

## INTRUSIVE NARRATIVES: MENTAL HEALTH AND DISCOURSE PATTERNS IN “TURTLE ALL THE WAY DOWN”

<sup>1</sup>, Rika Virtianti, Ria Yuliasari <sup>2</sup>, Ferdias Prihatna Sari <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>, Program Studi Manajemen, Fakultas Ekonomi dan Bisnis, Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika, Jakarta, 10410, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> Program Studi Teknologi Informasi, Fakultas Teknik dan Informatika, Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika, Jakarta, 10410, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup> Program Studi Manajemen, Fakultas Ekonomi dan Bisnis, Universitas Bina Sarana Informatika

<sup>1</sup> [rika.rvi@bsi.ac.id](mailto:rika.rvi@bsi.ac.id), <sup>2</sup> [ria.rys@bsi.ac.id](mailto:ria.rys@bsi.ac.id), <sup>3</sup> [ferdias.fps@bsi.ac.id](mailto:ferdias.fps@bsi.ac.id)

Received 2025-11-01; Revised 2025-12-02; Accepted 2025-12-10

### ABSTRAK

*Penelitian ini membahas representasi linguistik dari pikiran intrusif dalam film *Turtles All the Way Down*, dengan fokus pada bagaimana bahasa merefleksikan pengalaman tokoh utama, Aza Holmes, yang mengalami gangguan obsesif-kompulsif (OCD). Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengidentifikasi bagaimana pengulangan (repetition), interupsi (interruption), dan metafora (metaphor) berfungsi sebagai penanda linguistik dari kecemasan dan fragmentasi diri. Metode yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan menganalisis dialog dan monolog batin yang dipilih dari naskah film, menggunakan kerangka analisis wacana James Paul Gee yang memandang bahasa sebagai bentuk tindakan sosial dan konstruksi identitas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengulangan menggambarkan siklus pikiran kompulsif Aza, interupsi merefleksikan gangguan kecemasan dalam interaksi sosial, dan metafora—terutama yang berkaitan dengan bakteri, infeksi, dan parasit—menjadi sarana untuk mengeksternalisasi rasa takut dan kehilangan kendali. Fitur-fitur linguistik tersebut mengungkap ketegangan antara wacana internal dan interaksi sosial Aza. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa *Turtles All the Way Down* merepresentasikan OCD tidak hanya sebagai kondisi psikologis, tetapi juga sebagai pengalaman wacana, di mana bahasa berperan sebagai gejala sekaligus sarana pemulihan.*

**Kata kunci:** narasi intrusif, kesehatan mental, pola wacana

### ABSTRACT

This study explores the linguistic representation of intrusive thoughts in the film *Turtles All the Way Down*, focusing on how language reflects the main character Aza Holmes's experience of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). The research aims to identify how repetition, interruption, and metaphor function as linguistic signs of anxiety and self-fragmentation. Using a qualitative descriptive method, selected dialogues and inner monologues from the film script were analyzed through James Paul Gee's discourse analysis framework, which views language as a form of social action and identity construction. The findings show that repetition expresses Aza's compulsive thought cycles, interruption reflects the intrusion of anxiety into social communication, and metaphor—particularly those involving bacteria, infection, and parasites—externalizes her fear and loss of control. These linguistic features reveal a constant tension between Aza's inner discourse and her outward social interaction. The study concludes that *Turtles All the Way Down* portrays OCD not only as a psychological condition but also as a discursive experience, where language becomes both a symptom and a means of recovery.

**Keywords:** intrusive narrative, mental health, discourse pattern

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, awareness of mental health has increased significantly. Across the world, people have become more open about discussing emotional well-being, psychological struggles, and the importance of mental resilience. This global awareness has also influenced the creative industry. Films, novels, and music increasingly address mental health issues, helping to normalize conversations and reduce stigma.

The *World Mental Health Report* by the World Health Organization emphasizes that “*mental health is critically important to everyone, everywhere*” and that although “*mental health needs are high, responses are insufficient and inadequate*” (World Health Organization, 2022). This highlights the importance of understanding mental health not only from a medical perspective but also as a social and cultural concern—one that can be communicated and reflected through artistic works.

Scholars such as (Wahl, 2021) have noted that while awareness is growing, many media portrayals of mental illness remain inaccurate or sensationalized. Wahl explains that “*mental illness is still frequently presented as violent, unpredictable, and hopeless,*” which can perpetuate stigma and misunderstanding (p. 4). However, more recent creative works have begun to challenge these old patterns, portraying mental health with authenticity and empathy.

