket that Toby wasn't in so that I could stab someone if they grabbed hold of me.*

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*I stepped outside. Father was standing in the corridor. He held up his right hand and spread his fingers out in a fan. I held up my left hand and spread my fingers out in a fan and we made our fingers and thumbs touch each other. We do this because sometimes Father wants to give me a hug, but I do not like hugging people so we do this instead, and it means that he loves me.*

### 5.3 Physiological traits

Throughout the narrative, the author also highlights physiological characteristics of the main character. In particular, Christopher experiences disturbed and limited sleep, for example:

*...when I am still awake at 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. in the morning and I can walk up and down the street and pretend that I am the only person in the whole world.*

He eats very slowly and follows specific rituals – such as requiring food to be served on separate plates, as mixed food makes it impossible for him to eat, for example:

*I eat very slowly so my food is nearly always cold.*

Autistic individuals may also face challenges with personal hygiene rituals. In the novel, Christopher explains some of the reasons behind these difficulties, for example:

*And then I wanted to go for a wee, but I was on a train. And I didn't know how long it would take us to get to London and I felt a panic starting, and I started to tap a rhythm on the glass with my knuckles to help me wait and not think about wanting to go for a wee, and I looked at my watch and I waited for 17 minutes. But when I want to go for a wee I have to go really quickly, which is why I like to be at home or at school and I always go for a wee before I get on the bus, which is why I leaked a bit and wet my trousers.*

The author offers his own explanation for why people with ASD rarely make eye contact with their interlocutors, even during conversation:

*Usually people look at you when they're talking to you. I know that they're working out what I'm thinking, but I can't tell what they're thinking. It is like being in a room with a one-way mirror in a spy film. But this was nice, having Father speak to me but not look at me.*

Another characteristic of individuals with ASD highlighted in the novel is their exceptional memory, which the author interprets as follows:

*My memory is like a film. That is why I am really good at remembering things, like the conversations I have written down in this book, and what people were wearing, and what they smelled like, because my memory has a smelltrack which is like a soundtrack.*

*And when people ask me to remember something, I can simply press **Rewind** and **Fast Forward** and **Pause**, like on a video recorder, but more like a DVD player because I don't*

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*have to Rewind through everything in between to get to a memory of something a long time ago. And there are no buttons, either, because it is happening in my head.*

## 5.4 Reactions towards words and actions of others

One of the narrative threads in the novel portrays Christopher's possible verbal interactions with neurotypical members of society – his parents, neighbors aware of his condition, police officers, teachers at the school he attends, and even passersby. The author constructs dialogue models intertwined with Christopher's internal monologue, providing readers with insight into how to communicate effectively with individuals like him. By revealing Christopher's thought processes, the author fosters a deeper understanding of his behavior for the audience.

For example, if an interlocutor asks a question without using interrogative intonation or the syntactic structure of a question – such as in colloquial speech – Christopher may not respond, for instance:

*And now if I don't know what someone is saying, I ask them what they mean or I walk away.*

Loud noises, shouting, or a rapid succession of questions without pauses for answers can cause fear or confusion in Christopher, often expressed through “groaning” and specific body movements, for example:

*I do not like people shouting at me. It makes me scared that they are going to hit me or touch me and I do not know what is going to happen. Instead, she started screaming again. I put my hands over my ears and closed my eyes and rolled forward till I was hunched up with my forehead pressed onto the grass. The grass was wet and cold. It was nice. It was nice.*

*The policeman said, “I am going to ask you once again...” I rolled back onto the lawn and pressed my forehead to the ground again. And made the noise that Father calls groaning. I make this noise when there is too much information coming into my head from the outside world.*

*And I didn't like all the people being near me and all the noise because it was too much information in my head and it made it hard to think, like there was shouting in my head. So I put my hands over my ears and I groaned very quietly.*

The main character may react aggressively to being touched, especially if it is done roughly, for example:

*So I got out my Swiss Army knife and I flicked out the saw blade and I held it tightly in the pocket that Toby wasn't in so that I could stab someone if they grabbed hold of me.*

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Christopher is also uncomfortable when someone laughs at him. Because he has difficulty distinguishing emotions, he cannot tell whether the laughter is friendly, sarcastic, or mocking, for example:

*Then he laughed. I do not like people laughing at me, so I turned and walked away.*

To have a successful conversation with an autistic person, the interlocutor's speech should avoid metaphors and other stylistic devices-particularly those that do not evoke clear visual images, for example:

