

*Workshop on Corpus Linguistic Applications*  
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# The discourse presentation of autism in the UK press

## A case of critical corpus lexicography

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**Project: *Portrayals of Autism in the British Press 2011-2020***

(Karaminis et al., 2022, Maden-Weinberger et al., 2021)

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# Core Issues and Clarifications

# A critical look at existing terms (1)

Corpus	-based -driven -assisted	----- Critical	Discourse Analysis Discourse Studies
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These terms may lead to misconceptions that CL merely:

- helps carry out pre-CL (text-based) DA techniques.
- provides an initial layer of automated/quantitative analyses ...
- ... which are then followed by trad. DA analyses.

(See also Gabrielatos, 2009; Gabrielatos & Duguid, 2014, 2015)

# A critical look at existing terms (2)

Method		Objective	
Corpus	-based -driven -assisted	---- Critical	Discourse Analysis Discourse Studies

Discourse analysis (critical or otherwise) is the objective, which is achieved via corpus approaches and techniques.

**Discourse-Oriented Corpus Studies**

(Conrad, 2002; Virtanen, 2009)

# Qualitative vs. Impressionistic

Qualitative Analysis is:

Systematic

- Based on an explicit taxonomy of qualitative labels.

Principled

- Labels are informed by an existing body of knowledge (theory) and the relevant context.

Quantifiable

- Labels can be counted and frequencies can be analysed statistically.
- The study can provide precise quantitative information.

Replicable

- Other researchers should get the same results if using the same data, annotation taxonomy, and analytical settings and processes.

# Discourse Analysis Approaches: A sketch (1)

	Close Reading	Distant Reading	Content Analysis
Number of texts	Small	Large	Small
Type of reading	Detailed Nuanced	None (eyeballing)	Detailed Nuanced
Quantification	Yes (but unreliable)	Yes (but unreliable)	Yes (but unreliable)

(see Gillings & Hardie, 2022)

# Discourse-Oriented Corpus Studies

Core tenet of DOCS:

The critical examination of lexicogrammatical and discorsal patterns in context can help **uncover attitudes towards particular entities** (e.g. individuals, groups, issues).

- NB. In DOCS, *critical* denotes adopting a questioning, evidence-based approach, rather than adhering to particular sociopolitical or critical theories (see Chilton, 2012; Fjørtoft, 2013; Peters et al., 2006).

The usual **starting point** for accessing these patterns is the identification of relevant lexis via automated analyses:

- Collocation / Word Sketches
- Keyness



# Critical Lexicography

- “Ideologically positioned meaning is central to the concerns of critical lexicography.”
- **Focus:** “The meanings of words which denote, represent, or reflect politicized concepts and phenomena – ideologically loaded items, totemic and socioculturally significant.”
- “Such words have been the frequent focus of linguistic investigations more widely, for example in corpus-led studies from a discourse analytic perspective, or sociological and cultural studies.”

(Moon, 2014: 85)

# Lexicography and DOCS

## Approach 1: Lexicography **informing** DOCS

- Dictionary definitions inform DOCS focus and/or are contrasted with DOCS findings.

## Approach 2: **DOCS as Lexicography**

- DOCS techniques are seen as lexicographic work:
  - *emerging definitions* (e.g. Gabrielatos, 2011; Moon, 2014).
- Can incorporate Approach 1:
  - *expected vs. unexpected* findings (e.g. Krishnamurthy, 1996).

# (Co)Text and Context

- Contextual knowledge can inform:
  - The focus of a study.
  - The interpretation of results.
- Relevant contextual knowledge can be derived from:
  - Researchers' experience.
  - Targeted background reading.
  - Initial corpus analysis (Gabrielatos et al., 2012)
  - The texts/samples analysed (Brown & Yule, 1982)

# Discourse Analysis Approaches: A sketch (2)

	Close Reading	Distant Reading	Content Analysis	Condensed Reading
Number of texts	Small	Large	Small	Large
Type of reading	Detailed Nuanced	No ne (eyeballing)	Detailed Nuanced	Detailed Nuanced
Quantification	Yes (but unreliable)	Yes (but unreliable)	Yes (but unreliable)	Yes

(see Gillings & Hardie, 2022)

(Gabrielatos, 2005)

# The Role of Theory

Theoretical frameworks/concepts/categories can inform:

- The focus of a study.
- The annotation (coding) scheme.
- Annotation decisions.
- The interpretation of results.

