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Autistic polyglots: An analysis of the language experiences, motivations, and atypical learning profiles of autistic multilinguals

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INTRODUCTION

Autism
- **can be associated with language / communication difficulties**

Bilingualism
- **50% of the population**
- **profiles shaped by many features of exposure / use**
- **impacts social and cognitive processes**

Autism + Bilingualism
- **families: concern bilingualism will overload autistic child**
- **autistic multilinguals: only case studies available**
- **lived experience accounts of autistic multilinguals are lacking**

OBJECTIVES

1) Identify the different language profiles of autistic multilingual adults.

2) Describe factors contributing to the learning of multiple languages in autistic people, and describe the interplay between autism and bilingualism as perceived by autistic multilingual people.

METHODS

- Autism & Bilingualism Census:
  — online survey circulated from 22nd February 2017 to 31st March 2017
  — part 1 - language history, proficiency and use
  — part 2 - self-rating of social life quality and social life habits
  — part 3 - free responses: bilingualism x autism experience

- 297 respondents, including 54 respondents reporting 4 languages or more. The following analysis was performed on this sub-sample.
  — 47 clinically diagnosed, 7 self-identified
  — 55.6% female
  — mean age: 32.7 (SD = 9.8; range = 18—64)
  — 26 respondents reported 4 languages
  — 14 respondents reported 5 languages
  — 14 respondents reported 6 languages or more

RESULTS

1) Identify the different language profiles of autistic multilingual adults.