*This means that the word metaphor is a metaphor. I think it should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards. And when I try and make a picture of the phrase in my head it just confuses me because imagining an apple in someone's eye doesn't have anything to do with liking someone a lot and it makes you forget what the person was talking about.*

The novel provides an example of effective communication with an autistic child through the character of Siobhan, Christopher's teacher, for example:

*Siobhan understands. When she tells me not to do something she tells me exactly what it is that I am not allowed to do. And I like this.*

## 5.5 Reasoning patterns

The author's use of internal monologue as the narrative style allows readers to closely follow the protagonist's reasoning process. Christopher, who has developed only basic representational thought, struggles to quickly find appropriate answers when questions are asked too rapidly or when he is confronted with several questions at once. The text provides a vivid depiction of his mental state in such situations:

*He was asking too many questions. And he was asking them too quickly. They were stacking up in my head like loaves in the factory where Uncle Terry works. The factory is a bakery and he operates the slicing machines. And sometimes a slicer is not working fast enough but the bread keeps coming and there is a blockage. I sometimes think of my mind as a machine, but not always as a bread-slicing machine. It makes it easier to explain to other people what is going on inside it.*

*And this is how I recognize someone if I don't know who they are. I see what they are wearing, or if they have a walking stick, or funny hair, or a certain type of glasses, or they have a particular way of moving their arms, and I do a Search through my memories to see if I have met them before.*

*And this is also how I know how to act in difficult situations when I don't know what to do.*

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This reliance on basic representational thinking also limits his ability to use imagination and to understand or create humor, for example:

*I find it hard to imagine things which did not happen to me. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them. If I try to say the joke to myself, making the word mean the three different things at the same time, it is like hearing three different pieces of music at the same time, which is uncomfortable and confusing and not nice like white noise. It is like three people trying to talk to you at the same time about different things.*

At times, Christopher's behavior may appear illogical because he forms incorrect logical connections, associating current events with his past experiences, for example:

– *Then he said, "I am arresting you for assaulting a police officer."*

*This made me feel a lot calmer because it is what policemen say on television and in films.*

In this situation, Christopher misinterprets the illocutionary force of the utterance, which was likely intended to frighten him into cooperating. However, his misunderstanding unexpectedly produces the desired pragmatic effect – the boy calms down and follows the policeman.

The peculiarities of Christopher's reasoning shape his unique understanding of, and attitude toward, concepts such as death, truth, and lies. For him, death is a purely physical phenomenon that does not evoke any emotional response, including fear, as demonstrated in the following example when he discusses his mother's death:

*When people die they are sometimes put into coffins, which means that they don't mix with the earth for a very long time until the wood of the coffin rots. But Mother was cremated. This means that she was put into a coffin and burned and ground up and turned into ash and smoke. I do not know what happens to the ash and I couldn't ask at the crematorium because I didn't go to the funeral.*

In Christopher's view, metaphors – and even some idiomatic expressions – are considered lies because they do not mean exactly what is said. However, he distinguishes "white lies" as instances where information is simply withheld, for example:

*And I said, "I have been out." This is called a white lie. A white lie is not a lie at all. It is where you tell the truth but you do not tell all of the truth. This means that everything you say is a white lie.*

*It is when you describe something by using a word for something that it isn't. This means that the word metaphor is a metaphor. I think it should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards. And when I try and make a picture of the phrase in my head it just confuses me because imagining an apple in someone's eye doesn't*

*have anything to do with liking someone a lot and it makes you forget what the person was talking about.*

These peculiarities of reasoning are sometimes linked to the boy's physiology. For example, his limited imaginative thinking (the third element of the ASD triad) can trigger psychosomatic reactions in situations that involve dealing with fantasy:

*This is another reason why I don't like proper novels, because they are lies about things which didn't happen and they make me feel shaky and scared.*

Christopher is prone to individual rituals and stereotypical ideas, for example:

*In the bus on the way to school next morning we passed 4 red cars in a row, which meant that it was a **Good Day** – so I decided not to be sad about Wellington. Mr. Jeavons, the psychologist at the school, once asked me why 4 red cars in a row made it a **Good Day**, and three red cars in a row made it a **Quite Good Day**, and five red cars in a row made it a **Super Good Day**. And why do four yellow cars in a row made it a **Black Day**, which is a day when I don't speak to anyone and sit on my own reading books and don't eat my lunch and Take No Risks. He said that I was clearly a very logical person, so he was surprised that I should think like this because it wasn't very logical.*

