

## The Pragmatic Deficit in Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Linguistic Mechanism from Communicative Failure to Social Stigma and Verbal Bullying

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### Abstract

Although individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often show intact grammar and vocabulary, they have a fundamental deficit in pragmatic competence. This theoretical-analytical documentary study examines how pragmatic deficits in ASD may lead to social stigma and verbal bullying. Based on Grice's Cooperative Principle, Speech Act Theory, and Goffman's Theory of Stigma, and on recent literature from 2018-2025, the study analyzes how violations of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner maxims, and failure to understand indirect speech acts and sarcasm, are misinterpreted as rudeness. It proposes a model: Pragmatic Deficit → Misinterpretation → Stigma → Verbal Bullying. Reviewed studies show individuals with ASD face 2.4 times more bullying. As this study is non-empirical, its findings are theoretical and need future validation in the Iraqi and Arabic context. The study recommends explicit pragmatic training and awareness programs.

**Keywords:** Pragmatic Deficit, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Grice's Maxims, Speech Acts, Social Stigma

العجز البراغماتي لدى ذوي اضطراب طيف التوحد: الية لغوية من الفشل التواصلية إلى الوصم الاجتماعي والتهمز اللفظي

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### المخلص

بالرغم من امتلاك المصابين باضطراب طيف التوحد كفاءة نحوية ومعجمية سليمة، إلا أنهم يعانون عجزاً جوهرياً في الكفاءة البراغماتية. تهدف هذه الدراسة النظرية التحليلية الوثائقية إلى بحث الآلية التي قد تؤدي فيها العجزات البراغماتية إلى الوصم الاجتماعي والتهمز اللفظي. واستناداً إلى مبدأ التعاون لغريس ونظرية أفعال الكلام ونظرية الوصم، وتحليل الأدبيات الحديثة، تحلل الدراسة انتهاكات قواعد الكم والكيف والعلاقة والأسلوب والفشل في فهم الكلام غير المباشر والسخرية. وتقترح نموذجاً سببياً: العجز البراغماتي ← سوء التفسير ← الوصم ← التهمز. وتشير الدراسات الحديثة من ٢٠١٨-٢٠٢٥ إلى تعرض المصابين بالتوحد للتهمز ٢.٤ مرة أكثر. وبما أن الدراسة غير تجريبية فهي نظرية وتحتاج إلى تحقق ميداني وتوصي بالتدريب البراغماتي وبرامج التوعية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** العجز البراغماتي، اضطراب طيف التوحد، قواعد غريس، أفعال الكلام، الوصم الاجتماعي

## 1. Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder associated with persistently impaired social communication and interaction, and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior. Many people with ASD (particularly higher functioning people with autism) struggle with language not because of the rules or words, but because of the content. The great difficulty lies in the pragmatic competence, that is, the ability to use language in a socially appropriate way.

Pragmatics has to do with understanding the speaker's intention, adjusting language to the situation and obeying the implicit rules of conversation. Studies indicate that persons with ASD have a basic impairment in this area. This gap is seen in Grice's Four Cooperative Maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. It also shows up in the lack of understanding of indirect speech acts, sarcasm, and conversational implicature (Kissine, 2021; Gabbatore et al., 2022).

However, a difference in the way that is communicated isn't seen as a difference in language by the neurotypical peers. Rather, it can be misunderstood as impoliteness, coldness, and social inabilities (Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020). This misunderstanding results in tragic social consequences. Research has shown that verbal bullying is most likely to occur with individuals with ASD.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the mechanism by which pragmatic deficiencies in persons with ASD become social stigma and finally verbal bullying. This study builds upon the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975), Speech Act Theory (SAT) (Searle, 1964) and the Theory of Stigma (TS) (Goffman, 1966) to propose the following causal model: Pragmatic Deficit (PD) → Social Misinterpretation (SM) → Stigma (S) → Verbal Bullying (VB). This study aims to re-exam bullying in a psychological way, but to consider it linguistically as well.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

While it is acknowledged that pragmatic impairment is a hallmark of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), its social consequences have not been fully described linguistically. People with ASD may have ongoing problems understanding and using language in an appropriate way in context, such as with conversational implicatures, indirect speech acts, and other conventions. This communicative difference often leads to misunderstandings in all aspects of social interaction, not only when it comes to language, but also in the way autistic people are perceived by others.

