CHI 2026 DISSERTATION AWARD

Wearable, Discreet AAC

Co-design of Augmentative & Alternative Communication with People with Aphasia

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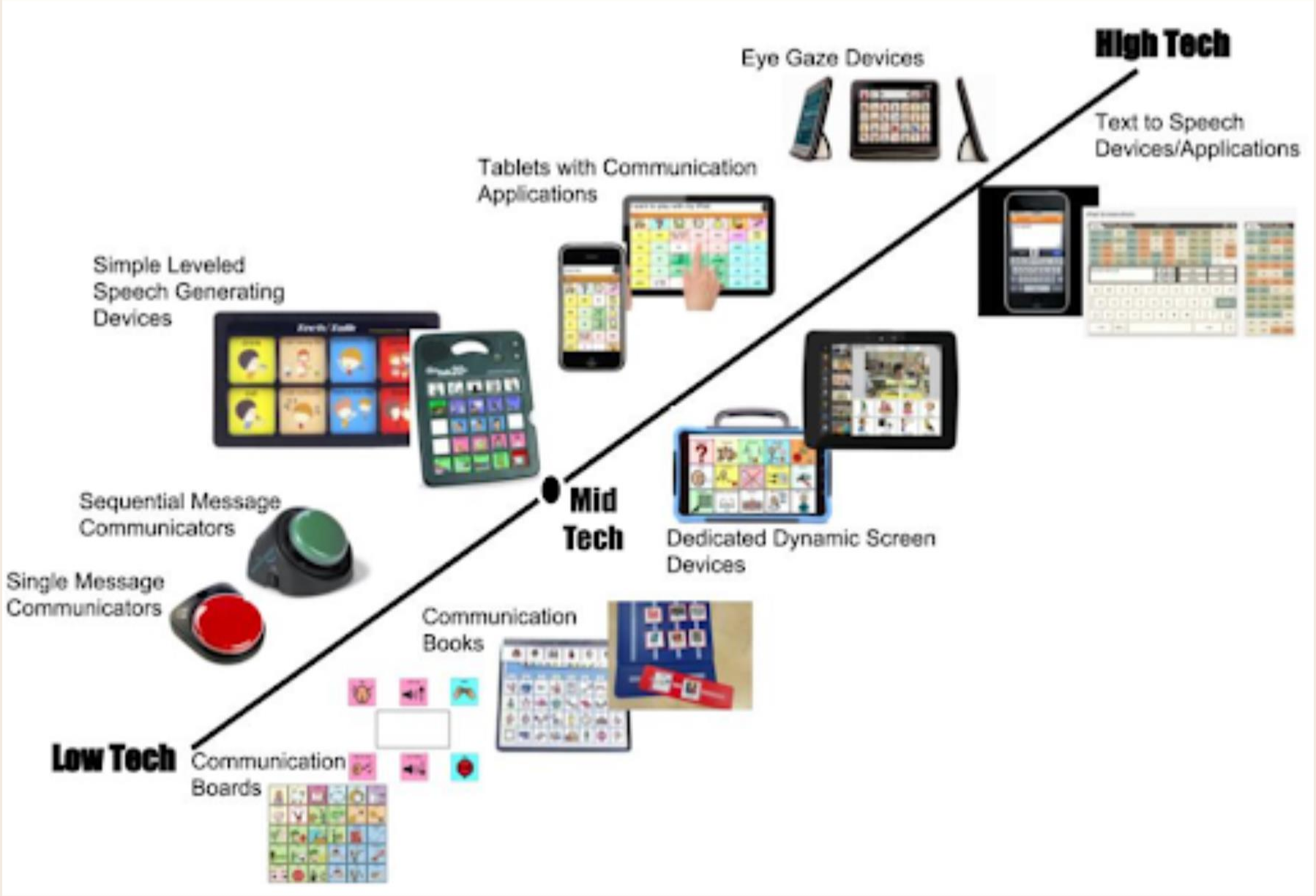
Supervised by Dr Timothy Neate & Dr Rita Borgo

Barcelona, Spain · April 13-17

Opening thoughts

Image credit: Visit Cornwall


High Tech
Eye Gaze Devices
Text to Speech
Devices/Applications
Tablets with Communication
Applications
Simple Leveled
Speech Generating
Devices
Sequential Message
Communicators
Single Message
Communicators
Mid
Tech
Dedicated Dynamic Screen
Devices
Communication
Books
Low Tech
Communication
Boards

Video credit: AssistiveWare

Video credit: Channel 4, When the Words Away Went

Images credit: Pexels

Adoption challenges

- Expensive
- Hard to learn
- Stigmatising
- Restricts agency & gestures
- Not portable

Image credit: ITV News: Unprecedented demand for new NHS dental practice in Bristol

- Older adults
- Low computer literacy
- Long-term condition
- Poor access to services and healthcare
- Cost matters

State of the Art in AAC

A Systematic Review and Taxonomy

In Proceedings of the 24th International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility (ASSETS '22), October 23-26, 2022, Athens, Greece. ACM, New York, NY, USA.

https://dl.acm.org/doi/proceedings/10.1145/3517428

Art in AAC: A Systematic Review and

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nication needs (CCNs) can use high-
ative communication (AAC) devices
r communication difficulties. While
uch research has highlighted chal-
ates of abandonment and solutions
r their end-users. Presently, we lack
to comprehend these shortcomings
ssibility community might direct its
ve AAC. In response to this, we con-
taxonomy of high-tech AAC devices
esults from 562 articles identified in
atabases. We provide a taxonomical
of AAC devices – e.g. their interac-
istics. We describe the communities
ethodological approaches used. We
er accessibility and HCI literature to
xploration in light of the current tax-
f the norms and incumbent research
iscourse on the communities of focus

ing → **Empirical studies in acces-**
ologies.

Critically, challenges in human soci
subject individuals to many risks suc
tions [122], employment challenges [
mental health disorders [76] and a m
Equally, communication and freedo
der UN legislature [120] and revere
man life" [105]. Aided and unaided
serve to remediate communication d
dividuals and communities with co
(CCNs) [126]. In particular, high-tec
sulate the most advanced electronic
speech generating devices (SGDs) or
aids (VOCAs) [42]. Data on the preva
AAC is limited, however there will be
individuals requiring AAC intervent
has been sustained academic research
and interventions since the formatio
for AAC (ISAAC) in 1983 and the AA
Since then, high-tech AAC has been d
ranges [106] and serve many comm
high-tech AAC devices and intervent
itive and successful outcomes for in
advances in computer technology, m
tificial intelligence (AI) hold much p
AAC [140, 185].

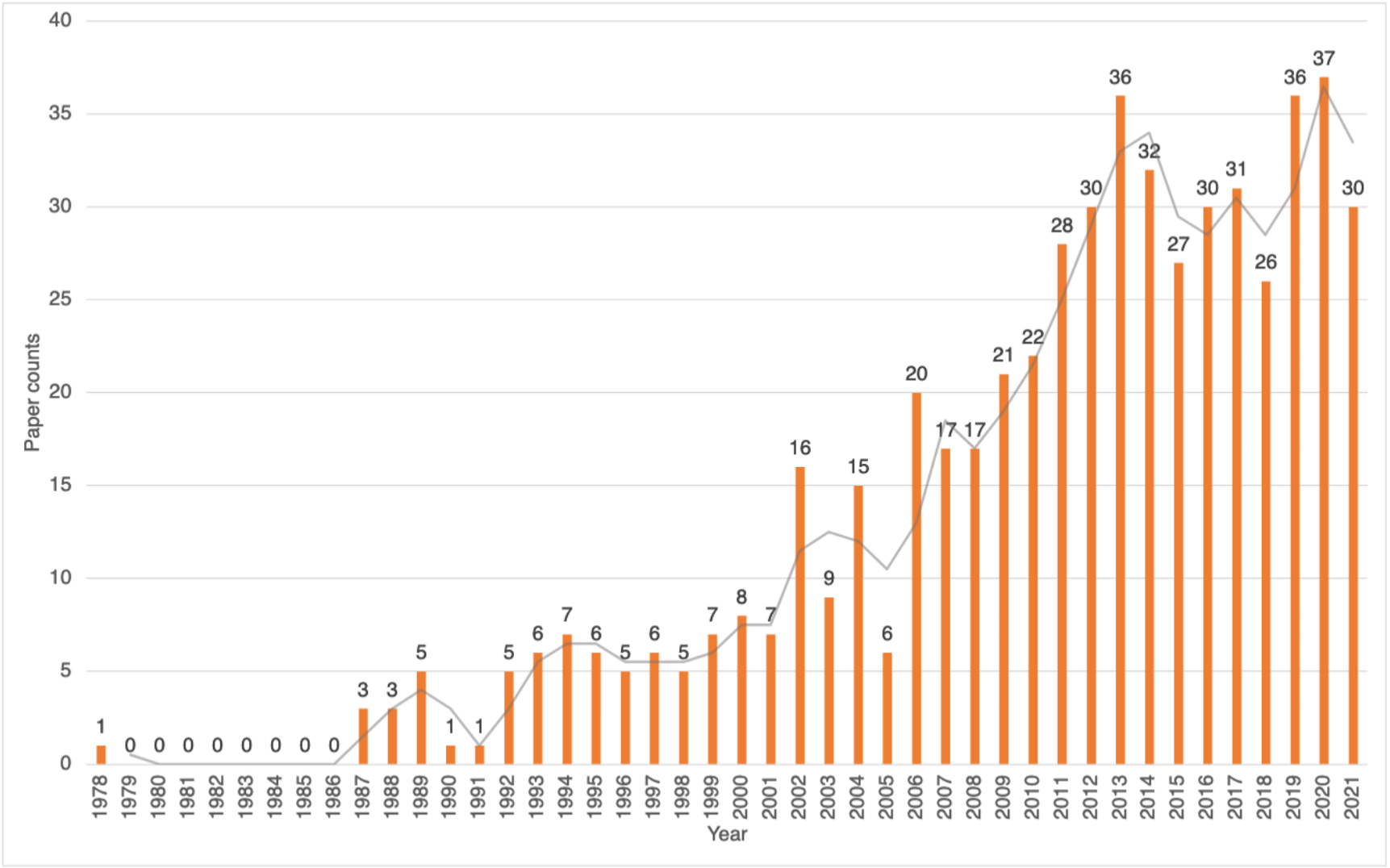


Figure 5: Frequency of 562 paper counts by year for high-tech AAC within dataset from 1978-2021.