One such film is *Turtles All the Way Down* (2024), directed by Hannah Marks and adapted from John Green’s novel. The story follows Aza Holmes, a teenage girl living with obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD), whose intrusive thoughts shape her perception, emotions, and communication. (Foundation, 2024) praises the film for its accurate and compassionate portrayal of OCD, noting that it “*captures obsessional thoughts, fears, and images using powerful visual and audio effects*” that allow audiences to “*see her visualizations and experience her anguish.*” Such authentic representation invites a closer linguistic exploration of how the film translates the inner experience of mental illness into words and dialogue.

Because language mirrors thought, studying how mental health is represented linguistically can offer deep insight into the lived experience of psychological distress. In *Turtles All the Way Down*, Aza's internal monologue reveals the rhythm and repetition of intrusive thoughts, while her spoken dialogues expose the tension between private anxiety and social connection. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the film from a linguistic perspective by answering the following questions:

1. How are intrusive thoughts linguistically represented in the film?
2. What discourse patterns illustrate the tension between inner thought and social interaction?

### **Definition of Intrusive Narratives**

The term intrusive narratives in this study builds upon psychological and linguistic research on *intrusive thinking* and *intrusive thoughts*. In psychology, intrusive thoughts are often described as involuntary mental events that disrupt the normal flow of cognition. (Kalivas, P. W., Gourley, S. L., & Paulus, 2023) define *intrusive thinking* as “any distinct, identifiable cognitive event that is unwanted, unintended, and recurrent. It interrupts the flow of thought, interferes in task performance, is associated with negative affect, and is difficult to control” (p. 2). This definition highlights the repetitive and uncontrollable nature of such thoughts, which frequently cause distress or anxiety.

(Hinuma, S., Ogishima, H., Shimada, H., Tanaka, Y., Osao, M., Moriishi, C., & Obata, 2025) provide a similar definition, stating that “*intrusive thoughts are thoughts that arise independently of intention and are difficult to control*” (p. 1). They further note that while intrusive thoughts are commonly linked to obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD), they can also occur in individuals without clinical diagnoses, illustrating that intrusiveness is a broader cognitive phenomenon.

From a clinical perspective, (Systematic Review, 2023) describes obsessions in OCD as “*frequent, persistent, intrusive, unwanted thoughts that provoke anxiety and distress and lead to attempts to neutralize them with either thoughts or actions.*” This

reinforces the idea that intrusive thinking involves both cognitive and emotional components that disrupt a person's internal balance.

Drawing from these psychological foundations, intrusive narratives can be understood as narrative or discursive forms in which such thoughts are linguistically and structurally represented. They are characterized by recurrence, unwantedness, and interruptive quality—appearing in the narrative as repetitive inner monologues, circular reasoning, self-address, or metaphors that depict anxiety and loss of control. In film and literature, intrusive narratives transform private cognitive disturbance into shared linguistic experience, allowing audiences to perceive the rhythm and persistence of intrusive thought through language.

### **Definition of Mental Health**

The term mental health encompasses more than the absence of mental disorders—it includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being. The (World Health Organization, 2022) defines mental health as *“a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.”* This definition emphasizes functionality and resilience, portraying mental health as an essential component of overall health rather than a separate or secondary condition.

In recent years, scholars have highlighted that mental health must be understood not only from a clinical perspective but also as a social and discursive construct. (Zayts-Spence, O., Edmonds, D., & Fortune, 2023) argue that *“mental health discourse is a dynamic site where meanings are constantly negotiated,”* suggesting that language plays a crucial role in shaping how societies perceive and respond to mental health challenges. (Kotera, Y., & Sheffield, 2022) emphasize that mental health awareness is strengthened when communication is open and inclusive, allowing individuals to articulate their emotions without fear of stigma.

Furthermore, the (World Health Organization, 2023) stresses the global urgency of addressing mental health issues, noting that *“one in eight people worldwide live with*

*a mental disorder,*” and calling for integrated strategies that combine prevention, care, and community support. This growing awareness has inspired scholars and creators alike to portray mental health experiences in art and media as part of a collective conversation about identity, emotion, and humanity.

From a linguistic perspective, the study of mental health also involves examining how it is represented through language. Language is both a medium and a mirror—it shapes perception, expresses emotion, and constructs meaning around psychological states. Therefore, mental health is not only a medical reality but also a communicative one: it lives in how individuals talk about distress, recovery, and resilience.

### **Definition of Discourse Patterns**

The concept of discourse patterns refers to the recurring structures, features, and strategies through which language is organized in communication. Discourse patterns can include repetition, metaphor, turn-taking, pauses, or thematic consistency that reveal how meaning is produced in spoken or written texts. According to (Schiffrin, 2022) discourse patterns are *“the observable regularities in language use that reflect how speakers construct coherence, manage interaction, and convey social meaning.”* This means that beyond individual words or sentences, patterns of discourse show how ideas, emotions, and relationships are expressed linguistically.

