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Signification at Its Limits
Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and the Narrative Potential of Graphic Communication

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Abstract: The novel is narrated by Christopher, a teenage boy affected with an unspecified autistic disorder, whose vulnerability and social incompatibility result largely from his distinctive understanding of language: as his cognitive disposition compels the boy to take each word at its face value, he feels estranged by linguistic "anomalies" such as metaphors or idiomatic expressions. Yet, as Christopher attempts to write a novel, language becomes an unavoidable instrument. To overcome its inadequacy and facilitate the storytelling process, he resolves to employ graphic elements: maps, charts, drawings, samples of handwriting, photographs and mathematical equations. This article discusses Christopher's understanding of the system of language, especially its function of representing the reality. My analysis focuses on the high potential of graphic means of communication employed by the narrator when the usual linguistic means fail him and he resorts to images to facilitate the structuring of his reality. Christopher's use of graphics undermines the referentiality of language and emphasizes the gap between the signifier and the signified.

Keywords: Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, autism fiction, graphic communication, representation

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Granice znaczenia
Potencjał narracyjny graficznych środków komunikacji w powieści Marka Haddona *Dziwny przypadek psa nocną porą*

Streszczenie: Narratorem powieści Marka Haddona jest Christopher, nastolatek dotknięty niesprecyzowanym bliżej zaburzeniem autystycznym, którego bezbronność i niedostosowanie społeczne wynikają głównie ze specyficznego sposobu rozumienia języka: jako że z uwagi na swoje zdolności kognitywne chłopiec rozumie wszystko dosłownie, jest wytrącony z równowagi przez takie „anomalia" językowe jak metafory czy idiomy. Skoro jednak zdecydował się pisać powieść, musi wykorzystywać język jako narzędzie. Próbuje pokonać niedoskonałość języka i ułatwić sobie proces budowania narracji przez wykorzystanie elementów graficznych: map, wykresów, rysunków, elementów pisma odręcznego, zdjęć i obliczeń matematycznych. Artykuł zajmuje się analizą sposobu, w jaki Christopher pojmuje język, a szczególnie jego funkcję odzwierciedlenia rzeczywistości. Rozważania skupiają się na potencjale graficznych środków komunikacji wykorzystanych przez narratora, kiedy zawodzą go zwykłe środki językowe i decyduje się budować swoją rzeczywistość poprzez użycie obrazów. Wykorzystanie grafiki w narracji Christophera podważa referencjalność języka oraz podkreśla lukę między znaczącym a znaczonym.

Słowa kluczowe: Mark Hadron, *Dziwny przypadek psa nocną porą*, literatura na temat autyzmu, graficzne środki komunikacji, reprezentacja

The publication of Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* in 2003 was a sensational success: marketed in two simultaneous independent editions, for adults and for children, the novel enjoyed lavish critical praise and commercial acclaim. The crossover character of the book is shown by its literary awards, which include both the Whitbread Book of the Year and the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize. In some way, it also translates into the novel's outstanding popularity: *The Curious Incident* has remained a bestseller for more than a decade and ranks twentieth in *The Guardian*'s list of top best-selling books of all time, superseded only by novels of such authors as J.K. Rowling, Dan Brown or Stephenie Meyer. As Bill Greenwell notes, Haddon's book was only one among several works of fiction published in Britain at the turn of the 21st century which feature characters (or narrators) affected with autistic spectrum disorders; they include, e.g., Gene Kemp's *Seriously Weird*, Elizabeth Moon's *Speed of Dark*, Marjorie Reynolds's *The Civil Wars of Jonah Moran*, or Kathy Hoopman's *Of Mice and Aliens* (Greenwell 2004: 271–273). In fact, characters with unmistakably autistic features have appeared in literature long before the condition was officially recognized. The examples include Boo Radley from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Benjy from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (Greenwell 2004: 273), Lennie Small from John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (Freeman Loftis 2015: 62–70), or even Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (Freeman Loftis 2015: 23–48).

