

Donna Williams' *Nobody nowhere* and *Somebody somewhere*: A corpus-based discourse analysis of the author's language as a tool to negotiate one's relationship with the world and the self

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Focusing on issues of identity, diversity, disability, labelling and shame, this paper analyses language as a tool to negotiate one's identity and relationship with the self and the world. The paper examines two international bestsellers by Donna Williams, *Nobody Nowhere* (Williams, 1992) and *Somebody Somewhere* (Williams, 1994), about her life before and after being officially diagnosed with autism, a neurodevelopmental disorder implying difficulties in communication and interaction (APA, 2013). Williams' social media presence has also been explored through her personal website (Williams, n.d.), where mature contributions about her life, work, and diagnoses can be found, and her presence on a social activism website (auties.org). Relying on a Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis methodology, Williams's language (Waltz, 2005) and the use and distribution of collocates and metaphors in it (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008) have been investigated to understand their role in the negotiation of her identity with 'the world' and with herself, as a person deemed as 'mad' first, and autistic later. The analysis revealed that writing enabled Williams to understand her own nature, and that her linguistic choices mirror her thoughts and feelings, which are also expressed through metaphors, despite issues with language, pragmatics, and metaphorical language being commonly associated with autism.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder; Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis; Corpus Linguistics; Critical Discourse Analysis; Donna Williams; Identity Negotiation

1. Introduction

Starting from the tenet that a binding relationship exists between language and identity (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021), this paper analyses how language, as well as the presence of collocations and metaphors therein, can be used to negotiate identity and construct one's relationship with the self and the world. Two international bestsellers, *Nobody Nowhere* and *Somebody Somewhere*, and two websites, *auties.org* and *donnawilliams.net*, were investigated, representing the life accounts of Donna Williams, a woman who

lived with Autism Spectrum Disorder between the XX and XXI centuries. Born in Australia in 1963 and passed away in 2017, Williams was a singer-songwriter, a painter, and a novelist by chance. Indeed, her international bestsellers were the result of an attempt to find out more about her 'diversity', which would be defined as autism only in her late 20s.

Autism has been explored extensively since the 1940s, in spite of numerous changes in its conception (from childhood schizophrenia to a neurodevelopmental disorder and a neurodiversity) and diagnosis. However, little attention has been paid to how language is used directly by autistic people to shape and negotiate their identity. Therefore, the present study aims to contribute to the linguistic analysis of first-hand contributions by autistic people sharing their personal experiences, by exploring Williams' personal and social worlds, as an autistic woman and a social activist.

The remainder of this paper presents an essential literature review in section 2, and the methodological tools and frameworks used for the analysis in section 3, whereas sections 4 and 5 describe and discuss the results of the investigation carried out on Donna Williams' novels and websites.

2. Background

Since it was first described in the 1940s (Kanner, 1943), autism has been studied extensively. However, in these studies the researcher was usually an external observer, which could explain the editorial and scientific success of Donna Williams' life accounts, which are not only literary works (Williams 1992, 1994), but also medically accurate descriptions (Williams, n.d.-a).

Most research carried out about autistic people focuses on the accounts of parents, particularly mothers, whose 'lack of warmth' supposedly caused a kind of psychiatric disorder in their children (Bettelheim, 1959, 1967; Kanner, 1943). Although Kanner's 'refrigerator mothers' theory has become obsolete (Koi, 2021) over the years, and autism is now regarded along a spectrum and as a neurodiversity (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, 2013), research still tends to consider accounts provided by parents and siblings rather than by those who actually live with this condition. The focus is usually on the influence of parental behaviour (Crane et al., 2021; Riccio et al., 2021), although recent research seems to be acknowledging the importance of first-hand accounts, particularly by adults (DePape & Lindsay, 2016; Kim, 2019), and recognises that women, who are more likely than men to receive a delayed ASD diagnosis, tend to develop compensatory strategies to try to fit in society (Green et al., 2019), such as social mimicry (Bargiela et al., 2016) and social camouflaging (Cage & Troxwell-Whitman, 2019; Leedham et al., 2019). Further approaches involve the intersection of gender and autism (Janssen et al., 2016), novel interpretations of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1983,

1990, 2013) applied to ASD, as opposed to the medical model (Chapman, 2019; Woods, 2017), or studies about young autistic people in educational settings (Mesa & Hamilton, 2021; Williams et al., 2019).

