

From Masking to Meaning: A Sociolinguistic Model of Gendered Pragmatics in Autistic Women's Communication

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Abstract

Autistic women frequently engage in pragmatic adaptation to align with gendered communicative norms. This paper frames camouflaging as anticipatory pragmatic labour: the pre-emptive modulation of language across cognitive, pragmatic, and social levels. A Three-Tier Sociolinguistic Model is proposed to capture this process. Drawing on interviews, naturalistic recordings, and culturally adapted inference tasks in the UK and China, preliminary findings reveal consistent use of hedging, prosodic mimicry, and affective suppression. These behaviours reflect internalised norms and socio-discursive pressures. The study reframes camouflaging as an effortful, norm-responsive practice shaped by gender, neurotype, and culture.

Keywords: autism, gendered language, pragmatic adaptation, camouflaging, cross-cultural sociolinguistics, identity negotiation

Introduction

Autistic women are underrepresented in diagnostic and sociolinguistic literature—not due to a lack of communicative difference, but because their adaptations often render that difference invisible. Recent work in gendered neurodiversity critiques dominant models of communication that privilege emotional clarity, deference, and relational attunement—norms typically associated with femininity (Bargiela et al., 2016; Hull et al., 2020).

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These expectations obscure how autistic women strategically reshape their discourse to meet implicit social demands.

This paper introduces gendered pragmatic misalignment: a structural disconnect between autistic communicative styles and prevailing norms of gendered interaction. In response, many women adopt camouflaging strategies such as hedging, affective suppression, and prosodic mimicry to avoid misreading or exclusion.

To explain this adaptation, I propose a Three-Tier Sociolinguistic Model. At the cognitive level, speakers assess social risk; at the pragmatic level, they adjust language in real time; and at the social level, they conform to normative discourse conventions. Rather than a marker of deficit, camouflaging is reframed here as skilled, anticipatory labour shaped by gendered and neurotypical interactional asymmetries.

Methodology

This qualitative, cross-cultural study examines how autistic women in the United Kingdom and China negotiate social acceptability through pragmatic adaptation. Twenty participants (aged 21–35 years), each formally diagnosed within the past five years, were recruited from urban, highly educated populations to reduce background variability.

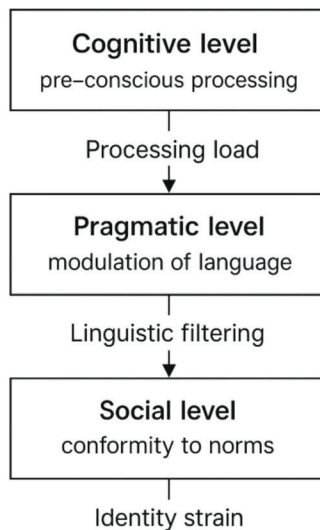


Figure 1. Three-Tier sociolinguistic model

Data collection integrates multiple modalities to capture camouflaging across reflexive and interactional domains. Participants completed three rounds of semi-structured interviews over six weeks, exploring emotional disclosure, communicative discomfort, and metapragmatic awareness. Each participant also contributed approximately two hours of naturalistic audio from everyday conversations in domestic, professional, and peer settings. In parallel, a curated corpus of publicly available posts authored by autistic women was assembled to examine pragmatic performance in digital self-representation.

To assess online processing, participants undertook brief EEG and eye-tracking tasks before and after the interviews. These culturally adapted scenarios involved resolving emotionally ambiguous or pragmatically indeterminate utterances. The design aims to detect whether extended self-reflection influences inference sensitivity under social ambiguity.

This study has received approval from the relevant institutional ethics board. All procedures involving human participants will be conducted in accordance with formal approval. Data collection will commence only upon institutional clearance. Analytical procedures include thematic coding (NVivo), discourse and conversation analysis, and cross-cultural matrix comparison. Drawing on pragmatic sociolinguistics and gender performativity (Butler, 2004), the study conceptualizes camouflaging as socially responsive linguistic labour, not as communicative deficit.

Preliminary Results

Initial analysis of interviews and public texts reveals a consistent pattern of anticipatory pragmatic filtering. Participants describe actively monitoring how their speech may be received, particularly in emotionally ambiguous or socially delicate contexts. Common strategies include hedging—through mitigators like “maybe” and “I suppose”—to soften epistemic stance and avoid assertiveness. Emotional disclosures are frequently postponed until interactional conditions permit.

These behaviours exemplify the Pragmatic Tier of the proposed model, wherein real-time adjustments reflect internalized gendered norms of appropriateness and relational harmony. Topic-shifting is also employed to maintain affiliative tone, especially when addressing disagreement or discomfort.

As one Chinese participant explained: “I write like the others in the group so I won’t be seen as rude. Even if I don’t feel that way, I change my tone.” Her comment illustrates mimetic alignment—adopting prosody, discourse markers, or affective cues associated with neurotypical peers.

Together, these observations suggest that camouflaging is not mere suppression but a skilled repertoire of norm-oriented linguistic strategies.

Discussion

This analysis suggests that camouflaging in autistic women is not passive concealment but cognitively effortful sociolinguistic negotiation. The proposed Three-Tier Sociolinguistic Model frames pragmatic adaptation as layered linguistic labour shaped by gendered and cultural norms of legibility, propriety, and affective restraint.

Drawing on interactional pragmatics (Levinson, 1983), gender performativity (Butler, 2004), and neurodiversity studies (Koi, 2021), the model conceptualises camouflaging as a stylised, adaptive response rather than a communicative deficit.

The findings have broader applications. In conversational AI, systems must better interpret mitigated or indirect cues common among neurodivergent users. In education, camouflaging-aware pedagogy can support students whose communicative labour remains unseen. Clinically, the model offers a tool for identifying masked autism, especially in women whose speech superficially conforms to neurotypical norms.

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