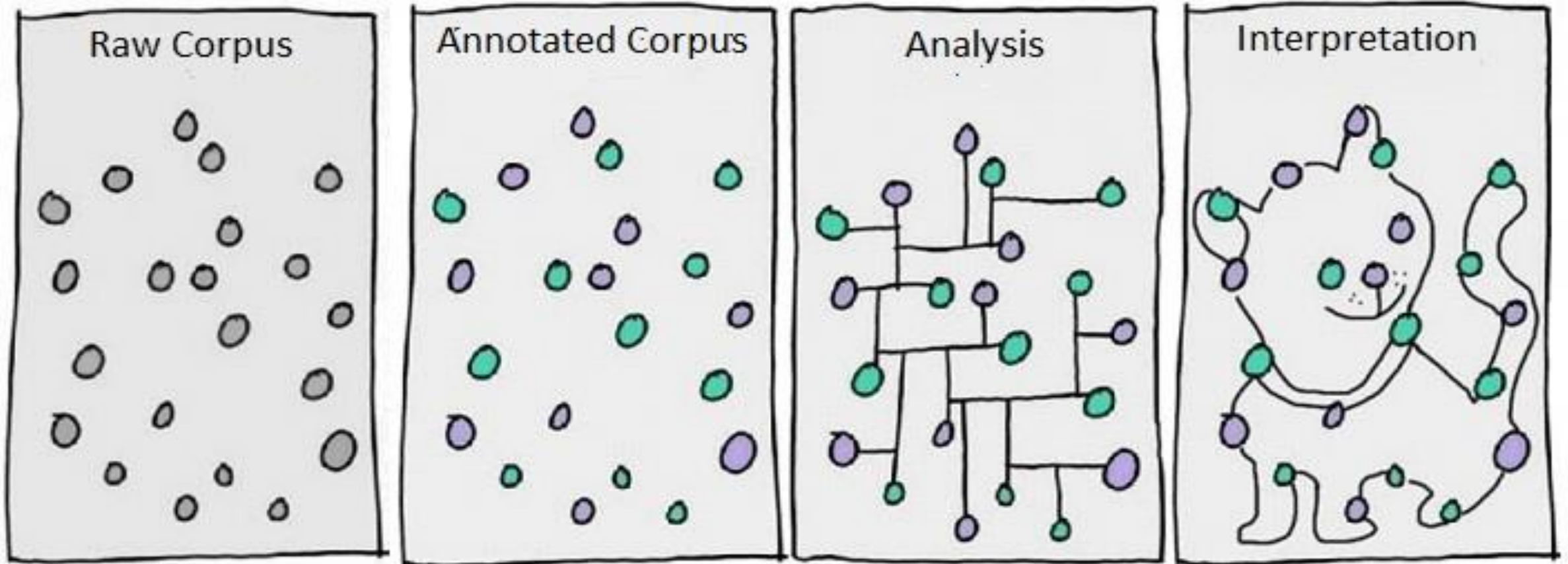
# Theory and DOCS: Words of Caution

Informing theories, particularly sociopolitical ones, are useful to the extent that they are based on systematic research and are approached critically rather than ‘applied’.

Otherwise, they can have a Procrustean influence:

- The focus of a study may be limited to concepts or issues that the theory recognises.
- The annotation scheme may be limited to categories that the theory recognises.
- The interpretation of results may be skewed/biased.

# Data, Theory and Interpretation: An irreverent sketch



(Gabrielatos, 2015 - adapted from MacLeod, 2014)

# *Portrayals of Autism in the British Press 2011-2020*

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# Approach

## Critical discourse studies as critical lexicography

The results of the corpus analysis can be ...

- contrasted to dictionary and/or technical definitions  
(e.g. Krishnamurthy, 1996 , Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008)
- used to formulate emerging definitions of the relevant issues or actors  
(Gabrielatos, 2011, 2021, 2022)

# Research Questions

- How is autism represented in the British press? Which perceptions and attitudes do autism portrayals in the British press reveal?
- How have portrayals of autism changed over time during the last decade?
- How does reporting style, which reflects the educational level and socioeconomic status of the readership, influence the portrayal of autism? How do portrayals of autism differ between 'broadsheets' and 'tabloids'?
- How does political orientation influence portrayals of autism in individual newspapers? How do portrayals of autism differ between newspapers perceived to be left- or right-leaning?