This research highlights the need to see pragmatic deficits not simply as communication problems, but as linguistic mechanisms that lead to social misinterpretation. Failure to see pragmatic differences as intentional rudeness, indifference, or social incompetence can start a negative social evaluation process that can raise the risk of stigma and verbal bullying.

Although previous studies have examined pragmatic deficits in ASD and others have investigated stigma and bullying separately, few have explained the linguistic pathway linking these phenomena. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by proposing a theoretical-analytical model that explains how pragmatic deficits may develop into social misinterpretation, social stigma, and ultimately verbal bullying.

## 1.2 Significance of the Study

### Theoretical Significance

The study fills a gap in the literature by linking Pragmatics to Sociolinguistics, and by proposing an analytical model that explains bullying from a purely linguistic, rather than solely psychological perspective.

### Practical Significance

1.For Specialists: It provides an analytical framework to train individuals with ASD in understanding indirect intent, thereby reducing social misunderstanding.

2.For the School Community: It raises awareness that the apparent "coldness" or "heaviness" in autistic individuals is an involuntary linguistic deficit, not an aggressive behavior, which can reduce stigma and bullying.

## 1.3 Research Objectives

### General Objective:

To investigate the linguistic mechanism linking pragmatic deficit in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to social stigma and verbal bullying.

### Specific Objectives:

1. To identify the main pragmatic deficits in ASD related to Grice's Maxims and the comprehension of indirect speech acts and sarcasm.
2. To explain how these deficits are misinterpreted by neurotypical peers and lead to social stigma.
3. To establish the causal link from pragmatic deficit to stigma and then to verbal bullying
4. To propose recommendations for explicit pragmatic training and awareness programs to reduce stigma in educational settings.

## 1.4 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions

1. What are the manifestations of pragmatic deficit in individuals with ASD according to Grice's Cooperative Maxims?
- 2.How do individuals with ASD fail to comprehend indirect speech acts and sarcasm?
- 3.What is the mechanism through which pragmatic difference is transformed into social stigma and subsequently into verbal bullying?

## 1.5 Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its theoretical and documentary nature. It does not include empirical data from Iraqi participants. Therefore, the findings are based on existing

literature from Western contexts and require validation through future fieldwork in the local context.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter reviews the theoretical and empirical literature relevant to the linguistic-pragmatic profile of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and its potential social consequences. It first examines the nature of pragmatic impairment in ASD, with particular emphasis on the distinction between structural language and pragmatic competence, the role of Theory of Mind, Grice's Cooperative Principle and Speech Act Theory. It then reviews studies that have investigated the role of pragmatic differences in the causes of social misunderstanding, stigma, and verbal bullying. This review is summarizing the results of the latest linguistic and interdisciplinary studies that will serve as a theoretical basis for the analytical model proposed in this study.

### 2.1 Autism Spectrum Disorder from a Pragmatic Linguistic Perspective

The present review is not dedicated to revisiting the clinical definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) but rather to its linguistic-pragmatic profile, which has received one of the most prolific research interest to date in the field of autism research. Although ASD is clinically characterized by persistent difficulties in social communication and interaction, linguistic studies consistently indicate that the principal challenge for many autistic individuals lies not in grammatical or lexical knowledge, but in the ability to use language appropriately within social contexts. Pragmatic competence involves interpreting speakers' intentions, integrating contextual information, and adhering to conversational norms. Deficits in these abilities have been repeatedly identified as central features of ASD and provide the theoretical basis for understanding later social consequences such as misunderstanding, stigma, and verbal bullying (Kissine, 2021; Gabbatore et al., 2022).

