

THROUGH THE PRISM OF FILM: INVESTIGATING LANGUAGE DISORDERS IN THE NARRATIVE OF AN AUTISTIC SAVANT IN 'THE BOY CALLED PO'

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Abstract

Embark on an illuminating odyssey through the world of autism, where the extraordinary life of an autistic savant reveals the juxtaposition of social challenges and cognitive brilliance. This study delves into the intricate tapestry of language difficulties woven within the enigmatic mind of the autistic savant depicted in the enthralling film "The Boy Called Po." Our exploration is guided by the evocative words of the autistic savant, breathing life into our immersive descriptive approach. Unveiling the labyrinthine findings, a compelling revelation emerges. Expressive language hurdles surface, accounting for 46.5 percent, portraying the autistic savant's endeavor to articulate thoughts. Yet, the journey unfolds bidirectionally. In receptive language, a distinct facet emerges – a language disorder resonating at 53.5 percent. The autistic savant navigates the symphony of comprehension, a dance of understanding and reflection. The tapestry of revelations forms a resounding truth – the cadence of an expressive language disorder resonates within the autistic savant's linguistic realm. The intricate struggles in articulation and thought coalesce, painting a portrait of resilience and complexity. This insight transcends cinematic confines, shedding light on the autism experience. Converse ripples through education, advocacy, and society, urging acceptance and empathy. The autistic savant's tale etched in "The Boy Called Po" becomes a testament to human diversity and boundless potential. From this dance of discovery, emerges a revelation – that "The Boy Called Po" unveils not one journey, but many. It offers a glimpse into traversing the corridors of language, forging connections that transcend words.

Keywords: language disorder, autistic savant, expressive language disorder, receptive language disorder

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1.0 Introduction

In a world where language weaves the fabric of human connection and understanding, there exist intricate tales that transcend the realms of speech and communication as we know them. These tales belong to individuals who navigate the labyrinthine corridors of language disorders, where the symphony of words and thoughts meets uncharted terrain. This research paper embarks on a profound journey into the heart of these narratives, guided by the cinematic exploration of a singular story, "The Boy Called Po."

Language, in its myriad forms, is the cornerstone of human interaction, enabling the transmission of thoughts, emotions, and experiences (Smith, 2019). Yet, not all voyagers in the sea of conversation set sail on the same vessel. For some, like the titular character in "The Boy Called Po," language transforms into an intricate puzzle, each word a piece that requires careful contemplation and unwavering determination. As the pages of this research paper unfurl, the tale of Po emerges as a vessel through which we peer into the lives of those graced with exceptional memory and computational talents, yet simultaneously entangled in the enigma of autism and language disorders. Po's journey transcends the boundaries of celluloid, mirroring the struggles, triumphs, and essence of the existence of countless individuals who navigate the labyrinth of linguistic intricacies.

Our exploration delves beyond the surface, delving into the nuanced layers that comprise the world of autism and language disorders. From the echo of an expressive language disorder to the symphony of comprehension that emerges from the depths of receptive language challenges, we navigate the dichotomies that form the backdrop of Po's life. As we uncover the threads of this narrative, we invite readers to journey alongside us, delving into the interplay between cinema, psychology, and the human experience. Through "The Boy Called Po," we chart not only the evolution of film portrayals but also the shifting perceptions of autism and language disorders that permeate our societal consciousness (Johnson, 2017).

This research paper seeks to illuminate the fusion of art and reality, where the silver screen transforms into a canvas that vividly paints the struggles and strengths of those whose words might find

solace beyond the realm of speech. "The Boy Called Po" beckons us to listen, observe, and immerse ourselves in the journey of discovery – a journey that transcends linguistic confines and connects us to the very essence of what it means to be human.

"The Boy Called Po" is a poignant British drama film that weaves a compelling narrative around the life of a young boy named Po, who grapples with autism and language disorders. Released in 2016, the film provides a touching and authentic portrayal of the challenges faced by individuals on the autism spectrum. Based on a true story, "The Boy Called Po" draws inspiration from real-life experiences, infusing its narrative with a sense of authenticity and empathy. The film captures the essence of the struggles and triumphs that individuals with autism and language disorders encounter, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of their journey (Williams, 2007).

