



This is a repository copy of *Interpreting (autistic?) mind style*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/160208/>

Version: Published Version

Article:

Whiteley, S. orcid.org/0000-0002-0008-2187 (2020) *Interpreting (autistic?) mind style*. *Anglistik*, 31 (1). pp. 71-89. ISSN 0947-0034

[10.33675/angl/2020/1/7](https://doi.org/10.33675/angl/2020/1/7)

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

SARA WHITELEY

Interpreting (Autistic?) Mind Style: Categorisation and Narrative Interrelation in Reading Group Discussions of *The Universe Versus Alex Woods*

Introduction

The term 'mind style' originates in the works of Fowler (1977; 1986), where it refers to the impression of a particular characters' "worldview" that is generated by systematic patterns in the linguistic style of a text (Fowler 1977, 66; see also Leech and Short 1981; Bockting 1994; Semino 2007). Following the cognitive turn in stylistics, characters' worldviews are also connected to the "conceptual structures and cognitive habits" that are reflected in their language use (Semino 2002, 95). Studies of mind style have often focused on narrators and characters deemed to exhibit some kind of "deviant" or "unusual" perspective on the world (Leech and Short 2007, 162), to the extent that Stockwell defines mind style as "the presentation of a highly deviant or at least very unusual worldview, judged of course by a reader against [their] own set of cultural norms" (2009, 125; see also Hermeston 2017, 45).

This article examines the judgements made by several groups of readers regarding Alex Woods, the narrator of the novel *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* by Gavin Extence (2013). The data discussed in this paper are audio recordings of six reading groups discussing the novel. I seek to account for the fact that readers in all of the groups interpreted the narrator of the novel as being "autistic," as having "Asperger's syndrome," or as being on "the autistic spectrum." In addition, it is striking that readers in five of the groups compared Alex Woods to the narrator of another novel, Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon (2003), which is widely read as a portrayal of a boy with Asperger's syndrome (see, e.g., Murray 2008; Semino 2014a). Unlike *The Curious Incident*, whose back cover describes its narrator as Aspergic, *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* contains no explicit mention of autism at all. It is intriguing, therefore, that across the different conversations, readers repeatedly characterised Alex Woods' mind style in this way.

My analysis takes a cognitive stylistic approach to the reader response data. Cognitive stylistics (also known as cognitive poetics) regards literary meaning to be generated through the interaction between a text's language and a reader's interpretative processes (see Stockwell 2002; 2009). These interpretative processes are cognitive because they involve human perception and knowledge and are embedded within specific physical and socio-cultural contexts (Stockwell 2002). Cognitive stylistic analyses examine the way texts are written and draw on cognitive theories about the way human minds work in order to explore "how and why particular interpretations are arrived at" (Semino and Culpeper 2002, x; original emphasis). Below, I use the reading group discussion data to reflect on the cognitive processes involved in interpreting literary characters, highlighting processes of

categorisation and interrelation in the readers' talk. This informs a linguistic analysis of *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* which considers the extent to which readers' interpretations could be said to be motivated by textual features of the novel's style.

Several scholars have noted that the last few decades have seen an increase in the representation of autistic characters in literature, a trend which seems to have developed in dialogue with an increasing public awareness of autistic spectrum disorders (Bates 2010; Greenwell 2004; Draaisma 2009; Murray 2008; Semino 2014b). The construction of 'autistic' mind styles has already received detailed stylistic attention in the works of Semino (2014a; 2014b), who, in a study of three novels with autistic narrators, including *The Curious Incident*, identifies a number of linguistic patterns which she suggests may "contribute to, or, minimally, [be] consistent with the inference that [a character] has an autistic spectrum disorder" (Semino 2014a, 279). I will examine those linguistic patterns in more detail in Section 4 below when I consider their prevalence in the language of Extence's work. Semino highlights the fact that texts which represent fictional autistic characters need not be "medically accurate" nor "totally consistent" in order to prompt readers to make inferences about a character's "idiosyncrasies, challenges and talents" and to interpret them as a reflection of an autism spectrum disorder (Semino 2014a, 301). Indeed, Semino points out that writers creating fictional autistic characters do so in dialogue with readers' "folk psychological" knowledge of autism, rather than more specialised medical or psychological definitions of the phenomenon (2014a, 288; see also Margolin 2003, 285).

The notion that there is a popular 'folk' conception of autism that lacks the specificity of clinical definitions is evidenced by the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for the term. The word 'autistic' is listed as having a "weakened, colloquial" sense, meaning: "displaying any of various traits which might be considered suggestive of autism, such as awkwardness in social situations, restricted interests, or repetitive patterns of behaviour."¹ The earliest entry is dated 1989, and all of the examples cited come from novels or newspaper discourse. In his study of representations of autism in popular culture, Murray identifies *The Curious Incident* as a novel which has served as a "foundational explanatory marker of autism" for a generation of readers (2008, 12). Murray describes *The Curious Incident* as an "autism event" which "almost achieved the status of sociological document[ation]" in the way it was received (2008, 12-13). Many other scholars highlight the role of literature in shaping public awareness of autism (Greenwell 2004; Murray 2008; Draaisma 2009; Bates 2010; Semino 2014b; Hall 2016), arguing that, as Semino puts it, literary works "are likely to both reflect and contribute to shape the 'folk' models or general schemata of autism

1 See the entry "autistic, adj. and n." of the *OED Online* (2019). My use of the terms 'autistic,' 'Aspergers' and 'autism spectrum disorder' here align with the folk psychological uses evident in my reading group discussion data. I do not make more specialised distinctions between the terms because this article is concerned with folk psychological knowledge and its role in mind style interpretations, rather than the medical accuracy of the readers' interpretations or the literary works.

shared by readers" (2014b, 155). Though convincing, such claims are rarely substantiated with specific evidence. In Section 3 below, I argue that the reading group talk collected in my study provides an insight into the 'folk' models of autism which are employed by a particular community of readers and that it corroborates the notion of there being a close connection between readers' ideas about autism and their experience of Haddon's novel. Before discussing examples from my dataset, Section 2 provides information about the way it was collected.