a. Many languages learned after age 10 – not raised polyglots

Age of acquisition

b. High levels of proficiency even in a 4th language

2) Describe factors contributing to the learning of multiple languages in autistic people, and describe the interplay between autism and bilingualism as perceived by autistic multilingual people..
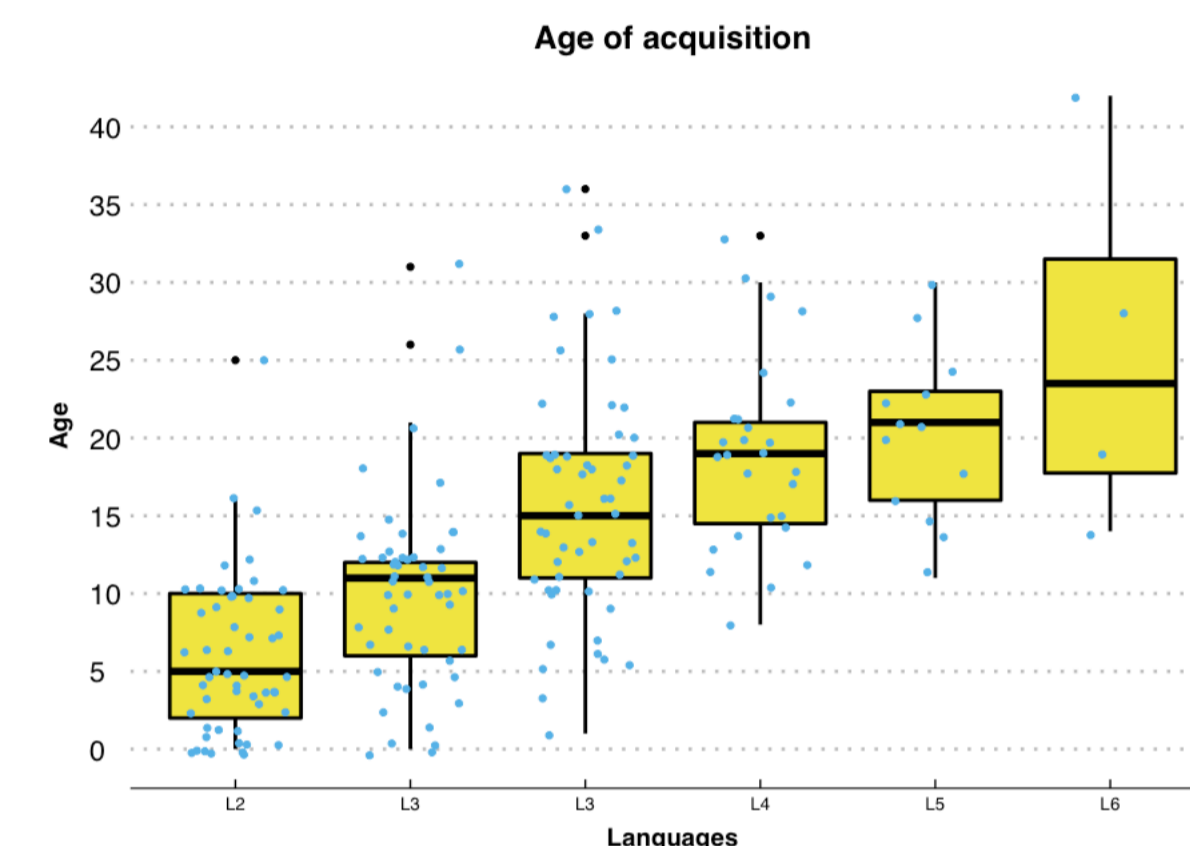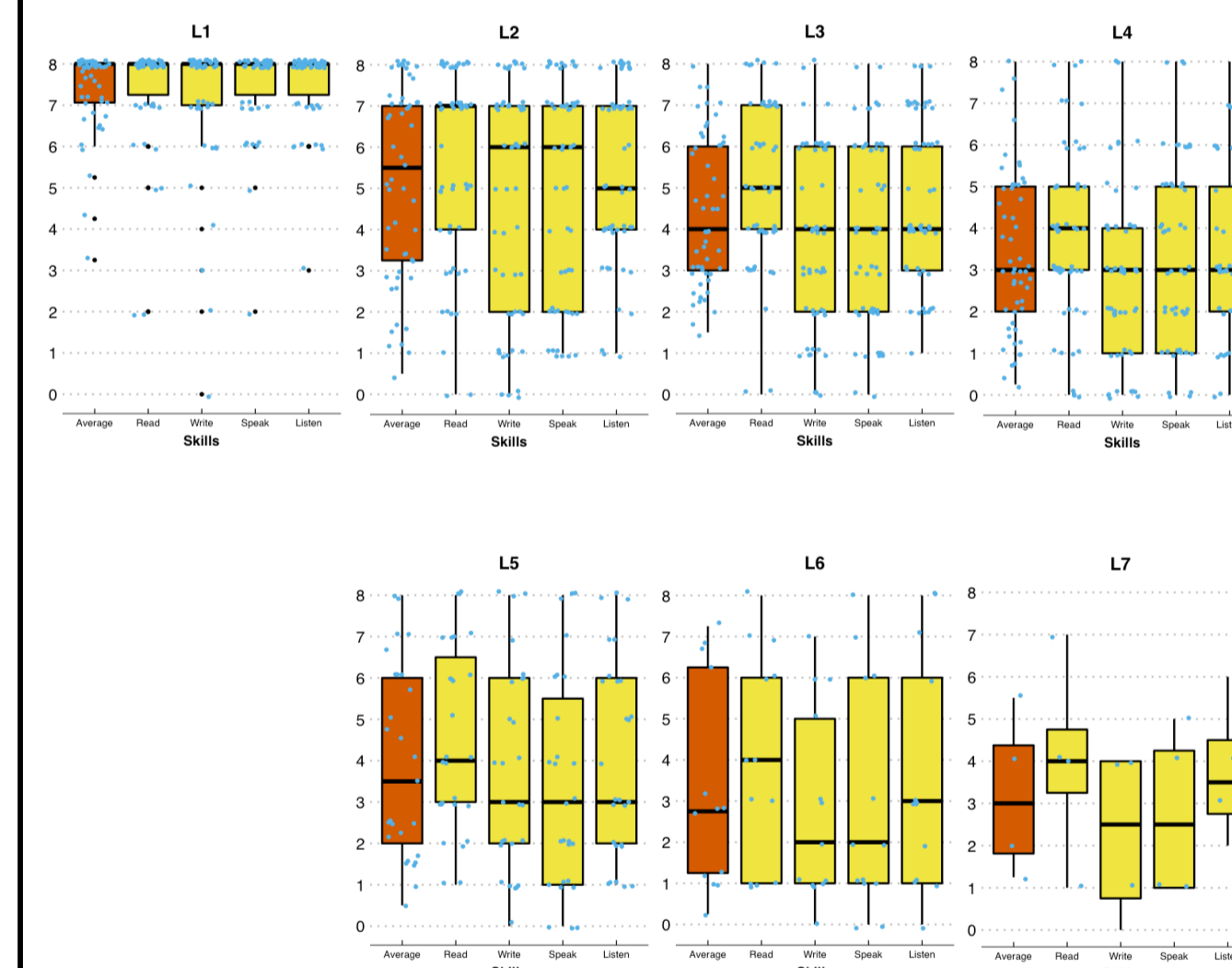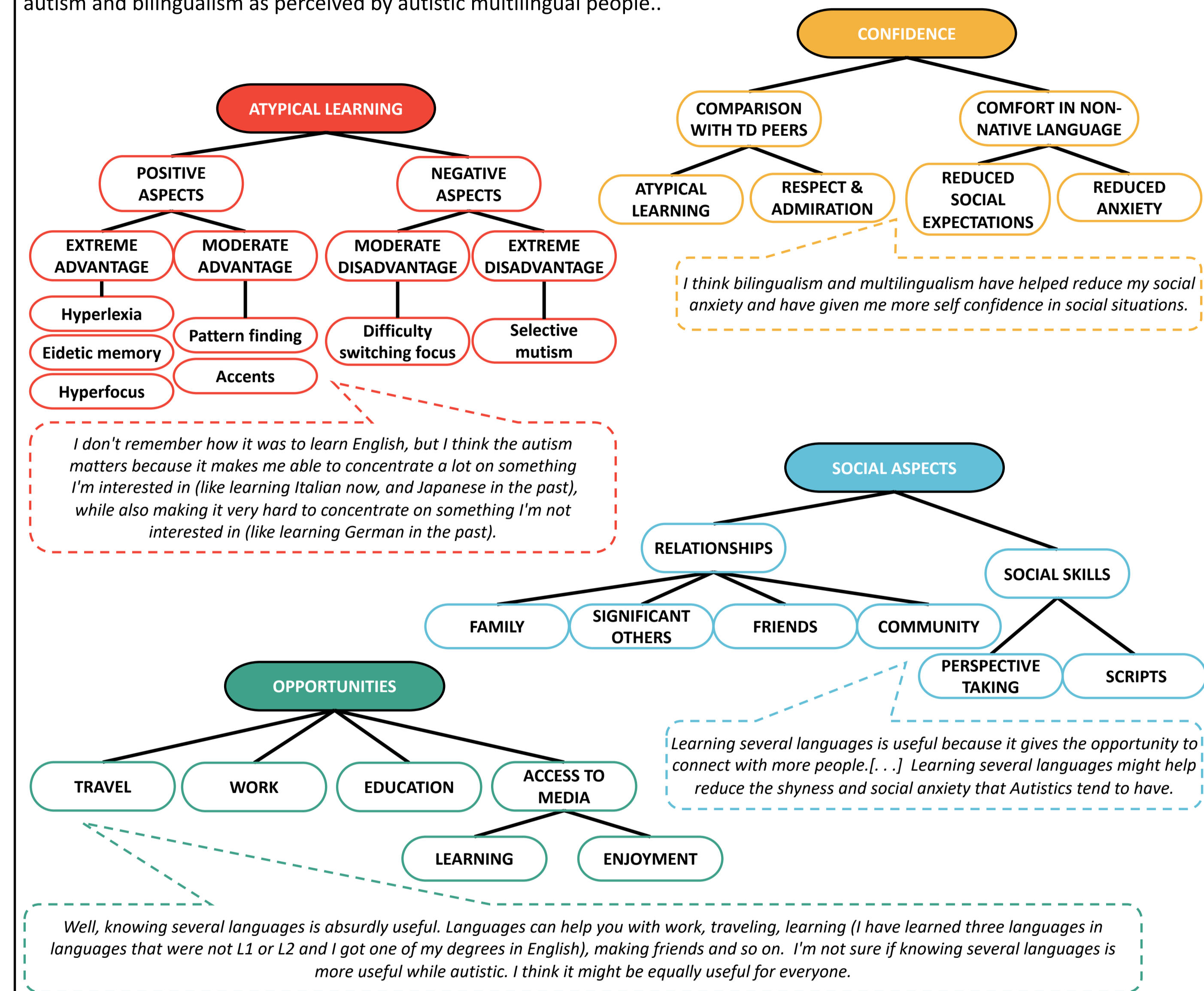

