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Autistic Students and the Use of Figurative Language as a Medium of Expression

Los estudiantes autistas y el uso del lenguaje figurado como medio de expresión

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Abstract:

This qualitative study challenges deficit-based perspectives on autistic individuals' use of figurative language by examining how two autistic university students engage with and express themselves through figurative language in creative activities. Drawing on neurodiversity frameworks, we conducted a case-oriented study at a public university in Mexico where participants completed visual and written creative tasks involving texts with varying degrees of figurative language. Data were collected through creative activities and semi-structured questionnaires exploring participants' perceptions and preferences. Findings reveal that participants demonstrated comprehension of figurative language and expressed enjoyment of literary devices, while preferring literal language in their own written expression. This preference reflects comfort with familiar communication patterns rather than comprehension deficits. The study contributes to challenging persistent stereotypes about autistic literal-mindedness and advocates for pedagogical approaches that recognize diverse communication styles and provide multiple pathways for creative expression in educational settings.

Keywords:

Autism, figurative language, neurodiversity, communication preferences, advocacy research

Resumen:

Este estudio cualitativo cuestiona las perspectivas deficitarias sobre el uso del lenguaje figurado por parte de personas autistas, al examinar cómo dos estudiantes universitarios autistas se relacionan con el lenguaje figurado y se expresan a través de él en actividades creativas. Con base en los marcos teóricos de la neurodiversidad, se realizó un estudio orientado a casos en una universidad pública de México, donde los participantes completaron tareas creativas visuales y escritas que involucraban textos con distintos grados de lenguaje figurado. Los datos se recopilaron mediante actividades creativas y cuestionarios semiestructurados que exploraron las percepciones y preferencias de los participantes. Los hallazgos revelan que los participantes demostraron comprensión del lenguaje figurado y expresaron agrado por los recursos literarios, aunque prefirieron el lenguaje literal en su propia expresión escrita. Esta preferencia refleja comodidad con patrones de comunicación familiares, más que déficits en la comprensión. El estudio contribuye a cuestionar los estereotipos persistentes sobre el pensamiento literal en personas autistas y aboga por enfoques pedagógicos que reconozcan la diversidad de estilos comunicativos y ofrezcan múltiples vías para la expresión creativa en contextos educativos.

***Palabras Clave**:*

Autismo, lenguaje figurado, neurodiversidad, preferencias comunicativas, investigación orientada a la defensa de derechos

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Introduction

The relationship between autism and figurative language comprehension has long been characterized by deficit-based narratives that position autistic individuals as inherently limited in their ability to understand and use non-literal language (Vulchanova & Vulchanov, 2022). These narratives, rooted in theories such as weak central coherence and mind-blindness, have shaped educational practices and research agendas in ways that may inadvertently restrict opportunities for autistic students to engage with creative and expressive uses of language (Gernsbacher & Pripas-Kapit, 2012). However, emerging scholarship grounded in neurodiversity frameworks challenges these assumptions, presenting evidence that difficulties with figurative language are neither universal among autistic individuals nor necessarily indicative of cognitive deficits (Davidson, 2008; Gernsbacher et al., 2016).

This study emerged from a critical engagement with these contrasting perspectives in the literature and was conducted within a Mexican university context, where research on autistic individuals' language abilities remains limited despite growing recognition of neurodiversity in educational settings. Initially conceived as an investigation into strategies for teaching figurative language to autistic students—premised on assumed deficits—the research direction shifted fundamentally after engaging with Gernsbacher and Pripas-Kapit's (2012) critique of deficit-based autism research. Their work illuminated how research biases have perpetuated harmful stereotypes about autistic literal-mindedness despite empirical evidence demonstrating autistic individuals' competence with figurative language when language abilities are appropriately matched.

Rather than focusing on presumed deficits, this research asks: How can the creativity of autistic students be expressed through engagement with figurative language? What are the self-reported perceptions of autistic university students regarding the implementation of figurative language in creative activities?

By centering autistic voices and examining their creative engagements with language, this study contributes to a growing body of advocacy research that challenges ableist assumptions and recognizes the diversity of autistic communication styles (Milton, 2012; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2013).