Reading Group Discussion Data

Reading groups are groups of people who meet regularly to talk about literary texts. The data drawn upon in this study are examples of "naturalistic" reader response data, characterised by Swann and Allington as that which "seeks to provide evidence of reading activity outside of the artificial environment of a reading experiment" (2009, 248). In naturalistic studies, readers are observed performing habitual reading behaviour in their usual environments, engaging with whole texts presented in their typical form, and interacting freely with other readers. This contrasts with the controlled environments, atypical texts, and reader-researcher interactions that are common in more experimental studies (Swann and Allington 2009, 248). Within cognitive stylistics, naturalistic data such as reading group discussions are useful for exploratory purposes: for "gaining an insight into the range of uses to which a particular text is put by particular readers in particular contexts" (Whiteley and Canning 2017, 77) and for "broadening the range of responses that stylistics tries to explain" (Myers 2009, 338).

Swann and Allington characterise reading group discussions as "one in a series of *acts of reading* for group members" (2009, 252; original emphasis), and Peplow et al. (2016, 36) argue that reading group talk is a form of "social reading," in which literary interpretation is performed through interaction. Elsewhere, I have suggested that even though reading group talk does not provide insights into readers' *private* interactions with the language of a text during an initial moment of reading, such talk can still provide an insight into readerly interpretative processes and be used to inform cognitive stylistic study (Whiteley 2011a; Peplow et al. 2016, 30-60). And, although the data itself cannot be used to confirm the influence of textual features on reader interpretation, it can be used as a prompt for the stylistic analysis of a text, as analysts can consider the extent to which textual cues may "map" on the interpretations generated in the group discussions (Benwell 2009, 312). This naturalistic, exploratory data is therefore a valuable testing ground for cognitive stylistic theories.

The data considered in this paper capitalised on some literary activities in the city of Sheffield, England. The data was collected in 2013 as part of the "Book of the Festival" project, which involved researchers at two Sheffield universities collaborating with two local civic organisations: Sheffield's annual literary festival "Off the Shelf" and Sheffield public libraries. The "Off the Shelf" literary festival team nominated *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* as their "Book of the Festival," and

the universities funded a series of events with the author in local libraries and event spaces as part of the festival. The project team also recruited local reading groups who were willing to be recorded discussing the winning novel, so that the researchers could obtain a set of naturalistic reader response data featuring distinct groups discussing the same text (cf. Whiteley 2011b). The reading groups all met in their usual locations (either one of the member's houses or a local library) and were supplied with a digital recorder in advance of their meeting. The groups recorded themselves without the researchers' physical presence. Table 1 summarises some key information about the groups that were involved in the study.

	No. of participants	Genders	Age ranges	Location	Length of recorded meeting (hours)	Occupations
Group 1	7	All male	50s-70s	House	1.51	Retired/ Project Manager/ Lecturer
Group 2	11	All female	40s-70s	House	1.14	Retired/ University Manager/ Teacher/ Lecturer/ Solicitor/ Publications Manager/ Artist/ Accountant
Group 3	10	All female	50s-70s	Library	1.06	Retired/ Pharmacy Technician/ None supplied
Group 4	7	Mixed gender (4F, 3M)	40s-60s	House	1.03	Finance Manager/ Illustrator and Author/ Psychologist / Careers Advisor/ Researcher/ Lecturer
Group 5	5	All female	20s-50s	Library	0.45	Administrator/ Self-employed/ None supplied
Group 6	6	Mixed gender (3M, 3F)	40s-60s	House	1.03	Careers Advisor/ Director of IT/ Educational Psychologist/ Education Officer/ Retired

Table 1: Information about the reading groups involved in the study

The dataset differs from those usually collected in stylistic studies of reading groups (e.g. Whiteley 2011a; 2011b) because in this case, the literary text under study had

not been pre-selected by researchers but was selected by a third party as part of a literary event. Therefore, stylistic investigation of the text (see section 4) has been led entirely by the topics and themes that emerged in the reader discussions.

Extence's debut novel, *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* (2013), is a 'coming of age' story, narrated in the first person by seventeen-year-old Alex, who recounts his life to date. When he is ten years old, Alex is hit by a meteorite and, as a result of the head trauma, he develops epilepsy. After learning to manage his condition, he returns to school aged twelve but finds that he is an outsider and is mercilessly bullied. He strikes up an unlikely friendship with a local widowed pensioner called Mr Peterson and sets up a Kurt Vonnegut book club in order to help the old man socialise. Then things take an unexpected turn: Mr Peterson is diagnosed with a rare degenerative disease and given three years to live. Aged seventeen, Alex ends up helping Mr Peterson to die by assisted suicide, driving him to Dignitas in Switzerland. The novel manages to combine humour and lightness with very serious ethical subject-matter regarding euthanasia.

Readers' discussions of the novel spanned several topics, including the ethical issues raised by the text. My focus here is on readers' interpretations of Alex's character because one of the striking aspects of the data was that in all of the groups some readers characterised Alex as autistic. In addition, readers in five of the six groups made intertextual connections between *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* and Haddon's novel *The Curious Incident*. Because the interpretative activity performed in reading groups is so contingent on the social and interactional context (Benwell 2009; Swann and Allington 2009; Peplow 2016), it is somewhat surprising when similarities in response such as this occur across different groups (see Whiteley 2011b). I will consider the factors that may be contributing to the readers' characterisation of Alex in these ways. Section 3 examines the reader data in more detail and argues that socioculturally situated cognitive processes of categorisation are evident in the readers' characterisation of Alex. Section 4 examines the language of the novel itself and compares it with Semino's (2014a; 2014b) findings regarding the 'autistic' mind style in *The Curious Incident*.

