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Self-Reported and Family Members' Perceptions of Language Strengths in Autistic Individuals: A Qualitative Study in Finland

Grace Joplin Ferreira [1*] **, *Mari Wiklund*** [1] **, *Henri Pesonen*** [2]

[1] *Department of Languages, Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki, 00014 Helsinki, Finlanda*

[2] *Special Needs Education Department, University of Oslo, 0313 Oslo, Norway*

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, language research on Autism has centred on deficits and difficulties, with much of the literature emphasizing what autistic individuals *cannot* do rather than identifying the full spectrum of their linguistic strengths and diverse communication styles. Despite recent growing awareness, the wide range of linguistic abilities in autistic individuals remains scarcely documented, leaving a significant gap in our understanding of their communicative potential. This study seeks to reframe the narrative by focusing on language and communication strengths among autistic individuals in Finland, including both Finnish- and English-speaking participants, with immigrant background. Data were collected through an anonymous survey completed by two distinct groups: 43 autistic individuals and 47 family members, partners, or friends of autistic individuals, totaling 90 participants. Notably, while previous research in the UK has identified honesty and straightforward communication among autistic people, this is the first study to report similar findings in the Finnish context. By documenting these traits in a new cultural setting, our findings add to cross-cultural research on autistic communication. They suggest that while directness and truthfulness may be common autistic strengths across contexts, their interpretation and social value vary depending on cultural norms—such as Finland's tendency toward reserved and concise communication compared with societies where casual conversations are more expected. In conclusion, the skills reported map onto areas

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Grace Joplin Ferreira, Department of Languages, Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki, 00014 Helsinki, Finland; Email: grace.ferreira@helsinki.fi

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of language strengths such as multilingualism, written language, grammar and direct communication style, but areas for improvement were also indicated, leading to a holistic view of language in Autism.
Keywords: Language Strengths; Autism; Neurodiversity; Strengths-Based Approach; Finland

1. Introduction

A central diagnostic and anecdotal feature of Autism is difficulty with social communication [1]. Despite this, Autism language research has traditionally focused on a deficit-based approach, identifying deficits in all language domains [2]. One of the reasons why the deficit-approach is more salient might be bias which is still present in the mindset of Autism researchers mostly concentrated within the realm of clinical paradigm [3]. As a result, researchers may opt to frame Autism through the dominant deficit-based lens, emphasizing impairments in behaviour, communication, and social functioning, while often overlooking the strengths of autistic individuals [4] [5–7]. Alternatively, researchers can shift from a clinical deficit-based model to a more holistic strengths-based approach to Autism research—one that gives equal attention to what autistic individuals can do. This paradigm shift is increasingly reflected in contemporary scholarship [8–15]. Despite its relevance, the volume of scholarly literature shifting away from abnormal views and adopting the strengths-based framework remains scarce, indicating a gap in current research.

Merely avoiding the deficit approach or relativizing contexts between autistic and non-autistic individuals is insufficient. What is needed is a more radical transformation — one that explicitly acknowledges and values the competencies inherent within the autism spectrum. The strengths-based approach focuses on what autistic individuals *can* do, aiming to leverage and build upon their abilities. Empirical quantitative research involving 138 autistic individuals has clearly demonstrated that leveraging strengths in Autism is positively linked with improved well-being and mental health [16]. A recent qualitative review reported that strengths-based technology programs for autistic youth can enhance key developmental outcomes—including confidence, future options, friendship, socializing, mutual respect, demonstrating skills, interests, and a safe place [17]. In Finland, positive characteristics of Autism are less likely to be considered than their counterparts in Sweden and England (e.g., only 82) positive descriptors were used by university student teachers to describe Autism in Finland, compared to 142 in Sweden and 103 in England [18].

Autism language and communication research in Finland predominantly has focused on native Finns of Finno-Ugric origin or autistic individuals who speak Finnish as their native language [19–22]. In studies that include languages beyond Finnish, the data are often derived from international samples, e.g. Switzerland [23, 24]. Internationally, countries such as the United States, Norway and New Zealand have taken steps to expand language inclusion for individuals with disabilities and Autism—for example, engaging in targeted research about (and with) autistic indigenous Māoris [25], and/or by conducting Spanish-language interviews with autistic Latinos residents of US [26]. These initiatives highlight the importance of recognizing and exploring linguistic diversity in Autism research within national borders. Turning to the Finnish context, the intersection of autism and language minorities groups remains overlooked, despite its rich multicultural identities within the country.