The educational implications of this work are significant. If autistic students' engagement with figurative language has been systematically misunderstood or underestimated, current pedagogical practices may be unnecessarily restrictive, denying students opportunities for creative expression that could enhance their learning experiences and sense of belonging in educational spaces. This study therefore aims to contribute both to theoretical understanding of autistic language processing from a neurodiversity perspective and to practical considerations for creating more inclusive educational environments.

Understanding Figurative Language: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges

Research on figurative language processing presents inherent methodological challenges that complicate our understanding of how individuals—autistic or otherwise—engage with non-literal language. As Vulchanova and Vulchanov (2022) observe, different types of figurative expressions (metaphors, idioms, similes, irony) have typically been studied in isolation, limiting our ability to examine individuals' broader competence with figurative language as a communicative system. This fragmented approach makes it difficult to assess performance holistically and obscures the ways figurative language operates dynamically across contexts.

Additionally, the degree of conventionality or novelty of figurative expressions significantly affects processing demands (Vulchanova & Vulchanov, 2022). Idioms or metaphors removed from their cultural contexts become more difficult for anyone to interpret, regardless of neurotype. This contextual dependency suggests that many comprehension challenges attributed to autistic individuals may actually reflect methodological limitations—such as decontextualized testing situations—rather than inherent cognitive differences (Norbury, 2005). Recognizing these methodological challenges is essential for critically evaluating claims about autistic figurative language processing.

Critiquing Deficit-Based Frameworks in Autism Research

Much research on autism and language has been shaped by deficit-based theoretical frameworks that position autistic communication as fundamentally impaired. Relevance theory, for example, suggests that autistic individuals should experience specific difficulties with pragmatic language use because they struggle to infer communicative intentions (Happé, 1993). Similarly, weak central coherence theory posits that autistic individuals process information locally rather than globally, leading to difficulties extracting context-dependent meanings from figurative language (Norbury & Bishop, 2002).

These frameworks share a common limitation: they interpret neurological differences as deficits rather than as variations in cognitive processing. As Happé and Frith (2006) later acknowledged, what was initially characterized as a "deficit" in global processing might better be understood as a cognitive strength in local, detail-oriented processing. This reframing is crucial

because it shifts attention from what autistic individuals supposedly cannot do to recognizing different, but not deficient, processing styles.

The tendency to pathologize difference becomes particularly problematic when research attributes any language comprehension challenges specifically to autism. As Gernsbacher and Pripas-Kapit (2012) demonstrate, if autistic individuals struggle with language comprehension, they will naturally also struggle with metaphoric, idiomatic, or otherwise complex language—just as non-autistic individuals with language impairments do. The crucial insight is that language difficulties are not autism-specific; they reflect language processing challenges that exist independently of autistic traits (Norbury, 2005; Gernsbacher et al., 2016).

Challenging the Myth of Autistic Literal-Mindedness

Despite empirical evidence to the contrary, the stereotype that autistic individuals cannot understand or use figurative language persists as what Gernsbacher and Pripas-Kapit (2012) call a “caricature” of autism. This stereotype is particularly pernicious because it influences how educators, researchers, and the general public interact with autistic individuals, often leading to unnecessarily simplified communication that denies autistic people opportunities to engage with rich, nuanced language.

Research consistently demonstrates that when language abilities are appropriately matched, autistic and non-autistic individuals show comparable figurative language comprehension (Gernsbacher et al., 2016). Autistic children acquire metaphor understanding at the same developmental pace as language-ability-matched non-autistic children. Similarly, autistic individuals demonstrate intact abilities in narrative construction, inference-drawing from stories, and negotiation of linguistic ambiguities when their overall language proficiency is considered (Diehl et al., 2006; Saldaña & Frith, 2007).

These findings underscore a critical methodological point: differences between autistic and non-autistic groups in figurative language tasks often reflect differences in language proficiency rather than autism-specific deficits (Kalandadze et al., 2018). When researchers control for language ability, the supposed autism-specific figurative language deficit often disappears. This pattern suggests that much previous research has confounded autism with language impairment, leading to inaccurate conclusions about autistic cognitive abilities.

Embracing Neurodiversity: Cognitive Difference as Strength

The neurodiversity paradigm offers an alternative framework that reconceptualizes autism not as a disorder requiring remediation but as a form of neurological diversity with its own strengths and challenges (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2013; Milton, 2012). From this perspective, autistic communication patterns are different but not deficient, and apparent difficulties often arise from mismatches between autistic communication styles and neurotypical-dominated environments rather than from inherent autistic impairments.