One area of study attracting numerous researchers is language, since one of autism's main symptoms is experiencing difficulties in communication and interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In fact, most research in this area is about the typical linguistic phenomena characterising the speech of autistic people, such as pronoun reversal, echolalia (Boksa & Kominek, 2022; Gernsbacher et al., 2016; Naigles et al., 2016), and challenges in the linguistic areas of pragmatics, lexis and semantics (Naigles & Tek, 2017). More specifically, it has been suggested that autistic people lack imaginative and metaphorical skills, which results in an infrequent use of metaphorical language and challenges in understanding it with ease (Vyshedskiy, 2019; Wing et al., 1979). However, research also shows that autistic individuals tend to produce better and more novel metaphors than neurotypical people (Rucińska et al., 2021). Generally speaking, how language is used by autistic people to shape their identities has been little investigated, the focus being rather on how language shapes the way neurotypical people perceive ASD (Markelova, 2017), or on the use of metaphors to frame ASD within different cultural narratives (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008).

Recent research is considering the use of social media by autistic individuals. It seems that both autistic people and those close to them tend to seek informational, social, and emotional support in online communities on digital networks (Cole et al., 2017; Saha & Agarwal, 2016; Zhao et al., 2019). Moderate use would appear to have beneficial effects, leading autistic people to also live happier lives (Ward et al., 2018).

3. Method

The present study consists of three separate analyses, whose results will be compared to get a holistic view of Donna Williams' growth as an autistic person.

The methodology used relies on Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis, a hybrid approach which takes advantage and overcomes the limitations of both Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis. The former approach has become increasingly popular in studying literary texts, leading to a new research branch, 'corpus stylistics' (McIntyre & Walker, 2019), providing quantitative and statistical support to qualitative intuitions. It relies on the use of specific software, which guarantees a higher degree of objectivity and a lower risk for the research to be influenced by the so-called 'researcher's bias' (Baker, 2006). Since concerns have been raised that Corpus Linguistics may not consider contextual features of production, particularly when multiple or

large corpora are analysed (Baker et al., 2008), it seems advantageous to combine Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis, which considers structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control, linking the text to the external and situational contexts, as language is understood a social practice, reflecting and producing social ideologies (Baker et al., 2008).

The software selected to analyse the corpora is *#LancsBox* (Brezina et al., 2020), developed by a team of researchers at Lancaster University. Although various tools to carry out a corpus analysis exist, *#LancsBox* is a sophisticated, open-source, downloadable toolbox, with which it is also possible to analyse corpora in .pdf or .txt formats. Moreover, this software relies on POS-Tagging, an automated annotation system which tags each word in the corpus based on its grammatical category, e.g., 'NN' for noun, singular or mass; 'NNS' for noun, plural; 'VV' for verb, base form. It is also possible to use the symbol * as a wildcard to search all the words beginning with the typed letters. *#LancsBox* offers multiple tools, including the Whelk tool, providing information about the distribution of a search term (node) across the corpus, and the Words tool, creating a list of the most frequent words. Both the Whelk and the Words tools can calculate raw frequencies (the number of times a node occurs in the analysed corpus) and relative frequencies, namely frequencies normalised per 10.000 tokens, which are very useful to compare corpora of different sizes (Baker, 2006). To ensure the relevance of the data retrieved for this study, only nodes whose relative frequency approximates 2 and absolute frequency is greater than 10 were considered. Another useful tool is the *GraphColl*, with which collocations can be identified and their collocation graphs generated. Grammatical words were excluded, with a few exceptions considered to be relevant within the context of the narration, and a span of 6 words to the right and to the left was chosen to get relevant results, alongside with one of the 14 collocational statistic measures offered by *#LancsBox*: the MI3 Score. This is a variation of the traditional MI Score (Mutual Information Score): both consider the exclusivity of the collocation, but the MI3 Score also considers its frequency, as the MI Score occasionally mistakes the low frequency of a collocational relationship with its exclusivity (Brezina, 2018).

The data retrieved from the corpora was also compared with a reference corpus to understand whether a node was used in the analysed corpora more or less frequently than what could be regarded as standard usage in a linguistic variety. For the present study, the Freiburg Brown Corpus of American English, also known as FROWN Corpus (National Library of Norway - Språkbanken, n.d.), was considered, as it contains texts from the early 1990s in American English, therefore representing a sample which is supposedly close to the linguistic variety used in Donna Williams's novels and website presence.