He rejects the concept of religion because, like other things he finds difficult to imagine, it involves believing in events that did not happen or cannot be seen:

*I think people believe in heaven because they don't like the idea of dying, because they want to carry on living and they don't like the idea that other people will move into their house and put their things into the rubbish.*

## 5.6 Behavioral rituals

In terms of behavior, Christopher is also defined by rituals – for example, he always knows the exact time:

*I was also wearing my watch and they wanted me to leave this at the desk as well but I said that I needed to keep my watch on because I needed to know exactly what time it was. And when they tried to take it off me I screamed, so they let me keep it on.*

Depending on his emotional state, he selects the most appropriate form of communication, for example: *when I'm sad, I like to be alone.*

In the text of the novel the main character lists his own behavioral challenges, allowing the author to convey that individuals like him are often aware of how they differ from others:

*These are some of my **Behavioral Problems**:*

*Not talking to people for a long time*

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*Not eating or drinking anything for a long time*

*Not liking being touched*

*Screaming when I am angry or confused*

*Not liking being in really small places with other people*

*Smashing things when I am angry or confused*

*Groaning*

*Not liking yellow things or brown things and refusing to touch yellow things or brown things*

*Refusing to use my toothbrush if anyone else has touched it*

*Not eating food if different sorts of food are touching each other*

*Not noticing that people are angry with me*

*Not smiling*

*Saying things that other people think are rude*

*Doing stupid things*

*Hitting other people*

*Hating France*

*Driving Mother's car*

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**Table 1.** Features of conventionalized ideas about the characteristics of persons with ASD

Type	Form
Speech and Language	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Presence of special terminological</li> <li>2. Linear construction of utterance with full sentences</li> <li>3. A lot of parallelism</li> <li>4. Lack of stylistically marked vocabulary</li> </ol>
Perceptual Features	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Visualization of objects</li> <li>2. Failure to recognize dynamic visual images (facial expressions)</li> <li>3. Symbolic color perception</li> <li>4. Spatial visual perception</li> <li>5. The perception of time is determined by the order of actions</li> <li>6. Perception of the surrounding world through olfactory perception</li> <li>7. Auditory perception through visual images</li> <li>8. Absence of a signifying generalizing function</li> <li>9. Tactile perception is heightened (does not like to be touched)</li> </ol>
Physiological Traits	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sleep disorder</li> <li>2. Slow and ritualized process of eating</li> <li>3. Limited personal hygiene skills</li> <li>4. Good visual memory</li> </ol>
Behavioral Rituals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of verbal reaction to incomprehensible information from an interlocutor</li> <li>2. Frightened by loud speech or many questions asked at once</li> <li>3. Aggressive response to touch</li> </ol>
Reasoning Patterns	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Literal way of thinking</li> <li>2. Incorrect associative-logical connections</li> <li>3. Individual concepts for “death”, “truth”, “lies”, “religion”</li> <li>4. Individual rituals and stereotypical ideas</li> </ol>

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## 6. DISCUSSION

Today, many pressing social issues are studied through a multidisciplinary approach to gain deeper understanding and develop effective solutions. Linguistics, alongside neurobiology, psychology, and pedagogy, examines various medical and communicative aspects of people with ASD, offering a unique perspective on the problem. Within linguistics, the communication of high-functioning autistic individuals – who represent approximately 1% of the global population – can be analyzed in terms of both successful interactions and communication breakdowns.

The portrayal of autistic communication in literary texts can also provide valuable insights. Artistic works employ a range of methods and techniques that make complex issues more accessible to a broad audience – issues that might otherwise seem obscure when presented solely in scientific language. Fiction, especially when narrated in the first person, not only offers an engaging story but also serves an important educational function.

In the analyzed novel, we identified specific techniques used to present the internal experiences of individuals with mental disorders to a broad audience. Primarily, these include first-person narration, internal monologues, and colloquial speech, which effectively illustrate the cause-and-effect relationships between reasoning, perception, and behavior in such individuals. Additionally, we highlighted the graphic elements employed in the text – such as emoticons used in teaching children with ASD, as well as graphic and mathematical schemes and diagrams that help clarify the concrete logical thinking characteristic of these children.