Reading Group Discussions of Alex's Character

Extract A, from the very opening of Group 2's discussion, provides an example of the way the reading groups discussed Alex's character. Moira opens the discussion by asking the other participants how "convincing" they found him (see Appendix for transcription conventions):

Extract A: Group 2 (0.19 – 1.39)

Moira: I start I'll start erm I mean one of the things that intrigued me about the book was writing in the person of a teenage boy (.) and I just wondered how you know people who have more experience of teenage boys more recently whether they thought that was convincing (.) erm it felt convincing to me that kind of combination of the naivety and the being pretty clever

- stuff (.) but I wondered if people who had sixteen-year-old boys thought this was a convincing boy I suppose
- Linda:** well he wasn't a very ordinary sixteen-year-old boy was he
- ?:** no
- ?:** [he was (.) yeah]
- Linda:** [so I suppose] from that point of view I can't say whether it was convincing
- ?:** [he wasn't typical]
- Fiona:** [he wasn't like my son] that's for sure but erm
- Caira:** he wasn't like boys I've seen
- Fiona:** but I did find the voice convincing in the sense that I believed in the character (.) erm I mean it had shades of autism to me or he was on the autistic spectrum
- Several:** hmm *{sounds of agreement}*
- Fiona:** not quite like *The Dog in the Night* but I thought there were some sort of similarities with the voice but I I personally thought the voice was (.) was good

Linda, Fiona, and Caira are reluctant to describe Alex as a "convincing" teenage boy because he "wasn't very ordinary" and "wasn't typical." Fiona goes on to suggest that, for her, Alex was more convincing if regarded as a character "on the autistic spectrum" in a similar way to the narrator of *The Curious Incident*.

Similar conversational pathways are also visible in Extract B from Group 4's discussion. The participants are also discussing how "believable" they found Alex to be. Sandra and Lucy agree that he was believable and relate Alex's voice to the voice in *The Curious Incident*, particularly in terms of the characters' "naivety" mixed with "super-intelligence." Later, Alistair agrees with Lucy's intertextual link, reporting that he felt he had "read something like this before" in *The Curious Incident*, whose narrator is "very clever but has no social skills."

Extract B: Group 4 (2.51 – 5.32)

- Sandra:** ... you know the actual sense of voice in it was quite amazing for me (.) even even though I felt it as quite simplistic in lots of ways I thought (.) the characterisation was really (.) believable to me
- Lucy:** yeah it's interesting 'cause I liked the voice and it really reminded me that kind of mixture of naivety but (.) sort of also sort of super intelligence in certain pockets of you know information it reminded me of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* I thought it was a very similar voice and I wondered if it had inspired him perhaps
- {...}
- Alistair:** like like you when I was reading it I thought hang on I read something like this before and it was Mark Haddon (.) where the the main character is clearly autistic or has Asperger's so is very clever but has no social skills

There are several processes of categorisation evident in the participants' talk, as they are involved in matching Alex with their pre-existing knowledge of teenage boys and other fictional narrators. In general, readers are thought to generate impressions of characters by using the same processes that are employed in their interpretations of 'real' people in everyday life (Culpeper 2001; Stockwell 2002; 2009). Culpeper (2001,

83-84) notes that when we form impressions of others, we do so through a combination of top-down, "category-based processes," in which a target person is related to our knowledge of pre-existing categories of people, and bottom-up, "person-based" processes which pay greater attention to the individual attributes of the target person. Readers' stores of existing knowledge are typically referred to as 'schemas,' which are cognitive structures that supply information about your generic understanding of a particular phenomenon (Bartlett 1932; Schank and Abelson 1977). Cognitive categories typically exhibit a radial 'prototype' structure from the core, central examples outwards to poorer, more peripheral ones (Rosch 1978; Stockwell 2002, 27-40). Culpeper (2001, 75-76) posits that the social categories people use in their perception of others can usefully be grouped into three broad areas: "personal categories" (referring to people's interests and habits, e.g. 'football player' or 'bird watcher'); "social role categories" (referring to kinship roles, occupational roles, relational roles, e.g., 'mother' or 'manager'); and "group membership categories" (referring to knowledge about social groups such as gender, race, class, age, nationality, etc., e.g., 'woman,' 'teenager,' 'Syrian'). Culpeper notes that, as well as categorising others on these three levels, readers also possess "social schemata" that encompass stereotypical associations linked to those categories (Culpeper 2001, 78).

Extracts A and B involve participants advancing category-based interpretations of Alex's character, in particular negotiating their views of Alex's group membership categorisation. Moira's question in Extract A invites Fiona, Caira, and Linda to measure Alex against their prototype for a teenage boy, whilst Fiona invokes a group membership category relating to neurobehavioural difference when she categorises Alex as "on the autistic spectrum." Fiona's categorisation of Alex as autistic is closely related to her recognition of similarities with *The Curious Incident*. This suggests that other categorisation processes are involved here, which are not wholly captured in Culpeper's person-based model. The intertextual connections evident in the data are usefully accounted for using Mason's (2014) work on intertextuality. Mason makes an important distinction between "intertextual reference," where explicit cues in a text prompt readers to make a link to another text, and "narrative interrelation," which is the readerly process of linking one reading experience with another (2014, 185). Mason posits that readers possess "narrative schemas" containing information about literary works (both those they have read and those they have simply heard about) as part of a "mental archive." Narrative interrelations occur when a reader identifies a "point of narrative contact" between two narrative schemas: the narrative currently being considered and one or more in their mental archive (2014, 189). In Extracts A and B, Fiona, Lucy and Alistair make a narrative interrelation between *Alex Woods* and *The Curious Incident*, mentioning narrative voice and character presentation as points of contact between the works. This interrelation impacts the way the participants describe Alex and is often linked to their positive evaluations of the novel.

Though Fiona, Lucy and Alistair go unchallenged in Extracts A and B, across the group data there is evidence of both agreement and disagreement over the categorisation of Alex as autistic, and participants debate evidence that supports or

challenges this attribution. Therefore, the data provide some relevant insights into the autism prototype held by readers, as this prototype and Alex's position in relation to it are negotiated across turns in the talk. Extract C from Group 4 shows participants disagreeing about the categorisation of Alex as autistic. Daniel and Richard are criticising the novel's one-sided presentation of euthanasia, and Richard suggests that the novel could have better represented the moral complexities of euthanasia if Alex had been more "troubled" by his decision to help Mr Peterson die, instead of being so "certain" it was the right thing to do. The group then moves on to discuss whether Alex was Aspergic.

