

Autistic Language Hypothesis



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Rachel Cullen (they/them)

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- Autistic researcher and advocate
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Guide of presentation

Introduction and the different approaches to autistic people



What is the Autistic Language Hypothesis?



Examples



Questions

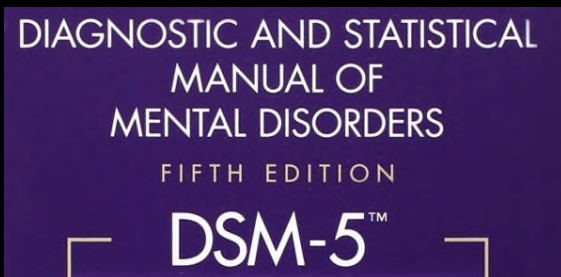
What is autism?

We are
Autistic people

The medical model approach

Defined by the DSM-5 as:

- (1) Deficits in **social communication**.
- (2) Deficits in social interaction.
- (3) Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities.



Frames autistic people as:

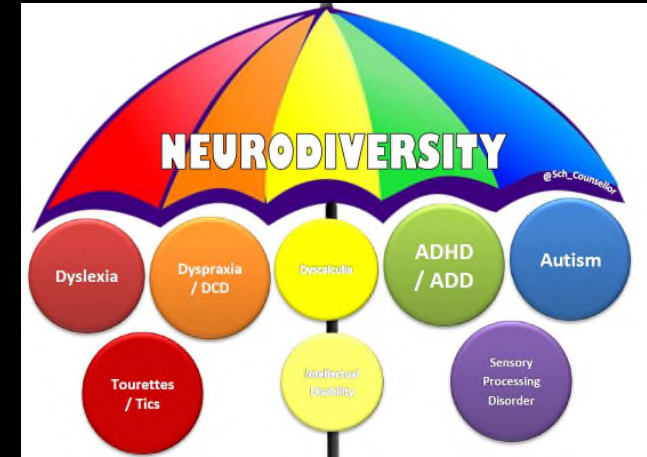
- (1) Disordered
- (2) Exhibiting deficits and impairments
- (3) Needing interventions and treatments to lessen autistic symptoms
- (4) Something to be prevented, reduced or cured



The Neurodiversity approach

Frames autistic people as:

- (1) A natural variation in human neurology
- (2) Different not disordered
- (3) A community and shared identity
- (4) Needing acceptance and accommodations to thrive



Quick narrative comparison

Neurodiversity model	Medical model
Autistic people/ person (integral to identity)	People/ Person with autism (something to be removed or altered in someway)
Differences across brains, behaviors, ways of processing and communicating	Neurological disorder
Lived experience	Outside- looking in approach
Strengths, difficulties, differences and societal barriers	Traits, symptoms, deficits, risk factors, impairments, high and low functioning labels, suffering from.
Right to exist as authentically autistic.	treatments, therapies for autism (people) and cures.
Fundamentally part of human (neuro) diversity.	A disorder with no known cause or cure.

Taking the Neurodivergent approach

Different not disordered

Verbal

Social Communication

Non-verbal

- Difficulty with inferred meaning
- Literal interpretation
- Scripting and Echolalia
- Talking about specific topics for extended periods of time (monologuing/ mini speeches)
- Turn Taking

Pragmatics studies the role of both verbal and non-verbal communication and how this contributes to meaning in social contexts

Why does any of this matter?

The ability to use pragmatic language is fundamental for social communication

Autistic people are predominantly theorized to lack the ability to use and interpret verbal and non-verbal communication appropriately in social contexts.

This perspective centers non-autistic social communication as *appropriate* and *normal* whilst framing autistic social communication as *inappropriate* and *abnormal*.

Why is this problematic?

Using a socialized norm with which to compare different groups to has led to human rights movements



How does this relate to communication?

Autistic people have been pathologized and 'othered' through centering non-autistic people as *normal*.

