AN AUTISTIC CONLANG AS A NEURODIVERGENT RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Gideon Henner ✉ gideon.henner@gmail.com 💻 https://autistic.conlang.org/

Abstract

- I created the autistic conlang *Laut* as part of a neurodiversity studies project
- Conlanging as research method
- **Aim:** demonstrate the following tenet of critical neurodiversity studies' understanding of autism:
- Supposed autistic speech/communication disorders constitute **differences** from arbitrary normativity, **not deficits**

Neurodiversity Studies Background

Two opposing paradigms on neurodivergence (such as autism)

- **Pathology paradigm** (Walker 2021) attributes any issues in **cross-neurotype communication** – e.g. between autistics and non-autistics - to autistics' supposed language/communication deficits
- **Neurodiversity paradigm** attributes this to a dispositional mismatch => blame societally assigned to the autistic; this is called the **Double Empathy Problem** (Milton 2012)

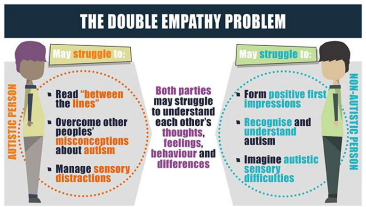


Image by Crompton, DeBrabander, Heasman, Milton, and Sasson - https://kids.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frym.2021.554875, CC BY 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=112489317

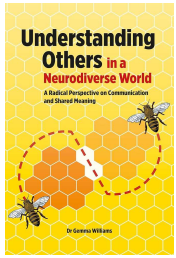
Research Question & Aims

Demonstrate how the Double Empathy Problem (DEP) manifests in Cross-Neurotype Communication (CNC) linguistically => **How can one do this through a conlang?**

- ➢ Reframe CNC as cross-cultural communication by way of the autistic conlang *Laut* (and its con-culture)
- ➢ Highlight differences between *Laut* and English, standing in for differences between autistic and neurotypical communication
- ➢ Refute CNC difficulties are based on autistic deficits by showing they are instead due to language-use differences/norms

Methodology

a) Based on neurodiversity-affirming research on communication and language
b) Take an autistic language "deficit" (=language difference) => make it a part of the language (feature!)
c) Pick & mix features – from both features that exist in natural languages, and invented ones (but ANADEW!)



Gemma Williams' above book (2024; cf. References) provides a good summary of neurodiversity-affirming research on autism and communication

Medium

Why use a conlang?

- Conlangs are ideal to interrogate neuronormative communication because many normative preconceptions are built into language and thus invisible
- Investigating Cross-Neurotype Communication dynamics using a natural language (natlang) is stymied by the language's cultural baggage, history and norms, an obstacle avoided by a conlang.

Limitations

- Creator's background always colours the conlang, despite e.g. this conlang's focus on non-Anglophone features
- Aim not to create a language for autistics to use, but to highlight real-world CNC dynamics

References

Blackburn, Catherine. 2023. 'A systematic review of interventions for echolalia in autistic children', *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 58, pp. 1977–1993, doi:10.1111/1460-6984.12931

Cohn, Eli and Matthew Harrison and Keith McVilly. 2023. ''Let me tell you, I see echolalia as being a part of my son's identity': Exploring echolalia as an expression of neurodiversity from a parental perspective', *Autism* 28.5, doi:10.1177/13623613231195795.

Henner, Gideon. 2025. 'The Laut Language—a Beginner's Guide', *Fiat Lingua*, https://fiatlingua.org/2026/03/ [accessed 10 April 2026]

Hisaizumi, Megumi, and Digby Tantam. 2024. 'Enhanced sensitivity to pitch perception and its possible relation to language acquisition in autism', *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, 9, pp. 1-20, doi:10.1177/23969415241248618.

McCann, Joanne, and Sue Peppé. 2003. 'Prosody in autism spectrum disorders: a critical review', *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 38.4, pp. 325-350), doi:10.1080/1368282031000154204.

