

## **“The Social Language Theory of Neurodivergence: Lost in Translation” (Part 1 of 2)**

by Janae Elizabeth

### **“Reality simply consists of different points of view.” -Margaret Atwood**

We the neurodivergent are neurologically different. We experience the world through a *differently connected* nervous system which informs every aspect of our thinking, our behavior, and our social values.

The dominant social group labels our way of being in the world as disordered because they don't understand us. Even though they don't understand, the dominant culture controls the narrative about our differences.

Society believes the experts who are not part of our culture, who see brokenness where there is order. We gradually start to believe the myths ourselves and lose all sense of self-esteem. We come to hate ourselves for being different.

### **How did we get here?**

The *pathology paradigm* is a system of diagnostic labels designed by neurotypicals which categorizes our genetic differences and traumatic stress responses as illnesses, disorders, deficits, and deficiencies. Some of these labels are ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, epilepsy, autism, bipolar, borderline, schizophrenia, and complex PTSD.

Up until now, scientists have studied us like they study animals — not asking our opinion or considering that there may be a complex system of mind behind the behaviors that they do not understand. They theorize that we are less empathetic, less aware of others, less social. More like robots than people.

They have largely not tried to understand the biological mechanisms that create our experience of self. Instead they have tried every means possible to force us to act neurotypical.

Some of us can pretend to be neurotypical, for a while, at great cost to our health and happiness, but we cannot change our neurotype. **We are neurodivergent.**

Our behavior and social values are different because the way we think is different. The way we think is different because our moment-to-moment experience of the world is different.

In this article, I'll explain the key ways in which neurotypical and neurodivergent people misunderstand each other. In part 2, I'll share how these misunderstandings impact people and how we can shift into a new paradigm of acceptance and accessibility for all neurotypes.

## **Processing differences cause us to speak different social languages.**

Neurotypical and neurodivergent people experience many misunderstandings or blocks to communication. It is common for both groups to assume that these misunderstandings happen because of a deficit or deficiency in neurodivergent people. However, neither group is at fault. We are simply speaking different languages.

Dr. Damian Milton calls this phenomenon *the double empathy problem*. He says, “Simply put, the theory of the double empathy problem suggests that when people with very different experiences of the world interact with one another, they will struggle to empathize with each other.”

Recent research from the University of Edinburgh demonstrates the double empathy problem in more detail. Through a series of conversations and social exercises, they found the following facts about autistic social communication.

1. *Autistic people share information with other autistic people as effectively as non-autistic people share information with other non-autistic people.*
2. *Information sharing can break down when pairs are from different neurotypes — when there is an autistic and a non-autistic person.*
3. *Autistic people have higher rapport with other autistic people, and non-autistic people have higher rapport with non-autistic people.*
4. *External observers can detect the lack of rapport apparent in mixed interactions (interactions between autistic and non-autistic pairs).*

These four facts are a notable contradiction to the clinical definition of autism, which focuses on communication deficits and social challenges. Scientists are learning that autistic people actually communicate and socialize quite well with other autistic people.

Neurodivergent people have been stereotyped as having difficulty with understanding other people’s thought processes, a skill called [\*mindreading\*](#). However, neurotypicals also experience *mindblindness* when communicating with neurodivergent people. Neurotypicals cannot intuitively understand our minds. Simon Baron Cohen’s theory of autism did not account for the fact that lack of understanding goes both directions.

If we think of neurodivergent and neurotypical people as speaking different social languages based on very different experiences of the world, the findings of this study make sense. **Here are 8 specific ways in which neurodivergent and neurotypical social languages differ.**

(There are more ways, but 8 is enough for today. I’m an autistic person obsessed with the intersection of neurobiology and sociology, so I’ll probably write more about this in the future!)

### **1. Emotions**

We process emotions differently. We think of emotions in extremes because we feel and sense in extremes. Happy is elated. Sad is distraught. Grief is the end of the world. Light, sound, touch, taste, and smell have an emotional effect on us. We sometimes have to turn off our emotions in order to protect ourselves from overload. This is not because we cannot feel; it is because we feel SO much all of the time.

We are good at recognizing emotions when they are congruent — when the expression of the emotion matches the situation. We may enjoy spending time with children or animals and be able to understand intuitively how they are feeling. When emotions are incongruent, neurodivergents tend to rely on facial expressions, while neurotypicals tend to rely on situational cues. Interacting with neurotypicals can be especially stressful if we are expected to prioritize situational cues, which feels unnatural to us.