The Curious Incident is narrated by Christopher, a teenage boy affected with an unspecified autistic disorder, who pursues a mock-Holmesian investigation into the murder of his neighbour's dog. The case evolves unpredictably and eventually leads the protagonist to a premature journey into the hostile realm of adulthood. Christopher's vulnerability and social incompatibility result largely from his distinctive understanding of language: as his cognitive disposition compels the boy to take each word at its face value, he feels estranged by linguistic "anomalies" such as metaphors or idiomatic expressions. His ineptness in verbal communication with other people problematizes social interaction: Christopher feels helpless in the world where most human actions and interpersonal relations depend on, and are structurally predefined by, language and the consequences of its operation. Yet when he decides to write a novel, language becomes an unavoidable instrument. To overcome its inadequacy and facilitate the storytelling process, he resolves to employ graphic elements: maps, charts, drawings, samples of handwriting, photographs and mathematical equations. This article discusses Christopher's understanding of the system of language, especially its function of representing reality. My analysis focuses on the high potential of graphic means of communication employed by the narrator when the usual linguistic means fail him and he resorts to images to facilitate the structuring of his reality. Christopher's use of graphics undermines the referentiality of language and emphasizes the gap between the signifier and the signified. He does not see signifiers as connected in a chain: they are either directly stuck to certain signifieds, or represent their empty graphic dimension. The article attempts to show how Christopher's scepticism about the linguistic system of communication interacts with postmodernist and poststructuralist opinions about language and referentiality.

The critical reactions to the accuracy and validity of the novel's representation of the autistic spectrum are varied. Some commentators point out that Haddon's narrative oversimplifies the model of the autistic mind, endorsing common assumptions about it. For instance, Alastair Wilkins and Simon Shorvon note that *The Curious Incident* reproduces the autistic language and thought-processes in a manner which seems "too simplistic and monochromatic to ring true", arguing that "this straightforward narrative does not reflect [the] complexity" of people affected with Asperger's syndrome (2005: 2473). Sonya Freeman Loftis, in turn, observes that "Christopher's character is a conglomeration of stereotypes, presenting autism as the public eye would imagine it to be"; for her, the effect of Haddon's representation of popular notions of the spectrum, more consistent "than any real individual person could be", creates "a figure who is overdrawn to the point of potential caricature" (2015: 124–125). At the same time, though, the analysis of several hundred Amazon.com reader reviews allows Marco Caracciolo to claim that according to multiple readers of *The Curious Incident* who have friends or relatives affected with autistic disorders, Christopher provides a faithful representation of such conditions; some of them even admitted that "reading this novel has allowed them to understand better the thought patterns of their children or siblings" (2014: 64). The critic further concludes that while Haddon's observations on autism might not be considered definitively strict for psychologists or neurologists, "they can enrich readers' folk psychology and deepen their understanding of autistic minds" (ibid).

The effectiveness of Haddon's clear and accessible delineation of autism relies not only on his use of the narrator who is affected with the syndrome, but on resorting to

models and analogies familiar to a neurotypical reader. Perhaps the most efficient approximation of Christopher's character is achieved by frequent references to his liking for science, especially for mathematics. The protagonist is fond of maths because "it involves solving problems, which are difficult and interesting but offer a straightforward answer at the end" (Haddon 2004: 78). Mathematical lack of ambiguity gives Christopher safety, anchoring him in definite factuality; this cannot be offered by life in general, "because in life there are no straightforward answers at the end" (ibid.). Likewise, when the novel endeavours to demonstrate that autistic people might find it challenging to differentiate between various emotions displayed by others, the narrator declares his liking for dogs, the creatures whose emotions he finds easy to gauge, because they only have "four moods. Happy, sad, cross and concentrating" (ibid.: 4). Alerted by such narrative strategies, most neurotypical readers of *The Curious Incident* look at Christopher through the prism of their own psychological constitution, immediately spotting his departure from the statistical "norm" in behaviour which manifests in certain social inabilities. They note his particular aversions and phobias, evoked by certain foods, colours or social situations; they detect his emotional inadaptability, evident, e.g., in his failure to react empathetically to his father's distress. Yet the novel's presentation of autism poses it as a neurological condition alternative to the "norm", which has not only disadvantages, but also advantages over a neurotypical structure of mind. This is especially visible through situating Christopher as a follower of Sherlock Holmes. The boy sees in Conan Doyle's detective a role model who allows him a potential of positive achievement – not despite his psychological structure, but precisely because of it. As Freeman Loftis suggests, "Christopher's reading of Sherlock Holmes allows him to conceive of his own disability identity in terms of neurodiversity rather than pathology, offering him a positive and empowering vision of his own autistic traits" (2015: 127). In fact, Holmes's observation from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, "The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes", quoted in Haddon's novel (2004: 92), is a pertinent observation concerning the discrepancy between the cognition of the reader and that of Christopher, or any autistic person for that matter.