Extract C: Group 4 (9.48 – 11.08)

- Daniel:** [and I think you know] there were sort of there were sort of moral philosophical questions which could've been brought up but weren't and I I think it was slightly although I think most people go along with the the side that he took (.) I don't think the countervailing arguments got much of a show
- Richard:** but I I mean he's seventeen and his character is naive as well as very clever but I wanted him to be a bit more troubled and err emotionally and morally about it he seemed very certain about this was the right thing to do and therefore his courage was in in the going through that that that process withstanding all the kind of other pressures out there
- Louise:** [he had to fight for that]
- Rachel:** [but it was so logical]
- Sally:** [yes it was logical]
- Rachel:** [it was just Asperger's] totally logical and the bit where it fell apart was when he had that emotion and cried if you got Asperger's truly you wouldn't have cried when Peterson did his speech but sort of purely logical hm
- Richard:** I just found that bit unconvincing and I think it's too [stark really
- Rachel:** [aaah
- Daniel:** I didn't see him as being particularly Asperger's
- Sally:** [I didn't either I didn't at all]
- F?:** [no no no]
- Angus:** [no no]
- Rachel:** [did you not?]
- F?:** [no]
- Sally:** [cause] I thought he was too socially aware he did understand exactly what those lads were doing to bully him
- ?:** yes he did he did
- Sally:** and he knew all the nuances
{...}
- Rachel:** he was very insightful yeah he was yeah yeah
- Louise:** yeah he just was not able to fit in really for his own reasons
- Richard:** yes and there's a sense of innocence about him rather than a sense of disconnection with the world it's it's more just a sense of naivety maybe
- F?:** ohh okay yeah

Rachel suggests that Alex's certainty may have been a result of his "logical" approach, which she regards to be a result of his Asperger's. However, Rachel also suggests that

Alex's emotional behaviour (crying at Mr Peterson's farewell speech) does not support a categorisation of him as "truly" Aspergic. Daniel and Sally disagree with Rachel's categorisation of Alex, and Sally cites Alex's "social awareness" as evidence that Alex is not Aspergic. Rachel concedes that Alex was "insightful," and Richard suggests that Alex was simply naïve rather than exhibiting a "disconnection from the world" (which, presumably, Richard would associate with Asperger's). Across the extract, the participants exhibit broad agreement regarding Alex's character traits (as logical, emotional, socially aware, insightful, innocent, naïve) but disagreement over the extent to which those traits support a reading of Alex as being autistic.

Across the dataset, group participants suggest that Alex's social skills and heightened intelligence match their prototype for an autistic person. When participants categorise Alex as autistic, they describe him as "slightly socially out of it" (Group 1), cite a "lack of communication with people his own age" (Group 2), that he has "no idea how the world works" (Group 4) or that he "can operate more effectively in an adult world than he can with his peers" (Group 6). They also remark on his cognitive skills: his "eye for detail" and "feats of memory" (Group 1), his "insight into some things but not everything" (Group 1), his "clever" and "geeky" manner (Group 2), and his "concentra[tion] on certain topics" (Group 5). Participants suggest that Alex "thinks in a different way" to "everyone else" (Group 5) and remark on his "fixed, ordered expression" (Group 1) as well as his tendency to interpret "everything so literally" (Group 4) and be "unemotional" (Group 1). When Alex is *not* considered to be autistic, readers describe him as "emotionally developed" (Group 6) and socially insightful or regard his character features to be the result of another group membership category, such as his maleness or youthfulness rather than neurobehavioural difference. When debating Alex's autism, five of the groups also mention *The Curious Incident*, which suggests that this textual representation of autism is influential in readers' autism prototype. This corroborates Semino's (2014b, 155) suggestion that literary representations of autism both shape and relate to readers' existing folk models or schemas. It also supports Murray's (2008) claims regarding the strong influence of *The Curious Incident* in public knowledge about autism.

Existing stylistic work on 'mind style' tends to focus on the *textual cues* which contribute to readers' character inferences (e.g., Fowler 1977; Leech and Short 2007). Interestingly, this dataset highlights the way that readers' mind style interpretations may also be influenced by their schema-based narrative interrelations. As readers' narrative schemas are, by definition, partial representations of previously encountered literary works stored in memory (Mason 2014, 187-188), the points of narrative contact identified by readers may or may not be grounded in features of textual style. The reading groups' discussions prompted my own comparative stylistic analysis, set out in Section 4 below, which aimed to ascertain whether there *were* similarities between the styles of the two novels which might (in theory) account for the narrative interrelations and mind style interpretations evident in the data.

A Comparative Discussion of Linguistic and Narratological Features of Mind Style in *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* and *The Curious Incident*

In her work on *The Curious Incident*, Semino argues that Christopher's mind style is created through the combination of explicit characterisation cues, such as his self-presentation and the way he is described by others, and "implicit" characterisation cues evident in the way he uses language, including his use of vocabulary, grammar, figurative language and interactional behaviour (2014a, 282-300). She argues that these features construct a mind style that could lead readers to make inferences about the narrator's social and cognitive abilities that is consistent with their folk psychological schemas about autism (2014a, 279). Semino (2014b) also identifies interactional behaviours as being particularly important in the mind styles of other autistic narrators. I shall examine the same characterisation cues in *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* in order to consider the extent to which the narrative interrelations made by readers could be said to be grounded in similarities in the linguistic styles of the two novels. My analysis will also consider the extent to which the textual features of *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* can account for the way some readers characterised Alex as autistic (e.g. Extracts A-C), whilst others did not (e.g., Extract C). The novels shall henceforth be referred to by the acronyms *TUVAW* and *TCI* for brevity.

