

## Pragmatic Failures Experienced by Jacob in Jodi Picoult's Novel *House Rules*

Riza Suryandari\*, Adi Sutrisno  
Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

\*Email: icha\_yo23@hotmail.com

---

### A B S T R A C T

Pragmatic failures are often discussed in the context of cross-cultural studies. However, pragmatic failures have also been evident in other circumstances. People who are diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, for example, also often experience pragmatic failures, even when they converse with others who come from the same geographical area and share the same culture. This paper examines pragmatic failures produced by Jacob, a character diagnosed with Asperger syndrome (AS) in Jodi Picoult's novel *House Rules*. The data were excerpts taken from the novel that show Jacob's failures to understand the other speakers. The data were classified into 12 categories of pragmatic failures: sarcasm, idioms, common phrases, metaphors, hyperbole, words with multiple meanings, the maxim of quality, maxim of quantity, maxim of relation, maxim of manner, joke, and indirect speech acts. The results showed that the most frequent type of pragmatic failures that Jacob produces in the novel is the infringement of the maxim of relation. In other words, Jacob often produces irrelevant utterances.

In this paper, the researcher analyzes the speakers' intended meanings and Jacob's interpretations. The researcher will also find which type of pragmatic failure that occurs most frequently.

*Keywords: pragmatic failure, Asperger Syndrome, House Rules.*

---

### INTRODUCTION

To get the meaning of an utterance, we must not only look at its literal meaning, but also the pragmatic factor or the context in which it is said. Pragmatic failure is the inability to understand "what is meant by what is said" (Thomas, 1982, p. 91). Thomas focuses on 'cross-cultural' pragmatic failure. She stated that the term 'cross-cultural' pragmatic failure is not only restricted to interactions between a native and non-native speaker, but any communication between two people who do not share a common linguistic or cultural background (Thomas, 1982, p. 91). Unlike Thomas, the present research examines pragmatic

failure made by someone who shares a common linguistic and cultural background with the speaker, i.e., someone with an Asperger syndrome (AS) because pragmatic impairment might be the most prominent aspect in an individual with Asperger syndrome (AS).

Asperger syndrome was introduced by an Austrian pediatrician, Hans Asperger (18 February 1906 – 21 October 1980). According to Frith (2001), AS is a mild form of autism which is "often undiagnosed until late childhood or even adulthood" (p. 969). Gold, Faust, and Goldstein (2010) state that "[AS] is characterized by social impairments, difficulties in communication, and a

set of circumscribed interests and/or a rigid adherence to routines” (p. 124).

AS is often highly associated with High Functioning Autism (HFA) in that individuals with AS and HFA have average and above average intelligence, but they may have difficulties interacting with other people (Autism Speaks Inc., 2010). Individuals with AS/HFA do not have significantly impaired language skills like people with classic autism, but their social difficulties are evident (Colle, Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, & Lely, 2007, p. 29).

Individuals with AS/HFA tend to interpret utterances literally (Attwood, 2007, p. 216). They would fail to infer the implication of an utterance in social scripts, metaphors, and speech acts (Dennis, Lazenby, & Lockyer, 2001, p. 47). For example, if someone said, “My house is a refrigerator in January” (Cutting, 2002, p. 38), an individual with AS would think the house literally turns into a refrigerator. He would fail to understand that the sentence simply means that it gets too cold in January where the speaker lives. This illustration shows that to get the meaning of an utterance, we cannot only take the words literally, but we must also have background knowledge about the context.

As mentioned earlier, according to Thomas (1982), pragmatic failure is the inability to understand “what is meant by what is said” (p. 91). The term ‘pragmatic failure’ is commonly used in cross-cultural studies, where a non-native speaker of a particular language fails to understand what is meant by a native speaker of that particular language. If the hearer is from a tropical island and has never even heard of winter, he would even fail to understand why it gets too cold.

It is important to remember that the term ‘cross-cultural’ pragmatic failure is not only restricted to interactions between a native and non-native speaker, but any communication between two people who do not share a common linguistic or cultural background (Thomas, 1982, p. 91). For example, a native English speaker from Australia might also experience pragmatic failure when talking to a native English speaker from the United States.