#### 2.1.1 The Linguistic Profile of ASD: Form-Pragmatics Dissociation

Linguistic competence is traditionally divided into two domains: Form and Pragmatics. Form includes phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Many individuals with ASD, particularly those with high-functioning autism or Asperger's Syndrome, demonstrate age-appropriate or even advanced skills in this domain. Pragmatics refers to the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. This includes understanding speaker's intent, adapting language to the listener, and following conversational rules. It is this domain that is pervasively and persistently impaired in ASD (Gabbatore et al., 2022; Kissine, 2021).

However, the inability to apply these pragmatic rules often leads neurotypical interlocutors to attribute negative social traits to the speaker, rather than recognizing a linguistic deficit

Recent studies have shown that many individuals with ASD, especially those with high-functioning autism, may acquire formal aspects of language such as syntax and semantics on time or even precociously, but they struggle significantly with the social use of language in everyday interaction (Tager-Flusberg, 2020). This dissociation between structural competence and pragmatic performance is now considered one of the earliest diagnostic markers of ASD (Eigsti et al., 2019).

Thus, the linguistic profile of ASD can be summarized as: "Intact Form, Impaired Pragmatics." This distinction is fundamental to understanding the communicative difficulties faced by this population.

#### 2.1.2 Theory of Mind (ToM) and its Relation to Pragmatic Failure

Pragmatic deficit is generally accepted to be due to a lack of Theory of Mind (ToM) (Baron-Cohen, 1985). The ability to attribute mental states 'beliefs, intents, desires, emotions' to oneself and to others, and to understand that others have mental states that are different from one's own is crucial for pragmatic phenomena, such as irony, sarcasm, indirect requests and implicature (Andres-Roqueta & Katsos, 2020).

For example, the listener needs to use the inferential process to grasp the dissociative attitude of the speaker from the literal one when he/she says "Well, this is a beautiful day!" during a rainy day (Peterson & Wellman, 2019).

Systematic reviews have shown that people with ASD also struggle with understanding inferences, indirect speech acts and the perspective of the speaker, not just with understanding irony and sarcasm (Baron-Cohen et al., 2015; Happe & Frith, 2020). However, research with neuroimaging shows that these pragmatic difficulties are linked to a decrease in activity in regions of the brain responsible for social cognition, like the superior temporal sulcus (Kana et al., 2019). The inability in ToM in ASD directly contributes to their literalness, and to a lack of social inferencing. (Saban-Bezalel et al., 2019).

#### 2.1.3 Core Linguistic-Pragmatic Features of ASD

Several recurrent pragmatic features were identified in the literature and were evidence for the pragmatic deficit:

1. Echolalia: The repetition of phrases immediately or at a later point in time with no communicative purpose. Represents a lack of producing new & contextually appropriate utterances.

2. Monologic Speech: It is characterized by tendency to talk one-sidedly, persist on a topic of interest, little awareness of the listener's turn-taking and feedback (Gabbatore et al., 2022).

3. Literalness: Difficulty understanding language that is not literal, such as metaphors, idioms, sarcasm. Utterances are only understood at their on-the-surface level of meaning (Saban-Bezalel et al., 2019).

4. Prosodic Atypicality: Speech that may be monotonous, robotic or slightly intonation-challenging, which can affect the paralinguistic cues necessary for pragmatic interpretation (McCann & Peppe, 2003).

Many people with ASD also have pronoun reversal, scripted or stereotyped language and struggle with topic shifts in conversation, which all have a negative impact on how they express themselves (Volden, 2017). Atypical prosody (flat intonation or irregular stress patterns) also hinders the listener's understanding of the speaker's intent and tone (Paul et al., 2018).

In conclusion, ASD is a clear case of population who have structural linguistic competence and have a fundamental lack of social use of linguistic competence. Using a pragmatic approach to analysis thus helps to elucidate why a person might have a rich vocabulary, correct grammar but still struggle with the aim of successful, reciprocal communication (Loucas et al., 2021).

The social misunderstandings mentioned in the following sections are based on this pragmatic impairment.