Motion is essential to our emotional processing and helps us express our feelings. We stim: tap, dance, flap, bounce, spin, rock, and wiggle, in order to stay in touch with our Inner Selves and our intense emotional world. When we are not allowed to do these things, we shut down on the inside and outside.

## **2. Empathy**

There are two kinds of empathy: affective empathy and cognitive empathy. *Affective empathy* is feeling the feelings that another person is experiencing. *Cognitive empathy* is knowing the thoughts that are in the other person's head, how they think about their feelings, and what they might do in response to them.

Neurodivergent people tend to have high affective empathy and low cognitive empathy. The inverse is true for neurotypicals. (Some people have a high degree of both types of empathy, because they have practiced and learned the type that does not come as naturally to them.) A neurotypical person's confidence that they can know what another person *thinks* can be baffling to us, just as our confidence that we can know what another person *feels* can be baffling to neurotypicals.

People who think of themselves as empaths tend to be neurodivergent people with very active mirror neurons. We may easily absorb the emotional feeling state of others, lose touch with our own feelings, and become confused or overwhelmed by the variety of emotional signals in large crowds of people.

## **3. Nonverbal Communication and Body Cues**

“Energy is our first language. Words are our second.” That’s how autistic activist Kristy Forbes describes herself and her children. She is an autism and neurodiversity support specialist who teaches parents & educators how to understand neurodivergent children.

“We are hypersensitive to the energy of other people. Much like other living beings that don’t have spoken words as their communication, we can communicate in other ways.” She says her

children let her know how *she's* feeling by their behavior, because they are so sensitive to her energy.

Neurodivergent people can understand each other's nonverbals even though we struggle with neurotypical's nonverbals. We take deep meaning from every aspect of a person's observable body language, including microexpressions and tone of voice. We intuitively understand people because we feel their energy. This sensitivity to nonverbal cues makes us very understanding carers for animals and small children.

Neurotypicals follow a hierarchy of meaning, placing spoken words at the very top, and sometimes ignoring other kinds of communication completely. I've worked with families of nonverbal children who ask, "When will they be able to communicate with us?" When these parents start to recognize that **behavior is communication**, a whole world of connection opens for the child.

#### 4. Words Mean Things

Words are a big deal to us. They're emotional, mental, and physical work. Many of us learn to conserve our energy by reducing the amount of time we spend speaking. This is one of the ways we adapt to our intense world. Many of us have situational mutism. Some of us never speak out loud, but instead communicate with sign language or assisted communication devices. Not speaking does not mean we can't understand what is said to us.

Because **words are work**, we appreciate deep meaning in a short message. Details matter. We expect people to say what they mean and mean what they say.

We often misunderstand colloquialisms, metaphors, and innuendo because we are so literal. The children's book series *Amelia Bedelia*, which features a babysitter who takes every word quite literally, offers a memorable example of the way we understand words.

*"Amelia Bedelia," asked a reporter, "what would you do if you were in the mayor's shoes?"*

*"I would polish them," said Amelia Bedelia. "They could use a good shine."*

Neurodivergent directness lends itself to a particular kind of humor that disrupts the default understanding of a word or concept. *Amelia Bedelia* is far from the only example. Have you seen Hannah Gadsby's groundbreaking stand up comedy show *Nanette* on Netflix? Hannah is autistic, and it shines through in every part of her comedy including her break from the traditional form.

#### 5. Social Rules

Whenever we gather groups of neurodivergent people together, the idea that we can't socialize well begins to seem rather silly. We certainly don't socialize like neurotypicals do, but we have our own set of social rules as well as consequences for breaking them.

We don't do small talk. We enjoy *parallel play* and shared activities that don't require continual conversation. When we talk, it gets deep quickly. We discuss what's real, our struggles, fears, desires, obsessions. We appreciate a good *infodump*, and there's no such thing as oversharing. We swap *SAME stories* — sharing a time when we felt similarly in our own life, not as a competition, but to reflect how well we are listening to each other.

As a group, we don't tolerate bullies or power games. We are naturally suspicious of people who claim leadership, and we may intentionally exclude people who try to control or dominate others. We usually respect each other's sensory needs, and we automatically pull away from those who don't understand our needs.

Neurotypical experts have called all of these ways of socializing inappropriate, but they work for us. Who gets to decide what is appropriate?

## **6. A Different Value System**

We value achievement, success, and hard work, but we tend to define these things differently from neurotypicals — more by internal metrics and less by external rewards. Fame, competition, and material wealth don't impress us. We prefer to measure success in terms of autonomy, justice, connection, and truth.

