## 'I can't understand a word he says': a personal exploration of autistic dysfluency in film

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## 'I can't understand a word he says': A personal exploration of autistic dysfluency in film

## Abstract

This article describes a cooperative venture by an autistic individual and a visual artist to articulate autistic dysfluency using the medium of film. Articulating this dysfluency required the finding of a way to overcome the dysfluency, and it is this process that is explored in this paper.

*N.B The article uses the spelling 'dysfluency'. 'Dys' (from the Greek) is used in preference to 'dis', taken from Latin and suggesting 'lack of'. 'Dys' is 'not a simple negation' (Pierre, 2015, n.p.) but indicates 'destroying the good sense of a word' (Liddell and Scott, 1883). In this way, Dysfluency recognises that the individual is using communication in a different way to 'overstep the narrow boundaries of able-bodied speech' (Pierre, 2015, n.p.).*

> 'I can't understand a word he says' (said by my mainstream secondary school English teacher at parents' evening).

I am autistic. One of the ways my autism manifests itself is that I can have difficulty making myself understood. Whilst I have a wide vocabulary and, personally speaking, find my own way of communicating enjoyable and interesting, I find that sometimes it can obfuscate my meaning. This is frustrating and can mean that I avoid social interaction. This article describes a cooperative venture by me – 'Fauxparl' (a pseudonym) – and visual artist Dr John Rimmer to articulate my communication. It can be hard for me to explain many of my fluency experiences and the mechanisms I put into place to manage them in words, so we used the visual medium of film to explore them.

This film is a 6-minute, first person narrative that uses collage and computer-generated imagery. It depicts a fictitious example of failed communication, through the eyes of an autistic pupil who tries to indicate that his glasses are broken and he needs to move nearer to the board. It portrays the mental effects that failed communication produces, including visual representations of the frustration, distorting and falling away of the pupil's coping mechanisms, and the distractions of his strong interests. All the while, the sights and sounds of the lesson continue in the background.

I chose to use the example of broken glasses as this is not an 'autistic need', and so might be more accessible for empathy by non-autistic viewers as they experience the frustration of failed communication.

All autistic people experience their autism differently but, while this film is my personal perspective, I wanted it also to reflect the experiences of the wider autistic community. To access these, I sought voices through the website 'autismforums.com'.

One contributor to this forum articulates autistic dysfluency in terms of a physical barrier to speech, suggesting that they sometimes know what they should say, but have to force the words out. Another describes how for them fluency can become 'blocked'. They describe it

as the situation of being in the middle of a sentence or word and catching on that word, comparing this to forgetting how to talk entirely.  Another contributor experiences fluency issues in terms of the way that thinking what to say can interfere with actually saying it, especially when thought and speech are supposed to happen simultaneously.  There is also a description of how communication as a two-way transaction, requiring the speaker to not only consider their own fluency, but also how the listener will receive it.  As this contributor puts it, it is a matter of translation, figuring out how to express things in a way that others will understand.

Each of these reports clearly echoes my own experience of struggling with verbal communication.

In order to create this film, I shared my experiences with John through sending him writing, clips, sounds and images to express what were often highly abstract ideas.  He would then send me what he had made, and I would make comments, and in this way we worked in repeated, on-going process to develop the film as a cooperative venture.  John's background does not include any training relating to autism so there was no pre-figuring in this work.  His previous artistic practice uses painting and video to illuminate conduits between private mental spaces and social public places, so having the opportunity to collaborate with him on this endeavour was apposite.

When expressing myself through the film, I was keen to include 'borrowed text' as this is something that I have always found useful.  By this, I mean stock phrases or quotations taken from other sources that become verbal shortcuts to help my speech keep up with my thoughts. I like taking on the voice of another person and I use these quotes to speak for me.

The film includes a stuttering repetition of the phrase "I find-myself" in the soundscape.  I find that I can sometimes speak faster than I can form the sentence so that I run out of sentence to actually say - so I add bits of words while I'm forming the next part - and the repetition captures this.  The film is particularly good at relating what happens when I go into my own world; I will get caught on a thought, a phrase or an image and that will distort.  I will get words or bits of words rolling around in my head when I am waiting to get noticed.

Confusion and disorientation are essential elements in the film.  I know that sometimes I fail to give contextual clues.  I assume a certain level of shared understanding without checking the other person's knowledge and can get angry because others do not share my understanding.  This can lead to an obscurity that can mean my communication loses coherence.

