viance in autism portrayals, and that portraying different styles of communication hints toward different Cooperative Principles.

Pragmatic Competence and Deviance in Autism Portrayals

In Chapter 6.1, I compared the commonalities of stereotypes portrayed with the diagnostic criteria as stated in the *DSM-5*. I found that while the stereotypical portrayals might represent one way in which autism symptoms could manifest, it fails to consider the multifaceted nature of autism. One aspect of the stereotypical portrayals included honesty and literalness. The *DSM-5* also refers to language difficulties, ranging from non-verbal individuals to stilted or overly literal language use. I also argued that individuals who communicate very literally are merely one form in which autism might affect language. In novels, such linguistic differences can be used as artistic devices but at times they are overused.

Thomas refers to pragmatic competence as 'the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context' (see above). I have also suggested that the Cooperative Principle can be considered the individual's readiness to make themselves understood to their best ability. However, the Cooperative Principle should also be understood as a set of cultural and social norms and rules by which language use is governed. Therefore, two individuals with the same pragmatic competence could employ different CPs and subsequently still arrive at a misunderstanding, e.g. misheard sarcasm. This simplified understanding of communication is sufficient to explain how normality and deviance can be negotiated through the use of language. I will assume that it varies based on age, upbringing, social status, cognitive abilities, cultural norms, native language, etc. Difficulties arising from a lack of pragmatic competence (in the following referred to as 'pragmatic difficulties') or a different CP may thus arise in a plethora

of situations and are not restricted to autists.[8] In this section, I will explore some instances of (failed) communication, including

i. under- and oversharing,
ii. literalness,
iii. body language,
iv. honesty and lies,
v. figurative language, and
vi. politeness.

There is a distinct overlap between the categories, but I have attempted to create some form of order to point out certain differences.

i. Under- and oversharing

What Semino classifies as problems with informativeness and relevance, essentially boils down to saying too little or too much. The Gricean Maxim of Quantity states that one should make a contribution as informative as is required but not more, whereas the Maxim of Relevance simply asks the statement to be relevant. Thus, what I have termed 'undersharing' refers to instances in which a conversation fails because a character is unwilling or unable to cooperate under the Maxims of Quantity and Relevance. I will loosen the linguistic bounds of this phenomenon by defining it as occurrences where a character is unable to communicate their thoughts and emotions and consequently appears passive, emotionless, or disinterested *even though they are not*. This communication barrier is portrayed in all characters to a certain extent. Examples include:

8 Another point of contention with Semino's study is the fact that she does not draw parallels to neurotypical individuals nor considers other causes for impairment other than ToM. Although she does not state that pragmatic difficulties hint towards autism, she assumes that autists will naturally be pragmatically impaired, regardless their age, etc.

Marcelo in the Real World:

> That's why I think many more thoughts than I actually express and why sometimes I come across as slow. I think too much about what I'm hearing and what I'm going to say, and that's a problem when trying to carry on a conversation. (*Marcelo* 45)

Mockingbird:

> *Your dad is worried that you might not understand that Devon…isn't alive.*
> *He tells me you say, Devon says this or Devon does that, as if he's still alive.*
> *I do say that but it doesn't mean I think he's still alive. He was alive when he said those things though.*
> *Your dad said you want Devon to take you shopping.*
> *I do.*
> *But Devon can't take you shopping. Do you understand that?*
> *Yes. But he asked what I want. That's what I want. I know I can't have it.*
> (Mockingbird 111f., original highlighting).

Can You See Me:

> 'It wouldn't have killed you to say sorry too,' Nell hisses, as she sits down at the table.
> Tally looks at the congealed honey as it solidifies on the toast and tries not to feel sick. She is saying sorry. It's not her fault that Nell can't see that. (*Can You See Me* 118)

The State of Grace:

> 'Sorry.'
> I surprise myself by saying it. Most of the time I find it almost impossible to get the word out. Not because I'm not sorry, but because it's like there's a glass bubble in my mouth stopping the words from forming. (*State of Grace* 98)

The instances of undersharing are very different but they will all cause characters to appear in a negative light due to a misunderstanding. Consequently, these characters are perceived as aloof, selfish, or rude, although they are actually struggling to communicate. Undersharing may also occur when individuals do not display 'adequate' body language (see below). In all examples, characters are ready to communicate, but their statements (with the exception of *The State of Grace*) cannot be understood by others. Therefore, it could be theorised that these characters have pragmatic difficulties, at least in certain situations. Of course, apologies also follow social norms and will easily result in impoliteness. It can thus be said that the undersharing of information is not meant to withhold the latter but stems from their inability to actually express themselves verbally. However, these are singular events and one instance alone cannot be considered a feature of autism portrayals since it may occur in other characters, too, for a plethora of reasons. Even characters who frequently fail to communicate their feelings or get a foot in the door during a conversation may simply be shy or overwhelmed; or rude for that matter.