Three corpora were built to investigate how the negotiation of Williams's identity with and within "the world" (Williams, 1992, 1994, n.d.) and her understanding of autism changed over the years. They consist of Donna Williams' two international bestsellers, *Nobody Nowhere* (1992) and *Somebody Somewhere* (1994), and selected contents posted on her websites (About Auties.Org, 2008; Welcome to Auties.Org, n.d.; Welcome to the new Auties.Org, 2013; Williams, n.d.-a), all of which contain significant contributions about her life with autism, both before and after receiving the diagnosis. The NN-Corpus is based on *Nobody Nowhere*, and consists of 71383 tokens and 6991 types, whereas the SS-Corpus is based on *Somebody Somewhere* and consists of 89422 tokens and 7059 types; in both cases, introductions, dedications, and/or afterwords were excluded. The Web-Corpus is composed of two subcorpora for a total amount of 19810 tokens and 3629 types: the DW-Subcorpus, based on selected contents among those available on Williams' personal website (Williams, n.d.-a), and the Auties-Subcorpus, containing extracts from the self-help website she founded with her husband, Chris Samuel (Welcome to Auties.Org, n.d.).

More specifically, the subcorpus based on *donnawilliams.net* (Williams, n.d.-a) consists of 16846 tokens and 3314 types, as only its three sections in which information about her life and her diagnosis can be found were taken into account: 'about me' (Williams, n.d.-b), 'diagnosis' (Williams, n.d.-c), and 'official bio' (Williams, n.d.-d); the 'my name' section (Williams, n.d.-e), containing information about Williams' ancestry, was only considered for further insights into her family history and life. Considering the importance of the internet portal *auties.org* (Welcome to Auties.Org, n.d.), which Williams and her husband launched in 2004, its contents were selected to build a second sub-corpus. Originating as a platform to help autistic people create their public virtual space and share information (About Auties.Org, 2008), it has been inactive since 2010 and in 2012 turned into "an information only page" (Welcome to Auties.Org, n.d.), as social media like Facebook or blogs were considered, by Williams and her husband, to be more effective in ensuring people have their own web presence. Nevertheless, its contents can still be accessed via the *Wayback Machine* (n.d.), a digital archive of websites: users can type a URL, select a date or a date range, and browse the available versions.

Based on the existing archives, it could be observed that the website featured two different aims and styles. Being a virtual place for people to meet, the second version seems very similar to what we would nowadays refer to as 'social network'; therefore, the Auties-Subcorpus only contains texts from the older version, which was online from 2004 to 2008 (the latest archive was considered, dated August 30, 2008). The aim of the website was explicitly declared: [a portal] "for people on the Autistic Spectrum who are ready to

dare reach out, open the doors to the community and market their abilities directly to the public and for those interested in supporting these pioneers” (About Auties.org, 2008). The ‘About Auties.Org’ section and its subsections ‘What is an Autism Spectrum Condition’, ‘Autism FAQs’, ‘Employability FAQs’ were considered, for a total amount of 2964 tokens and 755 types.

For the NN-Corpus and the SS-Corpus notes were taken based on the researcher’s intuitions; they constituted the core data to carry out a Critical Discourse Analysis. More specifically, a number of relevant topics were identified and used to draw conclusions, most of which were common to the two corpora: (a) Communication and writing; (b) Donna and her family; (c) Donna’s identity; (d) Donna in the outer world; (e) Donna versus the outer world; (f) Meaning of the title of the novel. In the SS-Corpus a further theme could be identified, (g) Autism, whereas one common topic, (d), slightly changes: it is not only Donna in the outer world, but it is (d1) autistic people in the outer world.

Subsequently, thanks to *#LancsBox*, corpus-based analyses were carried out. Firstly, the lexical variety for each corpus was calculated, and a word list with the most frequent lexical items was produced, before grouping them into relevant categories. Then, to grasp deeper meanings that could have possibly been missed by simply reading and critically analysing the texts, a study of the most relevant collocations and semantic fields was carried out. Afterwards, the use of metaphors and metaphorical language was analysed. Considering the pervasiveness of metaphors in everyday life, not only in language, but also in human thought processes (Gibbs, 2012; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), a number of nodes based on the categories of common metaphors related to autism identified by Broderick and Ne’eman (2008) was analysed, including geographic separateness and autism as a disease or part of a spectrum within neurodiversity; therefore, the nodes searched within the corpus are: ‘alien*’, ‘separat*’, ‘normal*’, ‘isolat*’, ‘wall*’, ‘surface’, ‘emerg*’, ‘beyond’, ‘identity’, and ‘name’. For each node, the relative and absolute frequencies were calculated and compared to data extracted from the FROWN Corpus. Moreover, the concordance lines were investigated to ensure the relevance of the data was considered.