In fact, Arthur Conan Doyle's fiction, due to its rigidity of logic, clear patterns of narrative structure, and relative transparency of language, epitomizes the only literary genre appreciated by Christopher: detective fiction. His identification with Holmes also enables him to "construct [his story] within the clearly defined parameters of genre fiction" (Gilbert 2005: 243). The boy openly admits that he does not understand, and consequently does not like, what he calls "proper novels". To a certain extent, this signals an issue which, arguably, *The Curious Incident* raises on a level independent of its discussion of autism: that of the representation of reality by the novel. As an example of unintelligibility of the novelistic language, Christopher quotes (slightly altering it) a fragment of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, "I am veined with iron, with silver and with streaks of common mud. I cannot contract into the firm fist which those clench who do not depend on stimulus" (2004: 5), complaining that it does not make sense for him, for his father, or for one of his teachers. The passage from Woolf only becomes meaningful once the reader realizes that it attempts to represent not factual or material, but a psychical reality. Haddon's novel endeavours to achieve exactly the same, using entirely different means, but, paradoxically, just like modernist prose, also stretching the generally accepted standards of the genre.

One of the most glaring manners in which *The Curious Incident* contravenes ordinary patterns used in novels is its numbering of chapters. Christopher's book does not number the chapters with consecutive numbers; they are labelled: 2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, etc., and these are consecutive prime numbers. The boy explains this decision with his affinity for maths, but completes this with a simple, naturalistic, but philosophical observation: "I think prime numbers are like life. They are very logical but you could never work out the rules, even if you spent all your time thinking about them" (2004: 15). In a way, using prime numbers to number chapters might be viewed as reflecting the abovementioned difference in cognition between Christopher and a neurotypical reader. At the same time, though, what a neurotypical reader immediately notices is that some chapter numbers are *missing*, which, in turn, might suggest that something in Christopher's account is elided, unsaid, perhaps ignored or forgotten, or perhaps silenced or repressed. On the one hand, the novel's plot is linear and events are arranged in a logical chain. Occasionally though, Christopher inserts into the main narrative brief digressive chapters, e.g., presenting certain scientific investigations or listing yellow and brown objects he abhors; the narrative detours seem to be sparked by his moments of distress. Ironically, it appears that the narrative form of Haddon's novel is closer to Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* than to Conan Doyle's fiction.

A major cognitive difference between Christopher and neurotypical people relates to his understanding of the system of language. The boy would like to see language as an ideally objective, logical and unambiguous means of interpersonal communication, and he is disappointed that it often falls short of this ideal. Certainly, his perception of logicality in conversation is rather unusual for his interlocutors, e.g., when he answers common questions, such as "How old are you?", with too detailed, redundant and irrelevant information: "15 years and 3 months and 2 days" (2004: 7). Yet what Christopher finds most problematic is that very often language is not used by other people in an absolutely literal manner. To a large extent, this issue stems from the boy's inability to tell lies in any form, even white lies. His rigidity dictates that any non-literal use of language is qualified as a lie, and, therefore, some areas and conventions of language natural for neurotypical speakers are not accessible to him. For instance, he does not use, or even finds it difficult to spot, rhetorical questions, as he considers asking a question if one knows the answer quite pointless. He also maintains that he cannot tell and does not understand jokes. Although the narrator only gives examples of jokes based on puns, saying he finds it "uncomfortable and confusing" (ibid.: 10) when words or phrases can convey more than one meaning at a time, this obstacle also results from his inability to decipher and appreciate irony. Yet the most emblematic of Christopher's problems with language is his animosity towards metaphor, which he finds most directly non-literal and, as such, unreasonable and misleading. The boy's incapability of decoding metaphors seems so acute that the phrases he lists to illustrate the point, e.g., "We had a real pig of a day", or "They had a skeleton in the cupboard" (ibid.: 19), although behaving like metaphors, would be classified by most language users as idioms. The last phrase allows Haddon to playfully exercise the narrative irony of his novel: as it turns out in the course of the events, Christopher's purportedly dead mother has in fact only abandoned her family and the boy's father keeps her letters precisely in the cupboard. In this way, "the skeleton in the cupboard" becomes indeed a vital metaphor for the narrator's family story, although its figurative meaning is not available to the boy himself.

