

An Experience-First Approach to Autism Pragmatics

UC San Diego

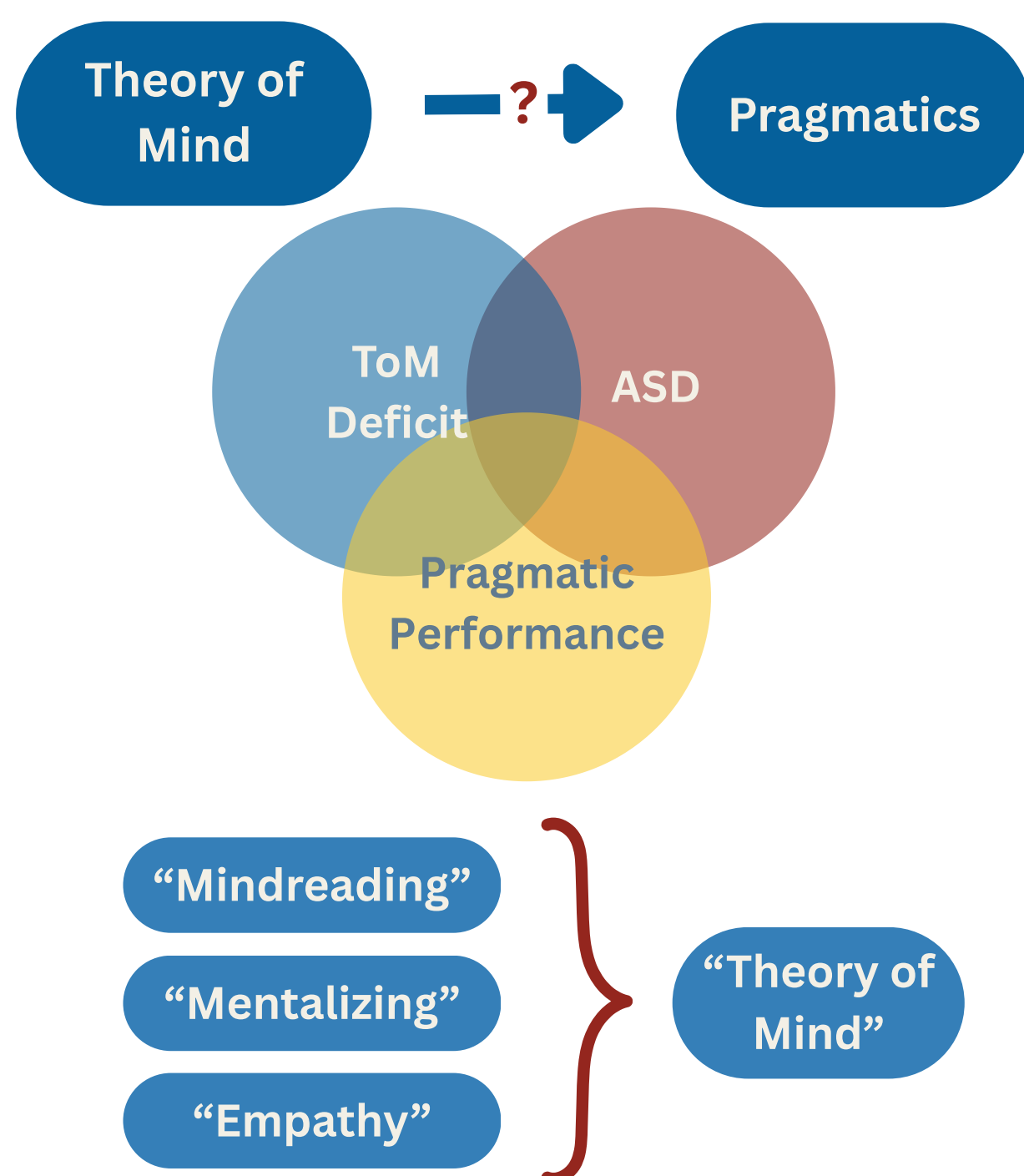
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Background

- Pragmatics in autistic people: often believed to be different
- Traditionally explained by a deficit in Theory of Mind (ToM, attributing mental states to others)

Drawbacks of the ToM Deficit Account



Goals

- An alternative explanation to pragmatics performance in autistic individuals
- Focus: **experience**