On the other hand, oversharing can at times be an autistic phenomenon. It usually occurs in relation to their special interests, i.e. topics they are very invested in. All protagonists examined in my study have such special interests:

Marcelo in the Real World:

> I wish I had a glass of water. There is no saliva whatsoever in my mouth. I cough again. 'My special interest is God.' …
> I think, Now she thinks I'm weird. I don't want to be here anyway. At Paterson no one regards me with suspicion or stays away from me because I have an interest in religion. I have to remember never to talk about anything religious while I'm here. It scares people. (*Marcelo* 57)

The State of Grace:

> 'Horse. She's a horse, because she's Arabian, and even if they're smaller than the official horse classification they're still horses…' I sort of tail off, because even I can tell when I'm doing the *fascinating facts by Grace* thing sometimes. (*State of Grace* 116, original highlighting)

The London Eye Mystery:

> [Preceded by a monologue on topological maps] When people are bored, Mr Shepherd says the muscles in their face don't do anything and they stare without really looking and he says I should always check to see if this is how people are looking when I talk to them. (*London Eye Mystery* 46)

All three characters mentioned have learned to reflect on their utterances when talking about their special interests, either because they might talk about it too extensively, breach non-free topics or simply bore the other person. Marcelo's father previously reminded him to not talk about his interest in religion (*Marcelo* 42), thus Marcelo is now struggling to obey his father's rule as well as the demand put on him by his co-worker's question. Although in this case, Marcelo tries to change the topic of conversation, there are several instances in the novel where he talks about religion, including with a rabbi, his parents, and his friend (e.g. *Marcelo* 114ff., 158, 188…), as well as other instances where he reflects on his life in light of religious ideas (e.g. faith, *Marcelo* 303).

However, while Grace can stop herself, Ted is actually more concerned about Salim being bored because his sister is talking about nail polish. Ironically, while he does remember his teacher's rule for recognising boredom, he cannot fathom that people would be bored by topological maps. This form of enthusiastic talking about a certain topic is often called info-dumping, yet also being considered a 'love language' within the autism community, as autists argue that they only offer up this much information on their special interest(s) to people they trust and care about (Whelan).

On the other hand, oversharing may also include breaching taboos and non-free topics (see Chapter 4.4), i.e. mentioning topics in the 'wrong' circumstances. Such instances relate to honesty and literalness, cf. Ted talking to his aunt:

> 'Aunt Gloria,' I said. I took a slice [of bread] for myself. 'Wouldn't it be better for your health to give up cigarettes?' Dad coughed as if something had gone down the wrong way. 'I read some interesting figures yesterday. If everyone in Britain gave up smoking, the National Health Service would safe –'
> 'Ted!' Mum said.
> Aunt Gloria chuckled. 'No, Fai, Ted's right to ask. …' (*London Eye Mystery* 26)

Ted is both, honest and blunt when he asks his aunt why she keeps smoking even though it is bad for her health, but he does not stop there and continues to reference the NHS and statistics about the topic until interrupted, showing how he is unaware of any wrongdoing. His parents, meanwhile, are mortified by his faux pas, indicating how it is a non-free or even taboo topic to breach. On the other hand, his aunt's reaction is calm and positive, she even laughs at the situation. Now, Ted not only breached a taboo by being too honest, but he presumably also would have continued to reference statistics he read about. I can thus state that the character is a) unaware of any social taboos relating to this topic, b) unaware of any emotional harm his question could have potentially caused, e.g. if Gloria had unsuccessfully tried to quit smoking before, and c) breaches of taboos or non-free topics may be received very differently. While oversharing is not a criterion for autism portrayals, it could be considered a disposition of the individual's Cooperative Principle: because they are so fascinated by a certain topic, they will make this topic a priority in their communication because they will assume that other people enjoy talking about this as much as they do themselves.

However, generally speaking instances of under- or oversharing will naturally contribute to the impression of a certain clumsiness when it comes to social interaction, mostly due to the communication barrier.