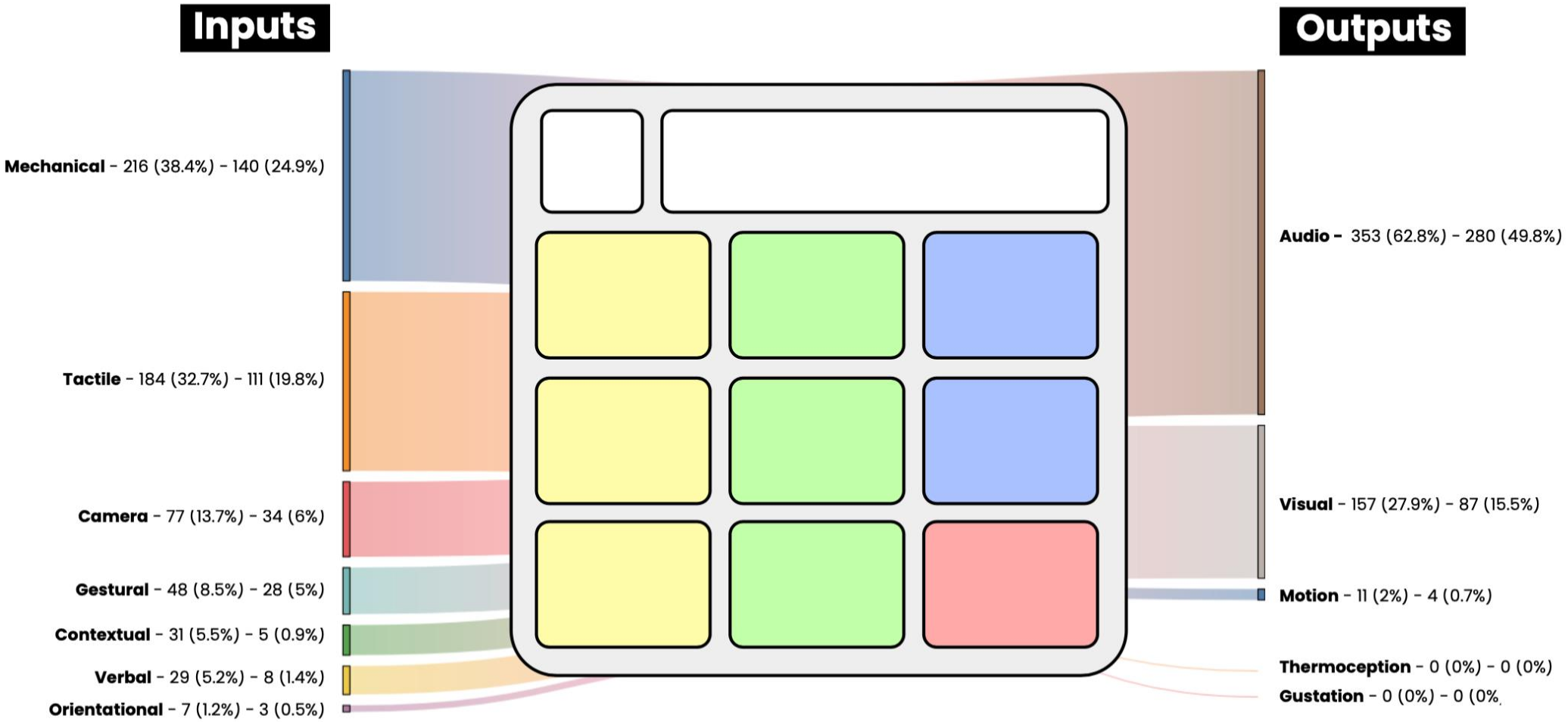
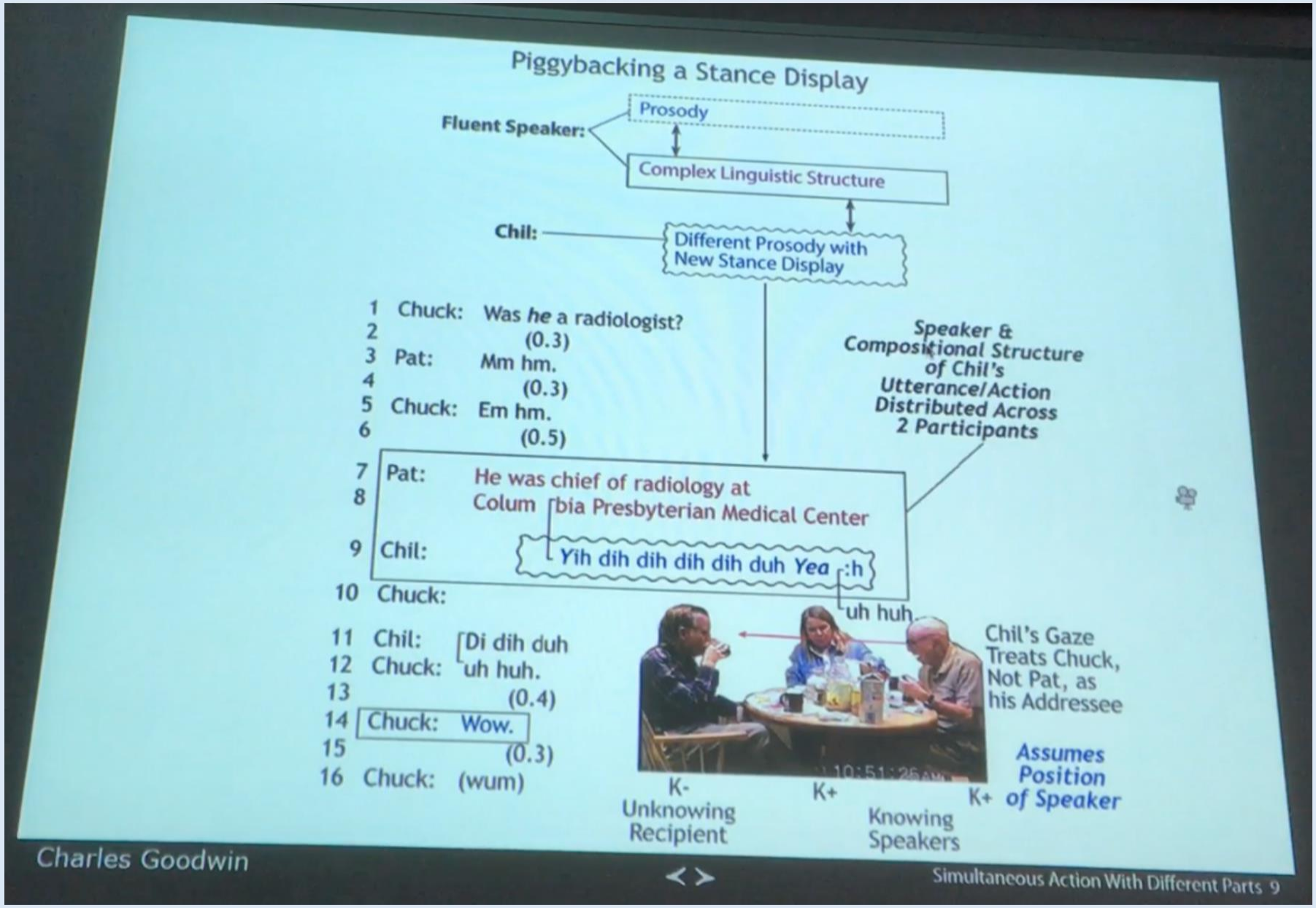

Inputs
Outputs
Mechanical - 216 (38.4%) - 140 (24.9%)
Tactile - 184 (32.7%) - 111 (19.8%)
Camera - 77 (13.7%) - 34 (6%)
Gestural - 48 (8.5%) - 28 (5%)
Contextual - 31 (5.5%) - 5 (0.9%)
Verbal - 29 (5.2%) - 8 (1.4%)
Orientational - 7 (1.2%) - 3 (0.5%)
Audio - 353 (62.8%) - 280 (49.8%)
Visual - 157 (27.9%) - 87 (15.5%)
Motion - 11 (2%) - 4 (0.7%)
Thermoception - 0 (0%) - 0 (0%)
Gustation - 0 (0%) - 0 (0%