Set against the backdrop of Po's life, the film takes audiences on an emotional journey as they witness his unique perspective and interactions with the world around him. Po's nonverbal communication and his difficulties with comprehension and social interaction become central themes that shape his experiences and relationships. As the story unfolds, Po's challenges are met with unwavering support from his mother, who serves as a pillar of strength throughout his journey. Their bond serves as a heartwarming backdrop against which the film explores the hurdles and growth that come with autism.

"The Boy Called Po" offers a glimpse into the complexities of language and communication for individuals on the autism spectrum. It deftly navigates the intersection of autism, language disorders, and the power of connection, highlighting the significance of understanding and acceptance. In essence, "The Boy Called Po" stands as more than just a film; it is a cinematic tribute to the resilience of the human spirit and an invitation for audiences to explore the world from a different vantage point. Through its heartfelt storytelling, the film opens a window into the experiences of those with autism and language disorders, fostering a deeper appreciation for their unique journeys.

The realm of language is an intricate tapestry that weaves

connections, conveys thoughts, and fosters interactions. However, for those grappling with language disorders, this tapestry becomes a labyrinth of challenges, constraining their ability to communicate effectively and engage in everyday conversations. This study embarks on a voyage to illuminate the unique experiences of individuals confronting language disorders, specifically within the realm of autism, as depicted in the cinematic narrative of *"The Boy Called Po."*

Language disorders manifest in various forms, impacting both expression and comprehension. As elucidated by Field (2003), these disorders can manifest as receptive language deficits, where language comprehension is impaired, or expressive language impairments, which hinder language production. The canvas broadens further, encompassing conditions such as Broca's Aphasia in stroke patients and autistic individuals, delving into the intricate realm where cognitive intricacies intertwine with linguistic challenges. The allure of *"The Boy Called Po"* lies in its portrayal of an autistic savant—an individual whose life unfolds in the confluence of exceptional intellectual abilities and the trials posed by language disorders. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), as elucidated by Carroll (2008), casts its enigmatic shadow, affecting predominantly males and intertwining with unique behavioral patterns—qualitative anomalies in communication, social interactions, and restricted interests.

Embedded within the spectrum of ASD lies the phenomenon of the autistic savant, a person who defies conventional boundaries, possessing extraordinary abilities that coexist with cognitive limitations. Treffert (2006) delves into the intricacies of this savant syndrome, where remarkable competence in one area shines amidst cognitive, mental, or sensory deficits. Numerical calculations, artistic prowess, and musical brilliance are just a glimpse into the spectrum of their abilities.

Cinema, as a medium, lends itself adeptly to capturing the nuances of autistic savants' journeys. The amalgamation of verbal and nonverbal communication in films forms a conduit for empathetic engagement. By choosing the cinematic narrative of *"The Boy Called Po"* as a lens, this study delves into the heart of communication challenges within the autistic savant spectrum. The choice of cinema as a data source is deliberate, as it offers an immersive window into the world of the autistic savant, capturing layers of emotion and experience that spoken words might not fully convey. Directed by John Asher and written by Colin Goldman, *"The Boy Called Po"* draws from a true story, rendering its portrayal authentic and relatable. Its accessibility through platforms like YouTube broadens its reach, amplifying its potential impact.

This research extends its reach beyond the filmic realm, resonating with linguistic perspectives, morphological studies, and psycholinguistic explorations. The study unearths distinctive manifestations of language disorders, both expressive and receptive, within the cinematic portrayal of an autistic savant. Insights gleaned from this exploration resonate with prior research, such as Sa'diyah's (2008) investigation into receptive language disorder in *"Mozart and the Whale,"* Nafiah's (2008) study on expressive language disorder in *"Mercury Rising,"* Firmawati's (2013) exploration of communication difficulties in autism, and Seol *et al.*'s (2014) comparative analysis of language deficits in toddlers.

Ultimately, this study shines a spotlight on the lived experiences of autistic savants, enriching our understanding of their linguistic challenges. By deciphering the dominant forms of language disorders portrayed within *"The Boy Called Po,"* this research contributes to a

more empathetic society that not only comprehends the intricacies of communication disorders but also embraces the unique brilliance that resides within individuals with autism.

2.0 Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative methodology, inspired by the insights of Hancock *et al.* (2009), aimed at unraveling the intricate tapestry of language challenges within the portrayal of an autistic savant in the film *"The Boy Called Po."* Specifically, the researchers delve into the expressive language deficits and receptive language dysfunction exhibited by the character. The methodology involves a systematic approach to data collection that encompasses multiple stages.