The reader of *The Curious Incident* might indeed notice that Haddon's novel, apart from being a commentary on social and psychological concerns related to the autistic condition, refers, figuratively, to other issues as well. As Caracciolo argues, Christopher's narrative perspective exposes to our view the uncannily familiar "strangeness of social conventions – a strangeness so ingrained in our thought processes that only an external observer like the narrator can reveal it" (2014: 70). Language itself is emblematic of such "social conventions", since it is generally taken for granted despite its apparent artificiality and "strangeness". As Elena Semino notes, Christopher's estrangement by the system of language allows the readers of the novel to realize that our seemingly straightforward everyday conversations strongly rely on imperceptible communicative protocols, and that they can be "disconcerting and treacherous" for a person "who finds other people relatively unreadable" (2014: 155). In this way, the depiction of the mind-set of an autistic character allows Haddon to engage in a postmodernist debate on language, referentiality and representation.

After Saussure, language is understood as a system of signs which do not refer to real world objects but to our concepts of them. Individual signs do not carry meaning: it is determined by differential relations between particular signs within the linguistic system. The relationship between the signifier and the signified (the constituents of each sign) is contingent, arbitrary and depends on social agreement. This agreement, as Jacques Lacan claims, is in fact imposed on each of us, because "language, with its structure, exists prior to each subject's entry into it" (2006: 413). Being human, for Lacan, means being subjected to what he calls the symbolic order, the order of language, discourse, codes and conventions that organize and regulate the society; the symbolic order is all-embracing: "we cannot escape it, although as a structure it escapes us [. . .] we can never fully grasp the social or symbolic totality that constitutes the sum of our universe, but that totality has a structuring force upon us" (Homer 2005: 44). Following the general loss of conviction in human ability to ultimately and unproblematically comprehend, or even know, the external reality, poststructural and postmodernist thinkers, as well as postmodernist writers, have frequently addressed the problem of the reference of language and the ambivalent relationship between the word and the world. Jean-François Lyotard, for instance, postulates "the impossibility of language ever being able to grasp the non-linguistic" and its consequent powerlessness to "articulate the meaning of the world", considering it the elemental limitation of the linguistic system (Hutcheon 2004: 150). Jacques Derrida, in turn, downgrades the referential function of language to the secondary status, arguing that "there is nothing outside of the text" (2016: 172), and that the meaning "can be derived only from within texts through deferral, through *différance*" (Hutcheon 2004: 149). Although *The Curious Incident* is not deeply involved in the intricacies of poststructural reflection, Haddon's effort to reproduce his autistic character's uncomfortable relation to language offers an inspiring perspective of looking at our linguistic system of communication built upon the agreed-upon artificiality.

Apparently, the characteristic of language which Christopher finds most problematic and disturbing is its inherent arbitrariness. The boy comments on the often haphazard conventionality of human practices and common understandings in his short digressive chapter on constellations. In it, he takes an example of a constellation that came to be called Orion, because some people in the past saw in it semblance of a hunter with a club and bow and arrow:

Figure 1. Orion – conventional
(Haddon 2004: 156)

Christopher argues, however, that people can only see stars, and arranging their positions into any picture is quite random and subjective: "you could join up the dots in any way you wanted, and you could make it look like a lady with an umbrella who is waving, or the coffee maker [. . .] with a handle and steam coming out, or like a dinosaur" (2004: 156).

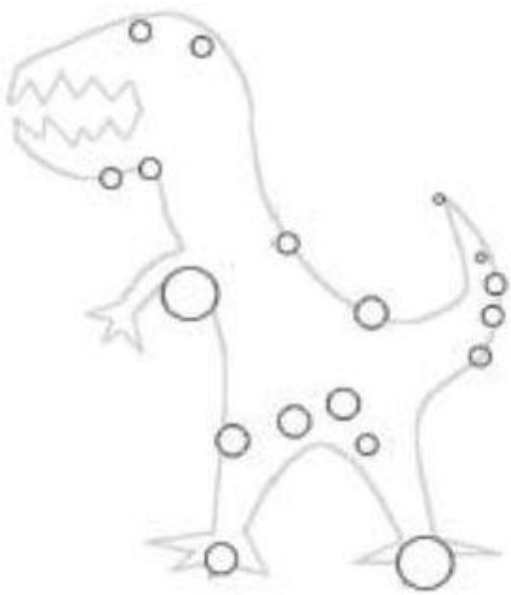

Figure 2. Orion – dinosaur
(Haddon 2004: 157)