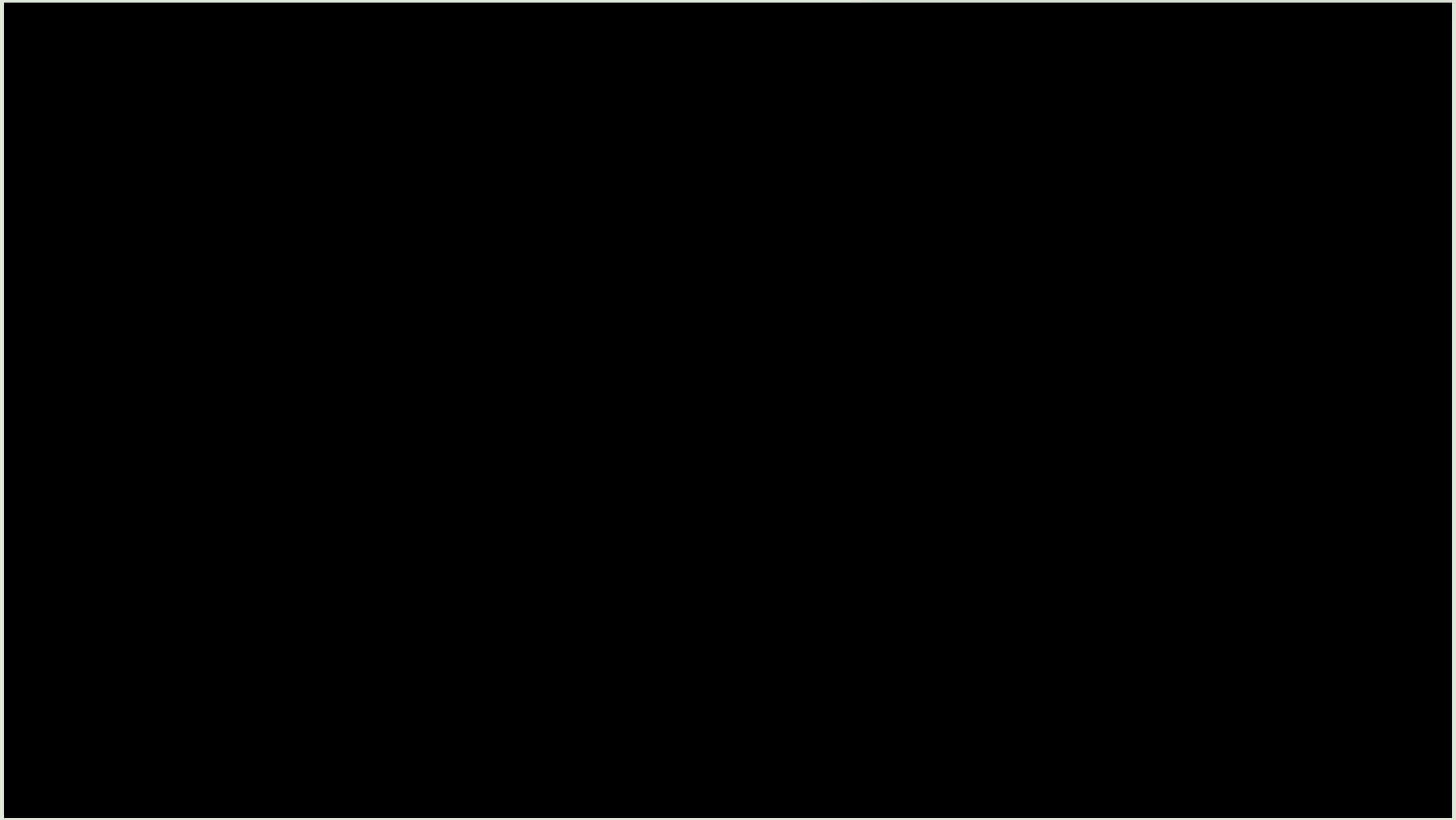
Image credit: Pexels

Image credit: Wikipedia

Image credit: Charles Goodwin



Video credit: Experiences seat requesting on the tube with non-visible disability, Aphasia Re-Connect



Beyond Repairing with Electronic Speech

Towards Embodied Communication and Assistive Technology

In Proceedings of the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '24), May 11-16, 2024, Honolulu, HI, USA. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 12 pages.

https://doi.org/10.1145/3613904.3642274

Beyond Repairing with Electronic Speech:
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ilosophies have strongly favoured a dual-
sciousness – emphasising the importance
ody'. However, we argue that adopted as-
ome embodied and extend intentionality
this paper, we restore an embodied view of
enhance: understandings of assistive tech-
an communication. Initially, we explore
logical theories of human experience, post-
nts of technology, embodied accounts of
l participatory design. We then present a
g the generative and disruptive effects of
for co-designing AAC with people living
ngs show that the embodied framework
mensional account of experience and sug-
levices that seek to 'repair' users' speech.
dy, we then outline concerns with nascent
disembody and limit accessibility.

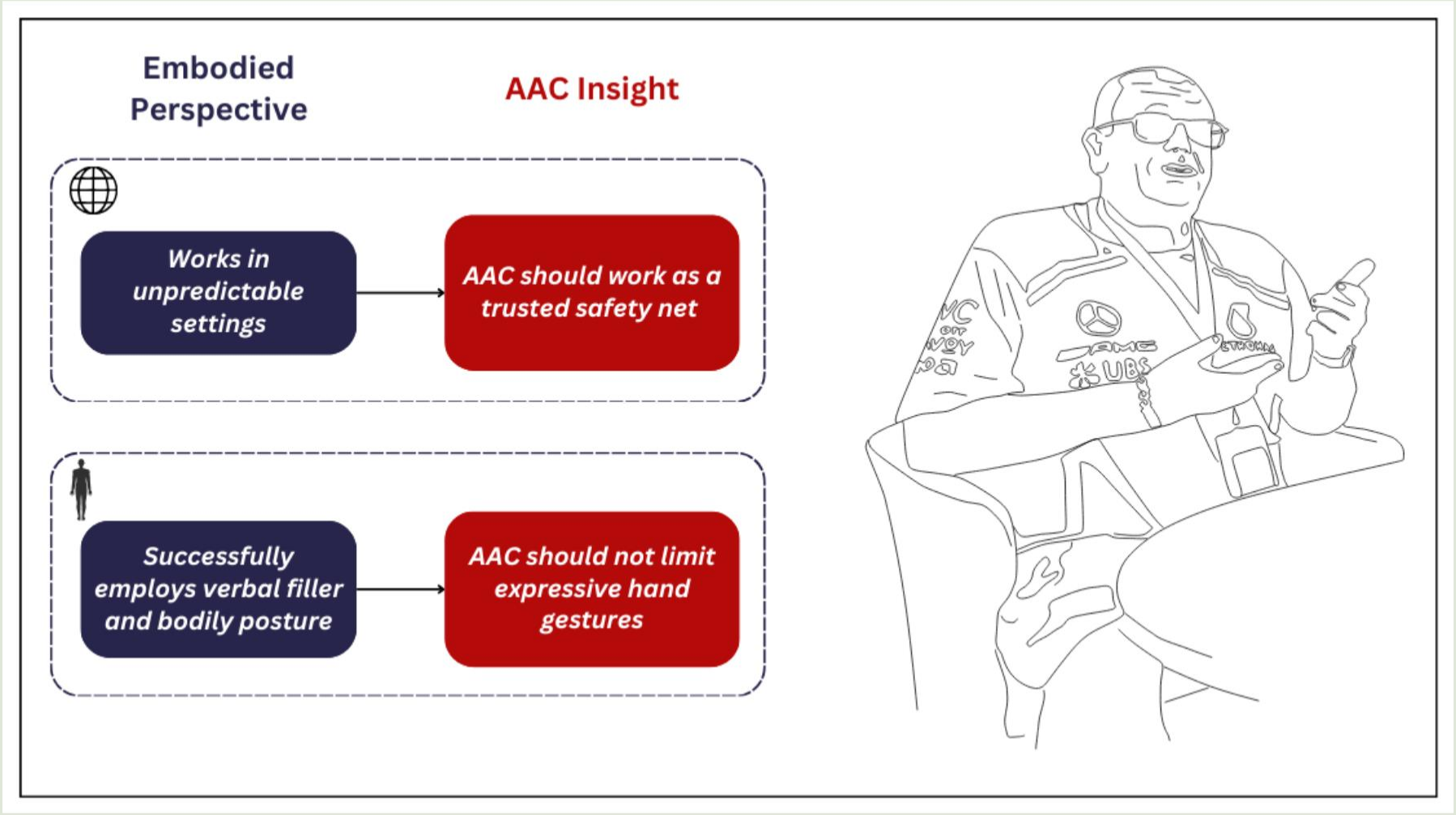
nputing → **Accessibility technologies**.

enomenology; participatory design; em-

mind and *body* were separate – meaning c
ducible to processes occurring *only* within
recent years, the Cartesian dualist position, w
the body has been significantly weakened by
and biological findings [22, 67, 88].