Recent studies have connected discourse patterns to identity and psychological states. (Gee, 2023) explains that *“discourse is not merely language in use; it is language plus social practices that enact and recognize particular identities and ways of being.”* This perspective suggests that when individuals experience mental distress, their discourse patterns—such as hesitation, self-correction, or fragmented speech—can signal internal conflict or emotional struggle.

In mental health discourse, certain patterns are particularly revealing. (Kotera, Y., McEwan, K., & Sheffield, 2025) note that discourse features like silence, repetition,

and metaphor often “*serve as linguistic indicators of psychological tension and recovery narratives.*” These features reflect not only the speaker’s emotional state but also how they construct meaning around their experiences. In this sense, studying discourse patterns provides insight into how people articulate, manage, and sometimes conceal mental distress through language.

Therefore, in this study, discourse patterns are understood as the recurring linguistic forms and structures—such as repetition, metaphor, hesitation, and self-repair—that reveal the interaction between inner thought and outward communication. They are central to analyzing how *Turtles All the Way Down* (2024) portrays the struggle between intrusive inner dialogue and social interaction through its characters’ speech and narration.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design with a focus on discourse analysis. The qualitative approach is chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of language use, meaning construction, and psychological expression within a film narrative. As (Creswell, J. W., & Poth, 2023) note, “*qualitative research explores and understands the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem*” (p. 4). In this context, the problem concerns how intrusive thoughts and mental health experiences are expressed linguistically in *Turtles All the Way Down* (2024).

A descriptive qualitative design is appropriate for this study because it seeks to describe, interpret, and explain how mental health issues—particularly obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)—are represented through language and discourse. The purpose is not to measure or quantify, but to uncover the patterns and functions of language that reflect the protagonist’s internal struggles.

The study applies discourse analysis as its primary analytical framework.

Discourse analysis examines how language constructs meaning in social and psychological contexts. According to (Gee, 2023), “*discourse analysis investigates how language-in-use creates and reflects the social identities and relationships of those involved.*” In film studies, this approach allows researchers to interpret how dialogue, monologue, and narration reveal psychological depth and character identity.

The analysis also draws upon elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to understand the relationship between inner discourse and social interaction. (Kotera, Y., McEwan, K., & Sheffield, 2025) emphasize that CDA can be used in mental-health research to identify “*how power, stigma, and emotional recovery are linguistically encoded.*” By combining discourse analysis with CDA principles, this research aims to interpret both the linguistic forms and the psychological implications of the language used in the film.

Through this design, the study seeks to uncover how intrusive thoughts are linguistically represented and what discourse patterns illustrate the tension between inner thought and social interaction, aligning directly with the stated research questions.

### **Research Object and Subject**

The object of this research is the linguistic representation of intrusive thoughts and the discourse patterns that illustrate the relationship between mental health and language in the film *Turtles All the Way Down* (2024). Specifically, the study examines how intrusive thoughts, obsessive language, and internal dialogues are linguistically constructed through the film’s narrative and character speech. The focus is on how language reflects mental processes—particularly those associated with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)—and how it conveys emotional tension between inner thought and social communication.

The subject of this research is the main character, Aza Holmes, a teenage girl who struggles with OCD. Her internal monologues, conversations, and self-reflective expressions serve as the primary linguistic data for this study. Aza’s speech patterns,

interruptions, repetitions, and metaphors are analyzed to identify how intrusive thoughts are linguistically realized and how these patterns represent her psychological state.

By focusing on Aza Holmes's discourse, this study explores the intersection between language and psychology, showing how linguistic patterns can reveal the cognitive and emotional dimensions of mental health in modern media.

## **Data Sources**

This study uses both primary and secondary data sources to support the analysis of language, discourse, and mental health representation in the film *Turtles All the Way Down* (2024).

### **1. Primary Data**

The primary data of this study consist of linguistic elements found in the film *Turtles All the Way Down* (2024), directed by Hannah Marks and adapted from John Green's novel of the same title. These elements include:

- Dialogues and inner monologues spoken by the main character, Aza Holmes, as presented in the film's official script and subtitles.
- Narrative sequences where intrusive thoughts, obsessive language, or repeated patterns of speech occur.
- Interactions between Aza and other characters that demonstrate the contrast between her internal thought processes and external communication.

The data were drawn from the official film script (see *Turtles All the Way Down*, 2024) and verified against the English subtitles available in the film's digital release. These texts serve as the main linguistic material for identifying discourse patterns that reflect obsessive and intrusive thinking.