Experience Atypicality

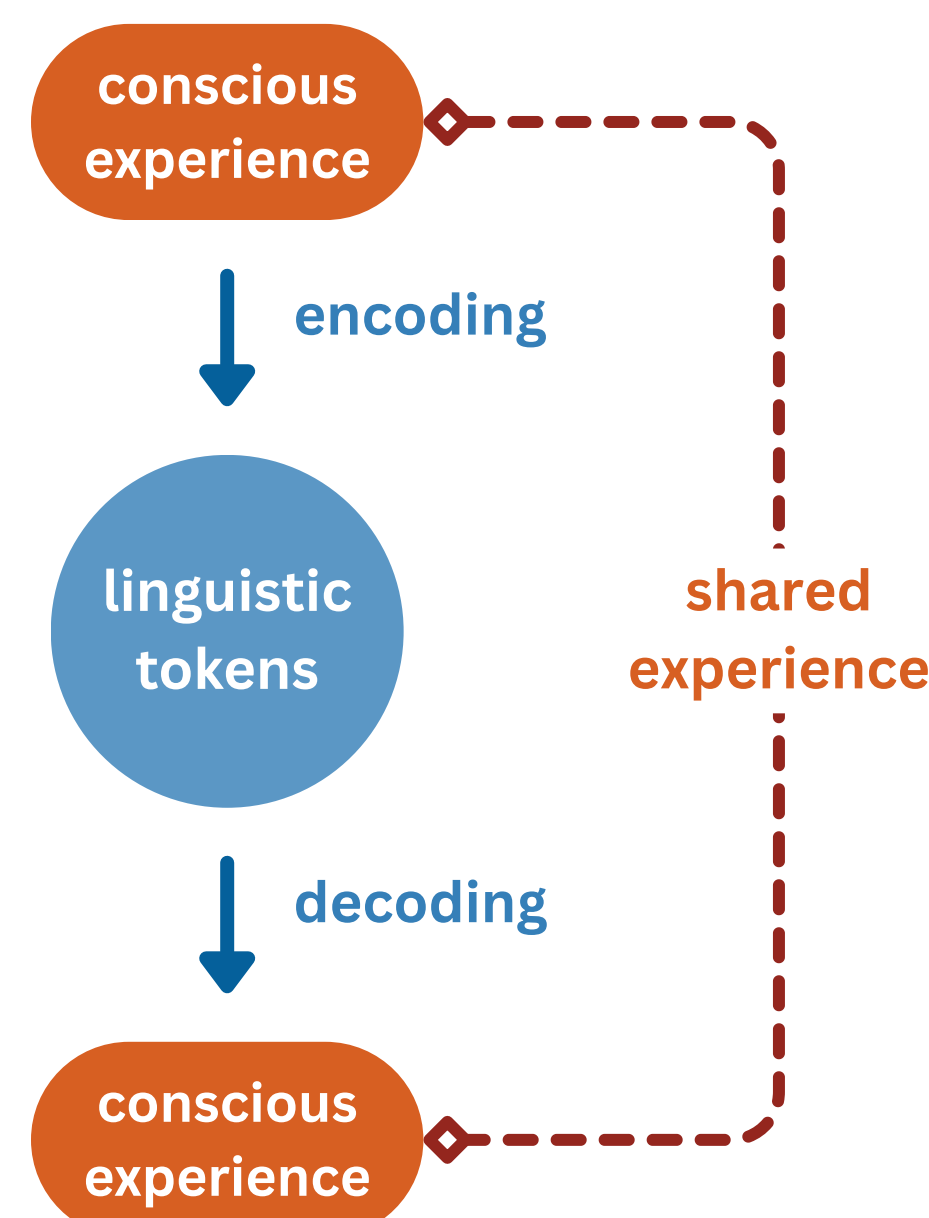
- Atypical **cognitive styles** in autism affect **conscious-selective** processes: both the gating and conceptualization of experience content
 - Attention allocation: Selects content of experience
 - Weak Central Coherence theory of autism
 - Sensory Processing.
 - What enters the conscious experience is different
 - Executive control:
 - forming associations, knowledge construction, mediates sense-making
- Difference in Experiences → Difference in Pragmatic-relevant Mental Content → Challenges in communication
 - Double Empathy Problem (DEP)

Double Empathy Problem

- Autism: oftentimes framed as a social communication disorder
 - communication difficulties in the autistic individual's brain**
 - 2 parties** of communication
 - 1 fails to understand the mind
 - 2 fails to understand the mind
-
- mutual failures on **both sides** (Milton, 2012)

Experience to Language

- Interpretive Sensory Access** (Carruthers, 2011; Rimkevicius, 2020)
 - Self- and other- knowledge rely on a shared cognitive mechanism
 - Misleading sensory cues → mistakes about self & others' attitudes



- The Ineffability of Experience** (Ji et al., 2025)
 - Difficult to fully articulate or describe conscious experience with language
 - Understanding experience described by language requires connection to one's own knowledge