This paradigm shift has profound implications for understanding figurative language use. If autistic individuals demonstrate detail-focused processing, this becomes a cognitive strength in contexts requiring precision and attention to specificity (Mottron et al., 2006). Such processing styles may support particular forms of creative expression, including carefully constructed metaphors or systematic exploration of semantic relationships in language. Davidson (2008) argues that autistic individuals frequently fail to meet neurotypical expectations for verbal fluency or communicative timing, but these differences should not be equated with lack of intelligence or inability to communicate meaningfully.

Furthermore, focusing exclusively on deficits obscures autistic individuals’ strengths in areas like narrative complexity and syntactic sophistication (Diehl et al., 2006; Capps et al., 2000). When researchers move beyond deficit-focused questions, they discover that autistic individuals often excel in language domains previously overlooked. This suggests that educational approaches should build on autistic students’ existing language strengths rather than concentrating solely on remediating perceived weaknesses.

Autistic Creative Expression and Storytelling

Contrary to stereotypes of autistic individuals as uninterested in or incapable of creative expression, evidence suggests that many autistic people engage enthusiastically with creative media and use figurative language effectively in their own communication (Roth, 2018; Davidson, 2008). Written expression, in particular, appears to be a preferred medium for many autistic individuals, who report feeling more comfortable communicating through text than through face-to-face interaction (Davidson, 2008).

Online environments have become especially important spaces for autistic self-expression and community-building (Davidson, 2008). In these contexts, autistic individuals frequently use metaphors and other figurative devices to articulate their experiences and challenge stereotypes about their supposed literal-mindedness.

This creative use of language demonstrates that when autistic individuals have control over communicative contexts and can work at their own pace, they often display sophisticated linguistic abilities that may not emerge in time-pressured social situations.

Storytelling represents another domain where autistic individuals demonstrate competence with figurative language. Research indicates that autistic children do not differ from language-matched peers in their ability to construct coherent narratives, draw inferences from stories, or navigate linguistic ambiguities in storytelling contexts (Gernsbacher et al., 2016; Diehl et al., 2006). These findings suggest that narrative activities could provide valuable opportunities for autistic students to develop and demonstrate their creative language abilities in educational settings.

Educational Implications: Supporting Diverse Communication Styles

Lampri et al. (2024) have documented that while autistic individuals encounter systematic difficulties in processing figurative language, conflicting results exist regarding the extent and source of these difficulties. Notably, some studies show that high-functioning autistic individuals can decode figurative expressions similarly to typically developing controls, with differences emerging primarily in task properties and linguistic demands rather than in comprehension ability itself. These mixed findings underscore the heterogeneity within autism spectrum disorder and challenge monolithic deficit-based interpretations of autistic language processing.

The research reviewed in this study has important implications for educational practice. Parents and teachers, attempting to prevent misunderstandings, often deliberately use highly concrete language with autistic children. While well-intentioned, this practice may inadvertently deprive autistic students of opportunities to engage with figurative language and develop their expressive repertoires. If educators assume autistic students cannot understand or benefit from figurative language, they may unnecessarily restrict these students' linguistic environments.

Educational approaches grounded in neurodiversity principles would instead provide multiple pathways for linguistic and creative expression, recognizing that autistic students may engage with figurative language differently than their neurotypical peers but with equal competence (Kapp et al., 2013). Visual supports, such as thinking maps that graphically represent semantic relationships in metaphoric expressions, can help students explore connections between abstract concepts (Mashal & Kasirer, 2011). These tools do not "teach" autistic students how to understand figurative language, as if they were inherently deficient; rather, they provide alternative representations that may align better with autistic cognitive processing styles.

Creating classroom environments where diverse communication styles are valued and where students have agency over their modes of expression may enable autistic students to demonstrate language abilities that deficit-focused approaches would miss. By positioning autistic students as capable communicators with preferences rather than deficits, educators can better support their development and sense of belonging in educational spaces.

Research Questions

Based on the literature reviewed, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How can the creativity of autistic students be expressed through engagement with figurative language?
2. What are the self-reported perceptions of autistic university students regarding the implementation of figurative language in creative activities?

These questions aim to center autistic perspectives and challenge deficit-based narratives by examining how autistic students themselves experience and evaluate creative activities involving figurative language.

