

Language and Autism:

Multimodality and the Untamed: a dynamic view of autism (self) representation

This paper deals with the topic of autism (self)narratives and, more specifically, focuses on how traditional and linguistic narratives can be transformed to create more nuanced and dynamic representations of autistic experiences. In the wake of Ian Hacking, I consider autism narratives or (self-)representations not only as descriptions of a certain reality or experience, but also as creations of a narrative in which it becomes possible to communicate autistic experience and feelings.

In this paper, I will use as case studies two autism stories, both of which have untamed narrative features and are using a multitude of genres and semiotic modalities. The first is a recently published book (*On)draaglijk lijden, de pijn van het anders-zijn* (anonymous, 2011) [(un)bearable suffering: the pain of being different] with anonymous testimonies by people with high-functioning autism. The second case study focuses on *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), the popular novel by Mark Haddon in which the narrator is a fifteen-year-old boy with autism. Although these two sources have a different place on the 'literary spectrum' (which will be taken into account), there is a striking similarity between them in terms of narrative and generic structure. Based on this analogy, my research question is therefore whether using the notion of multitude of genres and modes can be seen as an enrichment for the (self-) representation of people with autism. The analysis of the two texts will zoom in on the post-classical story features and on the how and why of the interweaving of genres and multimodality. The link between this and autism experiences will form the focal point of my attention.

The methodology integrates life writing theory (Eakin, Couser, Frank) and literary-theoretical considerations on multimodality (Ruth Page, Kress, van Leeuwen, David Herman). The insights of life writing theory (and more specifically illness narratives) are interesting because the theory is focused on the relation between language and identity. The theoretical framework around multimodality is important to study the transformation of the traditional and linguistic narratives in the two cases.

Ultimately, the projected outcome of this paper is twofold. At a theoretical level, I want to illustrate how the multitude of genres and modes can question classical theoretical considerations concerning autism. In other words: this study wants to be the beginning of a research into alternative ways of telling, that can even assist professional caregivers in the interpretation of autism stories. On a more practical level, I want to explore how people with autism translate their experiences with the world.

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(additions possible)

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