Since one of the most prominent characteristics of AS is pragmatic impairment (Landa, 2000, p. 125), it is interesting to investigate pragmatic failure experienced by an individual with AS when he interacts with someone who shares a common linguistic and cultural background.

Pragmatic failure has been studied by Jenny Thomas (1982). She focused on ‘cross-cultural’ pragmatic failure. Unlike Thomas, the present research examines pragmatic failures experienced by a fictional character with AS in Picoult’s novel *House Rules* (2010), who shares a common linguistic and cultural background with the other speakers in the novel.

Pragmatic failures experienced by characters with AS in fictions have been studied by Semino (2014). She investigated the fictional characters in three different fictions: *Speed of Dark* by Elizabeth Moon (2002), *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon (2003), and *The Language of Others* by Clare Morrall (2008). Semino found three types of pragmatic failures conveyed in the three novels: Problems with informativeness and relevance, unintentional impoliteness, and difficulties in the interpretation of figurative language. Her work is in line with the present research, implying that pragmatic failure does not only occur in cross-cultural context, but could also be experienced by anyone (Semino, 2014, p. 156).

Different from Semino’s work, Dewanti (2013) investigated both verbal and non-verbal communication problems faced by Adam, the character in the movie *Adam*. She found that the most frequent verbal language problems experienced by Adam are “lack of pragmatic and literal interpretation” (p. 85).

A similar research by Humaira’ (2015) investigated pragmatic deficits experienced by an AS character in the movie *Temple Grandin*. She categorized the types of pragmatic deficits found in the movie into five categories of verbal communication difficulties in autistic children: Unbalanced, mismatched, unresponsive, lack of sharing control, lack of playfulness. Humaira’ concluded that the most common type of pragmatic impairment found in the movie is unresponsiveness.

Grandin either a) ignores the other person's comments or b) gives irrelevant comments (Humaira', 2015, p. 43).

Relevance theory has been applied in a study relating to Asperger Syndrome/HFA by Loukusa (2007). This study investigated how neurotypical (age 3-9) children, as well as two groups of children with Asperger and HFA ( age 7-9 and age 10-12) answer questions targeting the pragmatic processes of reference assignments, enrichments, routines, implicatures and feelings. The results showed that age plays an important role in pragmatic abilities. Older kids with AS did better than younger kids with AS. However, the younger kids with AS/HFA answered contextually demanding questions less well than neurotypical kids (Loukusa, 2007, p. 6).

None of those works address the question how individuals with AS process utterances. There is also currently no research done on AS character in the novel *House Rules*. The present research explores how Jacob misunderstands utterances.

The novel *House Rules* by Picoult (2010) was selected because Picoult has been known to do extensive research for her books. In an interview on [simonandschuster.com](http://simonandschuster.com) (A conversation with Jodi Picoult, author of *House Rules*, n.d.), Picoult talked about the research process for *House Rules*. She gave out questionnaires to 35 teens with AS and their parents to fill out. One of those teens even volunteered to help Picoult by reading the manuscript for accuracy. Picoult also met with attorneys and even shadowed a CSI for a week. These were all necessary because the novel talks about a murder allegedly committed by Jacob, the fictional 18-year-old character with AS in the novel, who has a special interest in forensic science. Therefore, *House Rules* should give us deep insights into Asperger, representing how a teenager with Asperger acts in reality.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When discussing pragmatic failure, it is important to cover the main concerns in pragmatics such as implicatures, cooperative principle, and speech acts. Implicatures and speech acts share the theory that people do not always say what they

mean explicitly. That is, sometimes the hearer needs to infer the implied meaning of the utterances.

The cooperative principle (Grice, 1975) suggests that people will cooperate with each other when having a conversation (Yule, 1996, p. 37). We could think of this principle as a social convention in conversations. The cooperative principle consists of four maxims, which are usually called the Gricean maxims. They are the maxims of quality, quantity, manner, and relation.

Humor is often generated when people flout the maxims. A speaker is said to flout the maxims when s/he does not seem to follow the maxims but expects the hearer to understand the implied meaning (Cutting, 2002, p. 37). Cutting explained that people could also infringe the maxims, which is caused by, among others, language impairment, which is what people with AS have.