Milton, Damian. 2012. 'On the ontological status of autism: the 'double empathy problem'', *Disability & Society*, 27.6, pp. 883-887, doi:/10.1080/09687599.2012.710008

Ryan, Sally and Jacqueline Roberts and Wendi Beamish. 2024. 'Echolalia in Autism: A Scoping Review', *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 71.5, pp. 831-846, doi:10.1080/1034912X.2022.2154324

Walker, Nick. 2021. *Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities* (Autonomous Press)

Williams, Gemma. 2024. *Understanding Others in a Neurodiverse World* (Pavilion), ISBN 978-1-803883-70-0

Wolff, Phillip, and Kevin J. Holmes. 2011. 'Linguistic Relativity', *WIREs Cognitive Science*, 2.3, pp. 253–65, doi:10.1002/wcs.104

Example 1: Echolalia => Reduplication

- **Echolalia** = repeating words/phrases = a feature of autistic language
- Pathologising research defines echolalia as 'meaningless repetition' (cf. e.g. Blackburn 2023)
- Neurodiversity-affirming research shows echolalia serves a communicative function => feature, not a bug! (cf. e.g. Cohn 2023)
- Implemented as (full-word) **reduplication** in Laut as a grammatical feature
- Intensification of adjectives
- Progressive aspect on verbs
- Aim: showing that repetition is not necessarily meaningless

Glossed example sentence from *Laut – a Beginner's Guide* (available at https://autistic.conlang.org or *Fiat Lingua*)	<En bana sa toltol!>			
	En	ba-n-a	sa	tol-tol!
	1SG	have-1SG-PST	night	good-REDUP

Example 2: Atypical Prosody => Information Structure Marking

- **Atypical prosody** = frequently-cited autistic characteristic (McCann 2003: 325)
- Wide inter-autistic variation, contrary to stereotypical monotone (Hisaizumi 2024; Williams 2024: 69)
- English uses prosody/intonation to mark e.g. **information structure**
- ➢ Potential misunderstandings, which are then attributed to autistic language deficits - cf. Double-Empathy Problem (Milton 2012)!
- Laut reflects atypical prosody by **eschewing use of prosody** to express meaning, unlike English
- ➢ Prosody-related misunderstandings are thus avoided regardless of how prosody manifests individually
- ➢ Demonstrates prosody is not universally necessary to express meaning & atypical prosody is not a universal communication deficiency

Relevant excerpts from *Laut – a Beginner's Guide* (Henner 2025; slightly adapted/shortened)

Table 1: morphemes for marking the topic in a verb (singular only)	Default	DO
1SG (I/me)	(e)n	(i)tt
2SG (you)	(b)il	la
3SG (he/she/it)	ek	(i)kk

The basic Laut word order is: **Topic—Verb—Focus**

How do we know then who does something to whom—i.e. what the sentence's subject/object is? The answer is the same as for encoding intentions: this is marked on the verb, which agrees in person with the sentence *topic*.

This means you have to look at whether there is a topic, and then select the relevant building block from Table 1. There's one row for 'default', and one for the 'Direct Object'—the latter is used when the focus is the direct object of the sentence (e.g. 'the man' in 'The dog bit the man.'), and the default otherwise.

Example sentence	<Voavu saskeka nam.>		
	Voavu	sask-ek-a	nam
	dog[TOP]	bite-3SG.TOP-PST	man[FOC]

Translation: 'It was that/a man that got bitten by the dog!'

The topic of the sentence—assumed to be common ground—is 'the dog', and the focus/new information is 'a/the man'. The topic marker in the verb is 3SG (he/she/it) and further makes clear that the dog bit the man and not the other way round (the topic marker from the DO columns would otherwise be used). For this example, it's even possible to use a strategy in English that clarifies the sentence focus, though it is very marked and uses the passive (cf. 'Translation' above).