# Contextual Analysis: Sources

## **Six general online dictionaries**

- *Cambridge, Collins, Longman, Macmillan, Merriam-Webster, Oxford*

## **Technical definitions: Deficit Approach**

- Autism Diagnosis Criteria: DSM-5  
<https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-diagnosis-criteria-dsm-5>

## **Technical definitions: Diversity Approach**

- National Autistic Society (<https://www.autism.org.uk>)
- Autistica (<https://www.autistica.org.uk>)

# Contextual Analysis: Comorbidities

- Dyslexia, dyspraxia, insomnia, anxiety, depressions, OCD, epilepsy, learning disabilities  
(NHS, <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/other-conditions>)
- heart disease, diabetes, stroke, Parkinson's disease, allergies, gastro-intestinal disorders and autoimmune conditions, sleep disorders, obesity, diabetes, mental health conditions  
(Autistica, <https://www.autistica.org.uk/downloads/files/Autistica-Action-Briefing-Other-Co-Occurring-Conditions.pdf>)

# Corpus Compilation

Texts: Type & Focus	Newspaper articles mentioning autism or autistic individuals.
Texts: Sources	10 national British newspapers, and their Sunday editions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <i>Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, Daily Star, Daily Telegraph, Guardian, Independent, Observer, Sun, Times</i></li></ul>
Time Period	10 years (2011-2020)
Database	ProQuest European Newsstream
Query	<i>autism* OR autistic* OR Asperger* OR aspergic* OR Aspie? OR ASD OR neurodiver* OR (“on the spectrum” NOT “on the spectrum of”)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Developed following the RQTR process (Gabrielatos 2007).</li></ul>

# Corpus and Subcorpora

Articles: *24,000*

Words: *19 million*

Sub-corpora:

- per newspaper
- per year
- per period: early (2011-14), middle (2015-17), recent (2018-20)
- per reporting style: broadsheets, tabloids
- per political orientation: right-leaning, left-leaning

# Analysis: Settings & Processes

Examination of strong, dependable and frequent collocations:

- Corpus tools: WordSmith Tools 8 (and Sketch Engine)
- Collocation span: 5L-5R
- Over sentence boundaries (Krishnamurthy, 2006: 597; Phillips, 1989: 28-30; Sinclair, 1991: 111-112, 117, Stubbs, 1995: 246).
- $MI \geq 3$  (Hunston, 2002: 71)
- $LL \geq 15.13$  ( $p \leq 0.0001$ ) (Rayson et al., 2004; see also Gabrielatos, 2018: 240-245; Wilson 2013: 8)
- Ranked by joint frequency
- Semantic Preference analysis: collocates grouped thematically (Baker, 2004, Baker et al., 2008)
- Discourse Prosody analysis: manual annotation of random corpus samples of 100 instances of collocates in semantic preference groups

Results so far



# What is autism?

Collocations of *autism* and/or *autistic* reflect a blend of 'deficit' and 'diversity' approaches:

- *developmental, common, complex, lifelong, genetic, challenging, neurological*
- *disability, disorder, condition*
- [manifests in] *difficulties, problems, special needs, issues, challenges*
- [affects] *social interaction, behaviour, communication, sensory experiences*

# Comorbidities

Autism is mentioned together with:

- *learning disabilities, ADHD*
- *schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, psychiatric conditions, dementia, Tourette's syndrome*
- *epilepsy, cerebral palsy, diabetes, asthma, multiple sclerosis*

# Who is autistic?

- *son, boy, child, adults*
- Only from 2015 onwards is *girl* a collocate of *autism*
- Since 2018: *daughter, babies, students, pupils, teenagers*

# Semantic Preferences

Family	<i>mother, father, son, daughter</i>
Age	<i>boy, schoolboy, girl, teen</i>
Gender	<i>woman, females, man</i>
Medical	<i>diagnosed, condition, syndrome, disorder</i>
Comorbidities	<i>HDAD, learning difficulties, Down's, palsy</i>
Gradations	<i>high, severely, partially, functioning</i>
Treatment	<i>care, therapy</i>
Predicament	<i>struggling, challenges, bullied, disadvantaged</i>
Awareness	<i>raising, understand, organisation</i>
Support	<i>care, carer, charity, help, protect</i>

# Focus on Family / Age / Gender Semantic Preference Groups

BOY, SCHOOLBOY, LAD, SON, GRANDSON

GIRL, SCHOOLGIRL, DAUGHTER, GRANDDAUGHTER

FATHER, DAD, GRANDFATHER, GRANDDAD

MOTHER, MUM, GRANDMOTHER

- Including plural and possessive forms.