While undersharing could be attributed to pragmatic difficulties, oversharing is more likely a disposition of the individual.

ii. Literalness

I have previously mentioned literalness in connection with the stereotype 'Childlike', and it is in fact a common stereotype outside of literature that "autistic people are terribly literal" (Draaisma 1478). Thomas states that

> a speaker who is not operating according to the standard grammatical code is at worse condemned as 'speaking badly', the person who operates according to differently formulated pragmatic principles may well be censured as *behaving* badly; as being an untruthful, deceitful, or insincere person. (Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 107)

There are many instances in which we do not expect to be taken literally, such as when we inquire how somebody is (Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 107), yet if someone were to take us literally, both sides would be upset. Yet, for somebody operating under the assumption that there are but literal utterances, flouting a maxim will give the appearance of disregarding them completely. Such perceived 'insincerity' could be interpreted as a lie. Jokes, too, are linked to pragmatics, since they exploit the different levels of literal and non-literal meaning, including sarcasm, irony, puns, or other word plays.[9] Taking statements literally may thus also result in difficulties in understanding humour and cause the individual to appear like a killjoy. However, no character is portrayed as exclusively literal, and there is no common measurement for this either. We all know that one person who is incapable of recognising sarcasm, and we have all met somebody who has an utterly incompatible sense of humour compared to our own. Because 'being literal' touches upon so many different aspects of communication, including metaphors, I am

9 The topic of humour is altogether too big to discuss here; it is also not only related to the character portrayal but the reader's reception, too.

hesitant to make it a generalised criterion. Autists may very well be capable of sarcasm, humour, lying, or the use of figurative language. In fact, all these instances are portrayed in the novels[10]:

The State of Grace:

> [Gabe:] 'Jesus. What are you doing up here at this time of the morning?' …
> 'It's a bridle path. And this –' I indicate the highly unimpressed Mable, still stock still, who gives a well-timed huff of disapproval – 'is my horse. Wearer of a bridle. Hence the path.' …
> 'Right,' he [Gabe] says, and he's laughing. 'Did you have sarcasm flakes for breakfast?'
> I thought I was simply stating the obvious. (27f.)

Since this is not a movie, a reader has to imagine their body language and tone of voice, both of which would have given us clues about Grace's implicature. However, the reader is likely able to deduce some of it by Gabe's reaction; because he thinks Grace is being sarcastic, they are inclined to (re-)read it as such. Nevertheless, Grace's response to Gabe's question is funny if only for the dry way she points out the obvious. However, she is infringing rather than flouting the maxims, as she is in fact not intentionally being sarcastic but 'stating the obvious'; Grace is simply being literal. On the other hand, Gabe uses figurative language ('sarcasm flakes'), which Grace has no difficulty understanding, thus demonstrating a certain level of pragmatic competence. The misunderstanding thus arises from different Cooperative Principles that weigh the observance and non-observance of maxims differently.

Another example of literalness in conversation is the following dialogue between David and his sister (*What to Say Next*):

> 'So if you want to kiss Kit, that means you want her to see you like a *real guy*,' Miney says …

10 I forwent the analysis of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* because of the controversy surrounding it (see Chapter 5.4).

'I am a *real guy*.' How come even my own sister seems me as something not quite human? Something other. 'I have a penis.'
'And just when I think we've made progress you go and mention your penis.'
'What? Fact: I have a penis. That makes me a guy. Though technically there are some trans people who have penises but self-identify as girls.'
'Please stop saying that word.' …
'Do you prefer member? Shlong? Wang? Johnson?' I ask. 'Dongle, perhaps?'
'I would prefer we not discuss your man parts at all.'
'Wait, should I text Kit immediately and clarify that I do in fact have man parts?' I pick up my phone and start typing. 'Dear Kit. Just to be clear. I have a penis.'
'Oh my God. Do not text her. Seriously, stop.' Miney puts her coffee down hard. She'll climb over the table and tackle me if she has to.
'Ha! Totally go you!' I smile, as proud as I was the other day for my *that's what she said* joke.
'Who are you?' Miney asks, but she's grinning too. I'll admit it takes a second – something about the disconnect between her confused tone and her happy face – and I almost, almost say out loud: *Duh, I'm Little D*. Instead I let her rhetorical question hang, just like I'm supposed to. (100–101)

This dialogue shows the fine interplay of oversharing and breaching non-free topics, as well as literalness and humour. David obviously has a history of oversharing, something I can deduce from the fact that his sister reacts panicked because she fully expects him to see through with his plans. Moreover, David is aware that he is not supposed to talk with Kit about this, but he has no qualms about teasing his sister about the topic in front of their father. Moreover, while others would already have considered the word 'penis' a taboo – his sister tells him to stop mentioning it – David adds to the list. Thus, he obviously sees no harm in it but has internalised the rule not to talk about this with others. Although I technically cannot be sure at what point David becomes aware that he is breaching a non-free topic, or if he is all along, I know for certain that

he never intended to write Kit this text message. However, I can also deduce that he anticipated his sister's reaction. Therefore, David not only has the pragmatic competence to mislead his sister, but he is also aware of the norms that make certain topics taboo. On the other hand, the fact that he talks freely about penises shows how his Cooperative Principle diverges from his sister's.