4. Results

The results of the analysis will be presented separately for each corpus and then compared.

4.1. The NN-corpus

The first data to have been analysed is the lexical variety of the novel *Nobody Nowhere*, also known as the type/token ratio, which calculates the average

number of tokens per type (Baker, 2006); in this case, the types being 6991 and the tokens 71383, the lexical variety (rounded to the second decimal place) is 10%.

Secondly, a word list of the most frequent lexical items was produced; as #LancsBox also allows for a filtering system, by typing “/.*_(n|v|adj|adv)/”, only nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs were considered, although high-frequency verbs were manually excluded, such as ‘to be’, ‘to have’, ‘to say’. Therefore, the most relevant and frequent lexical items could be grouped in categories: ‘human beings’; ‘places’; ‘feelings and perception’; ‘communication’. The category ‘human beings’ includes: ‘people’; ‘mother’; ‘carol’; ‘donna’; ‘williams’; ‘nobody’ (manually searched, being part of the title); ‘willie’; ‘tim’; ‘children’; ‘brother’; ‘father’; ‘friend’; ‘teacher’; ‘characters’; ‘family’. The category ‘places’ includes: ‘world’; ‘school’; ‘home’; ‘room’; ‘nowhere’ (manually searched, being part of the title); ‘house’; ‘wall’. The category ‘feelings and perception’ includes: ‘eyes’; ‘face’; ‘fear’; ‘hand’; ‘feeling’; ‘mind’; ‘body’; ‘mirror’; ‘mad’; ‘afraid’; ‘different’; ‘disturbed’; ‘frightened’. The category ‘communication’ includes: ‘words’; ‘music’; ‘language’. One final category consists of eleven nodes, of which the first eight are featured in the frequency list, whereas the other five were manually searched for their importance in Williams’s life: ‘alone’, ‘name’, ‘darkness’, ‘problem’, ‘strange’, ‘closeness’, ‘autistic’, ‘nothingness’, ‘weird’, ‘autism’, ‘retard’, ‘retarded’, ‘weirdo’.

Subsequently, the relative frequencies of the above-mentioned nodes, with the exception of proper names, were compared to the data of the FROWN Corpus. Almost all the nodes are significantly more frequent in *Nobody Nowhere* than in the FROWN Corpus, with a few exceptions: the words ‘autistic’ and ‘autism’ are totally absent in the reference corpus.

Based on these results, the collocations of the most relevant words were analysed. The most relevant collocates of the node ‘mother’ include: ‘my’, ‘carol’s’, ‘told’, ‘said’, ‘brother’. The most relevant collocates of the node ‘world’ include: ‘the’, ‘my’, ‘outside’, ‘carol’s’, ‘donna’. The most relevant collocates of ‘donna’ include ‘williams’, ‘I’, ‘world’; it is interesting to note that there are no verbs. ‘Carol’ usually collocates with ‘willie’, ‘I’, ‘self’, ‘home’, while ‘willie’ collocates with ‘carol’, ‘time’, ‘other’. ‘Brother’ collocates with ‘older’, ‘little’, ‘my’, ‘mother’, while the only relevant collocate of ‘father’, excluding high frequency words, is ‘my’. ‘Autistic’ collocates with ‘I’ and ‘a’, while ‘autism’ has no collocates at all; similarly, the only significant collocates of ‘language’ are ‘I’ and ‘my’. ‘Mad’ only has one relevant collocate, which is “‘you’re’ (in quotation marks)”. ‘Home’ often collocates with ‘children’s’, ‘my’, ‘stray’ and ‘carol’, while ‘house’ collocates with ‘friend’s’, ‘carol’s’, and less frequently with ‘my’. ‘Writ*’ collocates with ‘I’, ‘music’, ‘my’, while ‘music’ collocates with ‘classical’ and ‘my’. Finally, ‘mirror’ collocates with ‘front’, ‘carol’, ‘my’.

By reading the novel, a number of semantic fields emerge: darkness, fear, loneliness, closeness, and war. Their frequencies, both relative and absolute, were analysed, revealing that war has lower frequency values. Interestingly, all the nodes occur more frequently in the novel than they do in the FROWN Corpus. This makes them relevant to the purpose of this study.