### **2. Secondary Data**

The secondary data include scholarly works, journal articles, and institutional publications related to:

- Mental health and OCD, particularly the nature of intrusive thoughts and anxiety (e.g., Kalivas, Gourley, & Paulus, 2023; Hinuma et al., 2025).
- Linguistic and discourse analysis theories, which provide analytical frameworks for identifying and interpreting discourse patterns (e.g., Gee, 2023; Schiffrin, 2022).
- Film and media studies addressing mental health representation and narrative style (e.g., International OCD Foundation, 2024; Wahl, 2021).

These secondary sources were gathered from reputable academic databases such as *Scopus*, *ScienceDirect*, and *Taylor & Francis Online*, ensuring that all references are credible and up-to-date. They provide the theoretical foundation for analyzing how the film linguistically represents intrusive thoughts and mental distress.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

The data in this research were collected through qualitative textual observation. The researchers watched *Turtles All the Way Down* (2024) several times to identify scenes that show the main character's intrusive thoughts and internal dialogues. The film's script and English subtitles were used to transcribe relevant utterances and monologues spoken by Aza Holmes.

After transcription, the linguistic data were selected and categorized according to indicators of intrusive thought—such as repetition, hesitation, self-repair, and metaphorical expression.

These features were chosen because they reflect how obsessive or intrusive thoughts appear linguistically. To ensure reliability, the collected data were cross-checked by all researchers before analysis.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The data were analyzed using qualitative discourse analysis, which focuses on how language creates meaning and reflects thought patterns. Each selected utterance

was examined to identify recurrent linguistic features—such as repetition, metaphor, and pause—and interpreted according to its function in expressing obsessive or intrusive thinking.

The analysis followed the general steps of qualitative interpretation: data reduction, data classification, and thematic interpretation. These stages helped the researchers uncover how Aza's inner language patterns represent the conflict between thought and communication.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Repetition**

1. Quotation: “And I don’t like the words that you write on your notepad to describe me, but if the shoes fit.”
  - Feature: Repetition + Idiom
  - Interpretation: Aza repeats her dislike of labels but still half-accepts them. This shows her struggle between rejecting the identity of being “mentally ill” and secretly believing it defines her.
  
2. Quotation: “Yeah. Yeah?”
  - Feature: Repetition
  - Interpretation: The short repeated words show her trying to come back to the conversation after drifting into her thoughts. It highlights her constant effort to appear normal while battling distraction and anxiety.
  
3. Quotation: “You need to drain the infection. Drain it and clean it.”
  - Feature: Repetition (imperative)
  - Interpretation: This is her inner voice giving orders. The repeated commands reflect the compulsive part of her OCD—she feels controlled by the need to act out rituals to stop imagined harm.

4. Quotation: “Um, I don’t... I don’t know.”
  - Feature: Interruption + Repetition
  - Interpretation: Her broken sentence mirrors her disrupted thinking. The pauses and repeats show how intrusive thoughts interrupt her ability to speak smoothly or stay present.
  
5. Quotation: “Stop it, you don’t have a fever... You did, you forgot to change it...”
  - Feature: Repetition + Self-dialogue
  - Interpretation: Aza argues with herself in a loop. This shows the constant conflict in her mind—reason against fear—making her thoughts feel like two separate voices fighting for control.
  
6. Quotation: (“This water is teeming with bacteria.”)
  - Feature: Repetition / Metaphor
  - Interpretation: She repeats the same contamination idea to calm herself. Saying it again gives her fear a shape — but also traps her in the same obsessive loop.
  
7. Quotation: (“You’re sweating, and everyone can tell you’re sweating. They probably think you’re just a sweaty freak.”)
  - Feature: Repetition (self-directed judgment)
  - Interpretation: Aza repeats harsh thoughts about herself. This shows how her anxiety turns into constant self-criticism. The looping words reflect how she can’t escape her own negative voice.
  
8. Quotation: (“Did you even change the Band-Aid today? Yes, I did. Are you sure?”)
  - Feature: Dialogic repetition (inner conversation)

- Interpretation: Aza talks to herself like two people arguing. This shows her mind split between logic and fear — a sign of obsessive thinking where she can't trust her own memory.
9. Quotation: (“Say something. Anything. Right.”)
- Feature: Repetition (inner command)
  - Interpretation: Aza forces herself to speak in social situations. The repeated order shows her struggle to appear “normal” while fighting her inner panic. Language becomes a way to control her anxiety.
10. Quotation: (“There’s no reason not to change the Band-Aid. Just go change it and be done with it.”)
- Feature: Repetition (imperative loop)
  - Interpretation: Aza gives herself strict instructions. The repeated commands sound like rules — her way to calm the fear, but it also shows how her mind traps her in rituals.
11. Quotation: (“It’s infected. You’re infected. Bacteria are multiplying inside of you right now. Do something. Do something. Do something.”)
- Feature: Repetition (thought spiral)
  - Interpretation: Her fear of infection grows stronger with each repeated phrase. The language mimics a panic attack — fast, urgent, and uncontrollable — showing how her OCD takes over her thoughts completely.
12. Quotation: (“If you kiss him, you’ll get his bacteria in your mouth. His bacteria will make you sick.”)
- Feature: Repetition (of “bacteria”) + intrusive inner voice
  - Interpretation: Her mind repeats the same warning over and over. This repetition shows how her thoughts about germs and infection

control her behavior. It's a clear sign of her OCD taking over her feelings, even in romantic moments.