Initially, the researchers procured the film and screenplay from online sources, setting the stage for the immersive analysis. Watching the film repeatedly from start to finish enabled the researchers to grasp its message and storyline comprehensively. Attention was meticulously directed toward pivotal scenes containing key utterances linked to language disorders. The film's script was transcribed for ease of reference, with specific segments underlined to denote instances of language difficulty. This notation process involved the use of highlighting tools, facilitating the identification of linguistically impaired statements. Concurrently, detailed notes were compiled, capturing phrases and timestamps, an essential aspect for distinguishing between expressive and receptive language anomalies.

Moreover, the study draws strength from the case study approach, renowned for its capacity to unearth profound insights from a focused exploration of an individual or subject. Aligning seamlessly with the film's narrative, this approach offers a fitting conduit to achieve the research goals of unraveling the experiences of Po, a character grappling with autism and language disorders. A case study affords unique advantages: The case study method allows the researchers to delve deeply into the character's experiences, behaviors, and interactions, providing a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. By closely analyzing the film and focusing on Po's character and encounters, the researchers were able to gather a rich dataset of information that includes both visual and narrative elements. This provides a holistic view of how the character's language disorders are depicted. The researchers were able to consider the broader context in which the character operates. The researchers were able to explore how Po's environment, relationships, and circumstances contribute to his experiences with autism and language disorders. This approach lends itself to qualitative analysis, allowing the identification of patterns, themes, and nuances that might not be captured through quantitative methods alone.

In essence, the combination of the descriptive qualitative approach and the case study methodology converges to form a robust framework for uncovering the silent symphony of language disorders within the realm of the autistic savant. Through this comprehensive methodology, the study endeavors to enrich our perception, offering avenues for improving communication and providing support for individuals navigating the intricate terrain of autism and language challenges.

3.0 Results and Discussion

This section presented the study's findings. The linguistic abnormalities discovered in the data are listed in the Table 1. Depicted in the table are the occurrence of symptoms of expressive language disorder. Within the fabric of the narrative, the main character

Table 1. The occurrences of expressive language disorder of an autistic savant portrayed in *“The Boy Called Po”* film.

| No. | Expressive Language Disorder | F | % |
|-----|---|----|------|
| 1 | Word finding difficulties | 4 | 8.7 |
| 2 | Repetition | 22 | 47.8 |
| 3 | Overuse of non-specific words | 8 | 17.4 |
| 4 | Over-reliance on stock phrases | 5 | 10.9 |
| 5 | Difficulty coming to the point of what they are trying to say | 3 | 6.5 |
| 6 | Less variation intonation or volume | 2 | 4.4 |
| 7 | Limitation in the form of sentence | 2 | 4.4 |
| 8 | Limited vocabulary | 0 | 0 |
| | Total | 46 | 100 |

grapples with the intricate art of articulating and projecting his intended words. Notably, the most prevalent manifestations of these linguistic challenges are encapsulated within the realm of repetition, resonating with a substantial occurrence of 47.8 instances. This recurring struggle paints a vivid canvas of his arduous journey to convey his thoughts. Intriguingly, the terrain of expressive language disorder unveils yet another facet of his linguistic labyrinth. The phenomenon of “overuse of non-specific words” emerges as the second most frequent symptom, casting its shadow with 17.4 occurrences. These insights collectively enrich our understanding of the multifaceted struggles that underlie his quest for effective expression. unique facet of his linguistic journey.

Table 2. The occurrences of receptive language disorder of an autistic savant portrayed in *“The Boy Called Po”* film.

| No. | Receptive Language Disorder | F | % |
|-----|--|----|------|
| 1 | Not appearing to listen | 25 | 47.2 |
| 2 | Difficulty understanding complex sentences | 0 | 0 |
| 3 | Difficulty interpreting words or phrases | 5 | 9.4 |
| 4 | Demonstrating lack of interest | 16 | 30.2 |
| 5 | Difficulty understanding what other people say | 7 | 13.2 |
| 6 | Difficulty following verbal directions | 0 | 0 |
| | Total | 53 | 100 |

Table 2 above elucidates the occurrences of receptive language dysfunction within the portrayal of an autistic savant in *“The Boy Called Po.”* The main character grapples with the intricacies of understanding and assimilating spoken communication. Within this context, a quartet of symptoms emerged, each painting a unique facet of his linguistic journey. Foremost among these is the manifestation of “not appearing to listen,” which dominates the landscape with a substantial occurrence of 25 instances. This nuanced observation encapsulates moments where the main character’s struggles in comprehending spoken messages surface, shaping his interactions and the depth of his engagement with his surroundings.

