

# Owning the languages of autism

© 2011 Martijn Dekker <[martijn@inlv.org](mailto:martijn@inlv.org)>



**AUTSCAPE**

2011 "Owning Autism"

# I. Language observations



# Person-first language

- English
- Dutch
- Scandinavian languages
- Finnish
- Romance languages

Person-first language is not a big issue in most countries/languages. But in many countries "Aspies" want to separate themselves from the word "autism" altogether.

\* Scandinavia: Gillberg is a major proponent of PF lang. Katja reports that recently people use terms like "people with autism spectrum disorders/conditions".

\* Finnish: "person with autism" is grammatically impossible, have to say "person who has autism". The politically correct soon give this up.



# Subtle suffix variation

“aut-” is an international word, so are the suffixes, so we can compare usages between languages.  
suffix -ist: like adherent of some ideology? whereas -ic connotates a condition.

- aut-ism, aut-ist, aut-ist-ic
- Connotations of suffixes -ist vs. -ic
- English: autistic for noun & adjective
- Italian: autistico (autista = driver, chauffeur)
- many other languages use ‘autist’ (for noun, adjective or both)



# From science to slur

- idiot, imbecile, moron
- retard
- autist

**Wikipedia:** In the early 1900s, [Dr. Henry H. Goddard](#) proposed a classification system for mental retardation based on the Binet-Simon concept of [mental age](#). Individuals with the lowest mental age level (less than three years) were identified as *idiots*; *imbeciles* had a mental age of three to 7 years, and *morons* had a mental age of seven to ten years.<sup>[7]</sup>

Especially popular in America. (IQ < 70)

In Dutch I have heard at times "wat ben jij nou voor een autist" (what kind of autist are you), "stomme autist!" (you stupid autist), etc.



## 2. Connotations and their (ab)uses



# Connotations

- “sensitive” vs. “averse”
- “empathy” vs. “understanding”
- “increase” vs. “epidemic”
- “repetitive” vs. “rhythmic”
- “behaviour” vs. “expression”
- ...



# Visual connotations



(Click the picture to see the video on YouTube.)

Visuals can also have connotations. For instance, the connotation in this video is that the kid is obviously insane (until shown otherwise).



# In politics (I)

- **[nl]** [...] doet Nederland internationaal “mee” als actief onderdeel van Europa (D66 en “aarzelend” VVD en CDA), OF voert Nederland een introvert, autistisch beleid (SP en PVV).  
(Peter Hagedoorn, “Linksrechts denken frustreert formatie”, [pluspost.nl](http://pluspost.nl), 20 Jun 2010)
- **[it]** “Una classe politica autistica e un’opinione pubblica afasica.” (Oana Parvan, characterising Romanian society in “Il suicidio come forma di protesta in Romania e in Tunisia”, [th-roug.eu](http://th-roug.eu), 25 Jan 2011)
- **[de]** “Die Bundesregierung betreibt eine autistische Politik” (Günther Jonitz, president of the Berlin Chamber of Physicians, about planned federal government reforms in the health system, [freitag.de](http://freitag.de), 17 Jan 2003)



# In politics (2)

## France: 'autistic Tories have castrated UK in Europe'

guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 4 November 2009 21.30 GMT

Speaking to the Guardian, Pierre Lellouche, France's described as "pathetic" the Tories' EU plans announced they would not succeed "for a minute". He said: "They have one line and they just bizarre sense of autism."

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article6904854.ece>

However, although the minister said today his remarks were "clumsy", he claimed that the term, which is colloquially used in French to refer to a stubborn person who does not listen, is a common term of political abuse in France.

"Pierre Lellouche fully understands the emotion that has been aroused and bitterly regrets that he may have wounded people," said Franck Allisio, his spokesman. "The words used obviously do not reflect the substance of his thought and the clumsiness was completely unintended."

"In French, the term autistic has been totally trivialised through overuse. President Sarkozy is called autistic every day," said the spokesman. "I understand that in English that this word could shock. That was a glitch. It was a misunderstanding."

- “Autism” as a term of political abuse is especially common in France
- Connection with dominance of psychodynamic theory?



# Autism vs. Asperger

- Seen as different conditions in several countries
- “Aspies” don’t identify with autistics
- Distinction lacks scientific validity
- Is this because “autistic” is perceived as a slur?



# 3. Taking ownership



# Language and behaviour

- Language and (social) behaviour are closely intertwined
- Our social behaviour is influenced by others' language
- We can influence others' behaviour using language



# Naming our condition

- Either find a new name to replace “autism” and advocate its use
- Or reclaim/redefine “autism” (cf. gay community)
- Or live with increasing prejudice due to autism becoming a slur
- Or...?



# Inversing “limitations”

Say you have to do a job interview, how to describe yourself?

- “In his own world” ↔ “Can dive deeply into specialist topics”
- “Literal” ↔ “Precise”
- “Aloof” ↔ “Independent”
- ...



# Triad of advantages

## 1. Enhanced communication

- Direct, precise, literal
- Cooperative monologue

## 2. Increased social independence

- Social honesty
- Independent thought

## 3. Dive deeply into specialisms

- Acute eye for details
- Perseverance

This is what you might get if you play a semantic game with the “[triad of impairments](#)” by turning all the impairments on their heads to reveal the other side of the coin.