People with AS lack Theory of Mind (ToM) (Attwood, 2007). This might explain why they experience pragmatic failure. Attwood (2007) defined Theory of Mind as the ability to understand cues which indicate people's thoughts, intentions, and feelings (p. 112). This causes them to have the tendency to interpret things literally, to be considered rude without meaning to be rude, to be painfully honest, and to have difficulty understanding empathy (Attwood, 2007).

## METHODS

The primary data for this research were excerpts from the novel *House Rules* which show pragmatic failures encountered by Jacob. The excerpts were limited only to Jacob's failure to communicate effectively. These included excerpts showing when the cooperative principle was not observed, and when Jacob made literal interpretations of the utterances. The excerpts did not include how other characters think Jacob would react in certain situations, regardless of how well those other characters know Jacob, as they were just assumptions.

However, excerpts that showed other characters recalling things that happened in the past about how Jacob had interpreted things were taken into account. In other words, only excerpts in

which Jacob was one of the speakers in the conversations—told from either Jacob’s or other characters’ perspectives—and in which Jacob *himself* told the reader how he would react in certain situations were selected.

The data were classified into categories based on the theory that says people with AS find it hard to understand figures of speech, common phrases, multiple meaning, and that they have a unique way of understanding or generating humor. Gricean maxims included in the categories based on the theory that says language impairment might cause people to infringe the maxims, resulting in failure to communicate effectively (Cutting, 2002).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Pragmatic failures experienced by Jacob

No	Category	Number	%
1.	Sarcasm	2	3.7
2.	Idiom	7	13.0
3.	Common phrase	5	9.3
4.	Metaphor	1	1.9
5.	Hyperbole	2	3.7
6.	Multiple meaning	2	3.7
7.	Maxim of Quality	2	3.7
8.	Maxim of Quantity	5	9.3
9.	Maxim of Relation	16	29.6
10.	Maxim of Manner	1	1.9
11.	Joke	2	3.7
12.	Indirect speech	2	3.7
13.	Pedantic	7	13.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>54</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Altogether, as many as 54 pragmatic failures were produced by Jacob in the novel. They were classified into 13 categories: sarcasm, idioms, common phrases, metaphors, hyperbole, multiple meanings, joke, indirect speech acts, pedantic, and infringements of the Gricean maxims (the maxims of quality, quantity, relation, and manner). Table 1 above shows the frequency and distribution of pragmatic failures produced by Jacob.

The table shows that the most frequent type of pragmatic failures that Jacob produced was the infringement of the maxim of relation. Out of 54 cases of pragmatic failures in the novel, Jacob infringes the maxim of relation 16 times, which is 29.6% of the total pragmatic failures, which differs significantly with the second most frequent types of pragmatic failures in the novel (i.e, idiom and pedantic). Jacob often makes irrelevant comments in conversations. This tendency is caused by weak central coherence. As Attwood (2007) puts it, people with AS “may be notorious for giving irrelevant information” (p. 242).

### Sarcasm

Sarcasm confuses people with AS because they think people say exactly what they mean (Attwood, 2007, p. 116), like people with AS say what they mean. Sarcasm, which is a type of figures of speech, is perceived as illogical (Attwood, 2007, p. 217). Why do we say something and mean another? Even worse, why do we say something when we mean another, and still expect people to understand?

(1) Picoult (2010, p. 601)

Jacob: “You know why you can pick up AM stations better at night? Because the ionosphere reflects radio signals better when the sun isn’t radiating the heck out of the upper atmosphere.”

Oliver: “Thanks. I couldn’t have gone to sleep tonight without knowing that.”

Jacob : “Really?”

Jacob provides some information that Oliver does not need to know. Saying he could not have gone to sleep without knowing that piece of information implies that Oliver is highly interested in radio science. Since Oliver never mentions his interest in radio science, it is likely that he does not have any interest in that field. Besides, he is a lawyer, and his client is accused of murder. Why would he lie awake that night wondering why his

AM radio works better, instead of thinking about how he could prove that Jacob is not guilty?