But what if...

Autistic people have an effective but different way of communicating which facilitates effective communication with other autistic people.

However, this is not understood or shared by non-autistic people therefore has been deeply misunderstood and considered a *deficit* in communication.

There are various ways to communicate

Verbal

Non-Verbal

Sensory

Pictures and Symbols

Binary Code

Text

Color

Given the diversity of communication in the world, could there be diversity in how different neurotypes (such as autistic people) use and process communication?

YES!

Let's look at the evidence...

The Double Empathy Problem (Milton, 2012)

Crompton, et al, (2020)

Williams, et al, (2021)



So, the question becomes...
How can we explain autistic
communication outside of a deficit
model?

This is what I propose:

The Autistic Language Hypothesis

Autistic language hypothesis main components:

(1) Processing occurs at word level instead of sentence level

(2) context is found in linguistic not non-linguistic features of communication

(3) What isn't said isn't known to autistic people

(1) Processing occurs at word level instead of sentence level

Hello, how was your day?



V.S

Hello

how

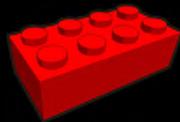
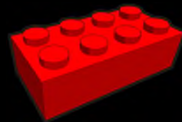
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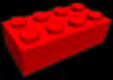
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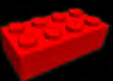
(1) Processing occurs at word level instead of sentence level

 **Hello** → Processing has started. Greeting, pleasant in nature.

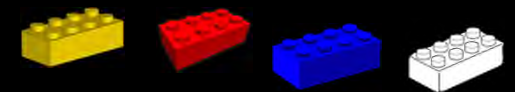
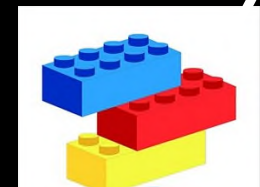
 **How** → The way or manner of something.

 **was** → Past tense.

 **Your** → Referring to myself, so they are asking about me.

 **day** →

- 12 hours
- hours of daylight
- since I woke up?
- Until this very second in which they are asking?
- How many things do you do in a day?

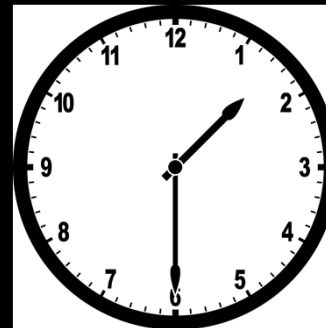


(2) Context is found in linguistic not non-linguistic features of communication

What does the rabbit look like?