We make deep connections with animals, objects, and hobbies, in addition to people. What looks like introversion and antisocial behavior is actually a preference for a certain kind of human connection, an energetic feeling of kinship. We may heavily rely on social media networking sites for a sense of social connectedness, and bristle at suggestions that what happens online is not real life.

We are suspicious of incongruence or posturing, and we bluntly tell the truth as we see it. Truth is so valuable that we will even risk relationship for it. We are the voices who point out the obvious — the emperor isn't wearing any clothes.

We have a long history of activism, disruption, and revolution. Greta Thunberg is a prime example, crediting her neurodiversity for her climate activism. She said, "If I didn't have Asperger's, I would be stuck in the social game that everyone else seems to be so infatuated with. I see the world in a different way, with a different perspective."

Masha Gessen puts it this way: "If you simply can't do doublethink, if your brain explodes, then it is less discomfiting for you to become a dissident than to exist within a society. For most people, it's more comfortable to do whatever you're required to do. If it requires doublethink, it requires doublethink. But if you just can't do doublethink, then you become a dissident."

## **7. Skills and Abilities**

We have *variable skills* and abilities. Our strengths and disabilities fluctuate based on our environment and stress level. We may be able to work and visit the grocery and make dinner one

day, and be unable to leave the bed on other days. We can happily socialize in some settings but not others. Many of us have chronic illnesses or trauma that interact with our sensitive neurology to cause unusual levels of pain and fatigue which change our abilities from day to day or even hour to hour.

It is unfortunately very common for professionals to disbelieve our reports of having pain or disabilities in other environments, when we present in clinical and educational settings as calm, clear communicators. They assume our day to day skills will be consistent, but they assume wrongly. What they are missing is our mask. *Masking* is an evolutionary adaptation to othering and lack of belonging. Under extreme stress, we force ourselves to appear neurotypical as much as possible. We grow up learning how to minimize hateful or abusive reactions to our differences by pretending we aren't different at all.

We find freedom in recognizing how much our skill levels actually vary and dropping the mask when it's safe to do so. Sensory aids and assisted communication devices allow us to overcome a number of challenges of modern society. But even with these, there will be times we can't do things that are expected of neurotypicals. We spend a lot of time managing our energy levels, noting what nourishes and what drains us, because we have to. If we stop paying attention to our energy resources and nervous system state, we become ill mentally, physically, or both.

## **8. Reactions to Stress, Pain, and Overwhelm**

Our stress reactions are not pathological, but they can be disabling. We are hypersensitive to pain, including social rejection.

As various input stimulates our nervous system, we feel increasingly anxious and uncomfortable. If we can't stop or change the stimulus, then a *meltdown* is our natural release valve. During a meltdown, the fight-flight part of our nervous system discharges excess energy.

If the energy in the body is overwhelming and meltdown doesn't feel safe or accessible, then *shutdown* happens. In shutdown, the dorsal vagus nerve disconnects us from the world to protect us. This state is where the old deficit theories of autism originate. When everything is too much, we may appear to daydream, stare blankly, or avoid social interaction — not because we don't want interaction, but because our body has reached its input limit. We've maxed out our CPUs, so to speak. (To be clear, this is a metaphor — we are not machines.)

Meltdowns and shutdowns may be misidentified as panic attacks and PTSD avoidance, because so many of us have trauma on top of our genetic neuro-difference. Trauma responses make up a large portion of the current diagnostic criteria for autism and ADHD, but phobias, anxiety, depression, agitation, insomnia, hostility, hypervigilance, self-destructive behaviors, and social isolation are not inherent parts of who we are.

Trauma around how people respond to our meltdowns and shutdowns often leads to self-harm, particularly if we were punished for these states as children. We might reenact abuse we have

received from others by hurting ourselves or other people in an attempt to stop our natural reactions to overwhelm. Trauma recovery often leads to more meltdowns, but also safer meltdowns, as we learn to allow our true feelings to move through us.

Our stress responses are a normal part of feeling so intensely. When we develop shame around these reactions, they can become dangerous. Finding safe ways to allow ourselves to meltdown and shutdown is quite healing.

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## **Conclusion**

The majority of the impact of all of these misunderstandings falls on us neurodivergents. Neurotypicals are the in-group, while the rest of us are made to feel like we don't belong. Interactions with people who don't speak our language can make us feel unnecessarily ashamed of ourselves.

“I feel like a foreigner who memorizes all of the customs of another culture. I try SO hard to communicate in the right way, but important things get lost in translation.” — an autistic adult

The set of traits that Western society has decided is normal is terribly unrealistic for our neurotype. We are not broken neurotypicals. We are not lesser beings for speaking a different language. We are whole, unique, and valuable just as we are.