Officially, in addition to its two national languages, Finnish and Swedish, approximately 11% of Helsinki population speaks a language other than these. Nationally, the number of foreign-language speakers has grown to 600,000 in 2025, as reported by Yle Finland's national public broadcaster, this data underscores the increasing multilingual character of this Nordic country. The largest language groups beyond Finnish and Swedish include Russian, Estonian, Somali, English, and Arabic. Furthermore, some ethnic minority groups in Finland—including the Roma, the indigenous Karelians, and the Sámi, (who are native to the Northern Calotte, a transnational region encompassing mid-to-northern Norway and Sweden, northern Finland, and Russia's Kola Peninsula [27]) have their linguistic rights secured. Despite the Ministry of Justice's 2017 defend that these specific minorities have the right to maintain and develop their own languages, research into endangered languages like Karelian [28] has yet to reflect this commitment in a sustained or systematic way. Recently, many scholars, activists, and community members

make efforts to revitalize the status of Karelian and other minority languages[29]. In theory, the Linguistic Rights Act exists, but in practice, debates on linguistic racial discrimination and intercultural deficits persist[30, 31].

Existing studies on autistic populations from linguistic minority backgrounds, including for example Swedish-speaking Finns, tend to concentrate primarily on educational settings[32–34]), but not strongly represented in Autism language and communication research. Building on the literature reviews[35] as well as empirical data[18, 22] we aim to investigate the specific areas of language in which autistic individuals can succeed according to themselves. This study addresses a gap in Finnish autism research, as strengths-based approaches are timidly applied. Prior work[21] has focused on relativizing communication rather than recognizing autistic individuals' skills on their own terms, in addition, linguistic minorities remain critically under-studied at the intersection of autism and language. To date, no similar study has yet been registered. The research questions of the present work are (1) What types of language skills do autistic individuals report as strengths (or difficulties)? (2) What language-related strengths (or difficulties) in autistic communication are identified by family members, partners, and friends?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Context

Given the limited availability of instruments specifically designed to identify and measure language and communication strengths in Autism—namely, the SASSI clinical interviews[11] and the Autism Good Feeling Questionnaire[36]—we opted to design an open-ended, anonymous survey that collected responses in text form in available in English and Finnish. This approach allowed participants to describe strengths in their own words, providing rich, nuanced insights that may not be captured through clinical settings, where autistic people often feel anxious[37]. Furthermore, open-ended responses are particularly valuable in exploratory research contexts, where the goal is to understand underrepresented or emerging perspectives that standardized tools have yet to fully address.

The anonymous survey was sent first to two autistic individuals to be tested and then to two groups separately: autistic individuals (Group 1) and their families, caregivers, and friends (Group 2). The inclusion of family is crucial, as they have long stood alongside autistic advocates to fight for their rights[38]. In this research design, we followed a low-level participatory approach, involving autistic people *in collaboration* rather than merely as subjects[39–41]. We consulted two autistics, one of whom is also a scholar, Emma Jenks, whose partnership with us shaped the design—prior to data collection. Based on their input, terminology was revised (e.g., "communication style" changed to "communication preference") and the use of positive psychology theories was reconsidered. Additionally, the survey was developed using terminology aligned with the preferences of the Finnish autistic community, including the considered use of person-first language[42, 43]. Feedback from autistic individuals was gathered throughout the research process, and materials were adapted accordingly.

2.2. Participants and Data Collection

In April 2024, we opened and ended the data collection of an anonymous online survey shared via a link, which can be found in open repository https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17431770 in accordance with the principles of FAIR data[44] Following the recommendations of good research practice, the main author decided to end data collection upon reaching the minimum of 20 participants per group[45]. The survey link was shared with Autism-related associations and NGOs in Finland, those are: the *Autismiyhdistys* PAUT ry (Association of Autism PAUT); Keski- Suomen Autismiyhdistys ry (Central Finland Autism Association); *Autismiliitto* (National association of Autism); *Rampaopiskellijat* (Students with disabilities group), the social media channels of University of Helsinki, Aalto University and University of Eastern Finland. For the recruitment of parents, we shared the link for the survey on the academic social media channels of the same Finnish universities in addition to some schools with a focus on special education in Helsinki. Some individuals, including autistic immigrants, were contacted directly by the main author via email.

Participants were required to complete the anonymous survey in either Finnish or English and to have an Autism diagnosis, be in the process of it, or self-identify as autistic. It is known that self-identified individuals are like diagnosed individuals in autistic traits[46]. Both groups included partic-

ipants who self-identified, since there are multiple barriers to official diagnosis and that self-diagnosis is now being more accepted within research circles. For many adults, it is difficult to obtain a diagnosis later in life due to financial barriers [47–49]. In the Finnish context, while awareness and diagnostic criteria have improved, diagnostic practices in the past were a barrier to obtaining an Autism diagnosis [50]. Furthermore, families have frequently expressed concerns about the lengthy diagnostic process in Finland and the lack of effective communication from clinicians [51].

In Group 1 (autistic participants), 43 individuals responded to the survey, but only 42 completed it in full. The age distribution of participants spans from 19 to 52 years (Mean = 28.3, SD = 6.9). Of these, 5 were male, 29 females, and 7 reported other genders. Regarding Autism diagnosis, 15 participants had a formal diagnosis, 24 self-identified as autistic, and 3 were in the process of obtaining a diagnosis.