To sum up, the use of metaphorical language related to autism was analysed. As previously mentioned, the nodes considered are 'alien*', 'separat*', 'normal*', 'isolat*', 'wall*', 'shell', 'surface', 'emerg*', 'beyond', 'identity', and 'name'. For each of them, both in the NN-Corpus and in the FROWN Corpus, only the metaphorical or strictly identity-related occurrences were considered. All of the nodes occur more frequently in *Nobody Nowhere* than in the FROWN Corpus, with the exception of 'beyond', which is never used metaphorically in the latter.

4.2. The SS-corpus

The analysis carried out on the SS-Corpus mirrors the one based on the NN-Corpus.

Firstly, the types being 7059 and the tokens 89422, the lexical variety rounded to the second decimal place is 8%.

Secondly, a word list based on frequency was produced relying on the same criteria used for the NN-Corpus and the categories in which the words were grouped. The words belonging to the category 'human beings' include: 'people', 'carol', 'person', 'children', 'someone' (manually searched, being part of the title), 'willie', 'donna', 'friend(s)', 'family', 'mother', 'woman', 'characters', 'father', 'tim', 'child', 'teacher'. The category 'places' includes: 'world', 'place', 'home', 'house', 'class', 'walls', 'somewhere' (manually searched, being part of the title). The nodes related to 'feelings and perception' are: 'face', 'eyes', 'hand(s)', 'mirror', 'touch', 'feeling(s)', 'body', 'mind', 'meaning', 'emotions', 'fear', 'ears', 'afraid', 'smile', 'sound', 'safe', 'close(ness)', 'lights', 'deaf', 'emotional', 'angry'. Finally, the category 'communication' includes: 'words', 'language', 'book', 'music'. An extra category which could be identified in *Somebody Somewhere* but not in *Nobody Nowhere* is connected to autism and includes: 'autistic', 'autism', 'control', 'different', 'pattern', 'normal'. Furthermore, a number of nodes were manually searched for their relevance in the light of Williams's growth and experiences, although they do not belong to any category in particular and the last five do not match the set frequency criteria: 'life', 'nothing', 'alone', 'aware(ness)', 'unable', 'nothingness', 'difficulties', 'name', 'strange', 'surface', 'nobody', 'retard*', 'disturbed', 'mad', 'weird'.

Subsequently, the relative frequencies of the nodes, except for personal names, were compared to the FROWN Corpus. All the words analysed occur

more frequently in the novel than in the reference corpus, with only two exceptions: 'autistic' and 'autism' are not present in the FROWN Corpus.

The following step was to analyse the most relevant collocations thanks to the *GraphColl* tool. More specifically, the main collocates of 'mother' are 'my', 'her', and 'me', while 'father' collocates with 'my' and 'said', and 'brother' collocates with 'tom' and 'my'. The only interesting collocates of 'home' are 'my' and 'felt', whereas 'house' often collocates with 'marek's', 'my' and 'their'. 'World' usually collocates with 'the', 'my', 'guarantees', 'mirror', 'strategies', 'place', 'me', 'real', 'against'. 'Donna's' collocates include 'williams', 'said', 'want', 'asked', while 'carol' collocates with 'willie', 'I', 'me', and 'willie' collocates with 'carol', 'I', 'me'. 'Autism' often collocates with 'me', 'words', 'people'; the main collocates of 'autistic' include 'people', 'I', 'children', 'woman'. 'Mad' collocates with 'I', while 'mirror' has multiple relevant collocates, including 'hands', 'my', 'world', 'front', 'against', 'reflection', 'looked', 'touch', 'eyes'. To conclude, 'writ*' often collocates with 'book', 'since', 'I', 'my', 'me', whereas the main collocates of 'language' include 'foreign', 'I', 'body', 'my'.

Similarly to what could be observed by analysing the NN-Corpus, the nodes belonging to the semantic fields of darkness, fear, loneliness, closeness, and war were considered. Each of them has higher relative frequencies in the SS-Corpus than in the FROWN Corpus, with one exception: 'aleness' is totally absent in the reference corpus.

Finally, the use of metaphorical language was investigated by searching the nodes 'alien*', 'separat*', 'normal*', 'isolat*', 'shell', 'wall*', 'surface', 'emerg*', 'beyond', 'identity', and 'name'. The results are the same as those which emerged from the analysis of *Nobody Nowhere*, as all the nodes are used much more frequently in the novel than in the reference corpus, whereas 'beyond' is only used literally in the FROWN Corpus.

4.3. The Web-corpus

As previously mentioned, Williams used to run a personal website (Williams, n.d.-a) and a self-help platform for autistic people and their dear ones (Welcome to Auties.Org, n.d.). Two versions of the latter can be retrieved through the *Wayback Machine* (Internet Archive, n.d.), which were online and active from 2004 to 2010 and from 2010 to 2012, respectively; however, the present analysis considers the older version.