Equally, there has been a significant growth
ness of bodily techniques for ensuring gener
such as meditation [76], yoga [47], fitness/
sleep [31] and balanced diets [1]. Specifically,
come from an Eastern philosophical tradition
essential role of the body in everyday hum
ence [46]. Although these mainstream trends
the importance of embodied interactions has
in the design of assistive technologies – parti
and alternative communication (AAC) device

Since the 1960s, AAC that generates speec
ating devices or SGDs) emerged as a technol
opportunities for people living with complex
(CCN) to produce electronic speech through
using symbol or lexical representations of l
Yet, recent research has found this AAC desig
communities' pre-existing autonomy and *n*
of communicative expression [9, 38, 40]. Lo
dialogue, many people with CCN actively ha
verbal communication strategies (i.e., gestur
and physical props etc.) to successfully comm

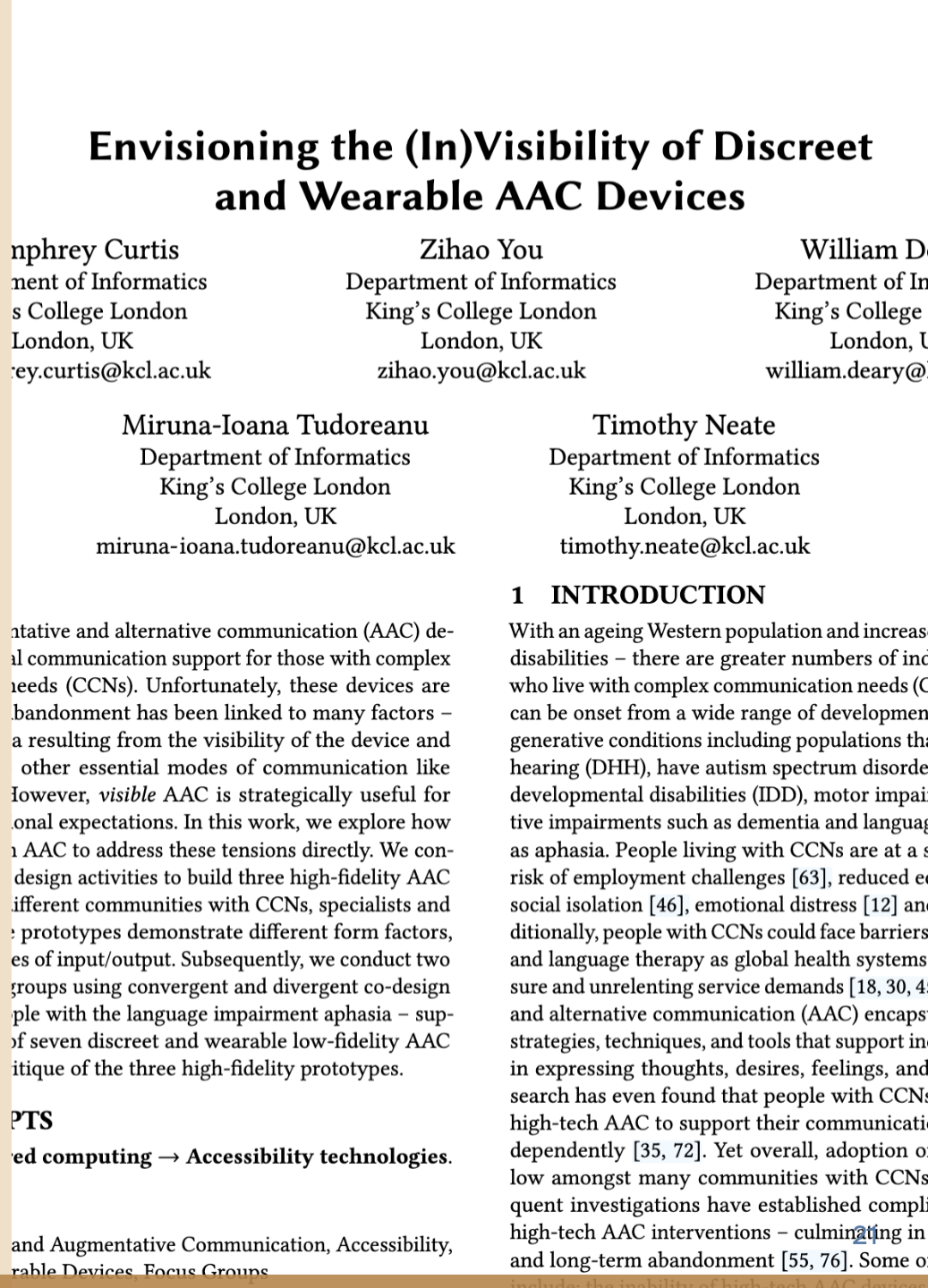

Embodied Perspective
AAC Insight
Works in unpredictable settings
AAC should work as a trusted safety net
Successfully employs verbal filler and bodily posture
AAC should not limit expressive hand gestures

Envisioning the (In)Visibility

of Discreet and Wearable AAC Devices

In Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '23), April 23-28, 2023, Hamburg, Germany. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 19 pages.

https://doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3580936



Envisioning the (In)Visibility of Discreet and Wearable AAC Devices

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ntative and alternative communication (AAC) de-
l communication support for those with complex
eeds (CCNs). Unfortunately, these devices are
bandonment has been linked to many factors –
a resulting from the visibility of the device and
other essential modes of communication like
lowever, *visible* AAC is strategically useful for
onal expectations. In this work, we explore how
AAC to address these tensions directly. We con-
design activities to build three high-fidelity AAC
ifferent communities with CCNs, specialists and
prototypes demonstrate different form factors,
es of input/output. Subsequently, we conduct two
groups using convergent and divergent co-design
ple with the language impairment aphasia – sup-
f seven discreet and wearable low-fidelity AAC
itique of the three high-fidelity prototypes.

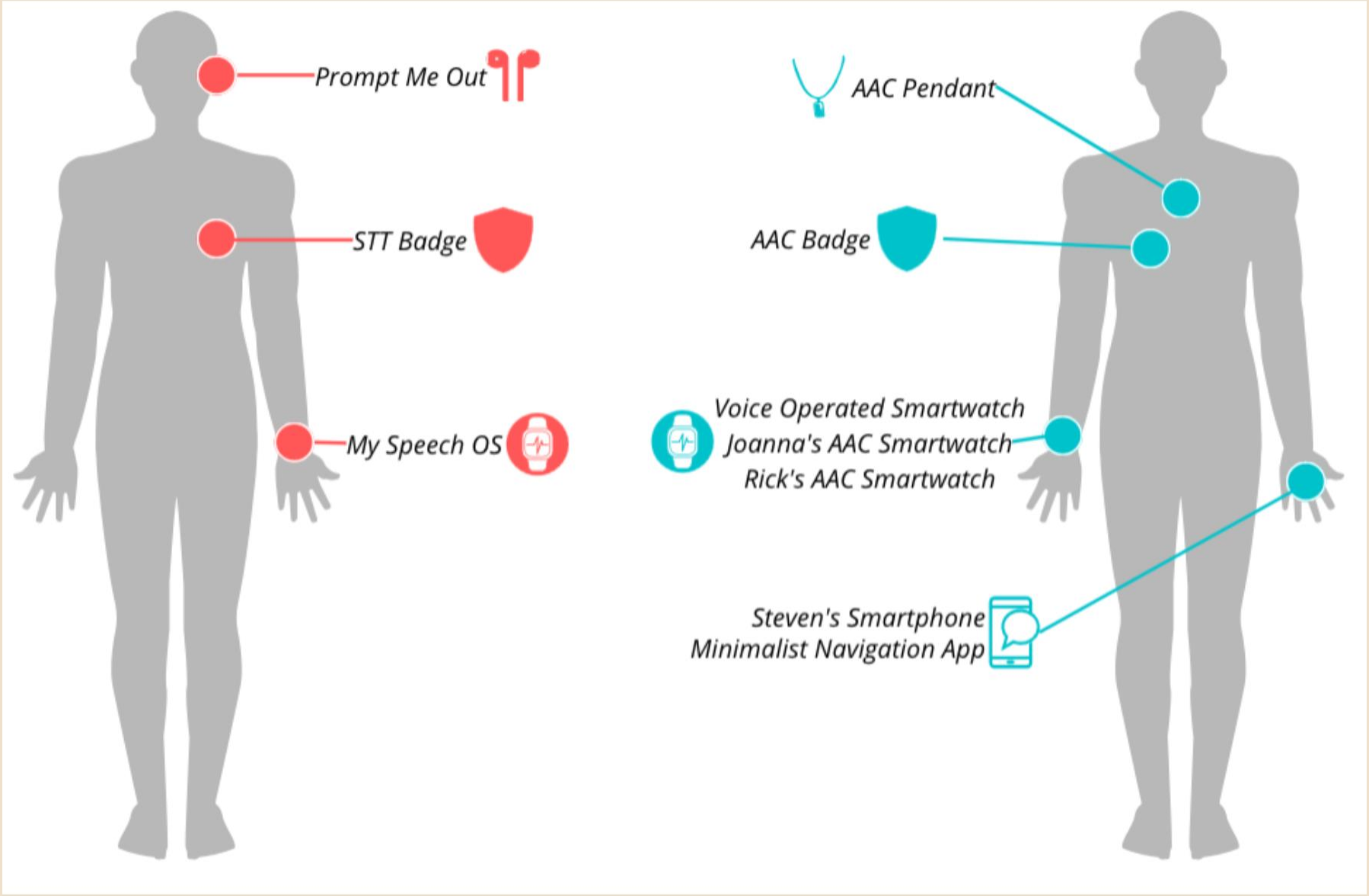
PTS

ed computing → Accessibility technologies.