Methodology

Research Design and Philosophical Approach

This study employs qualitative research methodology, which Vishnevsky and Beanlands (2004) describe as a "way of knowing" that prioritizes understanding experiences from participants' own perspectives. Given this research's focus on autistic students' perceptions of figurative language use, qualitative methods were essential for capturing the nuanced, subjective dimensions of their experiences.

More specifically, this research is positioned as advocacy research. Creswell and Poth (2017) define advocacy research as providing voice to participants, raising consciousness about marginalized perspectives, and advancing agendas for change. By centering autistic voices in discussions about figurative language—a domain where autistic competence has been systematically questioned—this research aims to challenge deficit-based assumptions and contribute to more inclusive educational practices.

The data analysis adopts a case-oriented approach (Sandelowski, 1996), focusing on understanding particular individuals holistically rather than seeking generalizable patterns. With only two participants, the goal is to provide rich, detailed insight into their diverse experiences rather than to make broad claims about all

autistic individuals. This approach aligns with neurodiversity principles by emphasizing individual variation within autism.

Setting

The study was conducted at the Universidad de Guadalajara, a large public university in Guadalajara, Mexico.

Participants

Two university students in their early twenties participated in this study: one male and one female. Both had received diagnoses of Autism Spectrum Disorder, though the timing of their diagnoses (both were diagnosed in late adolescence or adulthood) was not central to the research. Both participants are native Spanish speakers who developed advanced English proficiency through their university education. They were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) self-identification as autistic and willingness to participate; (2) enrollment in university-level studies; (3) familiarity with English language use in academic and creative contexts; (4) interest in creative expression through visual art or writing; and (5) native Spanish speakers.

Both participants expressed using creative expression—one primarily through drawing and visual art, the other through written expression—as forms of personal enjoyment and stress relief rather than primarily for academic purposes. Both were familiar with figurative language in English through their university coursework and personal engagement with English-language media. These characteristics were important because the study aimed to explore how autistic students with existing creative practices and language familiarity engaged with figurative language tasks.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided all stages of this research. Following Cohen et al.'s (2013) guidelines, participants' rights to privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, and protection from harm were prioritized throughout. Before agreeing to participate, potential participants received detailed information sheets explaining the research purpose, procedures, and their rights as participants. They were explicitly informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences.

After reviewing the information sheet, participants provided written informed consent. The consent form detailed the specific activities they would complete, how their data would be used, their right to withdraw within two weeks of participation, and assurances of confidentiality. Throughout data collection, participants were given ample opportunity to ask questions and were encouraged to take breaks if needed.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved two complementary instruments: a two-part creative activity and a semi-structured questionnaire.

Creative Activity - Part One: Participants were presented with two written texts and asked to create visual representations (drawings) of what each text described. The first text was an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros's (2018) "Puro Amor," which employs rich figurative language including similes and metaphors to describe cats:

"Cats–there were several varieties, feral as well as tame. One as fat as a Buddha, one as elegant as a carved Egyptian, one who looked like a dirty bath mat, and one who repeated all day, 'me, me, me, me'."

The second text was created specifically for this research to provide a contrast in linguistic style. It used direct, literal language to describe a dragon:

"There was a big red dragon, with long claws, spikes on its back and big yellow eyes. The dragon was 3 meters tall, and it looked very scary."

Participants were given time to read each text and then asked to draw images representing their interpretations. This activity aimed to explore how participants processed and represented figurative versus literal language visually.

Creative Activity - Part Two: Participants were shown two famous paintings—Vincent Van Gogh's "Café Terrace at Night" (1888) and Gustav Klimt's "The Kiss" (1907)—and asked to choose one to describe in writing with as much detail as they wished. They were given complete freedom in how they chose to describe the selected image. This activity aimed to examine what linguistic choices participants made when expressing their own creative interpretations.

Questionnaire: After completing both parts of the creative activity, participants responded to open-ended questions about their experiences. Questions explored which texts they found easier to represent visually and why, which texts they most enjoyed reading, what they appreciated about the language in each text, and what influenced their linguistic choices when describing the painting. This questionnaire provided crucial insight into participants' subjective experiences and preferences, allowing them to articulate their own perspectives rather than having researchers infer their experiences solely from their creative products.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved close examination of both participants' creative products (drawings and written descriptions) and their questionnaire responses. Following Zohrabi's (2013) recommendations for enhancing qualitative research reliability, multiple data

sources were triangulated to develop comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.