#### 2.1.4 Pragmatic Competence: Grice's Maxims and Speech Act Theory

Pragmatic competence is the skill to use and understand the language in terms of social context and communicative purpose. The two most influential models that have been developed to analyze this competence are Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) and Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Leech, 1983).

##### 2.1.4.1 Grice's Cooperative Principle and Maxim Violations in ASD

The Cooperative Principle (Cooperativeness) developed by Grice (1975) suggests that communication is effective when it is assumed that people are cooperating towards a common communicative purpose. There are four conversational maxims for this principle: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. People with ASD often engage in systematic violations of these principles, however, not out of non-cooperation, but simply because they lack social inference or Theory of Mind, and therefore fail to make the inferences required to comply. In terms of Quantity, autistic people can give too much information not related to the topic of conversation, or conversely, too little information, and thus not regulate the amount of information to the listener. In terms of Quality, the literalness that is characteristic of ASD causes problems in interpreting the meaning of what others are saying, leaving them to think that what they hear is naive or gullible.

Topic perseveration and tangential speech, where the speaker jumps to a favored topic no matter what the conversation is about, are common place in which the Maxim of Relation is not respected and is interpreted by the neurotypical peers as disinterest or self-absorption. Lastly, violations of Manner include abnormal prosody, mispronunciations and confused discourse structure, that are unable to reveal speaker intention. The pragmatic deviations do not signify a lack of grammatical or lexical skills, but rather an underlying difficulty in applying

language skills in a flexible social setting. Therefore, such violations of the maxims serve as the first place of social conflict, being constantly misunderstood by the interlocutor from a normal spectrum of brains as a sign of rudeness, freakiness, or social incompetence. (Kissine, 2021).

2.1.4.2 Speech Act Theory and the Comprehension of Indirect Speech Acts in ASD Austin (1962) and more elaborately developed by Searle (1969), propose that speech is a social act in which utterances carry out a specific function other than communicating propositional content. In this context, each discourse has a locutionary act, an illocutionary act, and a perlocutionary effect. The listener has to engage in a process of going beyond the locutionary, literal meaning to grasp the illocutionary meaning as intended by the speaker in order to be pragmatic competent. This inferential process is impaired in people with ASD. The real challenge is that of integrating linguistic input and the contextual (social and prosodic) information required to infer non-literal speaker intentions. This deficit is closely related to the limitations in Theory of Mind (ToM) related to the process of understanding the mental state and communicative intention of others. This means that people with ASD often respond literally to utterances, and there is a systematic problem in understanding indirect speech acts (where the communicative intention is implied, not expressed). Direct and indirect illocutionary acts are often confused since one cannot distinguish between them. This pragmatic failure is not attributable to either lexical or syntactic deficits, but to a more fundamental disruption of a social-cognitive mechanism that supports pragmatic interpretation. As a result, these challenges add to the overall issue of communicative failure which has been discussed in the literature, as well as to the misinterpretation cycle leading to social stigma (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Kissine, 2021).

### 3. Methodology and Analytical Framework

This study adopts a Qualitative Descriptive-Analytical Approach within the framework of Applied Linguistics. The research is theoretical and non-empirical, as it does not involve human participants, questionnaires, or field experiments.

#### 3.1 Research Design

The study is based on Documentary and Theoretical Analysis. It analyzes and interprets existing linguistic theories and secondary data from reputable scholarly sources to build an explanatory model.

#### 3.2 Theoretical Framework

The analysis is grounded in three main pillars of Pragmatics:

1. Grice's Cooperative Principle & Maxims (1975): Used to analyze systematic violations of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner in autistic discourse.

2. Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969): Applied to examine the comprehension failure in understanding direct verses indirect speech acts, implicature and sarcasm.

3. Goffman's Theory of Stigma (1963): Utilized to explain the social transformation mechanism from communicative difference into social stigmatization and verbal bullying, illustrating how pragmatic variations are socially translated into spoiled behavioral identities.