and Augmentative Communication, Accessibility,
rable Devices, Focus Groups

1 INTRODUCTION

With an ageing Western population and increas
disabilities – there are greater numbers of ind
who live with complex communication needs (C
can be onset from a wide range of developmen
generative conditions including populations tha
hearing (DHH), have autism spectrum disorde
developmental disabilities (IDD), motor impai
tive impairments such as dementia and languag
as aphasia. People living with CCNs are at a s
risk of employment challenges [63], reduced ed
social isolation [46], emotional distress [12] an
ditionally, people with CCNs could face barriers
and language therapy as global health systems
sure and unrelenting service demands [18, 30, 4
and alternative communication (AAC) encaps
strategies, techniques, and tools that support in
in expressing thoughts, desires, feelings, and
search has even found that people with CCNs
high-tech AAC to support their communicati
dependently [35, 72]. Yet overall, adoption o
low amongst many communities with CCNs
quent investigations have established compli
high-tech AAC interventions – culminating in
and long-term abandonment [55, 76]. Some o
include: the inability of high-tech AAC devices


Prompt Me Out
STT Badge
My Speech OS
AAC Pendant
AAC Badge
Voice Operated Smartwatch
Joanna's AAC Smartwatch
Rick's AAC Smartwatch
Steven's Smartphone
Minimalist Navigation App


CRYSTAL PALACE
THE EAGLES
APHASIA
CRYSTAL PALACE
THE EAGLES
APHASIA

Watch Your Language

Using Smartwatches to Support Communication

In The 25th International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility (ASSETS '23), October 22-25, 2023, New York, NY, USA. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 21 pages.

https://doi.org/10.1145/3597638.3608379

Watch Your Language: Using Smartwatches To Support Communication

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opulation and increased prevalence of people liv-
k communication needs there is a growing need
high-tech augmentative and alternative commu-
pps to support agency and social participation.
s currently difficult to regulate the prominence of
high-tech AAC devices and tablet-based apps –
conspicuous, offer poor portability, are aesthetic-
ed, and obstruct vital non-verbal communication
ponse to this, we leverage participatory design
ign and evaluate two discreet and inconspicuous
apps. We engage with a community of people
anguage impairment aphasia, to collaboratively
oth a smartwatch app for 'public' communication:
rivate' cognitive support: *Watch In*. Following this,
apps during an experience prototyping work-
r and subsequent focus group. We report results
tion interactions with both apps, interviews and
ses. Participants were not only successful in us-
nartwatch apps but, critically, the wearable and
ion did not restrict users' agency and non-verbal

PTS

red computing → Accessibility technologies.

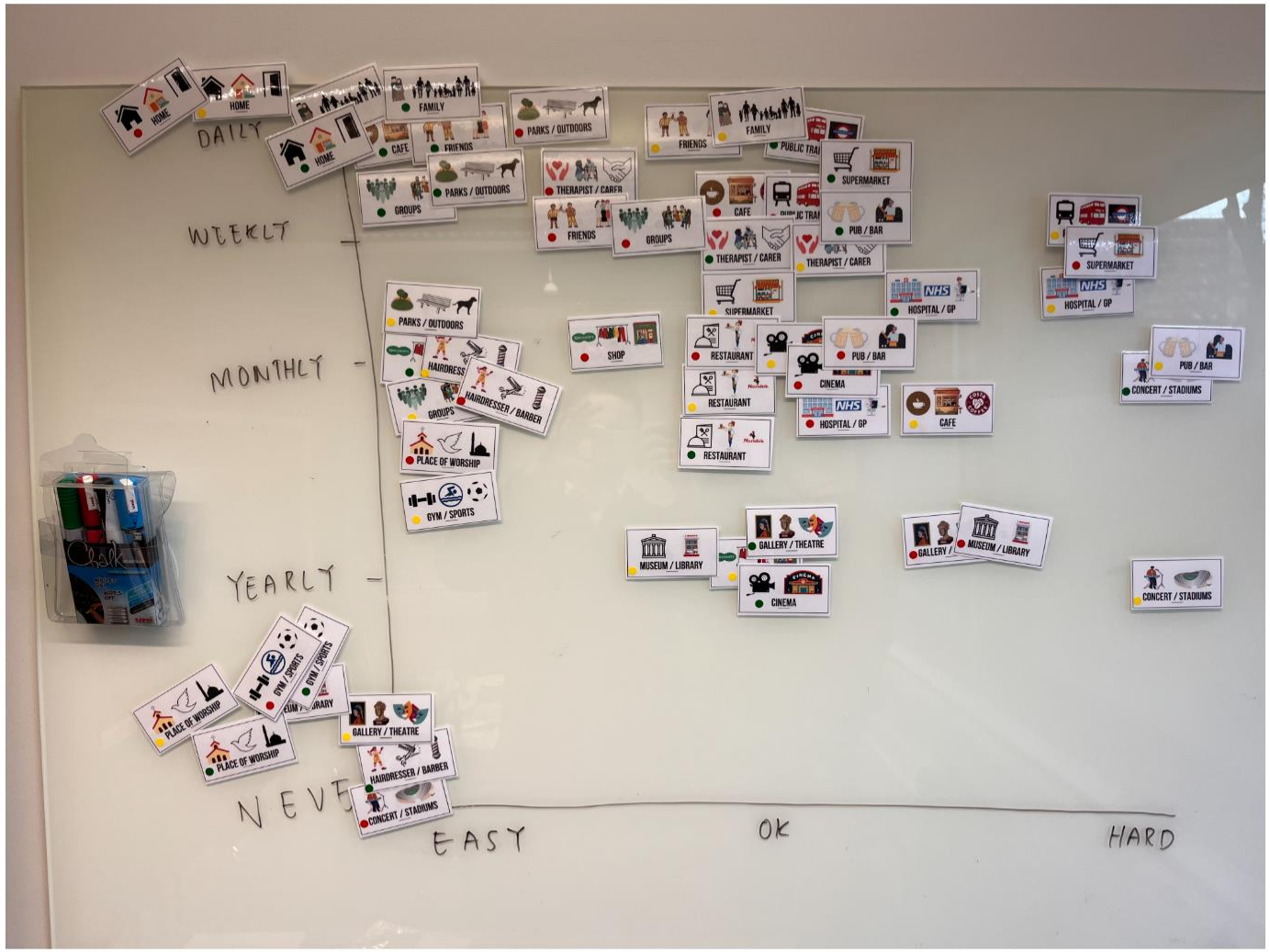
AC, Alternative and Augmentative Communica-
, Discreet and Wearable Devices

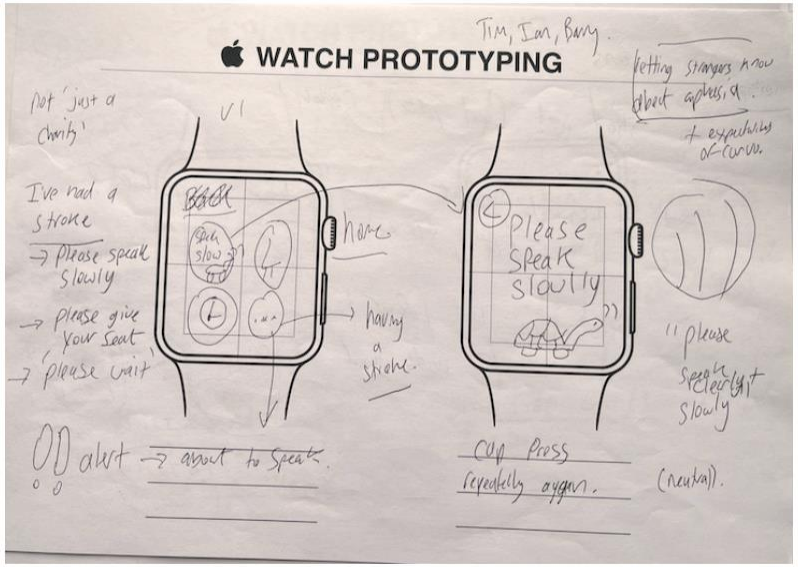
ormat:
nd Timothy Neate. 2023. Watch Your Language: Using
upport Communication. In *The 25th International ACM*
nce on Computers and Accessibility (ASSETS '23), October
rk, NY, USA. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 21 pages. https:
597638.3608379

1 INTRODUCTION

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC
diverse range of tools, strategies and techniques to s
als with complex communication needs (CCNs) in se
56]. Yet, adoption of AAC remains low and aban
mon [57, 91, 93, 97]. Recent research has highlig
devices detract socially and have the potential to
munication breakdowns [8, 35, 62]. Key AAC desig
include that they are not intuitive to use[1], too lar
prominent[2] [73]. Instead, AAC device design has
focused on accurately outputting verbal dialogu
unambiguous communication exchanges[3] [9, 35,
argue that there is undeniably more nuance and an
strictly *accurate* speech when communicating in
most AAC devices fail to support non-verbal comm
ways [33–35, 75], which make up a vital part of com
Consequently, our work considers the importance
nication, which people with CCNs already leverag
communicate[4] [75]. This expansionist framing of co
rarely considered in the design of AAC and perhap
of the proportionally smaller number of AAC devi
with communities living with CCNs [17, 18].