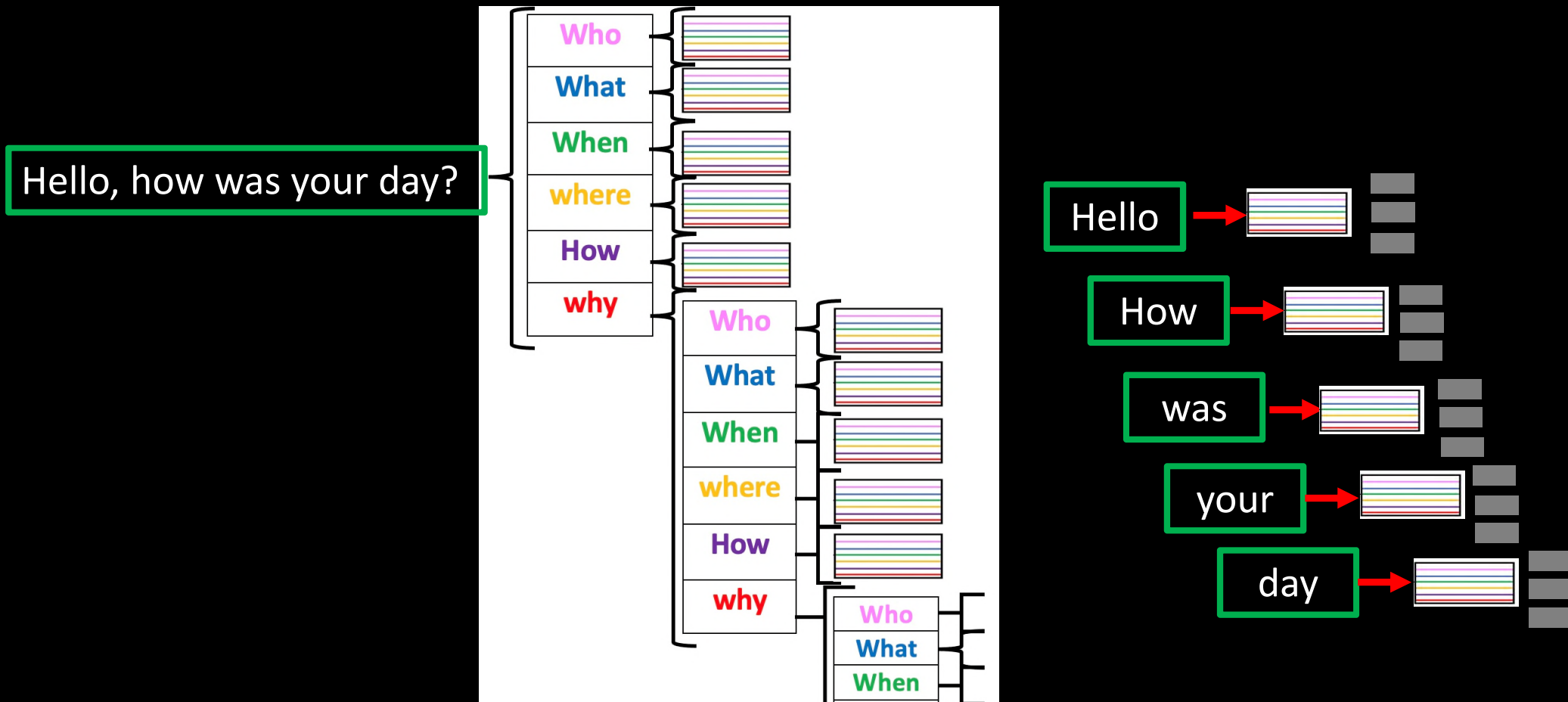
What time is lunch?