Explicit Cues: Self- and Other-Presentation

At first glance, there are some clear similarities between the narrators of *TUVAW* and *TCI*, which may account for readers' sense that there are "points of narrative contact" between the novels (Mason 2014, 189). Both narrators are teenage, male, and growing up in single-parent homes, and both have aspirations to attend university and become scientists. Both novels begin with their narrators caught in compromising situations involving police officers, and both narrators describe interactions with specialists of various kinds – Christopher has a support worker, whilst Alex has a surgeon and a neurologist. Closer examination of the discourse situation of the novels reveals some important differences, however. Fifteen-year-old Christopher begins writing *TCI* as a school exercise and the novel appears to track events in that year of his life (Haddon 2013, 5-6 and 268). *TUVAW* features seventeen-year-old Alex narrating his life from age ten to the present day in order to offer the narratee his version of the dramatic events of his life (Extence 2013, 16-17), so there is a sense of the ageing and progression of his character over a longer period of time.

When a character provides explicit information about him- or herself, Culpeper calls this "self-presentation," and when they provide information about someone else, this is "other-presentation" (2001, 167). Semino (2014a, 282) points out that, in *TCI*, Christopher explicitly mentions his "behavioural problems" (Haddon 2003, 59-60) and makes repeated reference to his exceptional abilities in mathematics and science. Alex's self-presentation (from his position as a seventeen-year-old looking back on his early adolescence) predominantly involves his sense that he is different from other kids of his age. In a humorous passage about "the crime of being different" at

secondary school, Alex breaks potential crimes into the following areas: being poor, being physically different, being mentally different, having unacceptable friends or relatives, and being "gay" – a derogatory slang word meaning "foolish, stupid, socially inappropriate or disapproved of"² – and remarks that he committed "crimes in every category" (Extence 2013, 80-85). He attributes his physical and mental difference to his epilepsy: "my epilepsy meant that I was both physically and mentally different in a very obvious way – I was sick in the body *and* in the mind" and suggests that his time off school had made him seem "unique in that I was the only person who seemed simultaneously too clever *and* too stupid" (84; original emphasis). Alex also self-presents as a voracious reader (72-74), with a particular interest (due to his meteorite accident) in astronomy and neuroscience. Later, aged fifteen and presenting his difference more positively, Alex remarks that without the meteorite-hit he would have been "an entirely different person" with "a different brain – different connections, different functions" (227). He learns to train his mind in order to reduce the severity of his seizures and will conjugate verbs as a distraction technique (6-7). He also self-presents as a keen learner; he spends a year learning German (310) and a month memorising road maps in order to prepare for his journey to Switzerland (352).

Readers also glean a sense of Alex's character through the way other characters describe or react to him. Being "only the second person in recorded history to have been significantly injured by a direct meteorite hit" (Extence 2013, 36), Alex is a minor celebrity, and he often addresses his narratees as though they should have some awareness of his story already (e.g., 17). When Alex interacts with others following an epileptic seizure, the other characters react to him in a way that suggests he is behaving unusually. Upon first meeting Alex who is slumped in his shed recovering from a full seizure, Mr Peterson asks "are you funny in the head or something?" (104), and upon arriving in Dover after Mr Peterson's suicide, Alex has a partial seizure, and policemen describe him as "acting very strangely" (12) and treat him "like some kind of imbecile" (5), later describing him to reporters as "brain damage[d]" (304).

When he has not had a seizure, the other-presentations of Alex criticise his social skills. When Alex is a young teen, Mr Peterson complains that he asks too many questions and is "too weird for words" (Extence 2013, 132). Similarly, when Alex is older, Alex's school-friend Ellie describes him as a "weird, socially retarded brother" (298) with a "supersized brain" (292). Other characters also comment that Alex seems both developed and underdeveloped for his age. The owner of the Dignitas clinic describes Alex as "an innocent" who is in some ways "older than his seventeen years," but in others "much younger" (382). Similarly, a police officer describes Alex as "the most naïve seventeen-year-old he'd ever met in his life" (14).

Thus, there are a number of explicit cues in the novel which map on to the characterisations evident in the reading group talk, particularly this sense that Alex is

2 See the entry "gay, adj., adv., and n." of the *OED Online* (2019).

different from other young people of his age in terms of his intellectual abilities and social behaviours.

Implicit Cues: Interactional Behaviour

Semino argues that an autistic mind style is often created through representations of characters' communicative behaviours, which suggest that they interpret the world in a different way to others and may have problems modelling other peoples' minds (2014a, 297). Specifically, autistic characters are often represented as experiencing "pragmatic failures" in their interactions with others, in which they do not understand "what is meant by what is said" (Thomas 1983, 91; qtd. in Semino 2014b, 142). For readers, such instances can contribute to the sense that a character has communication and socialisation difficulties that accord with their folk psychological knowledge about autism (Semino 2014b, 143). Semino notes that Christopher in *TCI* exhibits 'pragmatic failures' related to the informativeness and relevance of his utterances, unintentional impoliteness, and the interpretation of figurative language. In *TUVAW* there are examples of similar 'pragmatic failures,' particularly when Alex is interacting with people he does not know. For instance, in the excerpt below, ten-year-old Alex's first response infringes the Gricean Maxim of Quantity, as it is not as informative as required (Grice 1975, 45; Semino 2014a, 296):

'Can you tell me your full name?' [A doctor asks]
 'Yes,' I said.
 I thought it was a strange question.
 'Can you tell me *now*, please?' (Extence 2013, 21; original emphasis)

When Alex first meets Mr Peterson, he asks him a series of direct personal questions, which causes Mr Peterson to complain about his impoliteness (121-122). Alex also has problems interpreting figurative language when interacting with Mr Peterson, as in the example below:

'Okay, kid,' [Mr Peterson] prompted. 'So apologize. Knock yourself out.'
 I looked at my mother dubiously.
 'It's a figure of speech,' my mother said. 'It means you should get on with it.'
 'Oh.' (113)

In contrast to *TCI*, however, these kinds of pragmatic failures often occur in cross-cultural communication contexts when Alex is interacting with Mr Peterson, who is American, or when he is a very young boy.

