Narrating Autism

Although I have suggested the existence of two pre-dominant autism narratives – either overly positive ('capable of saving the world') or overly negative ('non-verbal, violent, self-injurious') – I have not yet explored the way these narratives are expressed. Chatman suggested the differentiation of story (content) and discourse (expression) (26) and I believe there are some modes of representation that have manifested themselves in shared narratological features. However, I will not cross the whole field of narratology, since it is altogether too large to cover. Additionally, the novels I examined all portray high-functioning characters, which were imagined by non-autistic authors. Thus, there always remains the critique that these portrayals represent the neurotypical gaze. Conversely, some autistic authors have described difficulties portraying neurotypical characters due to fundamentally different perceptions (cf. Caldwell).

Visual Rhetoric and Semiotics

In *Visual Rhetoric and the New Public Discourse*, Bruce McComiskey suggests that present-day multimedia communication should be framed as overall rhetoric (189), thus catering to the various ways in which information is presented, i.e. as video, audio, text, or graphics (188). He further states that

> Even documents that convey their messages by words alone are exhibiting more access strategies, visual techniques for guiding readers through blocks of text: emphasizing important words and phrases through **bold**, underlined, or *italic* script; beginning new sections with **Highlighted Headings**; using ▪ bulleted lists and color to draw readers' attention to particular areas on a page. (McComiskey p. 187–188, original highlighting)

However, being aware of the fact that information is communicated unfortunately will not guarantee comprehension on the receiver's end, or indeed unambiguity. Thus, when heading off into the field of rhetoric, I can only be sure that somebody is trying to persuade me of *something*.

Apart from *Trueman Bradley*, all novels feature highlighted passages, bold, underlined, or italic scripts, bulleted lists, or different fonts to emphasise letters, notes, diary entries, etc. Since all novels are told from a first-person perspective, these visualisations serve as further characterisation of the protagonist. For example, highlighted passages may indicate new words/expressions a character has encountered, lists or bullet points a love for order and routine, and so forth. They do not signify autism per se but may emphasise a character's unique mindset. The following examples will show how such techniques are used for more than making the text more appealing to the reader.

Mockingbird has two striking features, the first being that no quotation marks are used but direct speech is set in italic letters. While the text is legible, it has at times the curious effect that voiced statements could also be read as the internal voice of the protagonist. For example:

> [Mrs. Brook asking about the funeral:] *Did it make you uncomfortable?* I try to think of a different answer than I don't know because Devon says people don't like I don't know all that much. I don't know why. So I try hard to focus on her question. *Did it make you uncomfortable?* I think about what is comfortable. Being completely covered by my purple fleece blanket under my bed or putting my head under the sofa cushion or reading my Dictionary. I did not have any of those things at the funeral. *Yes. I was uncomfortable.* (*Mockingbird* 21, original highlighting)

While reading the passage, I do not know whether Mrs Brook repeats her question ('Did it make you uncomfortable?') or whether Caitlin echoes it, either aloud or in her head. Additionally, putting the question in italic letters could simply be a way of refocusing the reader, since Caitlin's thoughts have previously drifted off.

> I rub my finger across the wood back and forth harder and harder until a splinter cuts me. I hit the splinter back.
> There is a drop of blood on the wood now. It is read and it spreads…seeping into a crack and bleeding across the unfinished wood. …
> *No!* I rub the wood harder and harder to try to erase the blood but it won't go away.
> *Caitlin!*
> I press my finger against the raw wthood and rub faster and faster and it hurts but I don't care because I want to stop the blood but it's still there and I can't make it stop!
> *Caitlin!*
> *I can't stop it!*
> *Caitlin!* It's Mrs. Brook calling from somewhere and I feel pulling on my arm but I yank my hand free. *No!* I have to erase the blood! I have to. I have to! I HAVE TO!
> I can't see or feel or hear anything except for some screaming far away. (*Mockingbird* 25–26, original highlighting)

Focusing on statements set in italics, it is easiest to recognise Mrs. Brook, who repeatedly calls Caitlin's name. Since the reader has so far had no reason to suspect that Caitlin talks to herself in 3rd person, it is less likely to be interpreted any other way. Additionally, the 'I can't stop it!' is framed by two of Mrs Brook's utterances, thus giving the impression of a dialogue. However, both 'No!'s could also be read as internal utterances, i.e. a voice in Caitlin's head telling her to stop. Upon further inspection, one finds that 'I have to erase the blood! I have to. I have to! I HAVE TO!' is not set in italic letters, thus most likely being Caitlin's thoughts instead of an audible utterance. Yet, the 'No!' could be representative of Caitlin's emotional state. Since it is only a single world, this further complicates matters, as on other occasions in the novel, sin-

