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Technology of the future: New tool to simplify text and documents for people with autism

A new tool is now in development that will enable people with autism who have difficulty reading regular text and documents to convert them into a form that is easier to understand.

The new tool could be described as something like Google Translate for people who have autism.

As a result of their condition, people who have autism often have difficulty in understanding language, including their mother tongue. These can include difficulties in comprehending regular speech and writing (such as letters, bills and medical documents), understanding non-literal language (such as metaphors and expressions) and understanding complicated or lengthy instructions.

This new tool will adapt text and documents, converting them into a form that people who have autism can understand more easily. It's a bit like Google Translate, but instead of translating from one language to another, the tool will adapt the text from one language into a more accessible version of the same language.

The tool will replace long and technical words with short simple ones, replace long sentences with several short sentences, replace metaphors and expressions with literal language, replace pronouns with regular nouns and noun phrases and provide definitions for ambiguous and technical words.

It will provide the user with a new simplified document, which also contains a summary, pictures and document navigation tools.

People with autism can have a wide range of abilities in understanding text, so the tool will enable users to personalise settings to meet their own needs.

As we know from using Google Translate, no tool that automatically processes language is perfect, so where necessary, carers of people with autism will also be able to use the tool to ensure that the new documents meet their needs.

The tool is being developed by a team of computer programmers who specialise in language technology and professionals in the field of autism. The team comes from universities and non-profit organisations across Europe.

The team will work with a large sample of people who have autism to research and evaluate how the software can meet their needs.

The project's coordinator, Professor Ruslan Mitkov, of the University of Wolverhampton, explains: "The project aims to assist people with autism to read documents with greater confidence and autonomy. We aim to help them break down some of the barriers they face in everyday life so they can increase their social inclusion and gain better access to educational, vocational, cultural and social opportunities in Europe."

To arrange interviews, get more information and images, please do not hesitate to contact Nikki Sullings, at Autism-Europe in Brussels: Tel: +32 (0)2 675 75 05 Email: nikki.sullings@autismeurope.org

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