People with AS are known to have “remarkable ability in a chosen area of expertise” (Attwood, 2007, p. 172). They may assume that the listener is also interested in their special interests (Attwood, 2007, p. 188). This is also because they lack theory of mind. Jacob does not understand that some trivial fact about radio is probably the last thing Oliver wants to know that night.

### Idioms

Since people with AS often makes literal interpretations of what other people say, they are also confused with idioms (Attwood, 2007, p. 216). Emma and Theo avoid using idioms when talking to Jacob because they know Jacob will take it literally. Instead, Jacob hears idioms on TV or from other people who do not know Jacob very well.

(2) Picoult (2010, pp. 4-5)

Jacob: “There was a confrontation in the kitchen. It ended with the phone being thrown in defense, and me being chased into the living room, where **Theo clocked me.**”

Emma: (smiling) “Where did you hear that term?”

Jacob: “CrimeBusters, episode forty-three.”

Emma: “Well, just so you know—it means to punch someone. Not hit them with an actual clock.”

Jacob is obsessed with forensic science and CrimeBusters TV series. He likes to set up crime scenes in his house and tells his mother, Emma, to be the crime scene investigator. Emma has described earlier in the narration that the crystal clock peeks out from beneath the couch, instead of being on its usual place, the mantel.

In this crime scene, Jacob lies down in front of the fireplace with fake blood on his temple and his hands. As Emma fails to investigate the crime scene, Jacob gives her the explanation. We can see from the conversation above that Jacob thinks the idiom ‘to clock someone’ means ‘to hit them with an actual clock’. It explains why the clock is beneath

the couch and there is (fake) blood on his temple: Jacob’s brother Theo ‘clocked’ Jacob.

It is likely that Jacob has this interpretation based on other sentences with the same pattern, where the verb could also become noun. For instance, the sentence “Theo batted the ball” means “Theo hit the ball with a bat”. Jacob knows the “clock” in the sentence “Theo clocked me” functions as the verb, so he assumes the word “clock” in the phrase means to “do something with a clock”.

### Common phrase

Common phrases also confuse Jacob. There are common phrases that are predictable (i.e, we are able to assume what they mean even if they have never been heard before), and those whose meanings we cannot predict. Jacob has difficulties with both kinds of common phrases.

(3) Picoult (2010, p. 5)

Jacob : “What is it like (in Vermont)?”

Emma : “Lots of green, and **rolling hills.**”

Jacob : (crying) “Won’t they hurt us?”

In this excerpt, Emma recalls Jacob’s comment about ‘rolling hills’. We do not know for sure how old Jacob was at that time, but it was probably when he was little. He cried because he thought ‘rolling hills’ meant ‘hills that roll’, where ‘to roll’ means “to (cause to) move somewhere by turning over and over or from side to side” (dictionary.cambridge.org, 2017) instead of hills that are “gently rising and falling” (dictionary.cambridge.org, 2017). Jacob was worried that the ‘rolling hills’ would roll towards people and hurt them.

It is normal for a child to interpret it the way Jacob does. However, when such a common phrase confuses a grown-up man, neurotypicals would probably think the grown-up man is stupid. That is not the case with people with Asperger, though. They do have difficulty understanding common phrases because they are less aware of the meaning behind them (Attwood, 2007, p. 216).

### Maxim of quality

Maxim of quality is not observed when a person tells a lie. However, in the following excerpt, Jacob is free from the accusation of lying since he does not understand the question.

(4) Picoult (2010, pp. 394-395)

Oliver: "Jacob, you don't know what the Second Amendment really means, do you?"

Jacob: "**Yes, I do:** A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right to the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed."

Oliver: (to the judge) "Your Honor, nothing further."

People with AS have "intact syntactic abilities, but the flexibility and productivity of it are typically not assessed" (Landa, 2000, p. 127). This means that an individual with AS is able to make well-structured sentences, but is sometimes unable to infer meanings. When Oliver asks if Jacob knows the meaning of the Second Amendment, Jacob only recites (for the second time) what the amendment says.