Additionally, this moment is indicative of a Theory of Mind. A lack thereof is often made responsible for a lack of humour in these individuals since they are incapable of anticipating the reactions of others and figuring out their mental state. David obviously is neither, though he seemed to have struggled with it in the past, too. Whether this is due to a lack of Theory of Mind or differing principles that guide non-free and free topics remains in doubt. In the wake of his achievement of fooling his sister, he nearly trips upon her rhetorical question, which could also be considered an instance of literalness. However, David realises that it is merely rhetorical and lets it hang as he is 'supposed to'. Here, it must be mentioned that David in particular struggles with rhetorical questions, though this is not a common occurrence in all portrayals. It could thus be considered a pragmatic difficulty for him. Furthermore, the dialogue demonstrates how he actively has to reflect on the conversation to react 'appropriately', and how he has more or less internalised the rules. Such behaviour can be considered camouflaging. Here, David's development is mirrored in Miney's reaction, first her (slightly exasperated) 'and just when I think we've made progress', indicating how she has worked hard with David to explain implicit rules, as well as her happiness when she realises that he has in fact made progress and can now even surprise her. Grace's utterance was merely literal, i.e. she had no intention of being funny or sarcastic. In her case, I will assume that she was operating under a different Cooperative Principle. On the other hand, David's conversation started out as somewhat serious, but he proceeded to tease his sister, pretending to take their dialogue literally when in fact he was intentionally building up to a joke. This demonstrates pragmatic competency. However, he subsequently struggles with a rhetorical question and the dialogue is also characterised by different Cooperative Principles.

Another difference between these two excerpts is their conversational partners, with Gabe not expecting Grace to be 'merely' literal but interpreting her matter-of-fact utterance as sarcasm, whereas Miney assumes David to be literal based on her experience. Of course, David's joke would not have worked if Miney had seen through his act, and he nearly trips up on her rhetorical question. Indeed, characters usually struggle with understanding the non-literal meaning of different aspects, i.e. sarcasm *or* lies *or* humour *or* figurative language but not all at once and also not in every situation. Although it might be helpful to characterise autists as being literal, it should also be considered that they will not trip upon every non-literal aspect of language, or the reading experience would not be enjoyable (cf. *Figurative Language*).

iii. Body language

Although rather negligible for literary analysis, I wish to comment on body language in the context of communication, since it plays a vital role. Because body language such as other implicit rules for social interaction does not come naturally to many autists, they may be perceived as stilted or puppet-like. Most commonly, characters were reminded to look their conversational partners in the eyes or reported having difficulties with this.

Mockingbird:

> [Teacher:] *Look at me.*
> I do.
> *Not that way. Look in my eyes.*
> I sigh and fold my arms. *Fine*. I glance at her eyes. They are black and white and brown. Like Devon's. I never noticed that before. I'm so surprised that I actually stare instead of looking away.
> *Good! That's very good, Caitlin! That's how you show people you're interested in them and that you're listening to them. Can you see how happy my eyes are right now?*

> I nod. I'm still staring at her eyes or where her eyes used to be when she turs her head to look where she's walking. When she turns back I catch the eyes again and keep staring. I'm getting good at this.
> *Okay, but you don't have to stare quite so hard or quite so long.*
> I close my eyes.
> *You can just look away briefly and then come back to my eyes again.*
> I do.
> *Try to make it a little smoother so you don't look like you're about to jump on top of me when you stare into my eyes.*
> *See? It's too hard!* (95f.)

This dialogue points out behaviour most of us intuitively engage in, but which does not come naturally to Caitlin. It is the first time she actually looked her teacher in the eye and she does not look away solely because their eyes remind her of her brother. Caitlin then misses the mark when she keeps staring in the direction her teacher's eyes were, resulting in the teacher feeling uncomfortable. It is a fortunate setting, in that the teacher is explicitly trained to explain these behaviours to Caitlin and help her refine them. However, if this were to happen in a conversation with somebody else, they would likely react confused, scared, or angry, feeling provoked by Caitlin's stares or, incidentally, her lack of eye contact. Finally, Caitlin gets frustrated because she is trying really hard but has no intuitive grasp of what is expected of her. Similarly to how body language appears somewhat unnatural to her, she also has difficulties interpreting this form of communication. Without exception, all characters are portrayed as struggling to understand facial expressions, posture, gestures, or subtle shifts thereof.