The tabulated data in Table 3 unequivocally highlights the prevalence of receptive language disorder as the predominant type of language impairment depicted in the film. The narrative of *“The Boy Called Po”* intricately weaves instances where the main character grapples with conveying his thoughts, mirroring his struggle to grasp the messages conveyed by others. The tally in the table above resonates with this portrayal, with a notable 53.5

Table 3. Total both expressive language disorder and receptive language disorder

| No. | Receptive Language Disorder | F | % |
|-----|------------------------------|----|------|
| 1 | Expressive Language Disorder | 46 | 46.5 |
| 2 | Receptive Language Disorder | 53 | 53.5 |
| | Total | 99 | 100 |

percent representing the frequency of receptive language disorder.

Simultaneously, expressive language disorder emerges as a significant challenge, accounting for 46.5 percent. This statistic underscores the poignant journey of the main character in his quest to articulate his thoughts, akin to a symphony of words that occasionally faces hurdles. Delving into this dichotomy, it becomes apparent that receptive language disorder claims the lion’s share, casting a greater shadow in the narrative’s tapestry. This intricate interplay of language disorders forms the backbone of the main character’s experiences, underscoring the complexities and nuances that shape his interactions and perceptions.

In the captivating world of *“The Boy Called Po,”* the intricate tapestry of language disorders unfurls with remarkable detail, inviting us to delve into the specific challenges that the autistic savant grapples with. Po’s linguistic journey is a testament to the complexities woven within the realm of autism and language disorders, illuminating nuanced aspects such as vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatic errors.

The film artfully portrays Po’s struggles with expressive language, where words become elusive fragments in his pursuit of communication. His vocabulary appears constrained, often marked by a selective use of words that align with his immediate needs and thoughts. This manifests as a limitation in his ability to convey a wide range of emotions, ideas, or abstract concepts. Po’s language landscape echoes with a sense of precision; every word is carefully chosen, offering a glimpse into the intricate thought process that underlies his communication. Grammar becomes another facet of Po’s linguistic realm, painted with a blend of complexity and simplicity. The film subtly captures instances where Po’s sentences lack conventional structures, rendering his speech slightly fragmented or unconventional. These grammatical variations offer a window into his cognitive approach to language, unveiling the intricate dance between his cognitive talents and the language challenges he faces.

Furthermore, the subtleties of pragmatic language errors come to the forefront. Po’s interactions often reveal an interpretation of social cues and norms that is slightly askew. Conversations unfold in a manner that is guided by his unique perspective, resulting in moments of misalignment with the expectations of typical social exchanges. His pragmatic errors, though subtle, mirror the intricate dance of comprehension and expression that define his communication landscape.

The primary purpose of this research is to identify the autistic savant’s expressive language impairment, as depicted in the film *“The Boy Called Po.”* The second goal is to determine the autistic savant’s receptive language dysfunction, as seen in the film *“The Boy Called Po.”* Language disorders, according to Field (2003), can be expressive (impairment in language production), receptive (impairment in language comprehension), or both. This is more common in people who have a mental disorder, such as autism. The researcher observed that expressive language disorder is the most common of the two types of language abnormalities found in autistic savants, according to the data.

The investigation unveiled the primary presence of expressive language problems within the main character's linguistic landscape. This focus centers on his ability to articulate and construct the language he desires to communicate with others. Among the array of symptoms outlined by Suherman (2015) for expressive language disorder, eight stand out: struggles in word retrieval, repetition, excessive reliance on non-specific terms, overuse of stock phrases, difficulty conveying the essence of his message, limited variation in intonation and volume, constrained sentence structure, and a restricted vocabulary. Upon meticulous analysis of the data, a significant alignment between the main character's portrayal and the listed symptoms surfaced. Furthermore, distinctive features were observed within the autistic savant framework: challenges in succinctly articulating the intended message, diminished fluctuations in intonation and volume, and constraints in sentence construction. The main character exhibited an array of additional symptoms, with the most prominent being repetition, accounting for 47.8 percent. Repeated utterances such as "yes" underline his struggle to precisely vocalize the intended word.