In Group 2 (friends, family and partners), 47 individuals responded to the survey, but only 46 completed it in full. The age distribution of participants spans from 4 to 65 years old (Mean = 29.0, SD = 17.7). Out of these individuals reported, 25 were male, 16 female, and 5 identified with other genders. The relationships between the participants and the autistic individuals included 28 family members, 10 partners, 8 friends, and 1 teacher.

It is crucial to express that Group 2 yielded several unexpected outcomes. Firstly, while the survey link for Group 2 was intended for peers and family members of autistic individuals, six responses were submitted by autistic individuals themselves. Rather than excluding or reclassifying these contributions, we engaged with them reflexively, recognizing that their presence enriched the dataset by offering insight into how autistic individuals interpret questions framed for their inner circle. For data reading accuracy, their responses were reorganized into a separate Excel tab allowing readers to engage with these contributions in context.

Secondly, in Group 2, participants provided multi layered information about the autistic individual, for instance, some participants provided information about more than one autistic individual (e.g., a parent reporting on two children, another reporting on two friends and one partner), and one participant reported on a deceased individual. For the purposes of demographic counting and participant enumeration, we counted each respondent as one participant, regardless of how many autistic individuals they described. However, in the thematic analysis, we engaged with each described individual as a distinct unit of meaning, interpreting their linguistic profiles in context. This approach reflects the relational framing of the survey and acknowledges the multiplicity of lived experiences conveyed through a single response.

Finally, in Group 1 (autistic individuals), participants were asked about diagnostic status to contextualize their linguistic self-reports. In Group 2, this question was not posed directly. This reflects a semantic assumption embedded in the composition of Group 2: that members of an autistic person's inner circle are typically aware of the individual's diagnosis. This assumption is grounded in the broader context of past research, e.g. even though an individual's self-disclosure of an Autism diagnosis improved others' students ability to empathize with them and willingness to collaborate with them [52], self-disclosure is often avoidable in workplace settings [53] and even in clinical encounters [54]. More concerningly, some parents may withhold the diagnosis [55].

2.3. Procedure

The study complied with ethical guidelines (Declaration of Helsinki, GDPR, and TENK) for anonymous online surveys. Participants could answer the survey in Finnish or English. We adopted English considering potentially immigrant population in Finland and some of the Swedish-speaking Finns who either prefer the use of English due to identification with English, which is significantly and positively related to identification with Swedish [56], or do not prefer Finnish language [57]. All participants were fully informed about the nature of their participation, including the right to give informed consent and to withdraw their data at any time without penalty.

2.4. Data Analysis

In this qualitative study, we analyzed text data to explore perspectives of autistic people and their inner circle on their language skills. Due to the scarcity of literature on language strengths in Autism—with most existing research focusing on difficulties—we applied a combination of reflexive thematic analysis [58] and qualitative content analysis [59] to 87 text responses (29 in Finnish, 58 in English). We used reflective thematic analysis as the main approach and content

analysis to quantify categories. The analysis was conducted in two stages.

In the first stage, the main author read through all responses multiple times to familiarize with the data and identify incomplete or unclear entries. After discussion with co-authors, responses were divided by language. The English-language responses were reviewed by an autistic co-author, a native English speaker, who contributed to the development of the initial coding framework. The Finnish responses were collaboratively translated by the main author and a Finnish-speaking co-author, and subsequently reviewed for accuracy by a Finnish language scholar. We carefully considered potential linguistic differences between English and Finnish, as well as certain boundaries of translation. In some cases, responses were analysed in their original form without substitution or synonym—for example, writing as a hobby or *harrastaa kirjoittamista*.

In the second stage, the main author imported data into ATLAS.ti (version 28) using inductive coding, beginning with line-by-line coding to generate initial codes. These initial codes were clustered into themes and subthemes. Drawing on Eldh and colleagues [60], each quote was assigned a code reflecting its content. When a condensed quote revealed multiple distinct meanings or thematic elements, more than one code was applied. For example, "I speak several languages each from their cultural perspective (ID 2, Group 1)" and "I'm very good at learning new languages, especially mimicking the accents" (ID 3, Group 1) were grouped under the subtheme Bilingualism and Multilingualism, which fell under the broader theme Foreign Language Skills. Similarly, "he/she is honest and straightforward" (ID 18 group 2) were grouped under Honesty and Straightforwardness, within the theme Direct Communication Style. Statements like "good grammar" (ID 16 group 2) and "enjoy language games" (ID 17 group 2) informed the subthemes Grammar, Writing and Reading as a hobby within the theme Written Language Skills.

These themes and subthemes were reviewed and refined collaboratively by all co-authors. The autistic scholar provided essential input on interpretation, particularly in grouping codes under the theme of communication style and written language skills. We respectfully clarify that, irrespective of neurotype status, the interaction was clear and no miscommunication took place among us. A consensus coding framework was established through iterative discussion. Finally, we reviewed all codes using a data-driven approach to identify recurring patterns across participants.

3. Results

Across both surveys, three themes of strengths and one theme of language challenge were identified: (1) Direct communication style, (2) Foreign language acquisition, (3) Written language skills, and (4) Verbal language challenges. These themes are described below and summarized in **Table 1** following the presentation of results.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Language Themes: Group 1 vs Group 2.