Grace (*State of Grace*) describes body language as follows:

> For a split second I feel like I'm on the outside of some unspoken conversation – but then I often feel like that. I think it's probably how it feels when you're really fluent in a language but you're with native speakers. I speak human as a second language, and there's always a subtext that I miss. (8)

Grace recognises a change in her opponents' body language but she cannot decode it, not even consciously. She also mentions how this happens frequently and makes her feel like a foreigner, or, indeed, not even human, which refers to the alien stereotype. Her comparison also indicates that she has to make a conscious effort to translate body language in general, given she has the means to do so.

For those struggling to display and read body language, it might give the impression of being superfluous to communication. However, some facial expressions or gestures appear to be universal, hence the alien metaphor. Incidentally, a lack of body language was also associated with a lack of ToM and, consequently, a lack of emotions, which leads back to the communication barrier.

> Some scholars have suggested that this mirror mechanism is disrupted in ASD, leaving individuals with ASD without this automatic flow of shared felt experiences of self and other behaviours and with, instead, 'disembodied' and declarative social knowledge (based on explicit inferential reasoning) as the primary foundation for social understanding and social learning … . (Vivanti and Rogers 3)

Even if the theory concerning autism and the mirror neurons remains disputed, I believe it helpful to consider body language as well as social knowledge in autists as explicitly learned rather than intuitively grasped. Other instances portrayed in the novels include facial expressions and stimming (see Masking and Camouflaging, Chapter 6.4).

Body language plays such a vital part in our everyday communication that it might even lead to false assumptions being made about those who are not proficient at it. Displaying unusual body language can be obstructive in more than one way since it is a form of visible deviance. In 2022, a study with adult participants examined

> whether autistic individuals would be perceived as more deceptive and less credible than their neurotypical peers due to their demonstration of unexpected or atypical behaviors that are commonly judged as indicative of deception: specifically, gaze aversion, repet-

> itive body movements, literal interpretation of figurative language, poor reciprocity, and flat affect. (Lim et al. 500)

Gaze aversion, especially, is commonly associated with lying or deceiving (Lim et al. 501), yet researchers found no significant differences when it came to displaying the behaviours mentioned above (500). Despite this, "[a]utistic individuals were indeed judged as more deceptive and lower on perceived competence and character compared to neurotypical individuals" (500); with researchers speculating that autists are "more likely to display a unique combination of behaviors and nuances that discriminate them from neurotypical individuals and result in unfavorable impressions" (501). Consequently, autists may be perceived as dishonest or deceiving even if they are being honest, or at least as if there is something 'off' about their body language, but the study also demonstrates how autistic adults have learned to display 'appropriate' body language.

iv. Honesty and Lies

Being honest is more of a character trait and could be considered part of the Cooperative Principle, i.e. because an individual values honesty more highly in a conversation, they will also adhere to this rule when communicating themselves. On the other hand, deception requires pragmatic competence. Autists especially are often described as more honest and less inclined to deceit (Bagnall et al. 301). In *What to Say Next*, Kit even calls it David's honesty disease (177). A recent survey of studies on this topic came to the conclusion that it is likely related to age and ability. Researchers found that although "many autistic children have difficulties with deception", autistic adults are not typically incapable of deceiving others (Bagnall et al. 302).

> This therefore leaves room for the possibility that deception ability may develop later in life for autistic individuals without co-occurring ID or significantly delayed verbal ability. (Bagnall et al. 301)

Honesty would thus be linked to cognitive and verbal abilities, though in regard to the portrayals analysed, I can state that all characters are capable of deceiving others, e.g. by lying, evading the question, or violating a maxim, even if they are unwilling to or not very skilled at it. For example, in *The London Eye Mystery*, Ted starts out as being very honest and incapable of lying but learns to do so during the course of events (175). Marcelo (*Marcelo*), too, decides to go behind the back of his father to pursue something he deems right. When at some point he is forced to lie about leaving the office and claims a doctor's appointment, his lie catches up with him: when asked about the doctor's appointment, he reacts confused, indicating his lack of experience in not telling the truth. "For a moment I do not know what she is talking about. Lying requires an incredible amount of mental effort" (*Marcelo* 198).

Finally, David in *What to Say Next* is capable of lying but not very practised.

