

## Verbal communication can be challenging for many autistic people.

This is true even for those of us who developed language at a very early age, and who often speak eloquently. It's difficult to process what other people are saying, formulate an original response, and answer them directly, all at the same time.

Echolalia, which is a common autistic trait, is often used to assist with communication. This is especially apparent in autistic people who are semiverbal or primarily nonspeaking. However, echoing other people's words in our responses is something that many autistic people do. We do this to help us process what was said, and to respond accurately & in a typical amount of time. In conversations, people move quickly. So, we use words that have already been spoken, so we don't take too much time thinking up our responses. This may be especially true for autistic people who are speaking in non-native languages.

I was watching some interviews with Greta Thunberg yesterday, and noticed that when answering people's questions or responding to them, she tends to echo what the speakers said in her responses. I show her as an example here, because she is a very prominent autistic person and she also exemplifies this trait very well. One example is her interview with Ellen Degeneres:

**Ellen:** Does this just get overwhelming? Because you're just doing so much at your age. This is a lot of energy.

**Greta:** Yes, it is a lot. It is a lot to take in. It is a lot for a teenager.

**Ellen, chuckling:** yeah, it's a lot.

*Notice the repetition of the phrase "a lot". Greta took that piece from Ellen's question, and then used it three different times in her response, to articulate her point. Then, later in the conversation:*

**Ellen:** Do you ever think about- would you sit down with [Trump] to help him understand climate change?

**Greta:** I don't understand why I would do that.

*Here, she repeated and repurposed the word "understand," using it to express a different meaning.*

**Ellen:** What have you done to change your life? Like you said, you do things that you can do to look yourself in the eye and know you've done enough. What have you done?

**Greta:** I have done- I have stopped flying, and I have gone vegan...

*In this instance, she directly echoed Ellen's question (the key words "have done") before shifting to a sentence pattern that fit her response.*

This pattern of echoing and repetition is apparent in every single interview I have seen of her to date. She echoes people in many ways and in many circumstances. Greta has said that she is very shy and quiet in everyday conversations, and it is public knowledge that she has been diagnosed with selective mutism (which is disproportionately prevalent in autistic people).

Perhaps one reason for the silence of so many autistic people who are trying to navigate everyday conversations (including myself), is that it's difficult to echo people casually without seeming odd and strangely formal. It's more socially acceptable to echo people in an interview format, because there are set questions and it's generally understood that people may need to repeat some aspect of the question before responding to the interviewer.

But if you're just hanging out with a group of friends at a dinner party, and somebody asks you something like, "What do you want to eat?" And you respond with "I want to eat soup," rather than something like "I'd like the soup, please," people might be put off by your verbatim repetition of the question, or think you're being impolite.

Of course, those negative assumptions aren't fair to the autistic person and don't make much logical sense. Neurotypicals tend to expect conversations to be fluid and smooth, rather than to consist of word blocks that are copied and stacked together. However, autistic people often don't have the capacity to make our verbal communication as seamless and relaxed as other people would like it to be. Many of us think in pictures, or have alternate ways of thinking that aren't based in words. Asking us to translate our thoughts into verbal language while we process much more information around us than NTs, *and* to make that language smooth and original? It's absurd and unrealistic, and the problems are only compounded when we're speaking in a non-native tongue.

Everyone repeats things that other people have said, consciously or unconsciously. Autistic people just do it more frequently, and in circumstances where NT people usually don't. When we echo, it's often because we have to, because it's the only way we're able to communicate what we're thinking in that moment.

*This way of communicating needs to be recognized and appreciated. Echoing other people's words is not rude, cold, or stiff. It's a resourceful use of external prompts to express internal thoughts that might not have an outlet otherwise.*

~Eden 🐸