Jacob has a remarkable memory. It is very easy for him to memorize things. This is no surprise as people with AS have the ability to accurately remember events that occurred during infancy that neurotypicals do not have (Attwood, 2007, p. 244). This is due to weak central coherence, which also makes people with AS pay attention to details, but makes it hard for them to understand the big picture (Attwood, 2007, pp. 241-242). Jacob may have memorized the Second Amendment, but it does not mean that he understands it. He infringes the maxim of quality by saying he knows what the Second Amendment means, but that is not true. He only *thinks* that he knows.

### Maxim of relation

A person infringes the maxim of relation when he does not know what response is relevant

for the hearer. Jacob's tendency to have problem with relevance is most likely due to weak central coherence and impaired Theory of Mind.

(5) Picoult (2010, p. 211)

Emma: "You know how Jess has been gone for a while, so you couldn't have your meeting on Sunday? The police found her body. She's dead."

Jacob: (after a moment) "Okay."

Emma: "Do you have any questions?"

Jacob: (nods) "**Can we get a snack now?**"

Due to impaired Theory of Mind, sometimes Jacob finds it difficult to know what the other speaker expects him to say. When Emma asks him if he has any question, she expects Jacob to ask a question about Jess, as they are talking about Jess. Jacob's difficulty in identifying what the other person wants to know is more pronounced as he has weak central coherence, which makes him "less able to determine what to notice and what is irrelevant" (Attwood, 2007, p. 242).

If the other speaker does not know that Jacob has such difficulties, s/he might think that Jacob is being disrespectful, heartless, and very egocentric. His mother has just told him some terrible news about somebody close to him, yet Jacob does not show any sympathy. Instead, he asks if he could get a snack because he is hungry. Ideally, neurotypicals would say something about the terrible news (more than just saying "okay"), talk a little bit about the death, and then ask if they could get a snack.

When the world becomes too overwhelming for Jacob, he disengages from the world and finds peace in his own world. Attwood (2007) stated that using imagination is one of the strategies that children with AS develops when they realize that they are different (p. 23).

(6) Picoult (2010, p. 301)

Oliver: "I have some papers I need you to sign."

Jacob: (whispering) "**One.**"

Oliver: “One? Actually, it’s several. But hey, you don’t have to go back to jail, buddy. That’s the good news.”

Jacob: (wheezing) “**One, two, three, five.**”

Oliver: “You’re counting. You’re down for the count?”

Jacob: “**Eight.**”

Oliver: “Jacob, come on already.” (sits down on the floor beside Jacob) “One.”

Jacob: “Two.”

Oliver: (writes the numbers on his hands and recognizes the pattern) “Eleven.”

Jacob: “Nineteen.”

Oliver: “Sign these. And I will take you to your mother.”

Jacob: (slowly moves and signs the papers)

Jacob's comments have absolutely nothing to do with what Oliver says. This is likely due to the anxiety problem that Jacob is facing. When anxious or overwhelmed, a person with AS can have a one-track mind (Attwood, 2007, p. 137). In this case, what Jacob could think about is numbers, particularly the Fibonacci sequence. He thinks if somebody could understand him when he thinks in numbers, that person might understand what truly happened at the crime scene (Picoult, 2010, p. 287). That is why Jacob starts moving when Oliver speaks to him using numbers, too.

### Pedantic

People with AS tend to correct people’s utterance, though they are only trivial errors (Attwood, 2007, p. 220). Attwood (2007) argued that such errors could make someone with AS feel agitated. That is why they feel the urge to correct them. However, many people would find this annoying as most would ignore their errors and move on with the conversation. To most people, correcting such trivial errors is only a waste of time.

Being pedantic also means putting emphasis on rules and to talk too formally (Attwood, 2007, p. 220). In the following excerpt, Emma uses present

tense to ask Jacob what he is doing. As Jacob is no longer sleeping, Jacob puts emphasis on the word “was”. Most people would not find it necessary to put an emphasis in this case.

Jacob also corrects Emma about the hallway. While it is true that Jacob was sleeping in the hallway, Jacob is trying to communicate that his spot was a specific spot (i.e, in front of Theo’s room). To say that he is sleeping in the hallway could mean anywhere in the hallway. This correction is not necessary for most people.

(7) Picoult (2010, p. 432)

Emma: “What are you doing here?”

Jacob: “I *was* sleeping . . .”

Emma: “In the hallway?”