> 'Can I be excused?' I ask [the teacher].
> 'Excused? This is a classroom, not the dinner table. Let's get back to work.'
> 'I meant can I go to the nurse? I have a migraine,' I say, though this is a lie. Miney would be proud. She says I need to practice not telling the truth. That lying gets easier the more you do it. (24)

David's first attempt fails as he makes a wrong choice of words, indicating how he is not used to finding excuses for skipping class. If he were more proficient at it, he likely would have been successful at the first attempt. Instead, his utterance violates unspoken conventions, leading to his teacher reacting with indignation and a reprimand. Only at his second attempt and by clarifying what he meant earlier, David makes himself understood and succeeds in credibly telling his story. He then reflects on his sister's attitude towards lying and how she keeps encouraging him to practise it in order to become better.

All three characters have the pragmatic competence to lie, but they do not have the disposition to do so or only developed one later. Here, pragmatic difficulties might be intertwined with the Cooperative Prin-

ciple, e.g. a character could potentially value honesty higher because they are aware of their inability to engage in deception and consequently also have more difficulties recognising it in others.

The evaluation of the fictional portrayals in Chapter 3.4 has shown that all characters are portrayed as honest, at times too honest, but also capable of deceiving others, though usually in harmless situations.[11] Honesty is also often combined with literalness, causing friction in social situations when characters are too blunt or too honest. It is therefore most likely that the Cooperative Principles of these characters emphasise honesty. However, in reality, autists are often seen as more deceptive than others because of their differences in body language. Although they might generally be more honest, they are not necessarily perceived as such. Thus, perhaps 'being overly honest' to the point of face-loss is indeed a characteristic of fictional autism portrayals, or at least one that is exploited for various (humorous) effects.

v. Figurative Language

Researchers suggest that

> [F]igurative language processing and comprehension taxes the language system, but also involves appreciation for the communicative context and the integration of multiple sources of information from different modalities. (Vulchanova and Vulchanov 9)

Medical studies have found that neuroatypical individuals usually show difficulties interpreting figurative speech. However, researchers have also found that the ability to correctly identify figurative language increases with age (Beriault, Ditmars & Klatt), although usually lagging behind same-aged neurotypical individuals (Vulchanova and Vulchanov

11 As a side-effect, if a character is regularly portrayed as overly honest, to the point where it causes face-loss, they may also be given the benefit of the doubt when they lie, thus they would have a small advantage up to the point where other people realise they have acquired this skill.

6).[12] On the other hand, atypical adults scored similarly to control groups (Kasirer and Mashal; Vulchanova and Vulchanov 9), possibly indicating

> that conventional expressions are acquired in the course of development, and that with time, adults may increasingly rely on stored chunks for the purposes of processing. (Vulchanova and Vulchanov 3)

Thus, understanding and using figurative language can be attributed to pragmatic competence. For story-telling purposes, I can infer that autistic characters might struggle with figures of speech, but increasingly less so the older they are. These characters are also likely to have built some memory of common figures of speech thus speeding up processing. Semino theorises in her study that taking figurative language literally "defamiliarize[s] everyday conversational interaction, potentially resulting in some degree of 'schema refreshment'" (Semino 155). If I felt generous, I would give the author the benefit of the doubt, especially in younger characters. However, it often appears to be the proverbial rabbit drawn from the hat, for the mere amusement of the reader or viewer, since having characters misunderstand figurative language is the easiest way to create hiccoughs in conversation and demonstrate how literal-minded they are. At times it seems that it has also become an unofficial running gag when portraying autists. Of all the novels examined, only *The State of Grace* does not participate in this unofficial convention, although I could place the other characters on a gamut. For example, Trueman (*Trueman Bradley*) is exceptionally bad at recognising figurative language and tends to take everything literally.

> '… You're too naïve, kid. New York will eat you alive!'
> 'Eat me?' I asked. 'Are you saying there are cannibals in New York City? Cannibalism is illegal in the United States!'
> 'No, Trueman!' said Buckley. 'I don't mean that literally. I mean you can't succeed as a detective! Not with your condition! You gotta be able

12 Interestingly, autistic individuals were not only able to come up with their own metaphors but also showed more creativity in this area (Vulchanova and Vulchanov 6).