Experience in Pragmatics



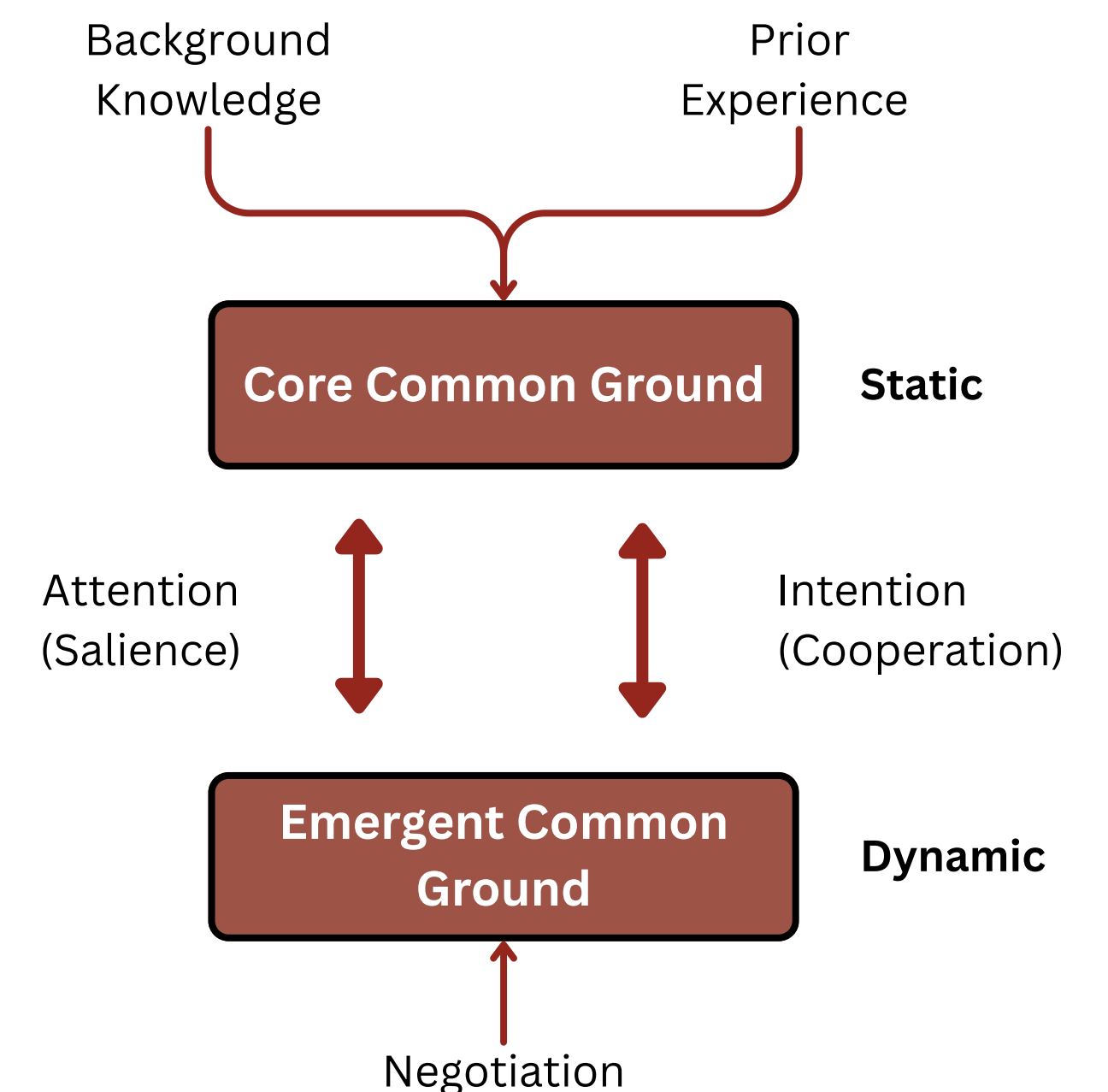
- Experience shapes what information is most salient (noticeable or important) to each person
- Salient details:
 - guide attention
 - influence how language is interpreted in context
- Different experience → Different salience → Different pragmatics
- Different assumptions about shared knowledge / common ground

Common Ground: shared knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions between people in a conversation, including both what's explicitly said and what's implicitly understood.

Salience: what people are most likely to focus on or interpret as relevant in communication; something that stands out as especially noticeable or important in a particular context.

Common Ground in Communication

- The Dynamic Model of Meaning (DMM) views common ground as dynamic instead of static (Kecskes and Zhang, 2009)



- Common ground: shaped by each person's unique experiences and is negotiated dynamically during interaction
- Autistic & NT:
 - core common ground often diverges, making pragmatic coordination more difficult
 - more negotiation is needed

Alice: Has the bread gone bad?
Bob: Not yet, but I'll put them in the fridge.

Alice: Has the bread gone bad?
Bob: ?? No. Usually bread will only start to go bad after one week in room temperature.

Alice: Has the bread gone bad?
Bob: No. Usually bread will only start to go bad after one week in room temperature.
Alice: I see. I'm still a little worried, could you put it in the fridge?
Bob: Yeah sure

Summary

- Pragmatic differences between autistic and neurotypical individuals may be attributed to experiential content as opposed to ToM deficits
- Communication issues come from mutual misunderstandings between autistic and NT
- Attention, sense-making, and common ground depend on individual experience
- Experience shapes how people interpret meaning and negotiate intentions
- These differences directly impact pragmatic performances

Selected References

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