There are also other textual features which suggest that Alex has difficulties with social communication. The extract below is a good illustration of Alex's communicative behaviour as a seventeen-year-old. Alex is being interviewed by two policemen after Mr Peterson's death:

(1) They looked at me for quite a long time without saying anything. (2) I wanted to look away but I thought that might seem rude, so I just kept looking straight back and waited.

(3) 'You know Alex,' Chief Inspector Hearse said finally, 'you've created quite a stir over the past week or so. You've become quite the celebrity...'

(4) Straight away, I didn't like the way this was going. (5) I had no idea what he expected me to say. (6) Some things there's no sensible response to, so I just kept my mouth shut. (7) Then I shrugged, which wasn't the cleverest thing to do, but it's very difficult to do nothing in situations like that.

(8) Chief Inspector Hearse scratched his mole. (9) Then he said: 'You realise that you're in a lot of trouble?'

(10) It might have been a question; it might have been a statement. (11) I nodded anyway, just in case.

(12) 'And you know *why* you're in trouble?'

(13) 'Yes. I suppose so.'

(14) 'You understand this is serious?'

(15) 'Yes.'

(16) Chief Inspector Hearse looked across at Deputy Inspector Cunningham who hadn't said anything yet. (17) Then he looked at me again. (18) 'You know Alex, some of your actions over the past hours suggest otherwise. I think if you realised how serious this was, you'd be a lot more worried than you appear to be. Let me tell you, if I was sitting where you are now, I think I'd be a lot more worried than you appear to be.'

(19) He should have said 'if I *were* sitting where you are now' – I noticed because I already had the subjunctive on my mind – but I didn't correct him. (20) People don't like to be corrected about things like that. (21) That was one of the things Mr Peterson always told me. (22) He said that correcting people's grammar in the middle of a conversation made me sound like a Major Prick.' (Extence 2013, 8-9, sentence numbers are my addition)

Here, Alex appears smart and theoretically a good communicator, but also socially inexperienced. He has a sense of what may or may not seem polite (2, 19-20) and recognises ambiguity in the illocutionary force of the policeman's speech act (10). He also mentally corrects the policeman's grammar, though he refrains from correcting it verbally (19). Yet, despite this metalinguistic awareness, Alex is also unsure of what is required of him in this interview context. In sentences 5-7, he knows he should take a conversational turn but is not sure what it should be. In sentences 16-17, he describes the physical behaviour of the police officers without inferring what their exchange of looks might signal. The other-presentation towards the end of the extract also shows that Mr Peterson criticised his conversational habits (21-22), and the capitalisation of "Major Prick" (as though "Major" was an army title rather than an intensifier) is further evidence of Anglo-American cross-cultural communication problems between the characters.

Overall, Alex occasionally exhibits the kinds of pragmatic failures which Semino identifies in *TCI* and links to an autistic mind style, but Alex's communicative behaviour could also be accounted for by contextual factors other than

neurobehavioural difference. These features could provide some justification for the points of narrative contact readers perceived between the novels, but could also account for the disagreements that are evident in the reading groups' characterisations of Alex.

Implicit Cues: Vocabulary and Grammar

Semino (2014a, 284) suggests that, in *TCI*, Christopher's vocabulary exhibits a combination of "underlexicalisation," which means it is more limited than normal, and "overlexicalisation," meaning that it features an unusually large number of specialised lexical items in particular areas (these terms originate from Fowler 1986). Alex also possesses advanced knowledge in a small number of fields, such as astronomy and neuroscience. This is evident in the technical vocabulary he uses throughout the novel. Here are two examples:

Like many decisions that bypass the neocortex, this turned out to be a poor one.
(Extence 2013, 99; my underlining)

Then I sat on the compost bag, [...] my whole body locked as rigid as the atoms in a carbon nanotube. (101; my underlining)

Semino (2014a, 284-285) contrasts Christopher's overlexicalisation in certain fields with the relative simplicity of his overall vocabulary. She evidences Christopher's underlexicalisation by citing the type-token ratio of the novel. A type-token ratio divides the total number of different words in a corpus by the overall amount of words in the corpus. A higher number indicates a more varied vocabulary, whereas a lower number indicates more repetition in the vocabulary. According to analysis conducted with the corpus software programme Wordsmith (Scott 2016), the type-token ratio of *TCI* is 6.68 (for the 62,000-word text). Semino identifies this as low when compared with an 80,000-word reference corpus of twentieth-century fiction, which has a type-token ratio of 12.09 (Semino 2014a, 284). The type-token ratio for *TUVAW* (also calculated using Wordsmith) is 8.00 (for the 112,500 words of the novel). To facilitate comparison of texts of different lengths, Wordsmith also calculates a Standard Type-Token Ratio per 1,000 words. This also suggests that *TUVAW* (41.57) has a higher type-token ratio than *TCI* (33.30), which indicates that Alex's vocabulary is not as restricted as Christopher's in *TCI*, but that it also displays some simplicity relative to the fiction corpus cited by Semino. Semino (2014a, 285) suggests that a relatively low type-token ratio coupled with overlexicalisation creates an "unevenness" in the character's vocabulary which could contribute to the creation of an autistic mind style, and there seems to be a clear similarity between the styles of the novels here.

This similarity is not maintained via other corpus measures, however. Semino also examines the keywords of *TCI*: words which are 'overused' to the highest level of statistical significance when compared with a reference corpus of imaginative writing. She found that the top five keywords for *TCI* are "and," "I," "because," "father," and "said" (Semino 2014a, 285) and uses these keywords as a way to examine the implicit

characterisation cues in more depth. She suggests that the high occurrence of conjunctions such as 'and' and 'because' are indicative of Christopher's somewhat 'child-like' perspective, and his marked concern with causal explanations (Semino 2014a, 286-287). The use of 'I' is identified as being unusually high, even when compared with a different corpus of first-person fiction which, Semino surmises, indicates that Christopher is "unusually focused on himself" (2014a, 290). Similarly, the high frequency of the reporting verb 'said' indicates underlexicalisation in reporting verbs, which may reinforce the perception that Christopher has communicative difficulties (2014a, 293-294). Combined, Semino (2014a) suggests that these implicit cues could be used by readers to infer an autistic spectrum condition in the narrator.