Jacob: “Not the hallway. In front of Theo’s room.”

When talking to people with AS, we need to keep in mind that their tendency to be pedantic is natural for them. This tendency increases when they are anxious (Attwood, 2007, p. 221). When being pedantic, they are not deliberately trying to be annoying or offensive.

### Metaphor

Metaphor is also difficult for Jacob to understand because it is, like many other figures of speech, non-literal. Consider the excerpt below.

(8) Picoult (2010, p. 635)

Oliver: “It’s your funeral.”

Jacob: “No. **It’s my trial.**”

This takes place in court. Oliver does not plan for Jacob to take the stand as a witness. Jacob insists to speak, and Oliver is angry at Jacob for that. Oliver is almost certain how all the jury will think of Jacob, regardless of what Jacob says. Jacob’s tendency to fidget and to not look people in the eye are expressions of guilt. That is why Oliver says it’s Jacob’s funeral—because he thinks the jury will not believe whatever Jacob tells them.

Jacob is, again, taking it literally. He knows they are in court, not at a memorial park. He

certainly knows he is still alive. What Jacob does not realize is that this trial could put him in jail, which could most likely be for years. He might even get a life imprisonment. If you are in jail for the rest of your life, does not it mean your life is over? If your life is over, there is your funeral.

Interestingly, if Oliver used simile and said “it is like your funeral” instead, it might make it easier for Jacob to understand. Reynolds and Ortony (1980) suggested that similes are easier to understand because they explicitly signal that a comparison is required. In other words, metaphors are an indirect form of similes, which would explain why Jacob is having trouble understanding them.

### Hyperbole

Hyperbole is another figure of speech that people with AS do not understand. According to Cutting (2002), we often use hyperbole to generate humor (p. 37). However, difficulties in pragmatic skills and impaired theory of mind have made it more difficult for people with AS to understand humor (Lyons & Fitzgerald, 2004).

There are two occasions in the novel where Jacob takes hyperbole literally. The first one happens at school. Depending on how the teacher says the utterance in excerpt 3, what she says could be funny for some students. Jacob takes it literally and puts himself in trouble.

(9) Picoult (2010, p. 25)

Teacher: “Don’t move—don’t even breathe.”

Jacob : (sits like a statue, holding breaths)

This happens in class when the teacher suddenly needs to take a phone call in the main office. She knows that when she leaves, the students will probably start chattering and soon the class will be noisy. Eventually they will disturb other classes. Neurotypicals would understand that the teacher is using hyperbole to make her point. She wants the students to keep quiet and to behave well while the teacher talks on the phone.

Jacob thinks the teacher means exactly what she says. This could be dangerous if Jacob keeps

holding his breaths for too long. He narrates that he is “on the verge of passing out” (Picoult, 2010, p. 25). It is either the teacher comes back before he passes out, or he realizes he misunderstood the teacher’s intention.

The second occasion in the novel where Jacob has difficulty understanding hyperbole happens in courtroom.

(10) Picoult (2010, pp. 243-244)

Oliver: “I just told you not to talk to anybody.”

Jacob: “You told me not to say anything to the judge.”

Oliver: “**You can’t talk to *anybody***. Do you understand?”

Jacob : (glances down at the table)

Oliver: “**Jacob? *Hello?***”

Jacob: (mutter) “You told me not to talk to anybody. Will you make up your mind already?”

Oliver, Jacob’s lawyer, is having a conversation with Jacob, who is accused of being involved in Jess’s murder. At first, Oliver tells Jacob not to talk to the judge. When Jacob calls out his mom, Oliver reminds Jacob not to talk to anyone. Jacob reminds Oliver of what Oliver actually said not to talk to the judge. He did not say not to talk to anybody.

While it is correct that “anybody” means any one with no exception, it is not correct to assume so in this context. In this case, Oliver is using hyperbole. There is an implied meaning that “anyone” does not include Oliver. Neurotypicals would understand that they still need to talk to their lawyer. Therefore, it would be impossible for a lawyer to tell his clients not to talk to him. Jacob’s response may be perceived as annoying, as he is also being pedant.

Since hyperbole, like metaphor, has to do with the maxim of quality, it makes sense that Jacob does not understand hyperbole, just as people with AS do not understand metaphor.