	Themes*	Group 1	Group 2
I.	Direct communication style	15	18
II.	Foreign language	11	10
III.	Written language	20	17
IV.	Languages challenges (oral)	4	7

* The counting units within each of the four themes are individual quotes, not participants. A single participant may contribute one or more quotes, and these quotes may appear in different themes.

3.1. Theme 1: Direct Communication Style

Subtheme: Honesty and Straightforward Communication

The first theme of these data extracts is the experience of honesty and straightforward communication, particularly how these traits influence social interactions and are perceived by others. A consistent theme across the responses is the emphasis on honesty and being straightforward "I am very straightforward and open. I don't like to spend time talking a lot so its easier and more efficient to just say what needs to be said" (ID 11, Group 1). Participants frequently mentioned their inability or unwillingness to lie, often describing themselves as blunt or direct in their communication "I try not to be rude, but misunderstandings happen. However, white lies and lying are very very very common among

neurotypicals" (ID 18 Group 1). The data reveal a consistent pattern of individuals valuing honesty and directness, often facing social challenges as a result:

"*I am direct and specific in my way to communicate, as I do not understand implicit stuff, I need a clear communication and to use the appropriate word for the appropriate purpose. This gives the feeling that I am arrogant or that I am really confident, which I am not*" (ID 17 Group 1).

The concept of a 'safe space' emerged in the data in relation to how lies are implicitly managed to enable better social engagement. It was recognized that family members and friends ensure a safe space for direct talk. Participants reported that in environments where a safe space is established, communication flows more openly and without the need for lying to navigate social interactions, e. g. "Extremely honest, frequently asked by family and friends for opinions as they know I will tell the truth" (ID 21 Group 1). Most participants from both groups described their linguistic skills as an advantage, particularly their ability to communicate directly rather than using indirect language, for example or engaging in 'small talk': "Very direct, no bullshit / small talk" (ID 5 Group 2). Further, it was also observed that they preferred addressing 'the obvious' in their communication, both in producing and receiving language "For me, being unnecessarily unclear is very nearly the same, and as bad as being outright dishonest" (ID 32 Group 1).

The subthemes of moral values of honesty and an inability to tell lies overlap again with the straightforward communication, as seen above, but also in many others. Especially in group 2, not telling lies and being straightforward is evident, according to a family member report of their children "They speak their mind quite often and could probably not tell a white lie if their life depended on it" (ID 11 Group 2).

Camouflage behavior, though not commonly reported, was notably evident in specific participant accounts during communicative interactions. Camouflaging refers to the behavioral modifications that autistic individuals may use to 'blend in' or appear neurotypical; for example, dressing like one's neighbor, suppressing repetitive behaviors or avoiding taxing social events[61]. In this sense the act of not communicating verbally and being in silence can be analysed as a strategy to show the autistic self as neurotypical, an act of camouflaging. In this case, being quiet overlaps with trust in the inner circle of autistics, and when there is no trust, there is 'silence' "as I have zero interest in social games, I just keep my mouth shut—but make no mistake, I am quite talkative around my trusted friends, with whom I can have genuine discussions without having to mask being neurotypical" (ID 26 Group 1). Communication, in this case, seems to be overlapping with the concept of trust. Autistics trust the ones whom they can maintain communications. Accounts from partners also align with the autistic individuals' own perceptions of using straightforward communication "he/she is very honest and the delivery of speech is very direct" (ID 28 Group 2).

3.2. Theme 2: Foreign Language Acquisition

Subthemes: Multilingualism and Bilingualism

The second theme of the data extracts reveal a spectrum of foreign language acquisition, with some individuals demonstrating exceptional bilingual skills "…(my child) has strong English skills (speaks more in English and expresses better in English) despite coming from a fully Finnish-speaking home" (ID 22, Group 2) or multilingual skills: "I was hyperlexic and I am proficient in languages. I can speak at least 8 languages" (ID 27 Group 2). Notably, three accounts pointed that participants prefer English over Finnish, and/or their native language, in other words, some languages are more dominant than others, either for proficiency level or preference:"…(my child) has strong English skills (speaks more in English and expresses better in English) despite coming from a fully Finnish-speaking home" (ID 22, Group 2). Or even preferable in specific contexts: "I am noticing that talking about feelings in, for example, English is easier, than in my mother tongue, as it sort of distances me from my own feelings" (ID 7, Group 1) and also "Finnish language is sometimes difficult to her, especially in school (…) However, my daughter is very talented in English, Spanish and also likes Swedish. So it does not totally hold true that all languages would be difficult for her" (ID 25 Group 2).

Conversely, some individuals show consistent linguistic strengths across all languages they use: "My partner is very skilled in languages. He writes grammatically correct text and pick up vocabulary and pronunciation of new languages quickly and easily" (ID 34 Group 2). An autistic individual reported: "I'm trilingual and have a large vocabulary, both in spoken and written language and can produce fluent and

natural text in all three languages"(ID 12 Group 1).