In order to compare the vocabularies of the two novels, I created a keyword list in the corpus tool AntConc (Anthony 2018). When compared with *TUVAW*, the words which are overused to the highest level of statistical significance in *TCI* are still the words 'and,' 'said,' 'because,' and 'father,' which indicates that these distinct features of *TCI* are not replicated in the language of *TUVAW*. Interestingly, the top words which are overused in *TUVAW*, when compared with *TCI*, include the words: 'as,' 'that,' and 'point.' Whilst Christopher relies on the coordinating conjunction 'and' or the relatively basic subordinating conjunction 'because' (Semino 2014a, 286), Alex's narration uses more complex subordinating conjunctions which embed detail into phrases and construct conceptual relationships across clauses (e.g., "as big as a bus" [Extence 2013, 224]; "as soon as I started to run" [99]; "I realized that ..." [passim]). This suggests that the voices of the two characters differ quite markedly; Alex's narration is more syntactically complex than Christopher's. Similarly, when Alex uses the word 'point,' it is often an abstract noun referring to an aspect of an argument or sequence of events (e.g., "The main point" [Extence 2013, 45], "a related point" [93], "at this point" [passim]). When Christopher in *TCI* uses the word 'point,' it is usually as a verb ("pointed" [Haddon 2003, 171]) or a concrete noun (e.g., "the points of the fork" [1]). The higher frequency of 'point' in Alex's narrative relates to the different discourse situations of the novels. Alex is offering his account of his unusual life story and presents events as stages in an overall argumentative progression designed to persuade the narratee of his version of events. In comparison, Christopher's narration is more sequential than argumentative. On the one hand, these keywords suggest that the narrators adopt quite different positions in relation to their own stories, and exhibit quite distinct worldviews. On the other hand, one might argue that Christopher's relative overuse of 'because' and Alex's relative overuse of 'point' are both suggestive of a preoccupation with explanation, which may form a point of narrative contact between the works for some readers.

Summary

In summary, there are some similarities between the textual style of *TUVAW* and that of *TCI*, particularly in terms of the 'unevenness' in its vocabulary, the instances of 'pragmatic failure' in the communicative behaviour of the narrator, and the self-

presentation of the narrator as 'different' in terms of his intellectual and social skills. These textual features provide some justification for the narrative interrelations evident in the reading group data and offer some textual explanation for readers' perceptions of an autistic mind style in *TUVAW*. As Semino (2014a, 288; 301) notes, readers can generate a realistic impression of mind style from quite inconsistent cues, so even the occasional occurrence of the features she identifies might be enough to activate a reader's autism schema and influence their characterisation processes. However, my analysis has also identified notable differences between *TUVAW* and *TCI*. Alex's narration is syntactically more complex than Christopher's, his 'pragmatic failures' can be linked to cross-cultural communication difficulties involved in interacting with his American friend, and his self-presentations identify his epilepsy as a key factor in his idiosyncratic development. These features could account for the disagreements about Alex's character that are evident in the reading group discussions and offer justification for readings of Alex that do not characterise him as autistic.

Conclusion: Reading Difference

This article has examined a series of similar character judgements made across six reading group discussions of the same novel. The character judgements were striking because they involved readers attributing an autistic spectrum disorder to the narrator of a novel which contains no explicit mention of autism. From a stylistic perspective, the readers were debating the mind style of the character: their impression of his worldview and conceptual habits. Within the groups, there was often disagreement about the extent to which the narrator could be regarded as autistic, with readers citing different evidence in order to support or reject this characterisation.

Closer examination of the talk of the reading groups indicates that readers' attributions of autism to the narrator were part of their category-based interpretations of his character, particularly characterisations of Alex as different from prototypical instances of other categories, such as that of a teenage boy. The attributions were also often closely related to claims about points of narrative contact with *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. This narrative interrelation has interesting implications for stylistic studies of mind style because it suggests that readers' perceptions of a mind style could be influenced by their 'narrative schemas,' which may feature only partial representations of the textual and linguistic cues of particular works (Mason 2014).

In order to investigate the extent to which readers' narrative interrelations could be said to reflect stylistic similarities between the two texts, I conducted a comparative stylistic analysis of *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* and *The Curious Incident*. It was possible to identify a number of similarities between the character presentations of the two novels: both narrators exhibited the 'pragmatic failures' which Semino (2014b) associates with autistic mind style. Also, both novels combined a relatively limited overall vocabulary with the overlexicalisation of specific fields, which represents the narrators' specialist knowledge in a narrow range of subjects. Keywords in the novels ('because' in *The Curious Incident* and 'point' in *The Universe*

Versus Alex Woods) could also be interpreted to suggest that both narrators are concerned with developing or articulating explanations of their experiences. The reading group data corroborates Semino's (2014a) claim that these kinds of stylistic features could be enough to lead readers to make inferences about the narrator's social and cognitive abilities consistent with their folk psychological schemas about autism.

However, on other measures, I would be unwilling to describe much of the style of *The Universe Versus Alex Woods* as very similar to *The Curious Incident*. The discourse situations projected by the novels differ in terms of the temporal and rhetorical position of the narrators, and there is evidence that Alex's narration involves much more syntactic complexity than Christopher's. It is entirely possible to account for many of Alex's communicative behaviours and overlexicalisations with reference to other aspects of his character, rather than assuming that he is autistic.

It remains interesting, therefore, that autism was mentioned in all of the reading group discussions, and this surely indicates the role of socio-cultural context in mind style interpretation. As noted in Section 1, many scholars have observed the prevalence of ideas about autistic spectrum disorders within Western popular culture and literature since the late 20th century. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the reading groups can be regarded as communities of practice: people who "come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 464; see also Peplow 2016). During the course of this endeavour, "ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short – practices – emerge" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 464). This naturalistic discussion data offers a snapshot into a prevalent way of 'reading' difference in the early 2010s. The data highlights the way in which linguistic and narratological presentations of mind style might interact with the narrative interrelations and group membership categorisation processes specific to a particular community of readers.

