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# Autistic People's Perspectives on Functioning Labels and Associated Reasons, and Community Connectedness

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## Background

The language used to refer to autistic people has received growing attention and dialogue. Functioning labels (e.g., 'high functioning', 'low functioning') have increasingly been associated with the profile of autistic people as with strengths or weaknesses in language, higher (e.g., savantism) or lower IQ (e.g., intellectual disability), and better or worse long-term outcomes. Some scholars suggested that membership in communities that use certain approaches toward autistic people would alter preferences in language preferences and use.

The aim of our study was:

- to identify language preferences and reasons behind them among autistic adults, and
- examine whether these preferences were related to Autistic Community Connectedness (ACC).

We proposed perspectives on language (separately Identity-First Language (IFL) or Person-First Language (PFL), and for or against functioning labels) will differ by degree of ACC, which includes a similar effect on uncertain preference



**Table 1.**

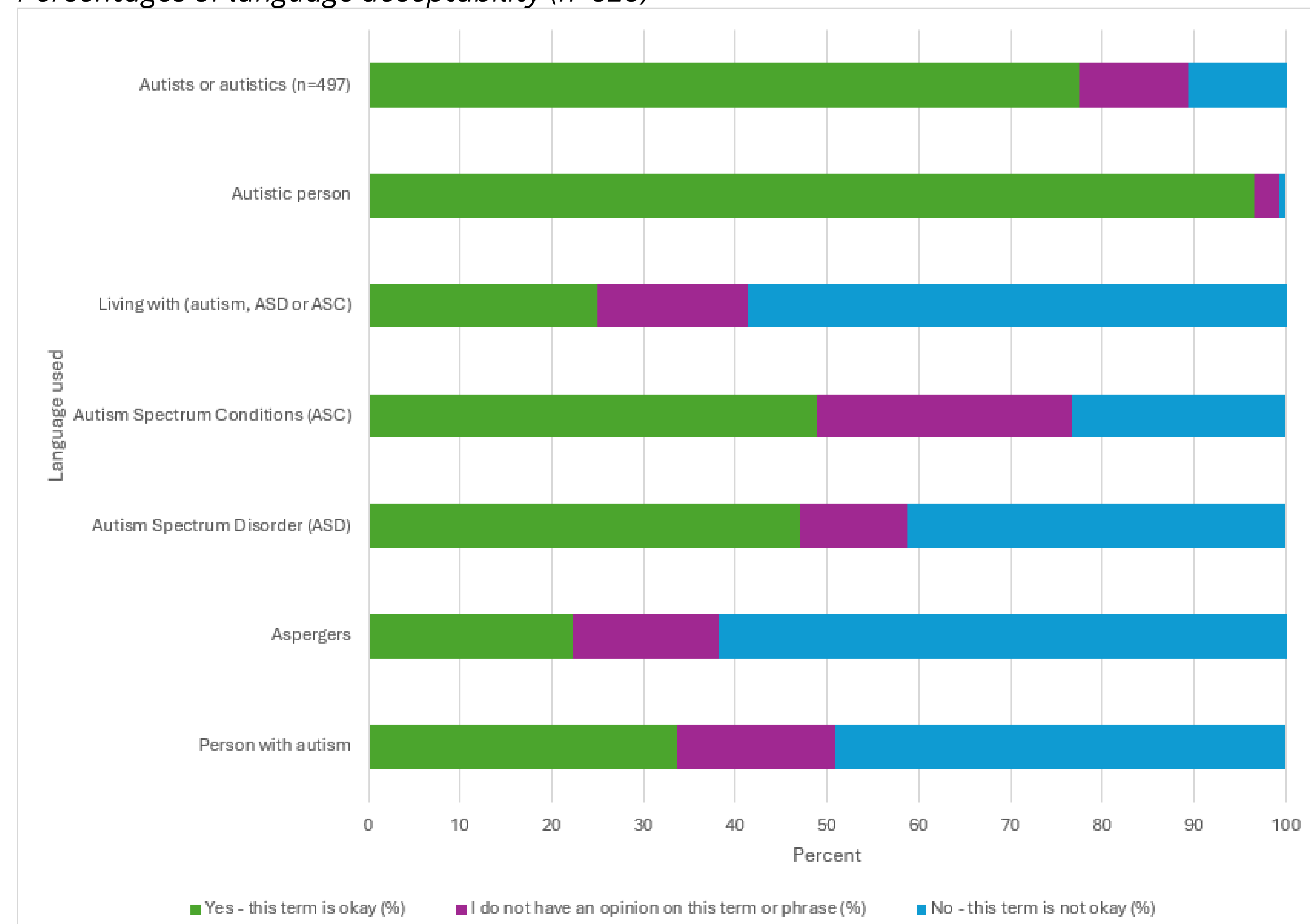
Model 1 of the linear regression analysis on acceptability of language terms regarding themselves, using ACC as the dependent variable.