> to read between the lines and be cagey as a cat, and you can't if you take everyone literally.'
> I didn't understand what a cat or a cage had to do with any of this, but I could understand enough of what he was saying. (*Trueman Bradley* 31)

The first use of figurative language (eat you alive) confuses Trueman to the point where he cannot make sense of it. He jumps to the conclusion of cannibalism, although one might argue that a city cannot possibly eat anybody. On a semantic level, this sentence does not make sense and cannibalism is Trueman's next-best explanation. He has no difficulties understanding the next metaphor (reading between the lines), or at least he does not get stuck on this utterance. Instead, Trueman focuses on 'cagey as a cat', which in itself is a simile and not a metaphor. However, because he apparently does not know the translation for cagey, he cannot make sense of this utterance either. Although his response is appropriate when he defends his own abilities, he would not have needed to understand this part of Buckley's utterance, since the latter explicitly stated that Trueman would not succeed as a detective because he takes everything literally. Because this novel is also intended as autism advocacy, I will assume that this discussion is supposed to be exemplary; Trueman is portrayed as able to compensate for his shortcomings in language competence with his extraordinary abilities. Unfortunately, while having a character stumble over (almost) all instances of figurative language they encounter certainly creates awareness of their difficulties, the refreshing momentum wears off quickly to the point where it becomes cumbersome. It may also tip to the point where the reader becomes suspicious of the character. In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Christopher is portrayed as struggling with figurative language, albeit more because he is unwilling to participate in the use of it, insisting that metaphors are in fact lies:

> 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. (*Curious Incident* 20)

Although this is meant to portray Christopher as very literal-minded, especially when he describes visualising these idioms, the reader is left to wonder whether his refusal to use them is simply principle-based. Generally speaking, while this may be idiosyncratic to Christopher's portrayal, most characters examined do not refuse to use figurative language.

The examples of Trueman and Christopher demonstrate how pragmatic difficulties can bleed into the Cooperative Principle. Especially in individuals who do not struggle with language on a general basis but figurative language in particular, this can be easily attributed to an unwillingness to adhere to social and cultural expectations. Both characters might arguably have more difficulties understanding figurative language, to the point where they would have to explicitly learn the meaning of idioms; however, they are also intellectually able to do so. Thus, by not including figurative language in their Cooperative Principle, they willingly distance themselves from what is considered 'normal'. Here, it could be said that these characters simply operate under a different CP, yet because figurative language is such widely used, they only succeed in cementing their deviance.

Difficulties with figurative language do not necessarily have to result in an aversion. Several characters like or enjoy figurative language and meaning. For example, in *What to Say Next*, David writes idioms down in his notebook:

> [David:] 'I like that expression. Eat your feelings. I keep a list of idioms. I'll have to add that one.'
> 'You're an idiom.' She says, and at first my stomach drops – she is making fun of me – but then I look up and see she's wearing a friendly smile. This is good teasing, I think. (41)

David has never before encountered this saying ('eat your feelings'), but he was able to deduce its meaning without having to ask. It is also left

up for interpretation whether he keeps a list for easier remembering or because he enjoys idioms. Here, the first could point to pragmatic difficulties when it comes to implicitly understanding figurative language. However, the fact that he keeps a list shows his acknowledgement of this socially accepted use of language. Additionally, David is able to understand what Kit wants to communicate when she calls him an 'idiom', although he expects an insult rather than a compliment.

Ted in *The London Eye Mystery* is another example of a character who enjoys metaphors, especially those linked to meteorology. At times, he even invents new ones to describe his own emotions or those of other people (*London Eye Mystery* 64, 188, 198…). I can thus state that the understanding of figurative language is portrayed as character- but not age-related. It can be used to further define a character and their interests but overused will lose its schema-refreshing moment and make a character appear limited in their ability to use language, as well as pedantic to the point where their CP is no longer considered 'normal'.

vi. Politeness

> Politeness, broadly defined so as to encompass both polite friendliness and polite formality, is concerned with any behaviour including verbal behaviour of an interlocutor to constitute and maintain his or her own face and that of the people he or she is interacting with. (Huang 6)

However, when it comes to impoliteness, research is "still in its infancy" (Huang 8) and apparently has been for the last decades. Generally speaking, it is altogether too complex and culturally diverse to be reduced to simple rules or even a definition. I will assume politeness to be a (rather fuzzy) principle that may come into conflict "with other, deeply held values, such as truthfulness or sincerity" (Thomas 106). Indeed, it is a common occurrence that one has to choose between different pragmatic principles. Put lyrically by Thomas, "we must navigate linguistically between the Scylla of tactlessness and the Charybdis of dishonesty" (Thomas, "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure" 108). As mentioned before,

being too blunt, too honest, or too curious will often reflect negatively on the character. Yet, being 'a bit' blunt, honest, or curious is not only socially acceptable but encouraged. Here, this concept would need further demarcation.