13. Quotation: "He's cute and smart... He makes me feel like I'm an acceptable girl to have a crush on."

- Feature: Repetition ("and..." / "because...")
- Interpretation:

Aza tries to *explain* her feelings instead of just feeling them. The repeated "and" and "because" make her sound like she's giving reasons for emotions. This shows her anxiety — she needs logic to feel safe. It's how she tries to control her emotions with rational thought.

14. Quotation: "I mean, I'm still crazy if that's what you're asking. Nothing's changed on the crazy front."

- Feature: Repetition + self-labeling metaphor
- Interpretation:

Aza repeats the word "*crazy*" to make fun of it and lessen its power. She's using humor to protect herself from the pain of being labeled. The repetition shows how deeply the label affects her, even as she tries to take control of it.

15. Quotation: "And you said my mind is what makes me, me. But it isn't my mind on the pills. It's a real catch-22, isn't it?"

- Feature: Repetition ("my mind") + metaphor ("catch-22")
- Interpretation:

Aza repeats "my mind" because she's trapped thinking about her own thinking. The "catch-22" metaphor shows how stuck she feels: she needs the pills to feel better, but the pills make her feel less like herself. Her language mirrors this cycle — going in circles, just like her thoughts.

16. Quotation: “His bacteria are joining your bacteria right now... Millions of his organisms are entering your body right now.”

- Feature: Repetition + metaphor
- Interpretation:

Aza repeats the same image again and again, turning a kiss into a picture of infection. The repetition shows how her thoughts spiral out of control, and the bacteria metaphor shows how intimacy feels dangerous to her. Her words mirror her mental loop — she can’t separate closeness from contamination.

17. Quotation: “You’re infected. You need to kill the bacteria now, now, now.”

- Feature: Repetition + command
- Interpretation:

Here Aza’s inner voice takes over and starts ordering her around. The repeated “now” shows her panic rising. Her language shifts from thought to command, as if her mind is controlling her body — a sign of how overpowering her compulsions are.

18. Quotation: “Am I okay?” / “I’m bleeding inside?” / “I can’t stay here, Mom.”

- Feature: Repetitive questioning + negation
- Interpretation:

Aza’s repeated questions don’t ask for answers — they show panic. The rhythm of “I can’t” expresses fear and helplessness. Her words circle the same worry again and again, just like her thoughts do.

19. Quotation: “C.diff is invading your body right now... You can’t. You can’t. You can’t.”

- Feature: Repetition + war-like metaphor
- Interpretation:

Aza describes bacteria as if they’re attacking her, turning her body

into a battlefield. The repeated “you can’t” shows how powerless she feels. Her language performs her fear — every line sounds like she’s losing a fight inside her own mind.

20. Quotation: (“Maybe you could kiss him. It’ll be different. No, no, no. Don’t kiss him. You’ll get sick...”)

- Feature: Repetition + self-argument
- Interpretation:

Aza still argues with herself, repeating warnings that reflect her old intrusive patterns. But this time, she stops herself — the “No, no, no” shows she’s aware of the spiral and can interrupt it. Her language shows progress: she’s beginning to manage her thoughts instead of being controlled by them.

21. Quotation: (“You need to be here for Daisy. You need to be here. You need to be here.”)

- Feature: Repetition (self-command)
- Interpretation:

Aza uses repetition again, but now it serves a different purpose. Earlier, repetition showed panic (“You can’t, you can’t”), but here it becomes a way to stay calm and focused. Her language shifts from fear to strength — she uses the same speech pattern to ground herself. It shows healing through awareness and control of her own voice.

### **Interruption**

1. Quotation: “Okay, thank you. But, please, just stop.”

- Feature: Interruption
- Interpretation: Aza cuts off the therapist to escape discomfort. The interruption shows how overwhelmed she feels by being analyzed and how she tries to regain control when her emotions spike.

2. Quotation: “Um, I don’t... I don’t know.”
  - Feature: Interruption + Repetition
  - Interpretation: Her broken sentence mirrors her disrupted thinking. The pauses and repeats show how intrusive thoughts interrupt her ability to speak smoothly or stay present.
  