Variable	Estimate	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
<b>PFL only</b>					
Don't mind the term used only	-7.415	1.039	-9.456	-5.375	<.001
<b>Controls</b>					
Age	.070	.028	.014	.126	.014
Female (compared to Males)	-3.388	.971	-5.297	-1.480	<.001
Non-Binary/Third Gender, or other (compared to Males)	-4.611	1.088	-6.748	-2.475	<.001
White compared to Non-White Ethnicity	-.268	.992	-2.217	1.682	.787
<b>IFL</b>					
Intercept	51.667	3.383	45.019	58.315	<.001

Note. Total N = 497. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

**Figure 1.**

Percentages of language acceptability (n=516)



## Method

516 respondents were recruited by an advertisement on social media and emails to national, international and local organisations, and charities between September and December 2022.

A favourable ethical opinion was gained from the Tizard Centre Ethics Committee on 15th June 2022.

Participants were asked to complete a battery of assessments, including the ACC, and a survey on language preferences and the reasons for these.

Data was analysed using SPSS.

## Findings

In the survey, 80% of the 503 respondents preferred Identity-First Language (IFL) for themselves, 15% had no preference, and 6% selected Person-First Language (PFL). Out of 510 respondents, 74% stated that functioning labels should not be used, 13% believed they should be used, and 13% indicated that they do not know. The survey also found near universal agreement that the term "autistic" is acceptable (Figure 1).

In the tables, both the difference between IFL and PFL (table 1) and the stance for or against functioning labels (table 2) were found to be statistically significant. Similarly, those who had no preference for either option also showed significance. Model 1,  $F(6, 490) = 26.119$ ,  $p < .001$ , explained 24% ( $R^2 = .242$ ) of the variance in ACC, while model 2,  $F(6, 490) = 30.417$ ,  $p < .001$ , explained 27% ( $R^2 = .271$ ) of the variance in ACC. The respondents' preferences, age, and gender were found to be significant for model 1, whereas neither age nor ethnicity were significant in model 2. It is important to note that individuals who preferred PFL (-13) and those with no preference (-7) scored lower Autistic Community Connectedness (ACC), as did those who preferred functioning labels (-10) and those who had no preference (-8).

**Table 2.**

Model 2 of the linear regression analysis on acceptability of language terms regarding functioning labels, using ACC as the dependent variable.

Variable	Estimate	SE	95% CI		p
			LL	UL	
<b>For the use of functioning labels only</b>					
For the use of functioning labels only	-10.274	1.082	-12.401	-8.147	<.001
<b>Maybe to use of functioning labels only</b>					
Maybe to use of functioning labels only	-8.086	1.096	-10.240	-5.932	<.001
<b>Controls</b>					
Age	.053	.028	-.002	.108	.060
Female (compared to Males)	-3.415	.950	-5.282	-1.548	<.001
Non-Binary/Third Gender, or other (compared to Males)	-4.409	1.060	-6.492	-2.326	<.001
White (ref Non-White)	-1.066	.970	-2.971	.840	.272
<b>Against the use of functioning labels</b>					
Intercept	53.438	3.294	46.966	59.909	<.001

Note. Total N = 497. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to determine whether what is considered acceptable language impacts the attitudes towards functioning labels. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate how community connectedness affects viewpoints on language. It is possible that an individual's level of connection to the community may influence their perspectives, or that their viewpoint makes them more likely to seek out like-minded individuals in the community.