### 3.3 Data Sources

The data is secondary and consists of:

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles from 2018-2025 in the fields of Pragmatics, Psycholinguistics, and Autism Studies.
2. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses on bullying and stigma in ASD.
3. Case studies and documented linguistic examples from established literature to illustrate the analytical tables
4. Classical theoretical sources published before 2018 (e.g., Grice, 1975; Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969; Goffman, 1963) were used to establish the foundational theoretical framework, while foundational empirical studies prior to 2018 were included selectively for historical baseline data. The systematic documentary analysis focused primarily on recent literature published between 2018 and 2025.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

1. Categorization: Linguistic deficits were categorized into two analytical tables: Grice's Maxims Table and Speech Acts Table.
2. Interpretation: Each deficit was linked to its social consequence using a cause-and-effect chain:

Pragmatic Deficit → Misinterpretation → Stigma → Verbal Bullying

3. Synthesis: The findings were synthesized to answer the research questions and propose the theoretical model.

### 3.5 Scope and Delimitation

The study is delimited to a theoretical-linguistic analysis of verbal bullying only. It excludes physical bullying and cyberbullying. It also excludes the clinical or therapeutic intervention aspect, focusing solely on the linguistic mechanism.

### 3.6 Operationalizing the Analytical Framework

This chapter transitions from the theoretical discussion to the analytical application of the proposed model. The objective is to deconstruct the linguistic mechanism through which pragmatic deficits in individuals with ASD are transformed into social consequences, namely stigma and verbal bullying.

The analysis is based on a documentary review of documented linguistic interactions from peer-reviewed literature between 2018 and 2025. Each example was categorized and interpreted according to the two primary theoretical pillars adopted in this study: Grice's Cooperative Principle and Maxims, and Speech Act Theory.

To operationalize the analysis, the documented pragmatic failures were divided into two core dimensions that are most frequently reported in ASD literature:

1. Violations of Grice's Cooperative Maxims, presented in Table 1.
2. Difficulties in Comprehending Indirect Speech Acts and Sarcasm, presented in Table 2.

The following tables are not simply meant to be a list of deficiencies. Instead, a causative chain postulated in this study is used to analyse each case:

Pragmatic Deficit → Social Misinterpretation → Stigma → Verbal Bullying.

This framework is intended to illustrate how the misinterpretation of a linguistic difference by peers who are neurotypical as rudeness or as a lack of social skills can be the basis for further stigmatization and victimization.

The presentation below starts by summarizing the manifestations of violations of the 4 maxims (Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner) in the table below, then moves on to some examples of these violations, and finally analyzes their social implications.

Table 1

Manifestations of Gricean Maxim Violations in Individuals with ASD

| Gricean Maxim | Definition                                                      | Manifestation in ASD                                                                                      | Illustrative Example                                                                          |
|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Quantity      | Provide as much information as required, neither more nor less. | Individuals may provide insufficient contextual information or excessive irrelevant details.              | A child responds, " <i>He went there,</i> " without specifying who or where.                  |
| Quality       | Do not say what you believe to be false.                        | Difficulty interpreting sarcasm, irony, or white lies because utterances are understood literally.        | Interpreting " <i>You're a genius</i> " said sarcastically after a mistake as genuine praise. |
| Relation      | Make your contribution relevant to the topic of conversation.   | Responses may shift to restricted interests regardless of the conversational topic.                       | When asked, " <i>How was school?</i> " the child replies with facts about train models.       |
| Manner        | Be clear, orderly, and avoid ambiguity.                         | Speech may include echolalia, unusual prosody, or scripted expressions that obscure communicative intent. | Using a movie quotation instead of answering a direct question.                               |

"Having examined violations of Gricean maxims, the analysis now turns to the second dimension: difficulties in understanding indirect speech acts and sarcasm, as illustrated in Table 2."