# Agency

## Autistic individual presented as having agency

- AN 11-year-old girl with autism has raised hundreds of pounds to help young people with the condition learn to swim. [*Daily Mirror*, April 2017]

## No agency – attribute of carer

- He also established the Strategic Autism Initiative, which he ran with Polly Tommey, a British mother with an autistic son. (*Independent*, May 2018)

## No agency – carer acts as representative

- I am the mother of a 45-year-old daughter who is autistic. My daughter was born into a social structure of others whose rules, mores and behaviours make little sense to her. [*Daily Mail*, November 2016]

# Burden

- Having spent much of her childhood as a carer to her disabled father, the discovery of her son's autism was, Lucy says, **a heavy blow**. [*Daily Mail*, July 2011]
- The call centre worker will **give up his £14,000-a-year job to volunteer for charities and help Kate care for their autistic son and daughter**, aged six and three. [*Daily Mirror*, September 2018]
- One so-called child development specialist, Bruno Bettelheim, even compared the mothers of autistic children to Nazi concentration camp guards. I was appalled; it had to be **hard enough to raise a child with such a complex condition**, without being apportioned the blame for it. [*Telegraph*, October 2015]

# Comorbidities

- More **mental illness** 'in children of older dads': Greater risk of **autism**, **ADHD** and **schizophrenia**. [*Guardian*, February 2014]
- Of my children, twins Lorie and Mirie, 21, Nikita, 19, Osborn, 18, and Pippa, 15, are all **autistic**, while my oldest daughter Jamie, 25, has **autistic tendencies**. In addition, their sister Kacie, 22, is **severely dyslexic**, and Pippa and Osborn also have **cerebral palsy**. [*Express*, November 2016]
- An autistic boy with a **damaged oesophagus** that made it difficult for him to swallow died after choking on a piece of beef while eating his school lunch. [*Telegraph*, May 2012]
- She said three of her children have epilepsy and that her son, Mark, 16, has severe autism and **epilepsy**. [*Express*, September 2019]



# Treatment / Cure

Expressed directly or indirectly (e.g. via polysemous lexis).

- Thanks to special classes and **therapies** and indeed her father's tireless work raising autism awareness, Mia learned to speak when she was seven years old and eventually she made the transition into regular school. (*Daily Mail*, May 2018)
- We are meeting in a west London cafe to talk about her new project, a centre for the **treatment** of children with autism. (*Times*, August 2018)

# Causes

- **Obese women** are nearly 50 per cent more likely to have a child with autism compared with normal weight mothers, according to a study from China. [*Daily Mail*, October 2015]
- **BABIES whose mums get flu while pregnant** have a 40 per cent increased risk of autism, a study suggests. [*Sun*, June 2017]
- Dr Allan Pacey, professor of andrology at Sheffield University, said: "We've known there are risks from **older fathers**, with increased risks of autism and schizophrenia, and that is why we have a cutoff for sperm donors. [*Telegraph*, July 2017]
- One study in 2001 showed mathematicians have higher rates of autism than those in other jobs, and another in 1997 showed that **children and grandchildren of engineers** were more likely to be on the autistic spectrum. Both mothers and fathers of children with autism have been shown to display excellent attention to detail in tests. [*Daily Mail*, November 2011]

# Discourses: Similarities and Differences (1)

- In all four semantic preference groups the most frequent discourse relates to **comorbidities**.
- Discourses relating to **research results on causes** are associated with **FATHER**.
  - Mainly regarding the fathers' age.
  - About 13 times more frequent than MOTHER.
- Discourses relating to **diagnosis** only refer to **MOTHER**.
  - No such discourses observed in the FATHER sample.

# Discourses: Similarities and Differences (2)

- Discourses on **comorbidities** are twice more frequent in **BOY** than **GIRL**.
  - **BOY** also attracts discourses of comorbidity twice as often as **FATHER** and **MOTHER**.
- Discourses on **socialisation** are only present in **GIRL**
  - But only represent about one in ten instances (8.38%).
- Autistic **girls** are discussed **collectively** 5 times more frequently than boys.
- **Differences** between boys and girls are only discussed in **GIRL** (i.e. when girls are the topic).

# Emerging Definition: autistic individuals ...

- Are children (esp. boys).
- Are cared for by parent(s) - esp. mother
  - 5 times more frequent collocates than fathers.
- Do not represent themselves (regardless of age).
  - Their carers speak and act for them.
  - Presented as 'attributes' of carer.
  - They are spoken about.
- Are disadvantaged.
- Are a 'burden'/'problem' for carers/society.
- Are the reason for carer's activism/advocacy.

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