Against this context, over the last two decades
have become *much* more socially prominent. Estim
that Apple has sold 100 million smartwatches alone
the growing functionality of smartwatches mean
almost as feature-rich as their counterpart smartph
over, smartwatches serve an aesthetic purpose – act
artefacts[5] [64, 69]. Additionally, they are also genera
able at a glance and therefore have the potential to
tial just-in-time support tool for people with CCNs [
a quick-access trigger for existing AAC applicatio
Proloquo2Go now supports a watch companion ap
users to quickly access functionalities of their table
spite these technologies, previous work has not co
smartwatch apps *directly* with communities with


DAILY
WEEKLY
MONTHLY
YEARLY
NEVER
EASY
OK
HARD
HOME
FAMILY
FRIENDS
CAFE
PARKS / OUTDOORS
GROUPS
THERAPIST / CARER
SUPERMARKET
PUB / BAR
HOSPITAL / GP
SHOP
RESTAURANT
CINEMA
HAIRDRESS
HAIRDRESSER / BARBER
PLACE OF WORSHIP
GYM / SPORTS
GALLERY / THEATRE
MUSEUM / LIBRARY
CONCERT / STADIUMS


WATCH PROTOTYPING
Tim, Ian, Barry.
Not 'just a charity'
I've had a stroke
→ Please speak slowly
→ please give your seat
→ 'please wait'
V1
Please speak slowly
having a stroke.
"please speak clearly + slowly
Od alert → about to speak.
Cup press repeatedly again.
(neutral).


60% IN 30DAYS
15°
SPOTIFY
248 • 28 • 06

*Patrick described the smartwatch as **"a really good safety net"** that gave him **"confidence to fall back onto it"** if his fluency dropped.*

(a)

Patrick: Hello! [waves hand]

Actor: Hi!

(b)

Patrick: Err… [Hits buzzer on display to draw attention]

(c)

Patrick: [Shows Actor *Could you please let me have your seat?* expression]

Actor: Okay!

(d)

Patrick: Thank you [with a thumbs up gesture]

(e)

Patrick: Thank you! [Repeating]

Actor: Thanks!

Breaking Badge

Augmenting Communication with Wearable AAC Smartbadges and Displays

In Proceedings of the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '24), May 11-16, 2024, Honolulu, HI, USA. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 25 pages.

https://doi.org/10.1145/3613904.3642327

Breaking Badge: Augmenting Communication with Wearable AAC Smartbadges and Displays

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ith complex communication needs employ multi-
s to communicate including: limited speech, par-
n-verbal communication and leveraging low-tech
er, most augmentative and alternative communi-
terventions undermine end-users' agency by ob-
intuitive communication pathways. In this paper,
ith 19 people living with the language impairment
ng contextual communication challenges, before
totyping and wireframing wearable AAC displays.
culminated in two low-input wearable AAC pro-
tead, scaffold users' pre-existing communication
the *InkTalker* is a low-power and affordable eInk
e designed to discreetly reveal invisible disabilities
communication prop. Secondly, *WalkieTalkie* is a
pp that converts smartphones into a feature-rich
perable via multimodal input/outputs. We offer
munication interactions with both devices, discus-
ack responses. Participants used both AAC devices
ntly socialise with others and augment pre-existing
abilities.

EPTS

ered computing → Accessibility technologies.

S

e and Augmentative Communication, Accessibility,
earable Devices, Smart badges

Format:

Ying Hei Lau, and Timothy Neate. 2024. Breaking Badge:
munication with Wearable AAC Smartbadges and Dis-
gs of the CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing

1 INTRODUCTION

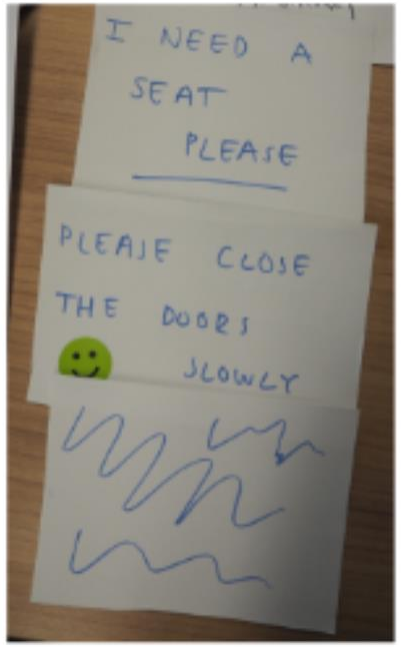
People with complex communication needs (CCN)
tative and alternative communication (AAC) syster
support their evolving communication abilities [3
for AAC will likely increase as people living wi
more common due to increased incidence of disabil
global population increasing likelihood of stroke [
commonly, AAC device input includes mechanical (
tile (i.e., capacitive touchscreen), eye-gaze and brai
faces (BCIs), for audio output with the device gen
aloud using a synthetic voice [17, 26, 89]. Alth
non-verbal people living with CCN, the interactio
stream AAC technology often fails to *embrace* ar
mally verbal users' pre-existing communication s

Specifically, AAC devices typically detract fron
and faster multimodal communication pathways
of: natural voice (i.e., paralinguistics) [65], access t
guage through natural speech building blocks [90
communication (i.e., gestures, facial expression,
appearance) [41] and total communication[1] [78
many pre-existing AAC technologies face low ra
adoption across many communities [65, 98] and hi
donment [6, 59]. Other identified problems wit
tions includes: slow communication rates [31, 65
expression [98, 99], high learning demands [39
difficulties [41, 42], limited agency [50, 54, 94] an
from prominent form-factors [18].

In light of this, Bircanin et al. [6], has advocat
tech AAC interventions and Pullin [76] has calle
terdisciplinary AAC research to improve AAC ex
teraction possibilities. Therefore, in this paper, we
contribution to explore badge form-factors to supp
ically, we co-design directly with communities l
The design of two wearable AAC prototypes take a

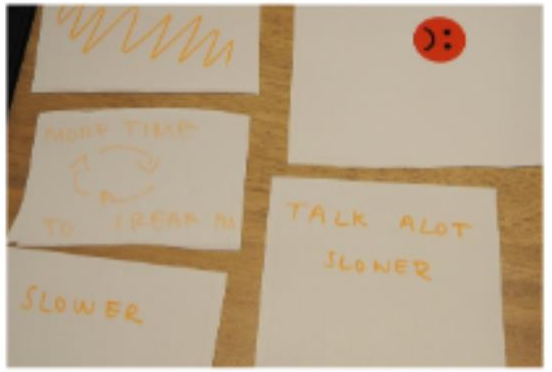
AAC jumper

Shh! Smartbadge



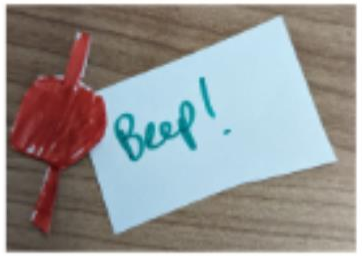
Cross-device smartbadge

Attachable smartbadge AAC



Speed-aware AAC

AAC bell



AAC smart ring

Smartwatch AAC

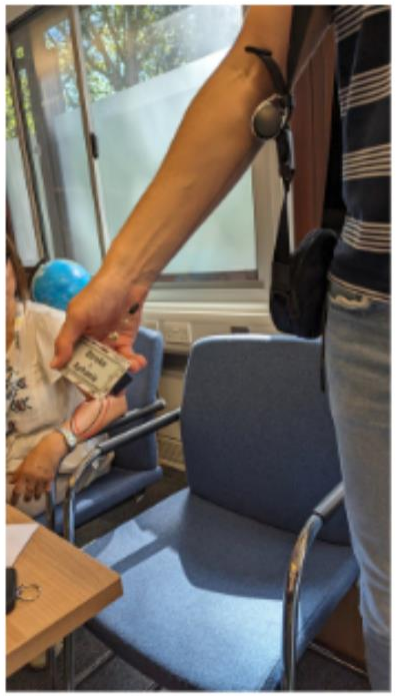
Image-based AAC

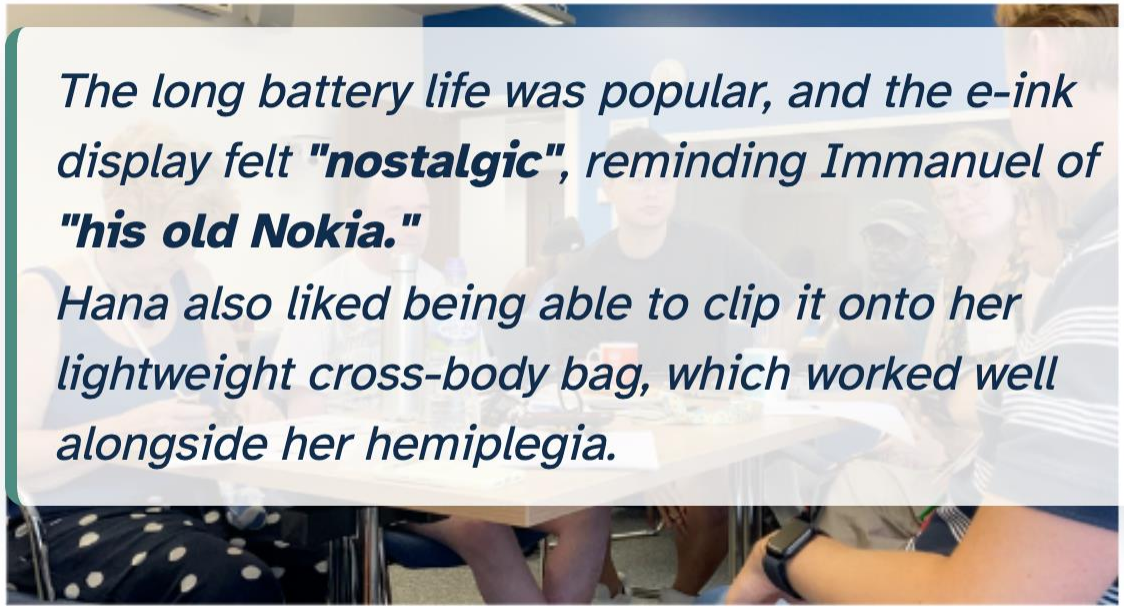
AAC lanyard display

Interdependent AAC

AAC smartbadge displays for ordering coffee


Text to speech functionality





*The long battery life was popular, and the e-ink display felt **"nostalgic"**, reminding Immanuel of **"his old Nokia."***

Hana also liked being able to clip it onto her lightweight cross-body bag, which worked well alongside her hemiplegia.