Table 2

Difficulties in Comprehending Indirect Speech Acts among Individuals with ASD

| Speech Act | Indirect Expression              | Literal vs. Intended Meaning                                  | Typical Interpretation by Individuals with ASD                 | Possible Social Consequence                     |
|------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Request    | <i>Can you close the window?</i> | Literal: Asking about ability. Intended: Request to close the | Replies, " <i>Yes, I can,</i> " without performing the action. | May be perceived as uncooperative or unhelpful. |

|                               |                                                   |                                                                                                         |                                                                                        |                                                       |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
|                               |                                                   | window.                                                                                                 |                                                                                        |                                                       |
| Sarcasm / Irony               | <i>Great job!</i><br>(after<br>spilling<br>water) | Literal: Praise.<br>Intended: Criticism<br>or irony.                                                    | Interprets the<br>statement as sincere<br>praise.                                      | May appear<br>socially naïve or<br>unaware.           |
| Conversational<br>Implicature | <i>It's cold in<br/>here.</i>                     | Literal: Statement<br>about temperature.<br>Intended: Indirect<br>request to close a<br>door or window. | Simply agrees by<br>saying, "Yes, it is,"<br>without taking<br>action.                 | May be perceived<br>as lacking social<br>reciprocity. |
| Apology                       | <i>Sorry for<br/>being late.</i>                  | Literal: Expression of<br>regret. Intended:<br>Restore interpersonal<br>harmony.                        | Produces the<br>apology with limited<br>emotional<br>expression or flat<br>intonation. | May be perceived<br>as insincere or<br>impolite.      |

Table 3  
Summary of Pragmatic Deficits in Autism Spectrum Disorder

| Pragmatic Aspect             | Observed Difficulty                                                    | Underlying Linguistic Mechanism                                           | Communicative Impact                                                  |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gricean Maxims               | Frequent violations of quantity, quality, relation, and manner.        | Literal interpretation and reduced sensitivity to contextual information. | Ineffective conversational exchange and misunderstanding.             |
| Speech Act Interpretation    | Difficulty recognizing indirect communicative intentions.              | Failure to infer illocutionary force beyond the literal meaning.          | Misinterpretation of requests, sarcasm, implicatures, and apologies.  |
| Overall Pragmatic Competence | Limited ability to infer speaker intentions within social interaction. | Literalness, decontextualization, and reduced social inference.           | Impaired social communication and reduced conversational reciprocity. |

### 3.7 From Pragmatic Deficit to Social Stigma and Verbal Bullying

The systematic pragmatic violations outlined in Tables 1/2 do not remain at the linguistic level. In a neurotypical social environment, these differences are interpreted as social deviations. This interpretation initiates a social process that culminates in stigmatization and bullying (Hull, Petrides, & Mandy, 2021).

#### 3.7.1 The Mechanism of Misinterpretation

Neurotypical peers and adults operate under the assumption of shared pragmatic norms. When an autistic individual violates a maxim or fails to understand an indirect request, the behavior is not attributed to a neurological difference. Instead, it is socially labeled as (Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020):

1. Rudeness or Defiance: Failing to act on an indirect request "Can you be quiet?" is seen as intentional disobedience.
2. Social Naivety or "Stupidity": Taking sarcasm literally is interpreted as a lack of intelligence.
3. Coldness or Lack of Empathy: Monologic speech or failure to provide relevant responses is perceived as self-centeredness.

This process is termed "Social Naivety", a documented vulnerability factor for trauma and bullying in ASD (Kerns et al., 2015).

### 3.7.2 Stigma as the Mediating Variable

Following Goffman, stigma occurs when a person possesses an attribute that is deeply discrediting. The pragmatic difference becomes a "spoiled identity" because it is visible in every social interaction (Hull, Petrides, & Mandy, 2021). According to Goffman's classification, the pragmatic difference in individuals with ASD falls under a "character blemish" stigma. This is because peers interpret the behavior as intentional or a matter of bad will, rather than as a neurological difference. Hence, it is not accepted as much as physical handicaps. Yet, recent research also suggests that pragmatic errors are frequently misinterpreted as "sloppy" communicative mistakes instead of as communicative differences, which exacerbates the stigmatization of errors in the school context (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021).