This variability underscores the importance of recognizing individual differences as well as the potential impact of environmental factors on language development, especially multilingual family environments, families who speak two or more languages at home: "(my child) has high oral and written skills in Swedish and Finnish (we are) bilingual family" (ID 33 Group 2), or three languages at home "my child is trilingual—the mother speaks Finnish, the father Dutch, and they communicate with each other in English (ID 31 Group 2).

The data suggests that autistic individuals may draw on unique cognitive processing —such as enhanced perceptual capacity—to support language-related functions. In some cases, these cognitive mechanisms may overlap with or compensate for language faculties, for example: "I don't understand grammar rules in any language but I speak 8 languages and I seem to understand the functioning and meanings of languages on a deeper level than other people. My brains learn languages by absorbing everything from my surroundings." (ID 26 Group 1). These findings highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of language abilities in autistic individuals, moving beyond stereotypes to appreciate individual strengths and challenges.

3.3. Theme 3: Written Language Skills

Subthemes: Writing as a Hobby, Grammar Acquisition, Reading

The third major theme of the data extracts revolves particularly as a proficiency in written language "Strong written skills" (ID 14 Group 1) either in the native language "I am good in Finnish language" (ID 30 Group 2) or in the context of other languages too, again multilingual capabilities "I can read languages well after studying for a short period" (ID 9 Group 1) subtheme reading, contrasted with challenges in verbal communication "I am quite good at creative writing and poetry since I have always struggled to express my internal world verbally to other people" (ID 21 Group 2). Autistic individuals demonstrate strengths in reporting their language skills through detailed self-assessment of their written language proficiency, multilingual abilities, confirmed by academic writing for example: "I am a good writer both in English and in my mother tongue. It helps me a lot as a scientist when I must write article or grant funding application" (ID 17 Group 1) or formal writing as a family member reported: "My second child is focused in formal writing" (ID 22 Group 2). Their attention to detail and ability to articulate thoughts in writing are a preference over verbal language evident throughout the data: "I am graduated in Language studies and I speak 3 languages (…) I'd rather express myself through writing than orally" (ID 31 Group 1). Following on theme I, it is possible to infer that honesty is also present in writing: "truthful and clear writing" (ID 8 Group 2).

Beyond the preference for writing, some participants reported that they not only produce writing, but also enjoy the process of production and reception of writing, cultivating as a hobby: play-word as a hobby or "harrastaa sanaleikkejä" (ID 17 Group 2), which has no direct translation to English, meaning a form of humour that plays with the meanings, sounds, or structures of words of Finnish language by reading. Aesthetic qualities in writing are also evident, as reflected in these two quotes: 'They write wonderful prose that is very beautiful' (ID 9, Group 2) and "I am a prolific writer and editor of scientific articles and nonfiction books" (ID 27 Group 2) " I am quite good at creative writing and poems" (ID 21 Group 2), and other genres of literature (ID 17 Group 2) all of which are grouped into subtheme of writing as a hobby.

3.4. Theme 4: Verbal Language Challenges

Subthemes: Minimally Speaking and Oral Language Delays

To conclude, the last theme of the data extracts is language challenges mostly concentrated within the realm of oral language. These challenges seem to be persistent and ranging from childhood up to adulthood: "(this person) has weaker than average language skills" (ID 4 Group 2) reported a family member of a 29-year-old autistic person. In childhood, it is possible to assume language delays: "He/she is behind peers and does not speak yet" (ID 32, Group 2), according to a family member describing a four-year-old child. However, in this case, the parent did not clarify whether the child understands language but does not speak, or whether both comprehension and expressive abilities are absent. Contrastively, another family member provided additional detail, suggesting that receptive language is present in a 10-year-old

autistic child, while expressive language remains very limited: "They use hand signs and one-word answers when requesting or telling the family what they need" (ID 13, Group 2). Taken together—including a testimonial from the parent of a 4-year-old ("Communicates only in one word," ID 44, Group 2)—these quotes may refer to delayed expressive language and potentially to minimally speaking children [62].

Nevertheless, participants who have the command in oral language expressed difficulties in verbal expression: "Okay with written language, not so good with oral language—this includes both native and my foreign languages" (ID 16, Group 1) and also Speaking, however, is not one of my strong skills. (ID 18 Group 1). Participants reported in detail their verbal difficulties in articulating their thoughts and internal world to others: "I have always struggled to express my internal world verbally to other people" (ID 21, Group 2). These quotes include challenges in both native and foreign languages, suggesting a broader issue with oral communication rather than a language-specific problem.

Even though the data indicates a preference and potential proficiency in written language due to challenges with oral communication, it does not necessarily imply causation. The preference for written language could be due to various factors, such as comfort, reduced anxiety, or the ability to process information at their own pace. Oral communication often involves real-time interaction, which can be anxiety-inducing for some individuals on the spectrum. The comfort of written communication might stem from the ability to communicate without immediate pressure or judgment.