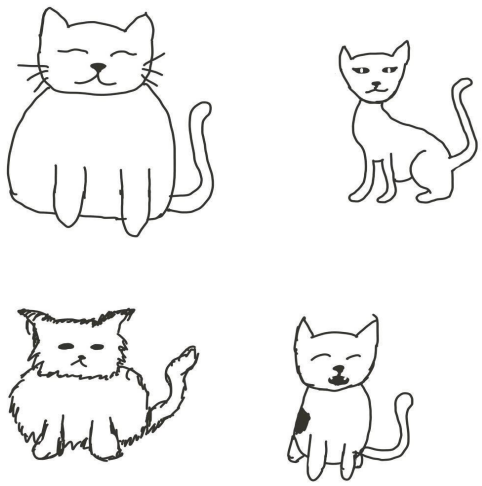
Analysis proceeded iteratively. First, each participant's drawings were examined for how they represented the figurative and literal texts. Second, participants' written descriptions of the paintings were analyzed for linguistic features, including level of detail, use of figurative versus literal language, and focus on concrete versus abstract elements. Third, questionnaire responses were analyzed thematically to identify participants' own interpretations of their experiences and preferences. Finally, findings across data sources were synthesized to develop holistic understanding of each participant's engagement with figurative language.

Throughout analysis, emphasis was placed on recognizing diversity rather than seeking deficit explanations for any observed patterns. Differences in how participants engaged with tasks were interpreted as reflecting individual preferences and processing styles rather than as indicating comprehension failures.

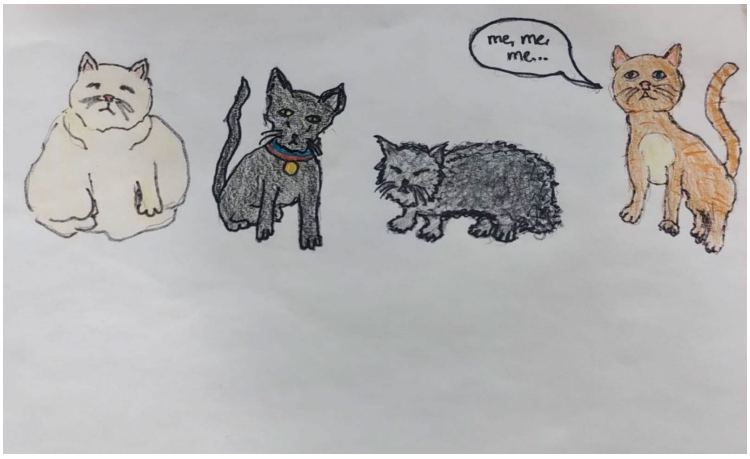
Findings

Part One: Visual Representations of Figurative and Literal Texts

When presented with the excerpt from "Puro Amor," which used figurative language including similes to describe cats, participants showed different approaches to creating visual representations. Participant 1's drawing (Figure 1) depicted cats with less detailed visual representation, capturing the presence of multiple cats but not elaborately illustrating the specific comparative descriptions ("as fat as a Buddha," "as elegant as a carved Egyptian"). Participant 2's drawing (Figure 2), in contrast, showed closer alignment with the figurative descriptions, including visual elements that corresponded more directly to the metaphoric qualities described in the text



[Figure 1: Participant 1's drawing of cats from "Puro Amor" excerpt]



[Figure 2: Participant 2's drawing of cats from "Puro Amor" excerpt]

For the literal description of the dragon, both participants produced drawings that closely matched the text's specifications. Participant 1's drawing (Figure 3) accurately depicted the described features, while Participant 2's drawing (Figure 4) included even greater detail, elaborating on elements like scale texture and claw structure beyond what the text explicitly specified.