3. Quotation: “I gotta go to my locker.”
  - Feature: Interruption
  - Interpretation: Aza suddenly leaves the situation because her inner anxiety takes over. This shows how easily her obsessive thoughts can break her connection with others.
  
4. Quotation: “Could you please row a little gentler, so I don’t get splashed?”
  - Feature: Interruption (control directive)
  - Interpretation: Aza tries to control Daisy’s actions to feel safe. Her language shows how fear turns into control — she manages her anxiety by managing other people’s behavior.
  
5. Quotation: (“The water will get on you, and then it’s only a matter of time before—”)
  - Feature: Interruption (unfinished intrusive thought)
  - Interpretation: The sentence stops mid-thought, showing how her mind cuts off when fear spikes. It’s a glimpse of her inner panic and her effort to stop the thought before it spirals further.
  
6. Quotation: “Does this look infected to you?”
  - Feature: Interruption (seeking reassurance)
  - Interpretation: Aza breaks her silence to ask Daisy for help. This shows how she relies on others to calm her fears, turning private anxiety into a shared, external problem.

## Metaphor

1. Quotation: “Did you know human beings are almost 50% microbial? ... You’re not real. You’re fictional. You’re just a glorified bacterial colony.”
  - Feature: Metaphor
  - Interpretation: The metaphor shows how Aza feels disconnected from herself. She sees her body as something separate and invaded, which reflects her anxiety and dissociation caused by OCD.
  
2. Quotation: “I was thinking it’s not fair that you and every other normal person can know you’re covered in bacteria and not give a shit.”
  - Feature: Metaphor
  - Interpretation: This line shows Aza’s obsession with germs and her frustration at not being able to think like others. Her focus on contamination reveals how trapped she feels in her intrusive thoughts.
  
3. Quotation: “No. I’d kill to be like normal people.”
  - Feature: Hyperbolic Metaphor
  - Interpretation: The exaggeration shows her deep desperation and self-rejection. It highlights how painful her difference feels and how strongly she wishes to be free from her obsessive thoughts.
  
4. Quotation: “That’s your stomach digesting your sandwich... ready to cause infection, ready to cause infection, ready to cause infection.”
  - Feature: Metaphor + Repetition
  - Interpretation: The bacteria metaphor and repeated phrase show how Aza’s thoughts spiral uncontrollably. She feels her own body as dangerous and invaded, revealing the intensity of her OCD fears.

5. Quotation: “I am listening to a cacophony of my digestive tract.”
  - Feature: Metaphor
  - Interpretation: Aza describes her anxiety as “noise,” showing how loud and overwhelming her inner world feels. The line turns her physical sensations into proof of her mental chaos.
  
6. Quotation: “Schopenhauer once said, ‘Man can do what he wills, but cannot will what he wills.’”
  - Feature: Quotation as Metaphor
  - Interpretation: Aza uses philosophy to explain her lack of control. The quote shows her awareness that she can’t “choose” not to have her thoughts, which reflects her deep frustration and helplessness.
  
7. Quotation: “This water has to be like, 50% urine.”
  - Feature: Metaphor (contamination)
  - Interpretation: Aza turns the river into something dirty and dangerous. The exaggeration shows how her mind constantly connects the world with pollution and infection, mirroring her OCD fears.
  
8. Quotation: (“This water is teeming with bacteria.”)
  - Feature: Repetition / Metaphor
  - Interpretation: She repeats the same contamination idea to calm herself. Saying it again gives her fear a shape — but also traps her in the same obsessive loop.
  
9. Quotation: (“Bacteria can lead to Giardia.”)
  - Feature: Metaphor (disease as logic)

- Interpretation: She uses scientific language to make her fear sound rational. It shows how Aza hides her anxiety behind facts — trying to sound logical when she actually feels out of control.

10. Quotation: “Maybe because the actual mechanics of it don’t suit my talents? Like, swapping bodily fluids is my idea of hell.”

- Feature: Metaphor (dating as contamination)
- Interpretation: Aza describes kissing as something dirty instead of romantic. This metaphor shows how her OCD turns love into a threat of infection — intimacy feels dangerous instead of comforting.

11. Quotation: “And also, when you date people, they say stuff like, ‘What are you thinking?’ And you’re supposed to say, ‘I’m thinking about you, darling.’ But you’re actually thinking about how cows literally could not survive without microbiota in their guts.”

- Feature: Metaphor + Contrastive repetition
- Interpretation: Aza can’t focus on normal romantic thoughts — her mind jumps to science and bacteria. The repeated imagined line shows how she compares what she *should* say with what her brain actually thinks, highlighting how OCD interrupts her ability to connect emotionally.