Indeed, if the positioning of stars in the Orion constellation can bring to mind the shape of an archer pointing his bow, it can also quite easily evoke the image of a lady with an umbrella or a coffee maker. When the reader realizes how much one needs to stretch imagination to visualize a dinosaur here, and extends this to other images suggested by the narrator, the level of arbitrariness involved in our universally shared conventions becomes evident. In this way, the passage might be read as Haddon's ironical commentary on the contingent character of the symbolic order, the system to which we all cede the power to organize our reality and living.

Relating *The Curious Incident* to the assumptions of contemporary narrative theory, James Berger claims that Christopher longs for some form of "pre-Saussurean language of pure correspondence in which signifier, signified, and referent merge, and all slippage and ambiguity are banished" (2008: 275). The boy cannot tolerate the arbitrary and sometimes unstable correlation between the signified and the signifier, and therefore he does not consider language a safe territory, as it cannot be fully controlled by reason, unlike maths. Yet this whimsicality of language lies precisely in its semiotic nature: the individual particularity of referents is juxtaposed to the broad universality of signs, and "the name can never mean only the thing" (Berger 2008: 274). The protagonist is annoyed with this aspect of language even in the context of his own name: the origin of the name Christopher, invoking the man who carried Christ across the river, brings associations with a kind and helpful person, but the boy would rather his name were perfectly unequivocal and had only one referent – himself.

Commentators have already noted that Haddon's reflection on the nature of language in the novel has a universal character and is not limited to autism. Vivienne Muller, for instance, maintains that certain parallels between Christopher and neurotypical people encourage us "to see the ways in which language can shape or confound our understandings of self and others in the symbolic field", also in relation to people not affected with ASD (2006: 123). Stefania Ciocia, in turn, claims that what begins as a quasi-detective story created by an autistic boy develops into "an inquiry into the nature of language" which reveals its inefficiency "as an accurate mimetic and epistemological tool" that can be universally used to describe the reality (2009: 323). The critic goes further, proposing that by means of drawing "our attention to the gap between signifiers and signifieds and to the impossibility of articulating exactly and unambiguously what we mean" Christopher fulfils the poststructuralist task of persuading his readers "that all language is approximate and figurative to a degree" (ibid.: 328).

Yet approximate and figurative is for Christopher no more than deceptive and untrue. This agrees with the poststructuralist assumption that language cannot be effectively used to describe the world we live in. What is of more consequence, if language is supposed to construct and organize our socio-physical reality into a realm of intelligible phenomena, it fails to do so for Christopher. In need of a replacement method, the boy resorts to graphical and paralinguistic means, which he abundantly employs in his narrative. The pages of *The Curious Incident* teem with various graphics: drawings, maps, charts, diagrams and mathematical calculations; the text uses fonts of several types. Some graphical devices are strictly diegetic and indispensable for Christopher to accurately depict the setting of the plot or other elements of physical reality. Others might be more digressive or helpful for the narrator to explicate his tangential reflections. For Berger, those graphic devices are

"stable forms that represent the world in ways that slippery words cannot", because the words are often self-referential (2008: 274). In this way, Christopher's prolific use of non-textual modes of communication does not only serve the purpose of facilitating the process of structuring his reality, but also becomes – on a more general level – his "indictment of the representational limitations of conventional linguistic signs" (Ciocia 2009: 324).

Employing graphic means of communication in *The Curious Incident* also demonstrates what happens with the signification process when language is partially supplemented by other semiotic systems. The communicative use of pictures in macro-scale is quite straightforward: reproducing the map of the train station means that Christopher does not need to depict the setting in words and that the layout of the place becomes immediately conspicuous; presenting a diagram with all possible choices he faces when he decides to leave his father clearly visualizes his options and allows the reader to discern all alternatives simultaneously. The use of non-linguistic signs in micro-scale is more limited and less definite, but, arguably, becomes more emblematic of Christopher's reliance on the *combination* of various semiotic systems. For instance, during his journey on the London Underground, he says: "I followed the arrow that said ← and I went through the left-hand tunnel" (2004: 215). The arrow sign is absolutely unambiguous inasmuch as it indicates direction, and it becomes incorporated by the narrator into the sentence, replacing a word ("left") or a phrase ("go left") that would complete the syntax here. Paradoxically, Christopher considers the arrow sign a more straightforward, and hence safer, symbol than its linguistic equivalent. After all, the word "left" in English has more than one meaning, e.g., it is simple past and past participle of "leave".