Semino quotes Culpeper, in that

> Situated behaviours are viewed negatively – considered 'impolite' – when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. Such behaviours always have or are presumed to have emotional consequences for at least one participant, that is, they cause or are presumed to cause offence. (Culpeper, qtd. in Semino 151)

In other words, if one party in the conversation ends up offended, impoliteness occurred. I am unsure to what extent it would be beneficial to analyse impoliteness based on this definition in relation to the portrayal of autism. I may investigate violations of the Cooperative Principle, non-free topics/taboos, literalness, and bluntness. However, involuntary impoliteness in autists mostly seems to be but the symptom of different pragmatic principles, e.g. valuing truthfulness over social conventions. I fear that assuming autists (and therefore their fictional portrayals) to be rude or impolite could all too easily be generalised into a character trait and thus attributed to malice. In her study, Semino falls into this trap, when she states that

> the protagonists potentially cause offence not out of malice, but because of a partial lack of awareness of the potential consequences of what they say for others' feelings, and, in turn, for their own social image. (Semino 151)

Out of this partial lack, Semino concludes "that people with ASDs are not cognitively *deficient* with respect to Theory of Mind, but rather lack the *motivation* to attend to others' minds, including others' emotions" (Semino 151). Thus, impoliteness is reduced to putting one's own values over the opponent's feelings, in essence being selfish over being com-

passionate. Of course, I may unintentionally be impolite. However, if "intentions and recognition of intentions are involved, then rudeness rather than impoliteness occurs" (Huang 7). In my opinion, it is significant whether a person has the intention of being rude. If somebody continually puts their foot in their mouth, I may call them a dork, yet if I know they are intentionally offending others, I will attribute it to malice. Since the investigation of impoliteness could inadvertently label autists as generally rude, which would implicate liability, I will rather focus on deviance in general.[13]

Concluding the topic of pragmatics, it can be stated that different aspects of autism portrayals such as literalness, under- and oversharing, honesty, deception, and figurative language can be conveyed on a textual level. Such idiosyncrasies can enhance the representation of autism in literary characters. However, the 'schema refreshment' of such misunderstandings will quickly wear off when overused, resulting in one-dimensional portrayals of characters that appear intellectually able but unwilling to adhere to social and cultural norms of language.

In some instances, it is difficult to ascertain whether misunderstandings arise from pragmatic difficulties, different Cooperative Principles, or even a general inability or unwillingness to communicate, including shyness and other communication barriers. Authors must be careful when portraying such pragmatic difficulties, as they can be easily re-read as a character's intentional disruption of communication. When positioned against background characters that represent social and cultural norms of language use, characters operating under a different Cooperative Principle will appear deviant and potentially unreliable.

13 That is not to say that unorthodox behaviour may not cause offence and that autists are never rude or impolite. Rather, I believe it wrong to focus on 'rudeness' and go hunting for any remarks that may cause offence; for if one were being honest, there are a lot of intentionally rude people out there, as well as a myriad of situations where utterances or actions could be considered rude if one were to scrutinise them.

Unreliable Narrators?

Upon encountering a character that struggles with understanding pragmatics and body language, I might be inclined to consider their testimony unreliable, after all, they are likely to miss the subtext or even misunderstand the whole situation. Similar to the other topics in this chapter, there is a whole discourse hidden behind the innocent term 'unreliable narrator', which was first coined by Wayne C. Booth in 1961. For this section, I will refer to Ansgar Nünning's *Unreliable, compared to what?* (1999), an essay in which he concludes that it is ultimately "not so much a character trait of a narrator as it is an interpretive strategy of the reader" (Nünning, "Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches" 94–95). In other words, conceptualising the narrator as unreliable can be seen as a "strategy by which the reader naturalizes textual inconsistencies that might otherwise remain unassimilable" (Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 69). Thus, according to Nünning,

> [t]he term ›unreliable narrator‹ does not designate a structural or semantic feature of texts, but a pragmatic phenomenon that cannot fully be grasped without taking into account the conceptual premises that readers and critics bring to texts. (Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 66)

I have previously established that pragmatics work according to the Cooperative Principle, i.e. the assumption that others are operating according to the same rules on which we base our utterances (Thomas, *Meaning in Interaction* 62). In essence, then, a narrator becomes unreliable when I – as a reader – realise that they are indeed not abiding by our Cooperative Principle, or, in Nünning's words, when there is a "distance that separates the narrator's view of the worlds from the reader's or critic's world-model and standards of normalcy" (Nünning, "Unreliable, compared to what?" 61). Thus, I have re-entered the discourse of normality, if ever I really left.