### Words with multiple meaning

Jacob sometimes finds it hard to understand words with multiple meanings. This might be due to weak central coherence that makes it difficult for people with AS to identify what is relevant (Attwood, 2007, p. 242).

(11) Picoult (2010, p. 10)

Emma: "What do you have left for homework?"

Jacob: "Stupid English."

Emma: "English isn't stupid,"

Jacob: "Well, my English *teacher* is. Mr. Franklin assigned an essay about our favorite subject, and I wanted to write about lunch, but he won't let me."

Emma: "Why not?"

Jacob: "He says lunch isn't a subject."

Emma: "It *isn't*."

Jacob: "Well, **it's not a predicate**, either. Shouldn't he *know* that?"

Jacob's interpretation of the word 'subject' is "the person or thing that is being discussed described or dealt with" (Subject, 2018). Jacob fails to understand that the word 'subject' has another definition: "A branch of knowledge studied or taught in a school, college, or university" (Subject, 2018), which is what his teacher meant when he said "favorite subject".

This particular case supports the statement that an individual with AS are less aware of multiple meaning (Attwood, 2007, p. 216). Jacob only realizes that another possible meaning for the word 'subject' is "a noun or noun phrase functioning as one of the main components of a clause, being the element about which the rest of the clause is predicated" (Subject, 2018), and not the other meanings aforementioned.

### Indirect speech acts

Since people with AS have difficulties with non-literal meanings, it makes sense that they also find it hard to understand indirect speech acts. After

all, indirect speech acts, by definition, are a non-literal way of saying something.

There are two cases of indirect speech acts that Jacob misunderstands.

(12) Picoult (2010, p. 394)

Oliver: "Can you tell us your name?"

Jacob: (nods).

Oliver: "Jacob, you have to speak out loud. The stenographer's writing down your words, and she has to be able to hear you. **Can you tell me your name?**"

Jacob: "**Yes, I can.**"

Oliver: (sighing) "What is your name?"

Jacob: "Jacob Hunt."

Oliver calls Jacob to the witness stand. The excerpt shows that Jacob could not understand indirect speech act. He thinks Oliver is only asking Jacob's ability to tell them his name. Therefore, he thinks a yes/no answer is all Oliver wants to know. He does not understand that a request is implied in the question. Oliver realizes that Jacob could not understand his indirectness and finally rephrases the question.

The word *can* could refer to ability, permission, request, possibility, or even an offer (Can, 2018). Jacob's difficulty understanding multiple meaning causes his misunderstanding of the request. He has trouble deciding which is relevant to Oliver.

(13) Picoult (2010, p. 572)

Sawyer Trigg: "I could fucking kill you, Hunt."

Jacob: (panicking for the rest of the day)

This happens after Sawyer Trigg gets sent to the principal's office because Jacob tells on him for impersonating their teacher, Mrs. Witchlow. Jacob then panics for the rest of the day and steals a butter knife from the cafeteria to protect himself in case Trigg tries to kill him. While "could" has the same meanings as "can", it does not mean that Sawyer Trigg is going to kill Jacob. It is only said as a threat,

to show that he is angry at Jacob. Has Jacob known the illocutionary act (i.e, the function) of the utterance, he would not have to panic.

People with AS “strongly believe in moral and ethical principles” (Attwood, 2007, p. 118). Jacob knows it is wrong to make fun of teachers. He might have been proud for reporting a wrongdoing. However, Jacob does not realize there is an unwritten social code that we are not supposed to tell on our peers, unless our peers did a terrible crime where justice really needs to be done. Jacob also does not understand how Sawyer must have felt after Jacob tattled on him.

## CONCLUSION

There are 54 occurrences of pragmatic failures in the novel. This high number of occurrence seems to support Landa’s (2000) statement that pragmatic impairment is one of the most prominent features of people with AS.