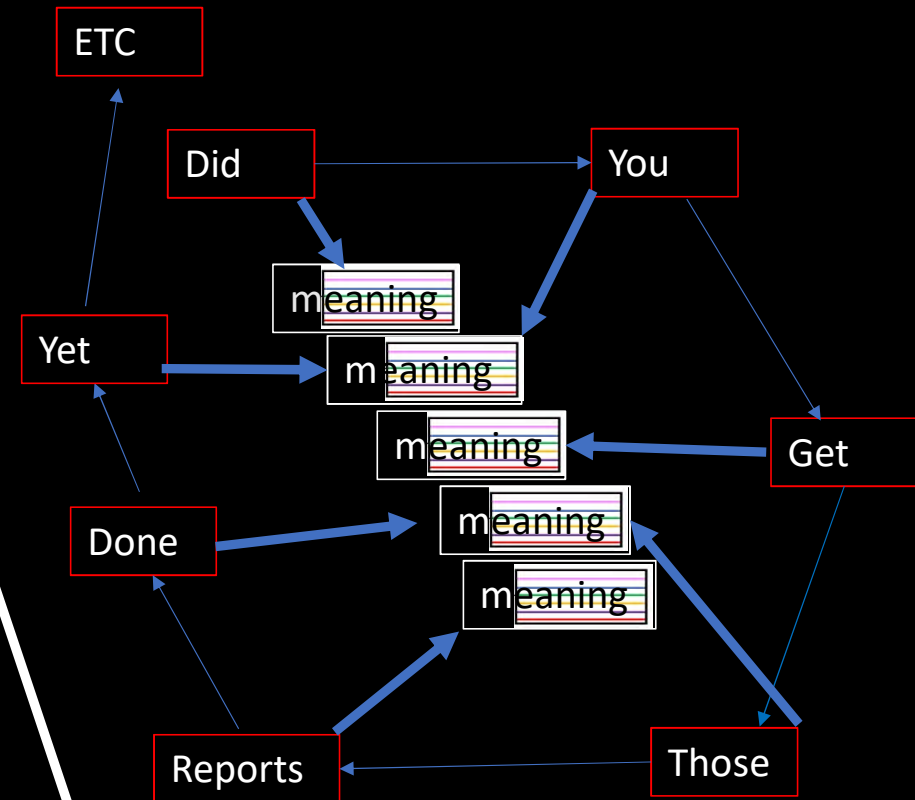
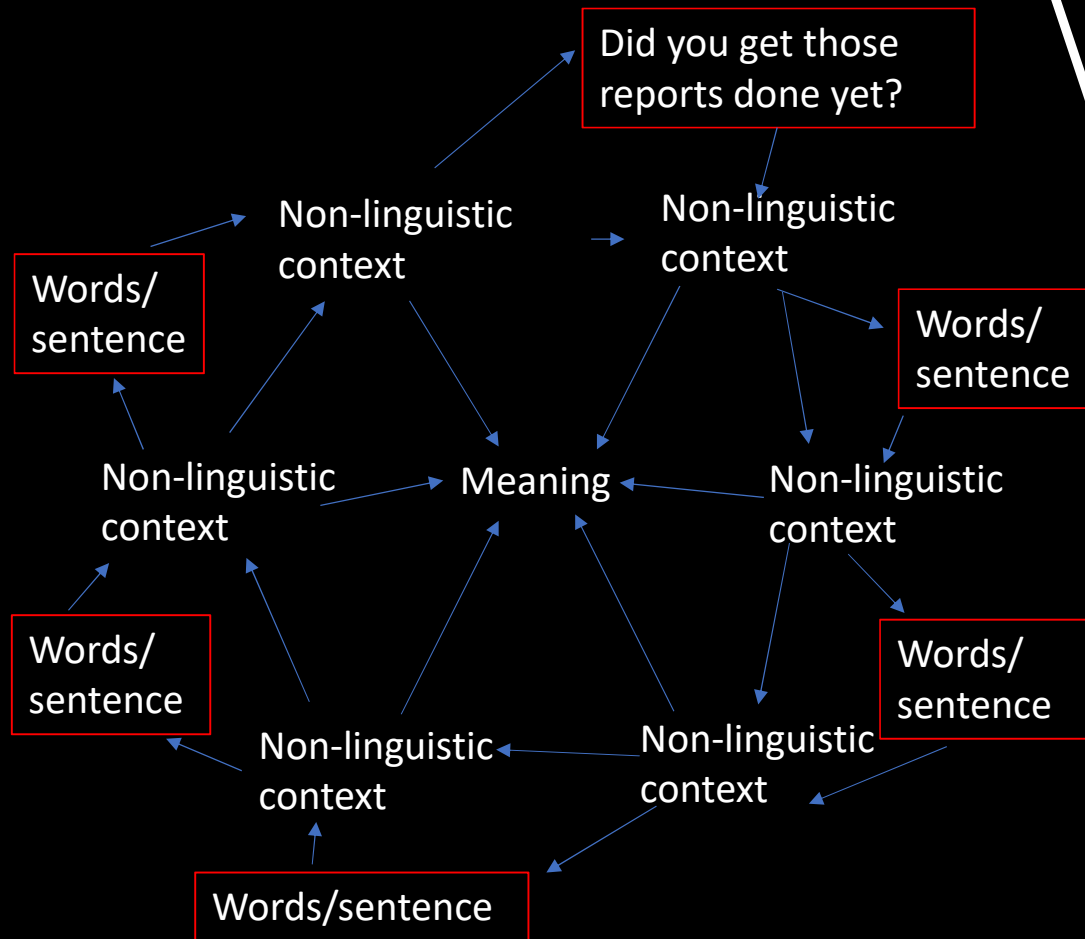
What is this?