The language and speech peculiarities of people with ASD were studied at the lexical, syntactic, and stylistic levels. A notable grammatical feature is the linear arrangement of utterances using simple sentences. The language of the main character is rich in technical terms and stylistically neutral vocabulary.

The main character's communicative behavior is categorized into groups including peculiarities of perception, reasoning, reactions to interlocutors, and physiological features.

Christopher's perception is primarily based on visualizing all objects of reality, which influences his other sensory experiences. He can even perceive spoken language as printed text. His tendency toward concrete, representational thinking prevents him from understanding figurative expressions. Since visual perception is his dominant and most important sensory channel, tactile sensations often feel redundant or even irritating, while his perception of color is selective – he categorizes colors as either acceptable or unacceptable in his environment. Dynamic visual stimuli, such as

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human facial expressions, also go largely undifferentiated by him. For people with ASD, visual perception of the surrounding world is marked by stereotypical spatial and temporal preferences: the surrounding space should be small and geometrically regular, objects must be arranged in an orderly, often rhythmic manner, and time is structured rigidly around daily routines. Physiological peculiarities include short sleep duration and certain atypical hygiene habits, aspects rarely addressed in medical or pedagogical discourse.

The peculiarities of the main character's reasoning reveal a distinctive understanding – and consequently, a unique attitude – toward concepts such as death, truth, and lies, which can contribute to communication difficulties with neurotypical individuals. Autistic people also tend to hold stereotypical ideas about many things, which is reflected in their communicative behavior.

In fiction, these characteristics are presented clearly and accessibly to a wide audience through artistic techniques such as repetition, carefully constructed situations, and internal monologues.

While this study provides valuable insights into the linguistic and communicative representation of persons with ASD through the lens of contemporary literature, several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis is based primarily on a single literary work, which, despite its authenticity and popularity, may not fully capture the diversity and complexity of autistic experiences. Additionally, the questionnaire survey was conducted within a specific online community, which may introduce selection bias and limit the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, the study's interdisciplinary approach highlights the significance of literature as a tool for bridging the gap between clinical research and public understanding. By aligning literary depictions with empirical data and real-life perspectives, the research underscores the potential of fiction to foster empathy, challenge stereotypes, and inform more effective communication strategies with individuals on the autism spectrum.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the linguistic and communicative characteristics of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are not only rooted in medical and psychological domains but are also vividly and instructively represented in contemporary literature. Through a comparative analysis of Mark Haddon's "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" and empirical scientific data, the research reveals that literary texts can serve as tools for increasing public awareness and understanding of ASD. The novel's portrayal of the protagonist's perception,

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reasoning, language, and behavior closely aligns with clinical descriptions of high-functioning autism, as confirmed by both expert literature and responses from individuals familiar with ASD. The findings highlight the importance of recognizing the unique patterns of communication, cognition, and sensory experience in autistic individuals, as well as the frequent causes of communicative breakdowns with neurotypical society. Ultimately, the study underscores the value of interdisciplinary approaches in fostering social inclusion and bridging the gap between clinical realities and societal perceptions of autism.

Currently, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterized primarily as a social communication disorder, meaning that the main challenge for individuals with ASD is establishing effective communication with others. Therefore, neurotypical interlocutors should take into account the stereotyped (restricted and repetitive) behavioral patterns of autistic individuals, their difficulties with social-emotional interaction, and their unique use and interpretation of nonverbal cues during communication.

Based on the insights gained from both literary analysis and empirical research, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance communication and social integration for individuals with ASD:

1. **Adopt Clear Communication Strategies.** When interacting with people with ASD, use simple grammatical structures, avoid figurative language and metaphors, and articulate speech clearly and calmly.

2. **Recognize and Respect Individual Differences.** Be mindful of the sensory sensitivities, behavioral rituals, and unique cognitive patterns that may influence the communication preferences and responses of autistic individuals.

3. **Provide Opportunities for Feedback.** Allow individuals with ASD to clarify or comment during interactions, as this can help bridge gaps in understanding and reduce communicative failures.

Finally, promoting awareness through literature could be implemented by using literary works featuring autistic characters in educational and public awareness campaigns to foster empathy and understanding among neurotypical individuals.

By implementing these recommendations, neurotypical society can contribute to more effective, respectful, and inclusive communication with individuals on the autism spectrum, thereby promoting greater social integration and well-being for all members of the community.

Future research could consider including a larger and more diverse sample and incorporating multiple literary sources or empirical data to enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings.

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