Due to impaired Theory of Mind and weak central coherence, Jacob has difficulties understanding sarcasms, idioms, common phrases, metaphors, hyperboles, words with multiple meanings, jokes, and indirect speech acts. Jacob’s difficulty in the pragmatic aspects of language causes him to have a tendency to infringe all four Gricean’s maxims and to be pedantic. Such pragmatic failures can sometimes generate humor, yet sometimes they could be frustrating to the other speakers. Those who do not know Jacob’s condition would think that Jacob is being deliberately uncooperative. On the other hand, those who know Jacob would understand that pragmatics just does not make sense to him. Thus, overtime, they will learn how to make it easier for Jacob to understand what they mean.

The most frequent kind of pragmatic failure that Jacob experiences throughout the novel is the infringement of the maxim of relation, which is 29.6% of the total pragmatic failures. Jacob often infringes the maxim of relation, making irrelevant responses to the previous utterances.

Understanding pragmatic impairment in individuals with AS minimizes misunderstanding between people with AS and neurotypicals, thus

creating a better way of communicating. Being understood and feeling accepted will reduce the anxiety level of people with AS, making them less pedantic and less likely to “zone out”.

## REFERENCES

- A conversation with Jodi Picoult, author of *House Rules*. (n.d.). In *Simon and Schuster*. Retrieved September 20, 2017, from : <http://www.simonandschuster.com/authors/Jodi-picoult/16352174/interviews/house-rules-qa/148>.
- Attwood, T. (2007). *The complete guide to Asperger's Syndrome*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Can. (2018). In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/can>.
- Colle, L., Baron-Cohen, S., Wheelwright, S., & Lely, H. K. (2007). Narrative discourse in adults with High-Functioning Autism or Asperger Syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 38, 28-40. doi:10.1007/s10803-007-0357-5.
- Cutting, J. (2002). *Pragmatics and Discourse*. New York, New York: Routledge.
- Dennis, M., Lazenby, A. L. & Lockyer, L. (2001). Inferential language in high-function children with Autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 31(1), 47-54.
- Dewanti, H. (2014). A Psycholinguistic analysis of verbal and non-verbal language problems of an individual with Asperger Syndrome in the movie *Adam*. Unpublished undergraduate thesis. Yogyakarta: Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta. Retrieved December 17, 2016, from <https://eprints.uny.ac.id/19408/1/Fitria%20Nur%20Kiswandari%200921114402.pdf>.
- Frith, U. (2001). Mind blindness and the brain in autism. *Neuron*, 32, 969-979.
- Gold, R., Faust, M. & Goldstein, A. (2010). Semantic integration during metaphor

- comprehension in Asperger syndrome. *Brain & Language*, 113, 124-234.
- Grice, P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In Cole, P. & J. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and semantics. 3: Speech acts*. New York: Academic Press, 41-58.
- Humaira', S. A. (2015). Pragmatic deficits of Asperger Syndrome. *Lingua* 10(1), 39-44.
- How are Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism different? (2010). In *Autism Speaks Inc*. Retrieved August 31, 2017, from <https://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/asperger-syndrome-and-high-functioning-autism-tool-kit/how-are-as-and-hfa-dif>.
- Landa, R. (2000). Social language use in Asperger Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism. In A. Klin, F. R. Volkmar, & S. S. Sparrow (Eds.), *Asperger Syndrome* (pp. 125-155). New York: The Guilford Press. Retrieved December 1, 2016.
- Loukusa, S. (2007). The use of context in pragmatic language comprehension in normally developing children and children with Asperger Syndrome/High-Functioning Autism: An application of relevance theory. Oulu: University of Oulu. Retrieved April 17, 2017, from <http://jultika.oulu.fi/files/isbn9789514285783.pdf>.
- Lyons, V., & Fitzgerald, M. (2004). Humor in Autism and Asperger Syndrome. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 34(5), 521-531.
- Picoult, J. (2010). *House Rules*. New York: Atria International.
- Reynolds, R. E., & Ortony, A. (1980). Some issues in the measurement of children's comprehension of metaphorical language. *Child Development* 51(4), 1110-1119.
- Semino, E. (2014). Pragmatic failure, mind style and characterisation in fiction about autism. *Language and Literature*, 23(2), 141-158. doi:10.1177/0963947014526312.
- Subject. (2018). In *English Oxford living dictionaries*. Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/subject>.
- Thomas, J. (1982). Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure. *Applied Linguistics* 4(2), 91-112.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.