While oral language difficulties are commonly reported, several autistic individuals in our dataset show multilingual competence, underscoring the importance of attending to strengths alongside challenges. Oral language challenges persist despite formal education: "I am graduated in Language studies. I'd rather express myself through writing than orally" (ID 31, Group 1). This suggests that academic training does not override neurodivergent communication preferences.

These findings suggest that oral language challenges among autistic children and adults manifest in diverse ways, ranging from reduced verbal output to delays in expressive language development. Despite this finding aligns with the deficit-based approach commonly found in clinical research, the presence of at least partial comprehension abilities invites a reconsideration of how language difficulties may coexist with communicative strengths, such as listening. The reported difficulty in lying may reflect a distinct cognitive or social processing style, potentially linked to literal interpretation or a heightened sense of honesty. Such traits, while often viewed as deficits, may also point to unique communicative strengths that warrant further language exploration.

4. Discussion

This research explored which linguistic domains autistic individuals can excel in, focusing specifically on strengths rather than only deficits in the Finnish context. While acknowledging reported challenges, the study emphasizes areas of linguistic capability. Although this study focused on linguistic advantages, it is essential to avoid framing strengths and challenges as separate, we echo Russell [10] *to separate the autistic strengths from weaknesses is a false dichotomy*. Within this dichotomy, we honestly acknowledge the difficulty of addressing every area reported by participants within the scope of this article.

Firstly, as seen in **Table 1**, the data saturation pointed mostly to preference for written over spoken communication, which is supported by findings from past studies like Cummins [63] likewise Remington and Cope [64] documented strong writing abilities in an autistic editor. Similarly, in Finland [22], it was observed that the attention of an autistic pupil was directed primarily toward writing the details of the story rather than engaging orally. This preference for writing, as well as reflected in our data, was not interpreted as a deficit. Kämäräinen concludes [22]: during the writing phase the student's proposals were accepted more frequently and rejected less often than in the planning phase (...) Moreover, in the writing phase the acceptance and rejection of proposals were more evenly distributed among all pupils.

Within the theme of written language, creativity also emerged as a notable skill, as participants described interest in fiction, comfort and expressive power in written language, even academic discourse—often preferring it to speech due to the time it allows for reflection and clarity. Family accounts describe writing by autistic children as not just skillful, but beautiful—"poetry" that communicates both emotion and intellect. These expressions help build a positive identity and challenge deficit-based perspectives on Autism [65].

Next, the theme with the second highest concentration across responses wass honesty and straightforward communication, often followed by difficulty to lie resonating with past empirical work [66]. Difficulty to lie yet recurrent across the dataset is analytically complex theme. While this pattern appeared across several responses, its interpretation resisted straightforward categorization. On one hand, it may reflect language challenges. On the other, it could be framed as a strength—signalling honesty, directness, or ethical clarity. Moreover, the modality was often unclear: some responses implied spoken interactions, while others may have referred to written or digital contexts. Rather than forcing this theme into a predefined category, we acknowledge its ambiguity and relational nuance. This common reported trait of autistics not being able to lye aligns with studies showing lower scores among autistic adults on deception scales [66]. And again, we highlight the controversial interpretations of it: some argue that being not able to lie can be a weakness, whether others recognize as a moral value [64, 67].

The present study expands the understanding of foreign language acquisition within the Finnish context, specifically focusing on bilingualism and multilingualism, areas previously unexplored. Our findings indicate that participants, including those on the Autism spectrum, exhibit the capability to utilize one or multiple languages. This observation aligns with global research, which underscores the linguistic competencies of multilingual individuals across various contexts [68–71]. Autistic individuals may benefit from the positive assumptions often associated with bilingual speakers—such as bilingual advantage on cognition, e.g. executive function, even though there are mixed evidence [72]. While these traits are not inherently tied to bilingualism, the social framing of bilingual competence can afford autistic bilinguals and multilinguals greater recognition, reduced stigma, or expanded opportunities in educational and interpersonal contexts. Moreover, the reality of multilingualism in within autistic populations challenges assumptions that the ones on the Autism spectrum are typically monolingual or socially limited [73, 74]. Recognizing and praising multilingualism is an action that goes in line with Milton and colleagues [75]: as no autistic person is completely uncommunicative.

Interestingly, our findings on jokes and humour (whether receptive or expressive) did not show the same consistency as the current data on Finnish-speaking students reported by Dindar [19]. While some parents and partners noted that the child enjoyed humour, these accounts represented only a minority, suggesting that humour did not receive attention and remains overlooked as both a potential linguistic resource and a psychological strength in autistic people. In comparable manner, reports of misunderstandings—often meticulously emphasized in prior literature [23]—did not emerge prominently in our dataset. This absence also invites reflection on a deeper relational asymmetry: it may be that autistic individuals are more aware of how non-autistics engage in communication than non-autistic individuals. Such a possibility challenges dominant deficit-based narratives and underscores the need to reframe communicative difference as mutual and often unevenly recognized rather than one-sided. This echoes findings by Williams and colleagues [1] on three types of conversational dyads: autistic individuals interacting with members of their inner circle, autistic individuals interacting with autistic strangers, and autistic individuals interacting with non-autistic strangers. Mutual understanding was unexpectedly abundant during these conversations across all neurotypes, except the pairings with non-autistic participants, those lacked mutual affect, enthusiasm flow and rapport but not misunderstandings.