During his solitary journey to London, when Christopher is stressed and worried, on several occasions he becomes overwhelmed by signifiers that are beyond his comprehension. The system of language collapses and he can only register individual signifiers, without arranging them in any chain that would produce some meaning. The symbols and inscriptions are unfathomable for him, and he cannot even distinguish between underground notices, adverts and graffiti:

> the walls were curved and they were covered in big adverts and they said **WAY OUT** and **London's Transport Museum** and **Take time out to regret your career choice** and **Jamaica** and ⇄ **British Rail** and ⊗ **No Smoking** and **Be Moved** and **Be Moved** and **Be Moved** and **For Stations beyond Queen's Park take the first train and change at Queen's Park if necessary** and **Hammersmith and City Line** and **You're closer than my family ever gets**. (2004: 215)

> And there were signs saying **There are 53,963 holiday cottages in Scandinavia and Germany** and **VIABIOTICS** and **3435** and **Penalty £10 if you fail to show a valid ticket for your entire journey** and **Discover Gold, Then Bronze** and **TVIC** and **EPBIC** and **suck my cock** and ⚠ **Obstructing the doors can be dangerous** and **BRV** and **Con. IC** and **TALK TO THE WORLD**. (ibid.: 226–227)

This disorientation is at its peak on the boy's arrival in London: the signs are even more remote from suggesting lexical units and they become empty signifiers, unrelated to any referents. This is represented in Haddon's novel by fonts of various kinds and sizes:

Figure 3. A London street: graphic empty signifiers
(Haddon 2004: 208–209)

After a few moments, when Christopher's anxiety grows, the system of written language ultimately collapses for him. Letters are no longer distinguished from non-linguistic symbols; all is a meaningless blur:

Figure 4. Language breakdown
(Haddon 2004: 209)

As numerous examples from Haddon's novel demonstrate, the narrator does not rely on conventional written linguistic means: he uses various elements of graphic communication to facilitate his storytelling task. In this respect, *The Curious Incident* is related to postmodernist books that experiment with typography, extensive use of illustration, iconic shaped texts, introduction of blank space or quasi-simultaneous texts. They include works by writers such as B.S. Johnson, Ronald Sukenick, Raymond Federman, or, more recently, Mark Danielewski. As Brian McHale observes, the main objective of such strategies is to draw the reader's attention to the material status of the book as a physical object; in this way, writers mark "a basic ontological boundary, the one between the real-world object, the book which shares our world with us, and the fictional objects and world which the text projects" (1987: 180). Furthermore, "the effect of foregrounding the presence and materiality of the book, and of disrupting the reality of the projected world" (McHale 2005: 181) emphasizes what McHale calls the "ontological dominant" (ibid.: 10), which is an essential feature of postmodernist literature. In the light of the above discussion, however, it seems that the use of graphic elements in Mark Haddon's novel serves mostly a different purpose: to convincingly represent a non-neurotypical mind of the narrator and to illustrate his reservation about the inadequacy of language.

As I have endeavoured to demonstrate, Christopher's apprehension towards language is mostly caused by his specific cognitive abilities: in many cases, he is not capable of following a chain of signification on which the linguistic system relies. The inherent arbitrariness of language is for him illogical and ambiguous. Interestingly, the narrator's estrangement by the linguistic system of communication agrees with Jacques Lacan's standpoint: "The subject is separated from the Others […] by the wall of language. […] Language is as much there to found us in the Other as to drastically prevent us from understanding him" (1991: 244). Thus, Haddon's novel can be interpreted as going beyond the inquiry of the idiosyncrasies of autistic cognitive processes and social behaviour. Offering the readers a glimpse of the world through autistic eyes "allows us to see aspects of our 'neurotypical' society to which we ourselves have become blind" (Caracciolo 2014: 69). Haddon once more emphasizes the claim of postmodernist thinkers that many phenomena which we have long taken for granted as intrinsically natural actually need to be carefully reviewed.

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