gle words are put in italic letters for emphasis (cf. *Mockingbird* 37). I thus cannot simply assume that all italic printed words are uttered aloud. For example, a bystander would either only see Caitlin rubbing the wood with her finger, or also perceive her shouting 'No!' (I will assume that she is uttering it with force because of the exclamation mark), thus creating two different impressions. This distinction is not necessarily relevant for the reader to understand the scene at hand since they have access to both, Caitlin's thoughts and verbal statements. However, printing it in italic letters has the effect of simultaneously hinting at a verbal, a non-verbal, and an emotional utterance. Thus, although some passages are clearly dialogues, the border between Caitlin's inner and outer self is blurred throughout the novel. Consequently, the reader is drawn into Caitlin's mind, creating a deeper understanding of her inner workings. Yet, Caitlin sometimes seems to lack self-awareness (her not being aware that she is screaming), something that is also portrayed in other characters (e.g. David talking to himself, *What to Say Next* 20).

However, Caitlin's lack of self-awareness is also reflected in her use of pronouns (or lack thereof): "All this time I thought I was learning YOUR Manners when really I was learning MY Manners?" (*Mockingbird* 68). Her dialogue with Michael shows that she had not made the connection between being 'you' (from another person's perspective) and herself. Yet it would be unwise to read too much into this incident since Caitlin reports everything from a first-person perspective. Thus, while 'YOUR Manners' might be a single misunderstanding, I can presume that in other situations Caitlin is very much aware of herself. Printing verbal utterances in italic letters instead of sectioning them off by quotation marks blurs the lines, but it does not nullify her self-awareness.

Another technique used is that of capitalising letters or printing them in all caps. Apart from instances where this is used for emphasis (as in the previous excerpt, 'I HAVE TO!'), it demonstrates Caitlin's strong interest in words. Thus, in several instances, she learns new words, e.g.:

> Here's what I'm writing down in my Word Study notebook because these are the words I want to study more than eLIMinate and DEVastate:
> CHAMbers
> AORta
> Atria
> VENtricles
> VEINS
> Arteries
> VALVES (*Mockingbird* 43–44, original capitalisation)

In a sense, this list is some kind of graphic insert, since it depicts the way Caitlin has written down the words in her 'Word Study notebook', i.e. with the emphasised syllables in capital letters. Throughout the novel, other words are introduced, such as finesse, which Caitlin echoes as fin-NESS (*Mockingbird* 96). Here, the misspelling shows how Caitlin only knows the pronunciation of the word, but not yet how it is spelt, or alternatively attempts to spell it phonetically. By imitating the way, words are printed in a dictionary, Caitlin's interest in words and dictionaries is emphasised, demonstrating her unique passion as well as her hyperlexicality.

However, there is another way in which capitalised words are used, which is to emphasise certain expressions. These include:

- The Day Our Life Fell Apart (*Mockingbird* 13)
- Look At The Person (13)
- Get It (14)
- Deal With It (16)
- Let's Talk About It (20)
- Personal Space (19), TRM=Tantrum Rage Meltdown (27), Facial Expressions Chart (22)
- Start A Conversation (29)
- No Running In The Halls (77)
- No Stickers On The Furniture (85)
- Work At It (122)

While The Day Our Life Fell Apart paraphrases the day Devon died, the other expressions are centred around conduct and social interaction. Interestingly, they are used as set expressions: "[Mrs Brook] She's using her Look At The Person behaviour to look at me and I don't like it. … She answers [the phone] but her eyes still Look At The Person." (*Mockingbird* 24) Interestingly, expressions are not only set in capital letters but remain rigid, which emphasises their artificiality. In other words, it demonstrates how these things do not feel natural to Caitlin by estranging them. Contrary to the reader, Caitlin has consciously learned to categorise behaviour, including certain rules for certain interactions. Because 'Look At The Person' is a behaviour Caitlin has learned, she does not perceive Mrs. Brook as 'still looking at her', but as still displaying a certain behaviour. Since the expression is not conjugated the way a verb in this place would be, it appears rigid and intentional, but not intuitive. In a sense, 'Look At The Person' is a disruptive element in this sentence, demonstrating how Caitlin cannot intuitively grasp such body language but has since formed a (rather prim) conception of it. The fact that 'No Running In the Halls' and 'No Stickers On The Furniture' are listed in the same fashion shows how Caitlin has consciously learned and internalised these rules, as well as attributes them the same importance. Other behaviours for interaction also include (respecting) Personal Space and Start a Conversation. Technically, 'Let's Talk About It' is one of Caitlin's categorised behaviours as well, although it is presumably a less intentionally taught one. Most likely, Mrs. Brook has used this expression to initiate a conversation, conditioning Caitlin to expect a discussion:

> But talking about it can help both of you a lot, she [Mrs. Brook] says. Talking about your feelings.
> That will not work for me. I don't like Let's Talk About It. (*Mockingbird* 79)

On the other hand, Work At It, Deal With It and Get It are not behaviours that pertain to body language or interaction per se. Rather, these are methods people apply to their own emotions, needs, cognitive state etc.