Firstly, the type/token ratio for both subcorpora was calculated. The lexical varieties of the DW-Subcorpus and the Auties-Subcorpus (rounded to the second decimal place) are 20% and 25%, respectively.

Secondly, using the Words tool in *#LancsBox*, two lists of words ranked by

frequency were produced, one for each subcorpus. In both cases, words with a relative frequency of at least 10 were considered and their concordances explored. In the DW-Subcorpus three broad categories could be identified: 'autism' (including 'autism', 'diagnosed', 'autistic', 'speech', 'echolalia', 'echolaic', 'feral'); 'personal development' (including 'mother', 'father', 'family', 'home', 'school', 'teacher'); 'medical language' (including 'disorder', 'cancer', 'brain'). Scrolling down the list, regardless of the relative frequencies of the words, other significant items could be found. For example, Williams identified herself not only as 'Donna', but also as 'Polly', explaining that her first name was chosen by her mother as it meant 'female' in Spanish, whereas her father used to call her Polly, with which she identified most in spite of acknowledging her first, legal name as her 'fame name' (Williams, n.d.-e); she also mentioned 'Dolly', the nickname her mother gave her, as "she developed attachment to me as her Narcissistic Object and . . . 'I was *her* doll" (Williams, n.d.-c, emphasis in original). However, it is interesting to note the use of highly specialised medical lexis, such as 'eds' (Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, with which Williams was diagnosed in 2012), 'ptsd' (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, with which she lived until her 40s), 'allergies', 'trauma', 'valium', 'conditions', 'borderline'. Furthermore, she defined autism as a 'fruit salad', a creative expression intended to convey the idea that this condition can change from one person to another.

A similar analysis was carried out on the most frequent words extracted from the Auties-Subcorpus, which were grouped in three main categories: 'autism', 'lexis related to economics and work', 'social relations'. The first category includes 'spectrum', 'autism' and 'autistic', 'conditions', 'community', 'ability', 'autie', 'diversity', 'diagnosed', 'disability', 'equality', 'celebration'. The words related to the world of economics and work include 'work', 'employment' and 'employable', 'businesses', 'services', and a series of means to increase one's employability, such as 'website', 'email'. The category 'social relations' includes '(autie-)friendly', 'social', 'activities'.

Subsequently, the collocations of some nodes considered to be relevant were analysed. In the Auties-Subcorpus, among the most interesting collocates of 'autistic' are 'spectrum' and 'people', while in the DW-Subcorpus 'be', 'with', 'have'. In the former subcorpus, 'autism' often collocates with 'spectrum', 'friendly', 'conditions', whereas in the latter there are many more collocates, including 'fruit salad', 'spectrum', 'diagnosed', 'expert', 'deemed', 'psychosis' and 'childhood', 'disorder'. 'Employ*' never occurs in the DW-Subcorpus, whereas it is frequent in the Auties-Subcorpus and often collocates with 'self', 'autism', 'spectrum'. Conversely, the nodes 'language', 'identity', 'book' and 'mother' do not have any relevant collocates in the Auties-Subcorpus, while in the DW-Subcorpus 'language' frequently co-occurs with 'processing' and

'disorder'; 'identity' with 'dissociative' and 'disorder'; 'book' often collocates with 'first' (referring to *Nobody Nowhere*); and 'mother' with 'my', 'father', 'child'.

Next, the use of words related to the semantic fields of darkness, fear, loneliness, closeness, and war was analysed. While in the Auties-Subcorpus there are no instances, in the DW-Subcorpus 'dark*', 'alone', 'void', 'empty', 'close', 'battle', 'surviv*' emerged, and their relative frequencies are higher than in the FROWN-Corpus.

In short, the analysis of metaphorical language revealed that this is almost absent in the Web-Corpus. In the Auties-Subcorpus, the word 'walls' is used only once, as a metaphor, in the sentence "if you are someone in the community who believes in building bridges and not walls, then welcome to Auties.org [...]" (Welcome to Auties.Org, n.d.). Conversely, the node 'normal*', is used only twice in relation to Williams's condition in the DW-Subcorpus: "I lived in an emotional and perceptual chaos which taught me surrealism and the relativity of the word 'normal'" (Williams, n.d.-b).

5. Discussion

Having analysed the three corpora and having presented the results of said analyses, this section compares and interprets the data.