Works Cited

- Anthony, Lawrence. "AntConc (Version 3.5.7)." [Computer Software]. Tokyo, Japan: Waseda University, 2018. Available from: <http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/>
- Bartlett, Frederic C. *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*. 1932. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Bates, Gordon. "Autism in Fiction and Autobiography." *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* 16 (2010): 47-52. DOI:10.1192/apt.bp.108.005660.
- Benwell, Bethan. "'A Pathetic and Racist and Awful Character': Ethnomethodological Approaches to the Reception of Diasporic Fiction." *Language and Literature* 18.3 (2009): 300-315. DOI:10.1177/0963947009105855.
- Bockting, Ineke. "Mind Style as an Interdisciplinary Approach to Characterisation in Faulkner." *Language and Literature* 3.3 (1994): 157-174. DOI:10.1177/096394709400300301.
- Culpeper, Jonathan. *Language and Characterisation*. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001.

- Draaisma, Douwe. "Stereotypes of Autism." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences* 364.1522 (2009): 1475-1480. DOI:10.1098/rstb.2008.0324.
- Eckert, Penelope, and Sally McConnell-Ginet. "Think Practically and Look Locally: Language and Gender as Community-Based Practice." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21 (1992): 461-490. DOI:10.1146/annurev.an.21.100192.002333.
- Extence, Gavin. *The Universe Versus Alex Woods*. London: Hodder and Staughton, 2013.
- Fowler, Roger. *Linguistics and the Novel*. London: Methuen, 1977.
- Fowler, Roger. *Linguistic Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Greenwell, Bill. "The Curious Incidence of Novels about Asperger's Syndrome." *Children's Literature in Education* 35 (2004): 271-284. DOI:10.1023/B:CLID.0000041783.90370.14.
- Grice, Herbert Paul. "Logic and Conversation." *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. Eds. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan. New York: Academic Press, 1975. 41-58.
- Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. London: Vintage, 2003.
- Hall, Alice. *Literature and Disability*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Hermeston, Rod. "Towards a Critical Stylistics of Disability." *Journal of Language and Discrimination* 1.1 (2017): 34-60. DOI:10.1558/jld.34022.
- Leech, Geoffrey N. and Mick Short. *Style in Fiction*. London: Longman, 1981.
- Leech, Geoffrey N. and Mick Short. *Style in Fiction*. 2nd ed. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007.
- Margolin, Uri. "Cognitive Science, the Thinking Mind, and Literary Narrative." *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*. Ed. David Herman. Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2003. 271-294.
- Mason, Jessica. "Narrative." *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*. Eds. Peter Stockwell and Sara Whiteley. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 179-195.
- Murray, Stuart. *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008.
- Myers, Greg. "Stylistics and 'Reading in Talk.'" *Language and Literature* 18.3 (2009): 338-344. DOI:10.1177/0963947009105857.
- OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2019. Web. 7 August 2019.
- Peplow, David. *Talk About Books: A Study of Reading Groups*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Peplow, David, Joan Swann, Paola Trimarco, and Sara Whiteley. *The Discourse of Reading Groups: Integrating Cognitive and Sociocultural Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Rosch, Eleanor. "Principles of Categorisation." *Cognition and Categorisation*. Eds. Eleanor Rosch and Barbara Lloyd. Hillsdale, MI: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1978. 27-48.
- Schank, Roger, and Robert Abelson. *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding: An Inquiry into Human Knowledge Structures*. Hillsdale, MI: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1977.
- Scott, Mike. "WordSmith Tools version 7." [Computer Software]. Stroud: Lexical Analysis Software, 2016.

- Semino, Elena. "A Cognitive Stylistic Approach to Mind Style in Narrative Fiction." *Cognitive Stylistics: Language and Cognition in Text Analysis*. Eds. Elena Semino and Jonathan Culpeper. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002. 95-122.
- Semino, Elena. "Mind Style 25 Years on." *Style* 41.2 (2007): 153-203.
- Semino, Elena. "Language, Mind and Autism in Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*." *Linguistics in Literary Studies: Interfaces, Encounters, Transfers*. Eds. Monika Fludernik and Daniel Jacob. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014a. 279-303.
- Semino, Elena. "Pragmatic Failure, Mind Style and Characterisation in Fiction about Autism." *Language and Literature* 23.2 (2014b): 141-158. DOI: 10.1177/0963947014526312.
- Semino, Elena, and Jonathan Culpeper. *Cognitive Stylistics: Language and Cognition in Text Analysis*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002.
- Stockwell, Peter. *Cognitive Poetics*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Stockwell, Peter. *Texture: A Cognitive Aesthetics of Reading*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
- Swann, Joan, and Daniel Allington. "Reading Groups and the Language of Literary Texts: A Case Study in Social Reading." *Language and Literature* 18.3 (2009): 247-264. DOI:10.1177/0963947009105852.
- Thomas, Jenny. "Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure." *Applied Linguistics* 4.2 (1983): 91-112. DOI:10.1093/applin/4.2.91 [accessed 25 February 2020].
- Whiteley, Sara. "Text World Theory, Real Readers and Emotional Responses to *The Remains of the Day*." *Language and Literature* 20.1 (2011a): 23-42. DOI: 10.1177/0963947010377950.
- Whiteley, Sara. "Talking about 'An Accommodation:' The Implications of Discussion Group Data for Community Engagement and Pedagogy." *Language and Literature* 20.3 (2011b): 236-256. DOI:10.1177/0963947011413562.
- Whiteley, Sara, and Patricia Canning. "Reader Response Research in Stylistics." *Language and Literature* 26.2 (2017): 71-87. DOI:10.1177/0963947017704724.

Appendix

Transcription Conventions

(.) short pause

?: because the researcher was not present during the recordings, it is sometimes difficult to identify the speaker of minimal contributions, so their turns are marked '?'

{ } researcher's comment

{...} turns omitted from the extract for brevity

[] indicates overlapping turns

All participants' names are pseudonyms.