12. Quotation: “Which means, cows sort of don’t exist as independent life forms, but you can’t say that because it’ll seem weird. So, you’re forced to choose between lying and seeming weird.”

- Feature: Metaphor (dependence / existence)
- Interpretation: Aza uses the cow metaphor to talk about herself — she feels like she isn’t truly independent, just like the cows and their microbes. This reflects her struggle with control and her fear of being “not real” or “different.”

13. Quotation: “I can get a little stuck in my head.”

- Feature: Metaphor (mental “stuckness”)
- Interpretation: Aza describes her mind like a place she can’t escape from. This simple image shows how her thoughts trap her — a sign of her obsessive thinking and anxiety.

14. Quotation: “I was thinking that, deep down, I’m just an organism in this vastness. It kind of terrifies me that what I think of as, like, my quote unquote ‘self’ isn’t really under my control.”

- Feature: Metaphor (self as organism in a huge world)
- Interpretation: Aza sees herself as a tiny, powerless creature in a huge universe. This shows how she feels small and not in control of her own mind — her OCD makes her question what part of her is really “hers.”

15. Quotation: “There’s this parasite. It only grows in the eyes of fish... The fish are literally trying to get themselves eaten by a bird... Sometimes I feel like a fish.”

- Feature: Extended metaphor (parasite controlling the fish)
- Interpretation: Aza compares herself to a fish being controlled by a parasite. This story is a symbol of how her obsessive thoughts take over her actions. The metaphor helps her explain her fear that her mind is not truly her own.

16. Quotation: “So you think I’m too crazy to live away from home?”

- Feature: Metaphor (“too crazy”) + rhetorical question
- Interpretation:  
Aza isn’t really talking about living arrangements — she’s talking about herself. The word “*crazy*” becomes a label she fears and repeats. This shows her inner shame and how she turns normal talk

into self-blame. Her mental world shapes how she speaks, showing how much her illness affects her sense of identity.

17. Quotation: “I just think it’s messed up. The idea of having to take a pill to become your real self.”

- Feature: Metaphor (pill = real self)
- Interpretation:

Aza’s metaphor shows how confused she feels about medicine and identity. To her, taking medication feels like changing who she is. This reveals her fear that the “real” version of herself will disappear — a common worry linked to her obsession with purity and control.

18. Quotation: “It’s not logical. It’s like I’m living with a demon.”

- Feature: Metaphor (personification)
- Interpretation:

Aza describes her OCD as a “demon,” turning it into something separate from herself. This helps her explain the illness, but it also shows how trapped she feels — as if something else lives inside her and controls her. The metaphor turns her mental struggle into a kind of inner battle.

19. Quotation: “Imagine being stuck in my head all the time with no break, no way out!”

- Feature: Metaphor of imprisonment + repetition
- Interpretation:

Aza’s language shows how it feels to live inside her own thoughts. The image of being “stuck” and the repeated “no” make her mind sound like a locked room. Her words show both the fear and exhaustion of constantly being trapped inside her own thinking.

Intrusive thoughts in *Turtles All the Way Down* are represented through repetition, interruption, and metaphor that mirror Aza’s obsessive-compulsive thinking.

- Repetition is the main marker of intrusion. Aza’s repeated words and phrases (“ready to cause infection,” “Do something,” “You can’t, you can’t”) recreate the looping rhythm of OCD thoughts. The language itself becomes circular, showing how her mind gets stuck and cannot move forward. Over time, this repetition shifts meaning—from panic (“You can’t”) to control (“You need to be here”)—illustrating her recovery as she learns to use repetition to ground herself.
- Interruption represents how intrusive thoughts break into normal communication. Aza’s speech often stops mid-sentence or changes topic suddenly (“I gotta go to my locker,” “The water will get on you, and then—”). These linguistic breaks show how her mind cuts off the flow of conversation, enacting the sudden, uncontrollable nature of intrusive thinking.
- Metaphor gives her inner struggle a voice. Aza repeatedly uses scientific and contamination metaphors—bacteria, parasites, infection—to make sense of her anxiety. Her body and mind become described as invaded or “not under her control.” Later, she replaces these fearful images with gentler metaphors of growth and presence (“You need to be here”), showing how her language evolves alongside her healing.

In short, intrusive thoughts are shown not just through what Aza says, but how she says it — her speech patterns repeat, break, and turn physical sensations into imagery, allowing viewers to *feel* her mental state through language.

The film constructs tension between Aza’s inner discourse (her intrusive, controlling inner voice) and her outer discourse (social communication with others) through clear linguistic contrasts.