Firstly, the lexical variety of each corpus was analysed: while this was quite low in the NN-Corpus and in the SS-Corpus, it was much higher in the two subcorpora of the Web-Corpus, which might be explained by the range of topics with which each corpus deals (Baker, 2006). The two novels are autobiographies written by Williams with the sole aim of understanding more about herself and were not meant to be published (at least initially); therefore, they are considerably personal and intimate. Conversely, the two websites deal with more varied themes, resulting in a greater linguistic variety: *donnawilliams.net* deals with Williams's own life, although the website was probably founded with the aim of spreading information about autism, whereas *auties.org* had a target-oriented approach from the onset, offering services and networking opportunities to and for autistic people. In this sense, the former website is closer to Williams's novels, since it features accounts of her diagnoses, her childhood and her family, albeit with a more scientific and objective style, as recourse to medical lexis shows. On the contrary, being a self-help website for autistic people or for those who live close to them, *auties.org* did not deal with Williams's personal life, although it may be argued that it was precisely the writer's personal experiences which made her realise the importance of founding the platform; indeed, this website featured a more practical approach, which may explain recourse to a very direct and plain writing style.

Secondly, frequency lists were produced and organised into relevant categories, most of which were common to the two novels. However, these lists can also be relevant for the Web-Corpus; while they are not always applicable to the Auties-Subcorpus, which is not about Donna Williams's life and in which only the categories (g) and (d1) fully apply, they are meaningful for the DW-Subcorpus, as Donna Williams's website functions as an extension of her autobiography, albeit with a different style and approach, since it has a more public nature than her autobiographies and appears to be more technical.

Comparing the data from the NN-Corpus and the SS-Corpus, the first and most striking difference is the presence of (g) Autism only in the second novel, which can be explained by the fact that Williams was officially diagnosed with ASD only in her late 20s, which resulted in the need of a new life and understanding of the world and of people around her; indeed, from the analysis of collocations it can be observed that the author talked both about herself and other autistic people and children. It is also interesting to note that 'autism' and 'autistic' are not present in the FROWN Corpus, which could be explained by the fact that autism had been considered a form of childhood psychosis/schizophrenia until the 1970s; it only became a separate disorder in 1987, with the publication of the DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association, 1987), and a spectrum since 1994 with the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Vivanti, 2020; Zeldovich, 2018).

'Words' often collocates with 'autism' and 'meaning', thus representing a way to connect with the outer world; words are the symbol of the author's difficulties in communication: she seemed unable to fully grasp the meaning of what people said and she felt that she spoke a totally different language. This leads to another point: (a) Communication and writing. Having always had trouble expressing her thoughts through her voice, Donna Williams realised that she could rely on other forms of communication. In *Nobody Nowhere*, Williams talked about a language of her own, and the node 'writ*' often collocates with 'music'; indeed, she was also an artist who could express herself through music: "Through my music I began more and more to reach and express my true self" (Williams, 1992, p. 127). Furthermore, *donnawilliams.net* welcomes users with a video in which Donna playfully sings and dances. In *Somebody Somewhere*, instead, 'writ*' collocates with 'book' and the importance of this relation is to be appreciated in the events occurring between the publications of the two novels. Williams never dreamt of becoming a writer; *Nobody Nowhere* originated from her wish to search inside herself for a word capable of rendering what she had in common with her friend Shaun. She recalled taking her autobiography to a child psychiatrist, who sent the book to a specialist on autism. It was this specialist who pointed out that her experience was very common, and that publishing

her book might contribute to a better understanding of people like her. Initially, Williams felt her book was too personal for the world to read, but she eventually agreed to have it published. This is the starting point of *Somebody Somewhere* and partially explains the titles (f): writing about herself helped Williams understand who she was, as she clarified: “More than a book, it had been an exorcism. Writing it had been like a fever before the waking” (Williams, 1994, p. 14). Therefore, *Nobody Nowhere* is a milestone in Williams’s life: she had never had any word nor diagnoses to describe and explain to herself why she was the way that she was; however, writing her book and having a psychiatrist read it enabled her to access a new part of her identity and find her place in the world, thus turning from a ‘nobody nowhere’ into a ‘somebody somewhere’.