Ultimately, it is worth discussing that mentions of grammar knowledge were prompted by the example provided in the questionnaire itself. These references were not treated as a standalone theme, as they did not emerge organically across all participants but rather reflected the influence of the prompt. That said, some participants commented on their grammar knowledge, yet together with aspects of structural language, e.g. phonology and syntax [76]. For example, individuals in our dataset reported abilities in mimicking accents and acquiring grammar. In our dataset, autistic individuals reported being able to mimic accents and learn grammar. These abilities match earlier results: Finnish and Canadian studies showed autistic youth can use and interpret specific prosodic cues [23, 77], while U.S. studies documented strong grammar knowledge [78, 79].

4.1. Strengths and Limitations of the Present Study

This study offers several contributions. Firstly, it highlights for the first-time themes of language strengths together with language challenges as self-reported by autistic them-

selves and inner circles, thus offering a holistic view of communication in Autism, as far as we know this kind of contribution is not documented yet in Finnish scholarship. In this sense we made an accomplishment by filling the gap and adding to the Finnish context the same findings previously documented in the UK. For instance, Russell [10] and Cope & Remington [63] identified that honesty, when articulated through professional language in workplace settings, becomes a strength that reinforces integrity, while Cummins [64] discussed how written language is not only a key tool in social media, but also psychological resource, because it gives more time to reflection and editing. Second, in the present work, we demonstrated that autism language research can be conducted outside the clinical paradigm within the deficit approach. Accordingly, we avoided hospital and other clinical settings by recruiting participants through autism associations. Therefore, the use of broad recruitment channels enabled participation from a diverse range of individuals, enhancing the inclusivity of the sample. As a result, we relied on participants' own perspectives rather than physician assessments, and the open-ended design further enabled them to articulate their views in their own words, yielding nuanced and context-rich responses. Third, the inclusion of both autistic individuals and family members provided a multifaceted perspective on language experiences, capturing both lived realities and relational dynamics. These elements contribute to the depth and authenticity of the findings, offering valuable insights into the complexity of communication in Autism. Forth, we added the inclusion of autistic people behind the research process, contributing to the literature about participatory approaches in Autism research [39, 40], we are aware that within the Finnish context, this is growing with modesty [10]. To conclude the contributions of this study, our sample included autistic individuals from ages 4 to 64, yet few studies examine autistic adults over 40, especially within the language research conducted with Finnish populations, though this is a global issue: less than 0.4% of Autism research includes older populations [80].

We must acknowledge, however, the exploratory nature and the limitations of our study. To begin with, this study has been criticized for its reliance of self-identification and self-reports on diagnosis, as these could not be independently confirmed. Subsequently, the use of English was contested as insufficiently inclusive, since immigrant status cannot be determined—even when detailed testimonies, such as references to multilingual family contexts (e.g., "mother speaks Finnish, father Dutch, children English with one another"), strongly suggest otherwise. Similarly, the use of English to translate Finnish was also subject to disapproval, despite the translations having undergone two reviews, which we understand may reflect the purist orientation favoured by some people. Another limitation concerns the exclusion of individuals with intellectual disabilities, who represent approximately one-third in the autism spectrum [81, 82]. Our instrument was not specifically adapted for them, since different approaches such as observational methods [83] or face-to-face interviews [84] are generally more suitable. Lastly, the broad and multifaceted nature of the research questions made it challenging to identify precise language domains. Written language emerged as the most clearly delineated domain; however, even this area incorporates several interrelated components—e.g. textual organization, coherence, cohesion, the broader semiotic practices of written communication, etc. But we do wish this research is just the beginning of exploring and understanding autistic strengths.

4.2. Recommendations for Future Research

Our findings indicate that data saturation was most evident in participants' written language competencies, which constituted the principal domain of reported skill in both groups, we propose that future research could place greater emphasis on areas where autistic individuals demonstrate language-related strengths—an aspect that has been largely neglected both in Finland and globally, as much existing literature continues to focus on deficits across all language domains [2]. By identifying and understanding these strengths, we may not only inform more effective interventions but also apply them to support areas where communication challenges persist, for example multimodal communication. Importantly, interventions should focus on interactional contexts—such as child–child, parent–child, or clinician–child dynamics rather than isolating the autistic individual from their social environment [83].