ATYPICAL LEARNING
- POSITIVE ASPECTS
  - EXTREME ADVANTAGE
    - Hyperlexia
    - Eidetic memory
    - Hyperfocus
  - MODERATE ADVANTAGE
    - Pattern finding
    - Accents
- NEGATIVE ASPECTS
  - MODERATE DISADVANTAGE
    - Difficulty switching focus
  - EXTREME DISADVANTAGE
    - Selective mutism

I don't remember how it was to learn English, but I think the autism matters because it makes me able to concentrate a lot on something I'm interested in (like learning Italian now, and Japanese in the past), while also making it very hard to concentrate on something I'm not interested in (like learning German in the past).

CONFIDENCE
- COMPARISON WITH TD PEERS
  - ATYPICAL LEARNING
  - RESPECT & ADMIRATION
- COMFORT IN NON-NATIVE LANGUAGE
  - REDUCED SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS
  - REDUCED ANXIETY

I think bilingualism and multilingualism have helped reduce my social anxiety and have given me more self confidence in social situations.

SOCIAL ASPECTS
- RELATIONSHIPS
  - FAMILY
  - SIGNIFICANT OTHERS
  - FRIENDS
  - COMMUNITY
- SOCIAL SKILLS
  - PERSPECTIVE TAKING
  - SCRIPTS

Learning several languages is useful because it gives the opportunity to connect with more people.[. . .] Learning several languages might help reduce the shyness and social anxiety that Autistics tend to have.

OPPORTUNITIES
- TRAVEL
- WORK
- EDUCATION
- ACCESS TO MEDIA
  - LEARNING
  - ENJOYMENT

Well, knowing several languages is absurdly useful. Languages can help you with work, traveling, learning (I have learned three languages in languages that were not L1 or L2 and I got one of my degrees in English), making friends and so on. I'm not sure if knowing several languages is more useful while autistic. I think it might be equally useful for everyone.

DISCUSSION

1) Wide range of language learning profiles (age of acquisition, proficiency).

2) Autistic polyglots' motivations: social aspects and a predisposition for language acquisition.
   Benefits: better social skills, increased opportunities, and confidence.

1st study reporting insights from autistic multilinguals on the relationship between autism and their language experiences, their motivations, and their perceived benefits of being multilingual.

This study highlights diversity in the language profiles of autistic multilinguals, and offers multiple leads to better support language learning opportunities for autistic people.

CONTACT

Thank you to all the participants and services that contributed to this research!

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