(2) Context is found in linguistic not non-linguistic features of communication



(3) What isn't said isn't known to autistic people



(3) What isn't said isn't known

- Who am I talking to?
- Where are we talking?
- How are they talking?
- What is their body language saying?

Hello, how was your day?

- Who are they talking about?
- What are they talking about?
- When did the day happen?
- Where did the things in the day happen?
- Why did the things in the day happen?
- How did the day happen?

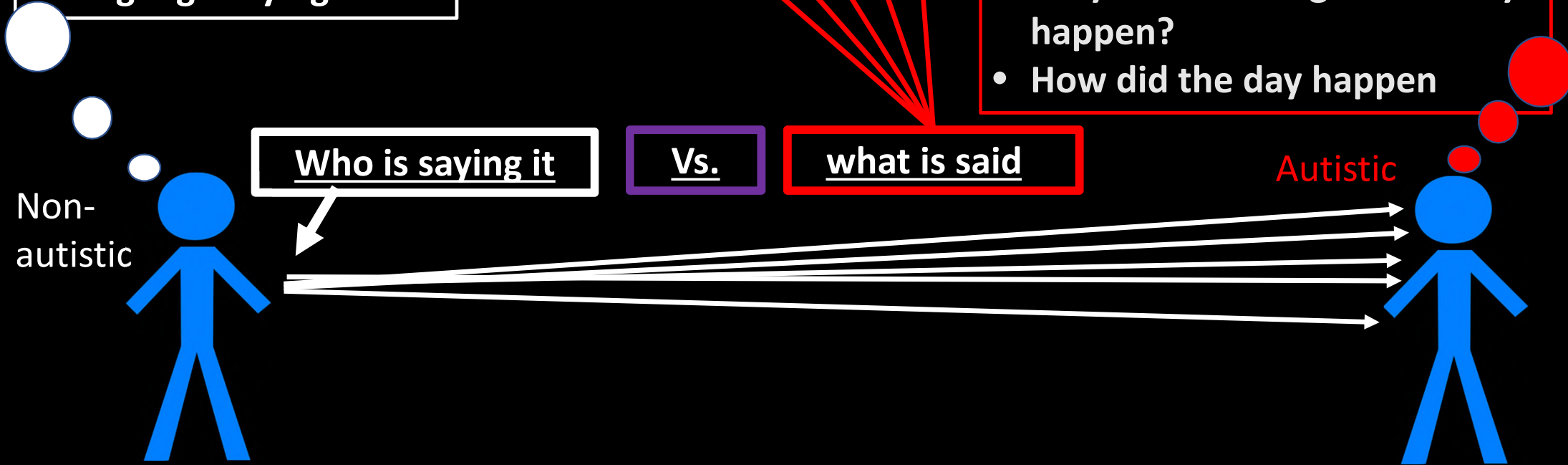
Who is saying it

Vs.

what is said

Non-autistic

Autistic



All Talk...No Action

Does this mean using this hypothesis to get anyone to speak?

ABSOLUTELY NOT!

The hypothesis and its purpose is to understand how autistic people communicate at a verbal level

The idea is that it could potentially be used to establish effective two-way communication for non-speaking autistic people

Two-way communication isn't about being verbal!

Its about establishing a neutral communication ground accessible to both parties involved via any means necessary

Time for A New Approach



Disclaimers

Still being developed (in very early stages of research)

Only currently applicable to autistic people without intellectual disabilities or other neurodivergence

Only applicable to the English language

THAT'S A WRAP



THANKS FOR HAVING ME

memegenerator.net

Any Questions/feedback ?



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