> Devon said, If you want to be a Scout you have to Work At It. (*Mockingbird* 122, original capitalisation)
> I wish they [the mints] were gummy worms because that's my favourite but I Deal With It. (16, original capitalisation)
> I make a smiley face with my mouth. I deserve these gummy worms because I do spend all my time considering everything. I just don't always Get It. (43, original capitalisation)

Deal With It is a form of self-regulation that helps Caitlin cope with less ideal situations. Having an expression for it presumably also facilitates this, since it makes it some form of rule. The same applies to Work At It, a behaviour that Devon has taught her, fostering perseverance. Finally, to Get It is Caitlin's way of categorising understanding. She not only applies this rule to herself but also to others: "I sigh and try to explain it [to the teacher] so she'll Get It" (*Mockingbird* 48). Thus, to Get It is crucial for Caitlin, not only in the sense that she is trying to Get It, i.e. trying to understand other people but also in the way that other people have difficulties understanding her.

> I sit at Mrs. Brook's table and cry because even though I Work At It I still don't Get It. (*Mockingbird* 128, original capitalisation)

Caitlin is aware that she has to work hard at understanding others, but she is also aware that her efforts quite often result in failure. However, categorising her behaviours allows her to find words for them, as well as frame her actions and emotions. In terms of her autism diagnosis, the emphasis on rules, even though these rules appear disruptive within a sentence, demonstrates how Caitlin has no intuitive grasp of social conventions. They are also symbolic of the way her behaviour is regulated by rules others have established.

Mockingbird is certainly the most striking example of visual rhetoric when it comes to underlining a character's lexicality. However, in *What to Say Next*, David's notebook in which he jotted down social rules and information on his classmates, teachers, etc., plays an important part. It is, so to speak, his rulebook for 'how to behave normal'. Whenever the note-

book is cited, a different font is used, as well as numbered lists. Moreover, all entries on persons have the same format, indicating David's love for numbers, routine and (mathematical) order (cf. 3).

Similarly, Marcelo tends to have a strict routine and works best with schedules:

> This is the schedule for this morning I prepared last night:
> 5:00 A.M. Wake up
> 5:05 A.M. Remembering
> 5:35 A.M. Feed Namu
> 5:40 A.M. Dumbbells … (*Marcelo* 36)

From this list, the reader not only learns about Marcelo's meticulous habits but it is also a powerful visualisation of his preference for order and clearly structured information. Here, a list conveys this idea much more effectively than a mere mention of it would.

In *The State of Grace*, the text's appearance is at one point used to visualise the effect of sensory overload:

> I can't hear very well and now my brain's doing that thing it does where it sort of goes on a
> delay
> so
> when
> someone
> speaks
> I
> watch their mouth move but the processor takes a moment to translate the words and by the time I've caught what they mean they've started to say something else. (*State of Grace* 127–128)

By interrupting the flow of reading, Grace's 'delay' in the processing of words is transferred to the reader.

Finally, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* also features graphics, which are not uncommon in children's literature, but less so in young adult fiction. In this particular case, pictures might be repre-

sentative of two things. One reason might be that Christopher cannot convey in words what can be shown in a picture or graph. Another reason might be that hinting towards modes of presentation in children's literature may also hint towards Christopher's juvenile way of thinking.

Although or perhaps especially since such visual rhetoric is not used consistently but constitutes a unique narrative feature, it allows the reader to enjoy the narrative while creating a new impetus for reflecting on the autistic mindset of the character, as well as emphasising individual traits of different protagonists.

Pragmatics

Even more characteristic for autism portrayals than visual rhetoric – a technique that interleaves young adult fiction in general – are moments of misunderstanding in communication. These can easily be featured across different media and are thus more noticeable and consequently more likely to be linked to autism portrayals. Indeed, many conversations that autistic characters participate in are portrayed as unconventional, to say the least. Generally speaking, pragmatics focuses on the context-dependent meaning of utterances, whereas semantics is concerned with context-independent meaning (Cummins 6). Since dozens of theories on pragmatics exist, many of which are interrelated or feed off of each other (e.g. based on Austin/Searle or on Grice), I am ill-equipped to make any statements of significance. Indeed, pragmatics and autism are their very own discourse, fed from both a medical and a philosophical perspective. Thus, my findings mostly amount to a list of observations I made about the novels I read. Because most readers will have encountered the Gricean maxims before, I will use them to loosely categorise these ideas.

For Grice, the heart of the matter is that speakers generally expect each other to be cooperative and that other expectations about their behaviour naturally follow from this, concerning the quality and quantity of information that they provide, how they provide it, and how it relates