Looking Past Screens

Exploring Mixed Reality and Discreet AAC

In Proceedings of the 26th International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility (ASSETS '24), October 22-25, 2024, St John's, Newfoundland, Canada. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 22 pages.

https://doi.org/10.1145/3663548.3675655

Looking Past Screens:
Exploring Mixed Reality and Discreet AAC Devices

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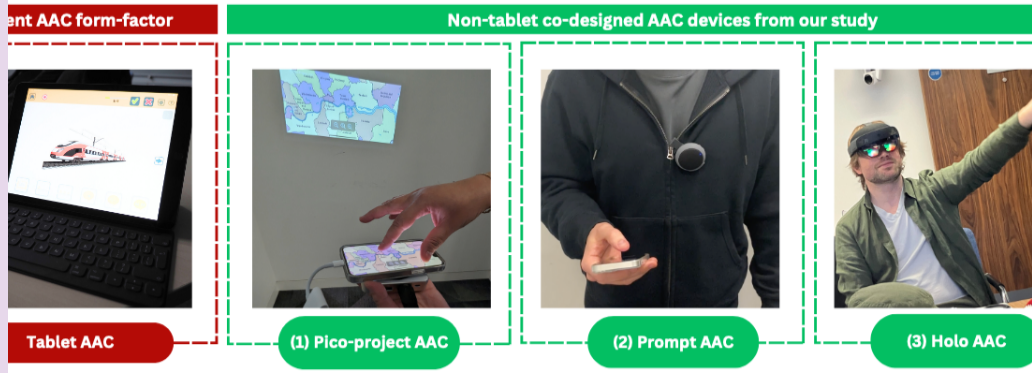


m left, mainstream tablet-based AAC device photographed at the clinic on iPad versus AAC device fo in our study: (1) Pico-project AAC, (2) Prompt AAC and (3) Holo AAC.

and alternative communication (AAC) technologies ixed-form factor mobile devices, which can be physi- e and visually identifiable – perpetuating public stig- ing non-verbal communication. These qualities are or many AAC-using communities including stroke o can have complex communication needs onset by emiplegic body paralysis. Furthermore, underrepre- nities such as people with aphasia are often uncon- design of emerging technologies. We contest these ing what these emerging and future technologies or communication support. To do this, we envision mixed reality and discreet assistive technologies that unication with people living with aphasia. We report

results from the co-design process, including participar tives on nascent mixed reality, diegetic technologies, ar from low-fidelity AAC prototyping. These activities in three high-fidelity prototypes with different charact form-factors: *Pico-project AAC*, *Prompt AAC* and *Holo* embody projection, worn audio devices, and headset d reality. From subsequent focus groups, we present findi evaluation of all prototypes, reflecting on the possibiliti and future mixed-reality technologies to augment com

CCS Concepts

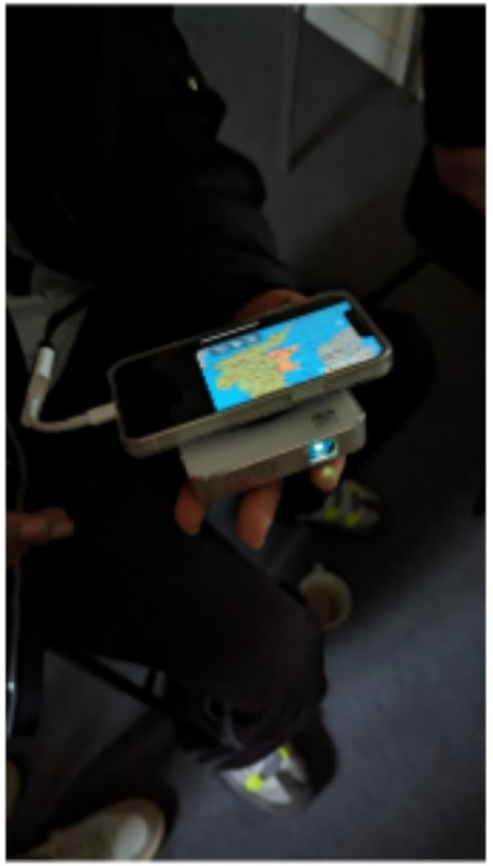
• **Human-centered computing → Accessibility te**

Keywords

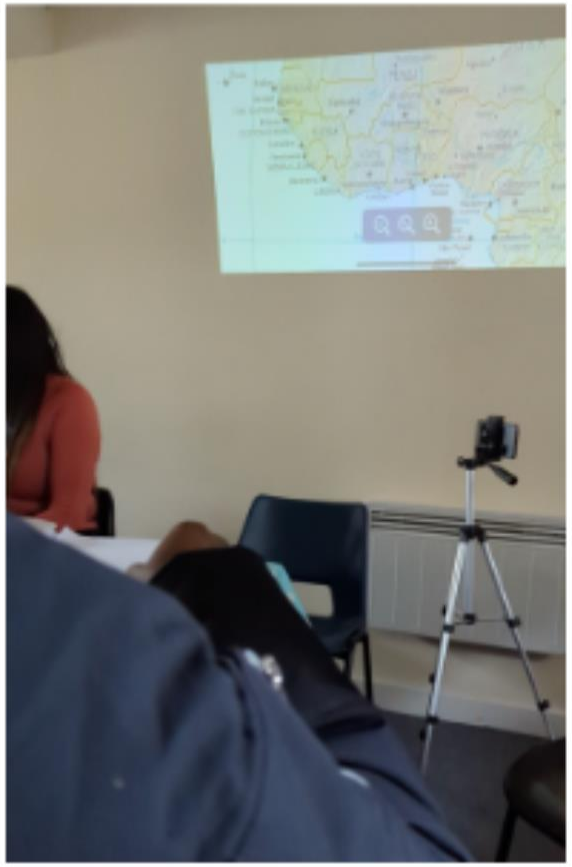
Mixed Reality, Pico Projection, AAC, Alternative and Au


Pico Project AAC
LOCAL MAPS
TFL Tube Map
London Boroughs
Map of the British Isles
CONTINENTS
Map of Africa
Map of Asia

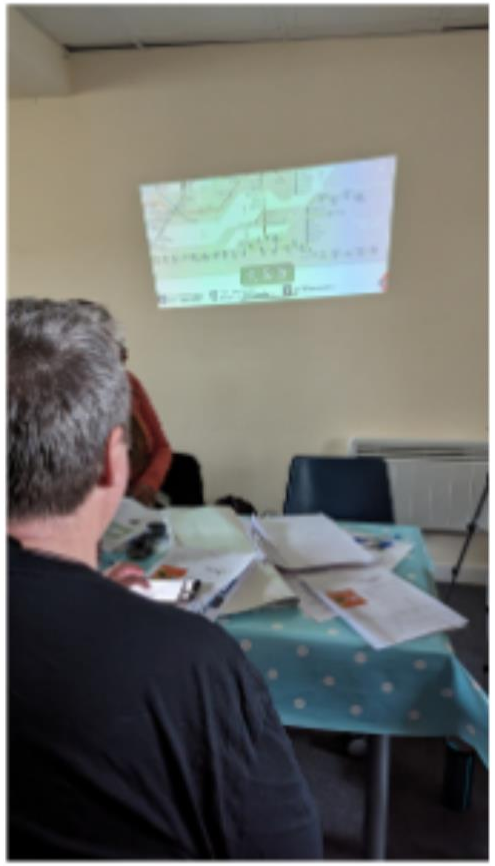
Pico-project AAC in-use



Chat about holiday in Accra

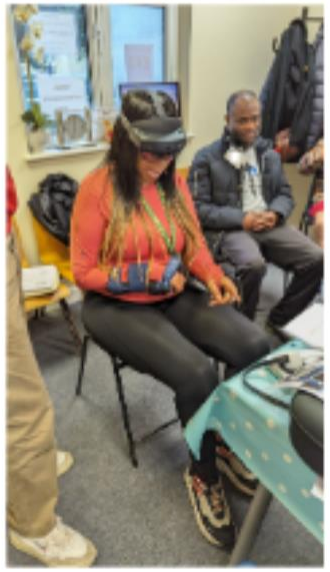


Tube commute discussion



Projected chair request

Participants with hemiplegia test Holo AAC Near Menu

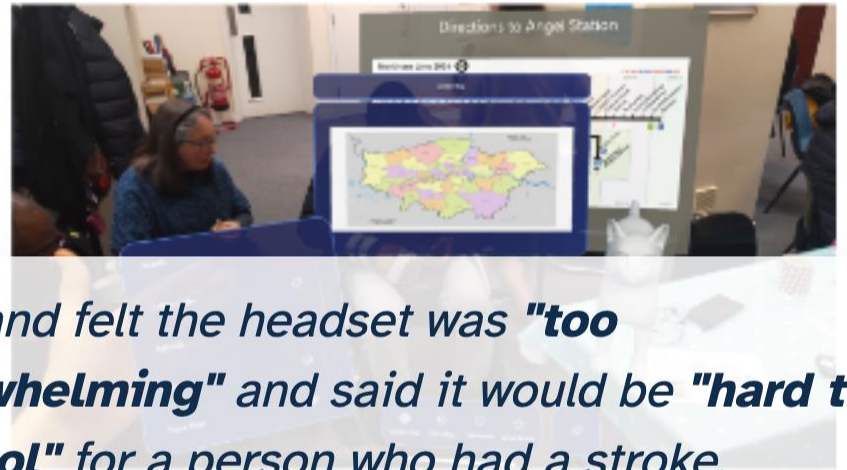


Testing Hand Menu

Holo AAC beverage symbols, Hand Menu, Tube Map, London Map and Near Menu deployed