- Inner vs. outer voices: Aza’s inner voice often overlaps with her spoken dialogue, creating a double-layered discourse. She talks to herself (“Did you even change the Band-Aid?” / “Yes, I did.”) while trying to respond socially

(“Yeah. Yeah?”). This overlap illustrates discourse conflict, where her private thoughts intrude on public speech.

- Control and avoidance: Aza often uses interruptions to escape emotional pressure or regain control (“Okay, thank you. But please, just stop.”). These cut-offs mark moments where her anxiety breaks social flow—her language becomes a defense mechanism against being overwhelmed.
- Rationalization and self-labeling: In social settings, Aza uses logical language and humor (“I’m still crazy... nothing’s changed on the crazy front”) to mask her discomfort. This shows how she negotiates her identity between how she feels internally and how she wants to appear externally.
- Metaphor as mediation: Her scientific metaphors act as a bridge between the two worlds—she uses them to explain herself in ways others can understand (“Sometimes I feel like a fish... The parasite was in charge all along”). Yet, these same metaphors also expose her isolation, since others cannot fully share her mental reality.

Overall, the tension lies in how Aza’s language constantly shifts between self-control and self-revelation. Her speech patterns show a person trying to live between two worlds—the world inside her head and the social world around her.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

### Conclusion

Intrusive thoughts in *Turtles All the Way Down* are linguistically represented through repetition, interruption, and metaphor that mirror Aza Holmes’s obsessive-compulsive thinking. Repetition turns language into a loop, echoing her intrusive cycles and expressing the loss of control within her mind. Interruption shows how these thoughts invade her communication, breaking sentences and forcing sudden topic shifts

that embody her mental disruptions. Metaphor, especially her recurring use of bacteria, infection, and parasitism, externalizes her anxiety and dissociation, turning inner fear into vivid imagery. Together, these linguistic features reveal the constant tension between Aza's inner discourse and her attempts to maintain normal social interaction. Her language shifts from expressing panic to reclaiming control—showing that the same patterns that once trapped her become tools of recovery. The film thus portrays mental illness not only as a psychological experience but also as a linguistic performance of thought itself.

### **Suggestion**

Future studies could explore how other characters' responses to Aza's language shape social perceptions of mental illness. Comparative research might also examine how different media—film, novel, or stage—translate intrusive thought into dialogue and sound. Lastly, educators and clinicians could use linguistic analysis like this to build empathy and awareness of how mental disorders shape everyday speech and identity.

## REFERENCES

- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2023). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (5th ed.)*. CA: Sage Publications.
- Foundation, I. O. (2024). *Turtles all the way down: A win for accurate OCD representation*. Retrieved October 4, 2025.  
<https://iocdf.org/blog/2024/07/22/turtles-all-the-way-down-a-win-for-accurate-ocd-representation>
- Gee, J. P. (2023). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method (5th ed.)*. New York, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003261314>
- Hinuma, S., Ogishima, H., Shimada, H., Tanaka, Y., Osao, M., Moriishi, C., & Obata, S. (2025). *Classification of intrusive thought patterns based on differences in the mechanisms of occurrence and persistence*. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 16, Article 1520496. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2025.1520496>
- Kalivas, P. W., Gourley, S. L., & Paulus, M. P. (2023). *Intrusive thinking: Circuit and synaptic mechanisms of a transdiagnostic psychiatric symptom* (p. 149,). *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2023.105163>
- Kotera, Y., & Sheffield, D. (2022). *Revealing the hidden mental health crisis: A critical discourse analysis of mental health awareness campaigns* (pp. 637–645). *Journal of Mental Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638237.2021.1913583>
- Kotera, Y., McEwan, K., & Sheffield, D. (2025). *Applying critical discourse analysis to cross-cultural mental health recovery research* (p. 9(4)). *JMIR Formative Research*. <https://doi.org/10.2196/39983121>
- Schiffrin, D. (2022). *Approaches to discourse (2nd ed.)*. NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Systematic Review. (2023). *What makes an obsession? A systematic review and meta-analysis on the specific characteristics of intrusive cognitions in obsessive-compulsive disorder* (p. 14). *Frontiers in Psychiatry*.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2023.11967193>
- Wahl, O. F. (2021). *Media madness revisited: Portrayals of mental illness in the 21st century* (pp. 72(1), 3–9). *Psychiatric Services*.

<https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.202000036>

World Health Organization. (2022). *World mental health report: Transforming mental health for all*. Geneva: World Health Organization.

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240063600%0A%0A>

World Health Organization. (2023). *Comprehensive mental health action plan 2013–2030*. Updated 2023 indicators.

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240083530>

Zayts-Spence, O., Edmonds, D., & Fortune, Z. (2023). *Mental health, discourse and stigma: Exploring meanings across languages and cultures* (pp. 11(1), 210). *BMC Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-023-01210-6>