The idea of Intersectional Stigma also applies, as other behavioral differences that may co-occur with autism further increase the distance between autistic students and their typically developing peers (Oexle & Corrigan, 2018). In addition, stigma is dynamic – it is reinforced every day by micro-interactions in which peers demand a "normative reciprocity" that autistic people are not able to provide (Morrison et al., 2020).

ASD is an "invisible" disability and others don't know about it, and may mistakenly interpret autistic behaviours as negative personality traits (Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020). In addition, the media often depicts autism as a deficit, which exacerbates this attribution bias and minimizes the need to consider pragmatic diversity. (Botha & Cage, 2022).

### 3.7.3 Evidence from Previous Studies

A number of previous studies have also found that people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are significantly more likely to be the victims of verbal bullying compared to neurotypical individuals. Systematic reviews have revealed a significant connection between peer victimization and ASD, indicating that social stigma and communicative differences are important factors contributing to the increased vulnerability (Sreckovic et al., 2014; Daghustani et al., 2025). In addition, longitudinal studies suggest that early pragmatic language problems carry over to peer rejection, despite controlling for intellectual function and structural language skills (Morrison et al., 2020). Together, these findings validate the theoretical basis presented in the present research regarding the indirect link between pragmatic deficits and verbal bullying via social misinterpretation and stigma.

1. Prevalence: Autistic individuals are 2.4 times more likely to be bullied than neurotypical peers (Sreckovic et al., 2014; Daghustani et al., 2022).

2. Causality: Severity of core ASD symptoms, including social interaction and communication deficits, is a direct correlate of increased risk of bullying victimization (Park et al., 2020).

3. Manifestation: Adolescents with ASD report social exclusion at 72% and verbal bullying at 66% as the most common forms (Daghustani et al., 2025). Qualitative studies add that "being misunderstood on purpose" is a recurring theme in victims' narratives, linking pragmatic mismatch directly to targeted teasing (Botha & Cage, 2022).

#### 3.7.4 Conceptual Model of the Study

The relationship can be summarized in the following causal chain:

Pragmatic Deficit (Literalness, Maxim Violation)

→ Social Misinterpretation (Perceived as Rude/Naïve)

→ Social Stigma (Spoiled Identity, Othering)

→ Verbal Bullying

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1 Introduction to Results and Discussion

This chapter presents a theoretical discussion based on documentary analysis of peer-reviewed literature from 2018 to 2025. As this study does not involve primary data collection, the discussion aims to synthesize existing theories and propose a causal model. The following analysis interprets linguistic deficits through the lenses of Grice's Maxims, Speech Act Theory, and Goffman's Theory of Stigma to explain how they may lead to social consequences.

##### 4.2 Analysis of Maxim Violations in Social Context

###### Case 1: Violation of the Maxim of Relation

Context: A group of peers is discussing a school trip. An autistic student, with a perseverative interest in trains, interjects.

Autistic Utterance: "The Shinkansen in Japan travels at 320 km/h."

Neurotypical Interpretation: The utterance is irrelevant to the topic of the school trip. Peers interpret this as the student not listening or not caring about their conversation.

Social Consequence: The student is labeled as "weird" or "self-absorbed." This contributes to social exclusion, a form of relational bullying.

Analysis: The deficit is not in vocabulary, but in the pragmatic ability to maintain topical relevance. The violation of the Maxim of Relation is misread as a violation of social interest.

###### Case 2: Violation of the Maxim of Quality via Sarcasm

Context: A peer accidentally drops their books. Another peer says sarcastically, "Nice one, genius."

Autistic Response/Interpretation: The autistic student, hearing this, replies, "Thank you."

Neurotypical Interpretation: The literal interpretation is perceived as the student lacking a sense of humor or being “gullible.”

Social Consequence: The student becomes a target for further sarcastic remarks, leading to verbal bullying. Research shows that failure to comprehend irony is a persistent challenge in ASD.

Analysis: The failure to recognize the speaker’s dissociative attitude is a direct result of a ToM deficit and leads directly to social stigmatization.