[Figure 3: Participant 1's drawing of dragon]

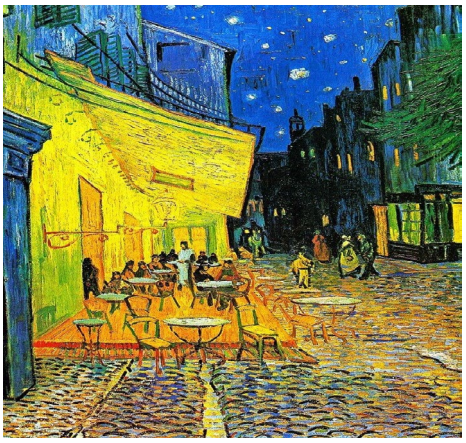


[Figure 4: Participant 2's drawing of dragon]



Part Two: Written Descriptions of Visual Art

Both participants chose to describe Van Gogh's Café Terrace at Night (Figure 5) rather than Klimt's The Kiss. Their rationale for this choice emphasized the diversity of visual elements in the Van Gogh painting, which they described as "easy to describe" and inspirational. They also expressed aesthetic preference, noting they found it "nice to look at."



[Figure 5: Vincent van Gogh, Café Terrace at Night (1888, Kröller-Müller Museum, public domain.]

The two participants adopted noticeably different approaches to describing the painting. Participant 1 focused primarily on abstract impressions and emotional resonances evoked by the image, writing statements like "this place makes me think of starting again" and "for other people might not mean anything, but those who are in the café are having everything." While not employing conventional figurative devices like metaphors or similes, this participant's description engaged with abstract conceptual interpretation of the scene's meaning. Participant 2 adopted a more systematically descriptive approach, cataloging concrete elements visible in the painting: buildings, people, the arrangement of the scene, and particularly the color composition. This participant noted interest in the variety of clothing colors worn by different figures and interpreted this chromatic diversity as reflecting "the mood of the place, which was a cheerful and jovial spot"—thus connecting observable details to abstract interpretation.

Participants' Perceptions and Preferences

Questionnaire responses provided crucial insight into how participants themselves understood their engagement with these activities.

Regarding the initial drawing tasks, both participants reported feeling more comfortable creating visual representations of the literal dragon description. They explained that this text was "clearer and direct," enabling them to "get a better and more precise mental image" from the straightforward adjectives. One participant noted that the dragon text's "simple" language and "natural structure" facilitated comprehension while still providing complete description.

Importantly, however, both participants identified the figurative "Puro Amor" excerpt as the text they most enjoyed reading. They appreciated that this text "made better use of literary devices" and was "more engaging to read." Specific features they valued included comparison, rhythm, and word repetition. Notably, neither participant

reported difficulty understanding the figurative descriptions of the cats; rather, they enjoyed the creative language use even while finding the literal text easier to represent visually.

When reflecting on their own written descriptions of the painting, participants explained their linguistic choices as reflecting their typical communication patterns. Participant 1 characterized their language as "organic, authentic and common in daily life," contrasting this with language that seemed "non-authentic, artificial or too figurative." This participant clearly valued authenticity and naturalness over-elaborate figuration. Participant 2 stated, "it's usually very difficult not to be literal when speaking or writing," indicating an orientation toward literal expression as their communicative default.

Discussion

Comprehension of Figurative Language

The findings from this study support recent scholarship challenging deficit-based understandings of autistic figurative language processing (Gernsbacher & Pripas-Kapit, 2012; Gernsbacher et al., 2016). Both participants demonstrated clear comprehension of the figurative language in the "Puro Amor" excerpt. As Rapp and Wild (2011) note, understanding figurative language requires grasping speaker intention within context. Both participants successfully identified that the text aimed to describe cats' diverse appearances through comparative language. Neither participant reported confusion about the figurative descriptions' intended meanings.

The varying levels of visual detail in participants' drawings of the figuratively described cats should not be interpreted as comprehension failures. Participant 1's less elaborate drawing may reflect preferences in visual representation style, time investment, or artistic confidence rather than linguistic misunderstanding. Notably, this same participant produced detailed abstract interpretations when describing the Van Gogh painting, demonstrating capacity for sophisticated conceptual engagement.

Both participants' statements that they enjoyed reading the figurative text more than the literal one provides particularly strong evidence against assumptions of autistic discomfort with or aversion to figurative language. Their appreciation for "literary devices," "comparison," and "rhythm" indicates aesthetic engagement with figurative language's expressive qualities. This finding aligns with Davidson's (2008) observations that autistic individuals' own writings frequently demonstrate sophisticated figurative language use and appreciation.

Detail-Oriented Processing as Cognitive Strength

Participants' descriptions of the Van Gogh painting exemplify what researchers have characterized as detail-focused processing in autism (Happé & Frith, 2006; Mottron et al., 2006). Participant 2, in particular, systematically cataloged observable elements—building features, people's positions, clothing colors—before synthesizing these details into broader interpretation of the scene's mood. This processing style demonstrates the strength of attending carefully to specific features, which can support rich, nuanced observation.