The second most prevalent expressive language impairment, with a proportion of 17.4 percent, is the overuse of non-specific words. This discovery contrasts Nafiah's (2008) findings, where repetitive behavior in autistic children was infrequent. Notably, Nafiah's research solely addressed expressive language disorders, while our study encompassed both expressive and receptive language disorders. Amidst the variations, a clear thread emerges – diverse forms of language disorders are evident among autistic individuals. Transitioning to the second facet of language disorder, the realm of receptive language, parallels with the autistic savant condition were identified. This category encapsulates difficulties in comprehending external communication. Symptoms encompass not actively listening, challenges with complex sentence understanding, struggles in interpreting phrases, lapses in attention, and difficulty processing verbal instructions. The main character in "The Boy Called Po" manifests traits of receptive language dysfunction, with a predominant symptom being "not appearing to listen," occurring at a frequency of 47.2 percent. However, not all symptoms align perfectly, notably the absence of all traits, such as struggles with understanding complex sentences or exhibiting disinterest.

This study engages in a comparative dialogue with previous research on language disorders, notably Suherman's (2015) exploration of language disorder in the film "My Name is Khan." Suherman's work highlighted expressive language dysfunction in the main character without delving into autistic savant traits. Noteworthy is the manifestation of specific symptoms, such as trouble getting to the core of their message. Conversely, this study encompasses both categories of language disorders and reveals the diverse spectrum prevalent among autistic individuals. In essence, autistic individuals navigate distinct avenues of expressing and comprehending their thoughts. The implications of these findings reach beyond the cinematic realm, reshaping the comprehension of language disorders in the context of autism. These insights offer a lens to refine diagnosis and treatment modalities, ushering in a more precise and compassionate approach to addressing language challenges in this unique population. The nuanced portrayal of Po's language challenges invites us to reevaluate how we perceive and support individuals with autism and language disorders. It prompts a shift from viewing their communication difficulties as mere limitations to recognizing the intricate ways in which their minds navigate the intricacies of language.

In essence, the cinematic portrayal of Po's language journey in "The Boy Called Po" serves as both a mirror and a catalyst. It reflects the intricate struggles of countless individuals while inspiring a transformation in our collective understanding. Through Po's experiences, we glimpse the intersection of cognitive brilliance and language barriers, driving us to amplify our efforts in diagnosis, treatment, and advocacy, ultimately paving the way for a more inclusive and empathetic society.

4.0 Conclusion

"The Boy Called Po" offers a poignant exploration of language disorders within the realm of autism, shedding light on key findings that illuminate the intricate nature of communication challenges for autistic savants. Po's journey through the film reveals specific aspects of language difficulties, including vocabulary constraints, unique grammatical structures, and subtle pragmatic errors. These nuances provide invaluable insights into the linguistic landscape of autistic savants.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the screen, forging a path toward a deeper understanding of language disorders in this unique population. By delving into the intricacies of how language is processed, expressed, and received, we gain a nuanced perspective that can redefine diagnosis, intervention, and support strategies. This research serves as a clarion call to refine assessment tools and therapeutic approaches, ensuring they are tailored to the distinctive communication patterns of autistic savants.

The importance of such research extends far beyond academia. It has the power to transform daily interactions and foster greater inclusivity in society. Enhanced insights into the challenges faced by individuals like Po hold the potential to bridge communication gaps, strengthening connections and relationships. Through increased understanding, educators, clinicians, and caregivers can adapt strategies to align with the cognitive strengths of autistic savants, nurturing their ability to engage more fully in the world around them. Furthermore, this research reinforces the role of cinema as a catalyst for empathy and change. Po's story, etched in cinematic pixels, amplifies the voices of countless individuals who grapple with language disorders. As we witness his struggles and triumphs, our collective consciousness expands, leading to increased awareness, acceptance, and advocacy. In a world that thrives on communication, understanding the intricacies of language disorders in autistic savants is a gateway to unlocking their potential and facilitating meaningful connections. The insights gleaned from this research illuminate the way forward, emphasizing the need for tailored interventions, societal compassion, and a shared commitment to embracing the diverse communication pathways that individuals with autism traverse. Ultimately, through these endeavors, we carve a path toward a more empathetic and inclusive future for all.

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