#### 4.3 Analysis of Speech Act Misunderstanding

##### Case 3: Failure to Recognize an Indirect Request

Context: In a classroom, a teacher says to an autistic student who is talking loudly, “Is it too noisy in here?”

Autistic Utterance: The student replies, “No.” and continues talking. Neurotypical Interpretation: The teacher and peers interpret the response as defiant and disrespectful.

Social Consequence: The student is labeled as “badly behaved,” which can lead to disciplinary action and peer rejection, forms of verbal and social bullying.

Analysis: The student processed the utterance as a literal question about the environment, failing to recognize the illocutionary force, which was an indirect command to be quiet. This demonstrates the core issue with indirect speech acts in ASD.

#### 4.4 The Cumulative Effect: From Language to Stigma

The three cases above illustrate that the consequences are cumulative. A single pragmatic failure is not isolated. Repeated failures in relevance, sarcasm, and indirectness construct a consistent social identity for the autistic individual: one who is “rude,” “stupid,” or “odd.” This consistent labeling is the definition of stigma. As documented, this stigma makes individuals with ASD 2.4 times more vulnerable to bullying. The linguistic difference is thus the root cause of the social victimization (Daghustani et al, 2025).

### 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

#### 5.1 Conclusion

This theoretical-analytical documentary study aimed to examine the linguistic mechanism that can create social stigma and verbal bullying for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a result of their pragmatic deficits. By adopting the Cooperative Principle, the Speech Act Theory and the Theory of Stigma defined by Grice, and Goffman, respectively, the study illustrated that the problem of many people with ASD is not of grammatical or lexical nature, but of using language in a context of social interaction.

It was found that violations of Grice's conversational maxims, including problems with understanding indirect speech acts, sarcasm and conversational implicatures were often misunderstood by the neurotypical peers as rude, indifferent or socially incompetent rather than as symptoms of a neurodevelopmental condition. These misunderstandings can lead to the emergence of social stigma and social exclusion, thus further increasing the possibility of verbal bullying.

This is a significant contribution as a theoretical model is proposed to connect Pragmatic Deficit to Social Misinterpretation to Social Stigma to Verbal Bullying. This model offers a unified account of a phenomenon which has been studied from a psychological or educational standpoint more often. The study focuses on pragmatic misunderstanding as a mediator to demonstrate the importance of language in the social experiences of persons with ASD.

The results also highlight the need for the explicit provision and promotion of pragmatic competence, as well as raising awareness about the communication challenges faced by autistic children. Increased awareness by teachers, families, and peers of communicating with an autistic child and child's communication style may help minimize negative messages or misinterpretations, and help create more inclusive educational and social settings.

However this study is still theoretical and documentary in nature, meaning that it has not been conducted on primary empirical data, but on published literature. The proposed model is therefore conceptual and should be regarded as a model that needs to be empirically tested. Future study is encouraged that replicate the findings of this research in other Arabic speaking countries, such as Iraqi, investigate cross-cultural differences in pragmatic language, and quantify and assess the success of pragmatic-language intervention to mitigate stigma and bullying.

## 5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this theoretical-analytical study, the following recommendations are proposed

### 1. For Linguists and Special Education Practitioners:

Intervention programmes need to move away from explicit grammatical structures and focus on explicit pragmatic training. This includes direct teaching of Gricean maxims, the illocutionary force of indirect requests and breaking down sarcasm and irony through visual and textual support.

### 2. For Educational Institutions and Schools:

There should be awareness campaigns to help educate other students and staff about the fact that things like literalness or irrelevance to the topic are a sign of a language deficit, and not deliberate social misbehavior. One of the first steps in preventing bullying is to reduce the stigma associated with it through awareness.

### 3. For Future Research:

Empirical research is recommended in the future to assess this theoretical model in an Iraqi and Arabic context. Research specifically could examine the translated versions of indirect speech acts and sarcasm in Arabic and see how it appears in the target language and culture.

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### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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