Participant with hemiplegia tests scalable London Map

Testing map based interaction



Holo AAC Hand Menu, London Map, Tube Map, Near Menu and cat deployed

*Rowland felt the headset was **"too overwhelming"** and said it would be **"hard to control"** for a person who had a stroke.*

An Old Bastard in Bright Orange Satin

Zuzenna's Aphasia Diary

In Proceedings of the 27th International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility (ASSETS '25), October 26-29, 2025, Denver, CO, USA. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 20 pages.

https://doi.org/10.1145/3663547.3746369

ASSETS 2025

**From left: Zuzenna's light-blue diary cover inscribed, *'Time to fill this book with plans and dreams. Or d*
g artwork – a colorful tissue-paper piece embodying her stroke experience. Finally, a still from Part 3's vid
showing Zuzenna expressing herself while pointing to her diary pages.

ld Bastard in Bright Orange Satin!": Zuzenna's Aphasia

And Lessons Learned from DIY Augmentative and Alternative Communication

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l abandonment continues to hinder the long-term adop-
nentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices
munities living with aphasia. Challenges with AAC are
ranging from poor personalization and stigma to pro-
ts. Critics argue that many AAC tools reflect top-down,
l models shaped by ableist assumptions and commercial
response, this paper presents bottom-up perspectives
-month qualitative study of Zuzenna's DIY AAC: a self-
unication diary. Far from a prescribed device, her diary
, organically evolving tool that empowers her daily life
y after stroke. We offer a re-imagining of AAC design
lived experience, highlighting how future tools might:
enuine communion through share-ability, (b) uphold
empowering self-expression, (c) value personal labour
t growth. Zuzenna's diary reveals that AAC does not
techno-centric or expensive to be powerful – it just
personal.

ncepts

centered computing → Accessibility technologies.

Keywords

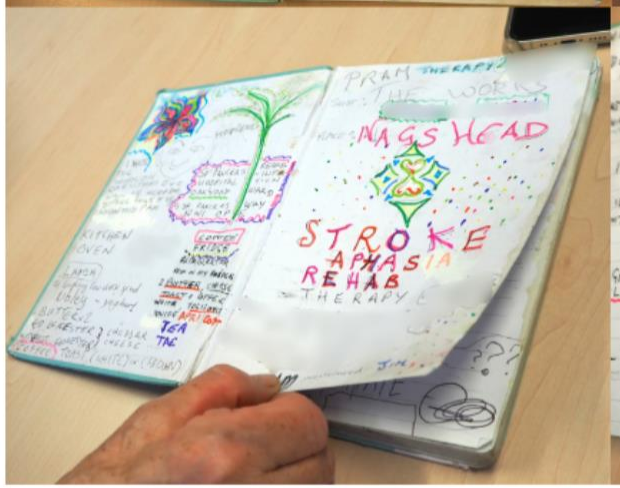
Assistive Technology, Accessibility, Aphasia, AAC, A
Augmentative Communication, DIY, Single-Subject, E

ACM Reference Format:
Humphrey Curtis, Filip Bircanin, and Timothy Neate. 2025.
in Bright Orange Satin!": Zuzenna's Aphasia Diary : And L
from DIY Augmentative and Alternative Communication.
ternational ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers a
(ASSETS '25), October 26–29, 2025, Denver, CO, USA. ACM,
USA, 20 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/3663547.3746369

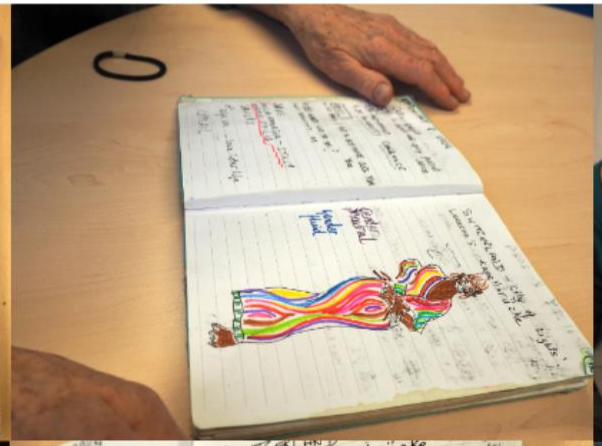
1 Introduction

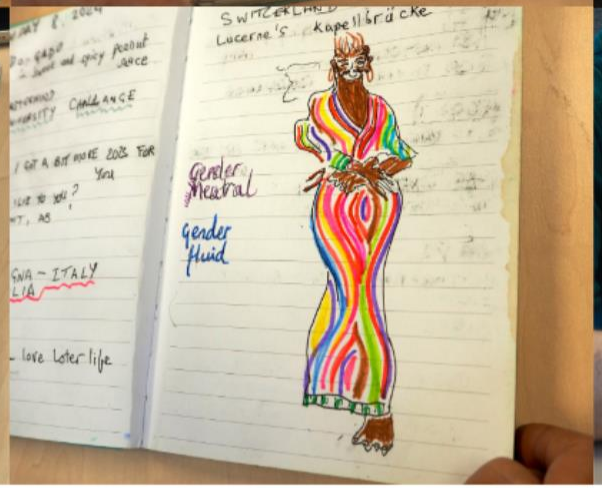
Aphasia is an acquired language impairment and di
commonly caused by a stroke later in life [7]. Aphas
profound social and psychological challenges; as str
Debra Meyerson writes, *"since so much of our identity*
through our social relationships, which rely so heavily
aphasia can obliterate that feeling of belonging" [50, 6
tive and alternative communication (AAC) technolog
prescribed as scalable interventions, which can enha
munication abilities and quality of life of people livi
sia [51]. AAC encompasses a spectrum of tools and te
supplement or replace the language of people living

Doodles

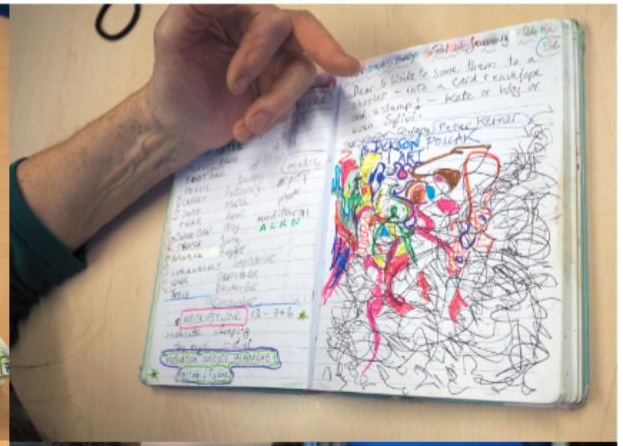


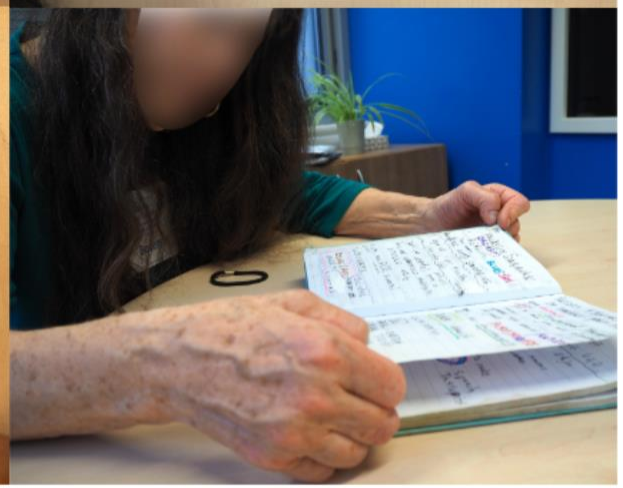
India travel sketches





Jackson Pollock themed





Sequence of actions as Zuzenna flips through diary pages

Pages 5-6 Zuzenna coffee order & keywords

Yellow sticky note of preferred coffee order

Reminder of names

Notable place-names

Months of the year

Discussion & contributions

- We re-frame AAC as **embodied, multimodal and co-constructed**
- Expand the design space through **wearable and discreet AAC**
- Show that **confidence, discretion, non-verbal communication and partner-awareness** matter in everyday use
- Demonstrate that people with aphasia can shape technology through **accessible co-design**

Gareth Jones, 1959-2026

Thank you

Questions?

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With thanks to the people with aphasia who shaped this work, Aphasia Re-Connect, collaborators, and King's College London.

Link to full thesis