Importantly, participants' detail-orientation did not prevent them from engaging with global meaning or abstract interpretation. Participant 1 moved directly to abstract conceptual responses to the image ("this place makes me think of starting again"), while Participant 2 connected detailed color observations to interpretations of emotional atmosphere ("cheerful and jovial"). This challenges weak central coherence theory's suggestion that detail-focused processing results in failure to extract global meaning (Norbury & Bishop, 2002). Instead, participants demonstrated flexible movement between specific details and holistic interpretation.

These findings support Rajendran and Mitchell's (2007) observation that autistic individuals' detail-oriented processing style represents a cognitive difference rather than deficit. In contexts like careful visual observation or systematic description, detail-focus becomes a valuable asset. Educational approaches that recognize and value this processing style, rather than pathologizing it, could better support autistic students' strengths.

Linguistic Preference and Cultural Context

Both participants chose to use predominantly literal language in their own written descriptions, and both indicated this reflected their typical communication patterns. This preference is consistent with Kalandadze et al.'s (2018) findings that figurative language use is influenced by linguistic and cultural contexts. As Spanish speakers who learned English as a second language, participants may have developed comfort with more straightforward descriptive language in English while being fully capable of comprehending figurative language they encounter.

The distinction participants drew between comprehending and enjoying figurative language versus choosing to use it themselves is theoretically important. This pattern suggests that comfort with literal expression reflects communicative preference rather than comprehension deficit. Participants demonstrated what Happé (1993) termed flexible linguistic competence—the ability to understand multiple linguistic registers while having preferences about which registers to use in their own communication.

Davidson's (2008) research on autistic online communication provides relevant context here. He found that autistic individuals often prefer written communication

because it allows more control over pacing, word choice, and self-presentation. Participants in this study may feel more confident using literal language because it gives them greater certainty that their intended meanings will be accurately conveyed, reducing the ambiguity risks inherent in figurative expression.

Educational Attainment and Language Experience

Both participants were university students with extensive exposure to English language use in academic contexts. As Nippold and Sullivan (1987) observed, figurative language understanding develops through accumulated knowledge, abstract skill development, and language experience over time. Participants' university education likely contributed to their figurative language comprehension.

However, this does not mean that autistic individuals who are not university students inherently lack figurative language abilities. Rather, it underscores that—as with non-autistic individuals—language competencies develop through experience and education (Norbury, 2005; Kalandadze et al., 2018). The key implication is that autistic students' figurative language abilities should be understood in relation to their overall language proficiency and educational experiences, not as predetermined by their autism.

This finding reinforces Gernsbacher et al.'s (2016) argument that language impairment, rather than autism per se, predicts figurative language comprehension. Educational environments should provide autistic students with rich language experiences, including exposure to figurative language, rather than restricting their linguistic environments based on stereotypical assumptions.

Centering Autistic Preferences

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this study is its centering of participants' own perspectives on their experiences. Rather than relying solely on researcher interpretations of participants' performance, the questionnaire component enabled participants to articulate their preferences, enjoyment, and reasoning.

Participants' articulation of what language felt "organic" and "authentic" to them highlights the importance of valuing communicative agency. Milton's (2012) concept of the "double empathy problem" is relevant here: communication difficulties between autistic and non-autistic individuals arise from mutual incomprehension, not solely from autistic communication deficits. When autistic individuals can communicate in their preferred styles—for these participants, literal but detailed language—they demonstrate considerable communicative effectiveness.

Educational implications follow directly. Rather than insisting autistic students use figurative language to match neurotypical norms, educators might better support students by providing multiple pathways for expression and valuing the communicative effectiveness of different linguistic styles. Creating classroom environments where students feel safe expressing themselves in their preferred modes—whether literal or figurative—may enhance both learning and sense of belonging.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, this study was conducted at a Mexican public university with bilingual (Spanish-English) participants whose native language is Spanish. Although the study's findings regarding figurative language comprehension and communication preferences may have relevance beyond this specific context, cultural and linguistic factors-including bilingualism and second language acquisition-may influence how autistic individuals engage with figurative language, particularly in English.