We suggest that once written language is recognized as a strength, it can be further leveraged to support communication in verbal encounters, especially for autistic individuals who tend to avoid interactions with neurotypicals. This avoidance is not necessarily due to a lack of communicative

ability, nor are these difficulties universal and fixed[85] but may stem from the challenges of cross-neurotype interaction. There is growing evidence that autistic–autistic communication may be more successful than communication with non-autistics[86, 87]. Complementing this, recent research in Sweden also indicates that autistic individuals are often more concerned with how non-autistics perceive them in social situations, which significantly influences their communication experiences with more anxiety[67]. Together, these findings underscore the importance of creating communicative environments that validate autistic modes of expression—such as written language—as legitimate and empowering tools for connection.

While families are often assumed to be natural allies in supporting autistic individuals, research and clinical experience show that they can also be a significant source of stress—particularly when navigating diagnostic processes, communication expectations, or if they belong to Black or Latin American communities, not because of their ethnicity per se, but due to systemic disparities in access to support and resources[88]. This underscores the need for targeted education and awareness campaigns for families to better understand the diversity of communication in Autism, including skills in written language, multilingualism, and directness. Families should be encouraged to move beyond deficit-based expectations and recognize that delayed or atypical language development does not equate to non-existent communicative potential. Institutions, such as grant funders for autism research, exert considerable influence over the trajectory of scholarly work. By prioritizing non-deficit perspectives, they contribute to reshaping societal understandings of autistic communication. Likewise, stakeholders can also take part in this paradigm shift, to address this, we echo Gréaux and colleagues[89] in proposing three key areas of policy action for promoting the communication rights of autistic children, for example: (1) promoting inclusive communication practices across society, (2) enabling the co-creation of communication support services with autistic individuals and relevant stakeholders, and (3) increasing the visibility, accessibility, and inclusivity of specialist services. Extending these cited child-focused policies to adults requires inclusive practices across societal domains grounded with dialogue between autistic people, policy makers and stakeholders.

5. Conclusions

Taken together, our findings reveal a coherent ecology of communication rather than isolated areas of language abilities. The communicative capacities of autistic people—whether direct, written, multilingual —deserves more attention, documentation and dissemination. These language skills part of this coherent ecology of communication often co-occur as context-dependent strengths aimed at achieving precision, clarity, and control over social risk. For example, using written language to succeed in multimodal interactions or being rather straightforward even risking to be known as a blunt person (for perhaps non-autistics, hence the double empathy problem[75]). As seen from the quotes and the whole data corpus available in the open data repository https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17431770, these areas of language strengths tend to thrive in trusted relationships and/or structured, written-first settings. However, those same skills can be misinterpreted or penalized from the perspective of a non-autistic user of language in ambiguous and politeness-driven interactions—an asymmetry that persists not only between non-autistics to autistics interactions but also overlapping with local culture which has its own norms, in the case of this data collection English co-existing with Finnish.

One brief comment about the linguistic situation of Finland is needed. Finnish language is prescriptive normative with purist approach[88]. For Finnish, it has been essential to preserve the indigenous character of the language and protect it from foreign influence. In contrast, for Swedish, the goal has been to maintain the unity of the Finnish variety alongside Swedish as spoken in Sweden[90]. Finnish is also a synthetic language and politeness is indirect[91]. Politeness—as well as other pragmatic nuances—is conveyed through suffixes, endings, and markers. As a result, politeness embedded in words as suffix morphemes is harder to detect than lexical politeness[92]. This theoretical background might explain why some autistic individuals may be seen as rude, because research shows they succeed within lexicon[78], however there are descriptions of politeness in Finnish research[22]. In this scenario, Finnish language and communication norms reflect a complex and distinct cultural value placed on verbal moderation, that is measured speech coexists with richly layered oral expression. Effective engagement in such contexts of the Finnish

language often requires attachment to controlled and subtle, multilayered verbal cues in addition to a preference for thoughtful restraint over overt directness or straightforwardness.

According to our data, writing emerges not only as a talent but also as an enabling form of expression that provides time to plan, use precise vocabulary, regulate emotions, and construct identity. Similarly, the selective use of a non-native language (e.g., English) to discuss emotions can create useful emotional distance and should be viewed as a self-directed communication strategy rather than a deficit. Perspectives from autistic individuals and their family members converge on the importance of honesty but differ in framing: autistic participants present it as a deliberate communicative choice, while family members often describe it as a fixed trait. A developmental pattern also emerges, showing that early oral challenges can coexist with later strengths in writing and multilingualism. Practically, these results suggest shifting from remediation to *context design*—for example, encouraging explicit norms around honest feedback, implementing written or hybrid communication formats, allowing flexible language choices, and fostering trust-based environments that reduce masking and enhance participation. Conceptually, this strengths-based, interactional interpretation clarifies apparent misconceptions in autistic communication and highlights that its success and visibility depend less on individual traits than on whether social environments align with autistic preferences in communication.

Author Contributions

G.J.F.: Conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, software, writing and editing—draft and original.

M.W.: Supervision, writing and feedback—draft and original.

H.P.: Supervision, translation, data analysis, feedback, writing and editing—draft and original.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Informed Consent Statement

Although participation was anonymous, informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data can be found in the open repository Zenodo: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17431770

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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