The film both begins and ends with a quotation from the film, *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2017), saying, "Too larby?  Not larby enough? How many times do I have to say 'larb' before you'll talk to me?".  I chose this quote because it includes a word which I had never heard before and found interesting.  Also the character is attempting to get another's attention, so the quote is relevant and self-referential. The use of the quote at both the beginning and end of the film makes it appear as if that monologue has continued under the audio stream throughout. I do sometimes talk (at length) in my head and sometimes out

loud without expecting or wanting a response.   This makes me feel relaxed and helps relieve stress, although it can obstruct fluent reciprocity

The film includes talking by a Bionicle (Lego character toy), which is a reference to a strong interest from when I was young.  This alludes to the fact that I have strong interests that can dominate what I say. The pronoun reversals in the film echo the way that I sometimes refer to myself in the third person, and that as a child I used to include the 'he said/she said' part of dialogue, so I might have said, '"Can I have a biscuit", he asked'.

There are also visual references to games I enjoy. I use computer games in my mind to entertain myself and sometimes these can dominate my thoughts unbidden, particularly in a situation like this when waiting and disengaged. This can turn my attention inward, preventing interaction. The fact that the images are spinning references that I like the way things visually transform when they turn around.  There is the sound of a washing machine in the soundscape; this is a sound that I find soothing and I might play it internally as an alternative to words.

The film includes turning squiggle shapes, generated freehand through the computer.  These represent how I enjoy exaggerated movements, especially with my hands.  These might involve flicking or turning my hands or making shapes in front of my face, sometimes looking through them with one eye. There is a visual and tactile element to this and I find it relaxing, although I realise that other people might inadvertently interpret it as an unsuccessful attempt at communication.

The floating words 'Hamlet', 'equus' and 'lotus' are a reflection of the fact that I actually enjoy words, and often take them out of context. I enjoy the sensory appeal of them, although I realise that this can interfere with communication if they have no meaning to the listener.  As a child I called a hat I used as a bag my 'willpower', and this alternative use of words is something that has developed as an adult.  I will say "perfection in steel" when I am satisfied by something - borrowed from the song '*What have you done?*' by The Megas – and "chek chek", borrowed from the computer game *Warframe*, to indicate that I have finished with something, to signify this to myself.  Each of these is reflected in the film.

Towards the end of the film typed words appear on the screen, taken again from *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2017). My preferred form of expression is typing, as this is where I find my fluency.  Typing takes how I think and allows these thoughts to come out.  Another way I communicate well is to 'monologue' and for someone else to type the words as I talk.  Watching the words as they appear on the screen and reading them back helps me.  I can take them in the context of the rest of what is written, and I can clear up confusions or non-sequiturs as they happen.  Typing – either myself or by another person – provides a form of drafting which I cannot access in speech.

The blackness that ends the film has significance as representing a situation where the pupil has completely given up on any communication. This leads to a very important point:

It is important to note that the 'dysfluency' in this film, as referenced from the opening quotation from one of my English teachers, is as much a result of the teacher failing to support communication as it is inherent.  When I was younger, I would put a hand up and then rehearse in my head what to say when asked.  The teachers often didn't notice when I put my hand up – or they ignored me.  I do not know if this was because of dysfluency or

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more just because of them assuming I would say something not worth hearing.  Being ignored in this way is a very distinct feeling, very specific. Being ignored - not being wanted to speak - is attached to all sorts of lack of confidence issues as an adult, and at the time is just very, very frustrating and hurtful.

Strictly speaking, then, this film is not only accurate to what my dysfluency is, but it is also accurate to how it feels. My inner world is private.  By nature it is literally my thoughts and how I function on the inside – and it is strange to see it so accurately represented here in another format.  It feels almost profane and is very surreal.  It feels uncomfortable for me to watch, not because there is anything wrong with it but because it is so accurate.  It is like looking at yourself in a non-reversing mirror when the image is true and yet unfamiliar. I am happy with how accurate this film is of my experiences in and around autistic fluency.

*The film can be viewed here:*

[Broken: a personal exploration of fluency](#)

*It is hoped this film will form part of an Initial Teacher Education programme to support understanding of autistic communication, and that resources will be created to support teachers to adjust their interactions with autistic pupils.  Findings from these will be shared.*

[Word count: 1975]

*With thanks to contributors to*  https://www.autismforums.com/threads/does-it-take-effort-to-speak *and* https://www.autismforums.com/threads/speech-troubles

See also:
Liddell, H. & Scott, R. (1883). *An intermediate Greek-English lexicon.* Oxford University Press accessed at https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=dys-
Pierre, J. (2015, August 5th).  *Disfluency vs. Dysfluency: What's in a name?*  Available at*: https://www.didistutter.org/blog/disfluency-vs-dysfluency-whats-in-a-name*