Second, with only two participants, findings cannot be generalized to all autistic individuals. The case-oriented approach provides rich detail about these particular participants but cannot support broad claims about autistic figurative language use. Individual variation within autism is substantial (Hull et al., 2017), and these two participants' experiences may not reflect those of other autistic individuals.

Third, both participants were university students with strong English language skills and interest in creative expression. This particular profile—high educational attainment, bilingualism, engagement with arts—likely influenced their figurative language abilities and preferences. Findings might differ with participants having different educational backgrounds, language proficiencies, or relationships to creative practices.

Fourth, the activity design had limitations. While intended to contrast figurative and literal language, the two texts differed in multiple dimensions beyond figuration, including content domain (cats versus dragon), cultural familiarity, and complexity. These confounding factors make it difficult to attribute participants' responses solely to the figurative-versus-literal dimension. Future research might employ more carefully controlled stimuli.

Fifth, data collection was limited to creative tasks and self-report questionnaires. While these methods aligned with the study's advocacy research goals, they did not include observational data from naturalistic educational settings or longitudinal data tracking participants' language use over time. Multiple methods across contexts would provide more comprehensive understanding.

Finally, as a study focused specifically on autistic university students' experiences, findings may have

limited applicability to younger students or to non-academic contexts. How autistic children in primary or secondary education engage with figurative language, or how autistic individuals use figurative language in employment or social settings, remain important questions for future research.

Conclusion

This study contributes to challenging persistent deficit-based narratives about autism and figurative language. By centering autistic university students' voices and examining their creative engagements with language through activities they controlled, the research demonstrates that autistic individuals can comprehend, appreciate, and selectively employ figurative language according to their preferences and communicative goals.

The participants in this study defied stereotypes of autistic literal-mindedness. They enjoyed figurative language in texts they read, appreciated literary devices, and comprehended metaphoric descriptions. Their preference for using literal language in their own expression reflected personal communication style rather than comprehension deficits. This distinction—between understanding diverse linguistic registers and preferring particular registers for self-expression—is crucial for educators and researchers to recognize.

From a neurodiversity perspective, these findings support reconceptualizing autistic communication patterns as different but not deficient. Detail-oriented processing, often characterized negatively in deficit frameworks, emerged as a cognitive strength supporting rich observational descriptions. Participants' clear articulation of what felt "authentic" and "comfortable" in their own language use highlights the importance of respecting autistic communicative agency rather than imposing neurotypical norms.

Educational implications are significant. Creating classroom environments where multiple communication styles are valued and where students have agency over their modes of expression may better support autistic students' learning and sense of belonging. Rather than restricting autistic students' exposure to figurative language based on stereotypical assumptions, educators should provide rich linguistic environments while respecting students' preferences about their own language use.

This study's advocacy research approach—centering autistic voices and challenging deficit narratives—represents an ethical commitment to conducting autism research that respects autistic individuals' perspectives and experiences. Future research should continue building on participatory and advocacy-oriented approaches that position autistic individuals as experts on their own experiences.

As our understanding of neurodiversity deepens, educational practices must evolve beyond deficit-based approaches toward frameworks that recognize, value, and build upon the diverse ways autistic individuals think, communicate, and express themselves. Figurative language can be a meaningful medium of expression for autistic students—not because they need remediation to understand it, but because, when approached on their terms, it offers opportunities for creativity, engagement, and authentic self-expression.

Article Statements

1. Social relevance

This work addresses the deficit-based stereotypes about literal-mindedness that affect autistic students, particularly in higher education. Its findings may help teachers and institutions recognise the communicative diversity of these students and design more inclusive pedagogical practices that offer multiple pathways for creative expression.

2. Data and materials availability

The data are not publicly available because of the confidentiality commitments made to participants through informed consent and because the small sample size prevents guaranteeing their anonymity. Conditions for requesting access may be consulted with the corresponding author, to the extent permitted by the terms of the consent granted.

3. Use of artificial intelligence

During the preparation of this manuscript, Claude (Anthropic) was used solely for language editing and proofreading of the English text. The authors reviewed and corrected the output and take full responsibility for the content, which is original.

4. Ethical considerations

The study was not submitted to an institutional ethics committee; the ethical principles described in the Ethical Considerations section were followed, and written informed consent was obtained from the participants.

5. Author contributions (CRediT)

E.M.H.L.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. K.E.R.A.: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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