Donna Williams occasionally talked about herself with a plural personal pronoun, “we”, which might seem bizarre, since *Somebody Somewhere* is an autobiography, but this is actually particularly meaningful considering how Donna managed to survive before her diagnosis. Indeed, she invented a set of characters, Carol and Willie, allowing her to merge with the world (Carol’s pleasing and accommodating behaviour), and to protect herself from it (Willie’s more assertive behaviour). However, after writing *Nobody Nowhere*, Williams’s feelings changed: “I [Donna] didn’t need Willie and Carol anymore. I needed Donna. I said goodbye to the characters who had sustained me for so long and welcomed the me I wanted to know better” (Williams, 1994, p. 8). As a matter of fact, the names of the characters often collocate with ‘Donna’, thus signalling a strong relationship with her, but also with ‘mother’, with whom she had a very complex relationship, and ‘home’, where Donna could not feel at ease; moreover, the lack of verbs among Donna’s collocates might signal a lack of agency and linguistically reflect the author’s rather passive attitude in life. Donna Williams’s characters are the emblem of her difficulties in establishing a safe relationship with the world, which leads to a set of key issues: (b) Donna and her family; (c) Donna’s identity; (d) and (d1) Donna and autistic people in the outer world; (e) Donna versus the outer world. Having always been considered retarded and mad, as the frequency of these words show, particularly in the first book (therefore, before her official diagnosis), Donna Williams started re-negotiating herself, also in relation to other people, fully embracing her diagnosis. Her mother was perhaps the most influential person in her early development (as the relative frequency of the node ‘mother’ shows): having psychological issues herself, Donna’s mother was described as unloving and not interested in her child, whom she looked at as ‘retarded’. Donna Williams’s father, with whom she felt closer, only lived with her until she was three, when “he was ordered not to speak to me and to have nothing to do with me” (Williams, 1992, p. 8); unsurprisingly, in both novels the node ‘father’ has lower relative frequencies than ‘mother’.

The analysis of collocations in the novels is also useful to understand how Donna (d) and autistic people in general (d1) relate to the outer world. In both books, 'mirror' is used as a noun and as a verb. In *Nobody Nowhere*, its main collocates are 'front', 'carol', 'my': as a matter of fact, social mimicry is one of the compensatory strategies autistic people, and particularly women who receive a delayed diagnosis (Green et al., 2019), tend to use when trying to merge in the world, and Donna Williams experienced this since her childhood. One day, she met a girl named Carol and, by copying anything she did, she felt she was "amused and amusing" (Williams, 1992, p. 17). Therefore, even when Carol's mother forbade her to meet Donna again, the latter would meet her friend in her own mirror, and that was the moment when one of her characters was born, since Willie already existed as "a pair of green eyes . . . that lived under my bed" (Williams, 1992, p. 9). Thanks to the Carol in her mirror, Donna learnt how to please others, make friends, and be a socially acceptable person, capable of surviving the outer world. In *Somebody Somewhere*, 'mirror' has more collocates: 'hands', 'my' and 'me', 'world', 'front', 'against', 'reflection', 'looked', 'touch', 'eyes'. Growing up and becoming more conscious of her neurodiversity, Donna Williams realised that looking in the mirror enabled her to try to get into Carol's world of social acceptance, or to live in what she called 'my world': a secure space where she could be alone with her own reflection. However, even if the mirror was initially only Williams's private refuge, she later realised that there were other people who also "knew what it was to live as a mirror, to become other people" (Williams, 1992, p. 9).

Although during her university years she had already met someone like her, Tim, it is mainly in *Somebody Somewhere* that Donna Williams engaged in social life, meeting other autistic people, for example during her training as a teacher's aide in schools for people with special needs. This work experience showed her that there were lots of autistic people; most of them, labelled as 'retarded' or 'slow', were taught to live "up to unbelievably low expectations" (Williams, 1992, p. 21), and their teachers were not trained adequately. However, having learnt how to live with autism herself, Donna Williams could better understand their feelings and thoughts (d1); for example, she knew that tugging a child's arm was enough to bring them back into "the world" from a moment of self-isolation, or she could teach children that humming a tune to oneself was a better option than grinding one's teeth to detach from the disturbing noise of the outer world. Moreover, working with other autistic people allowed Williams to learn how to better manage her own emotions; for instance, it had always been very challenging for her to deal with being touched by someone else, until she met a child who helped her overcome a panic attack after he took her hand to be accompanied to the toilet. Therefore, being close to other autistic people was a mutual exchange for Donna: "I learn

from others by reflecting them and can learn from them by their reflecting me" (Williams, 1994, p. 69), and "I was afraid to see it finally so clearly from the outside. I could finally see why others had sometimes been frightened by my sudden shifts, changes, and contradictions" (Williams, 1994, p. 240-241).

These considerations about Donna's growth and understanding of her condition also led to a negotiation of her own identity (c). Indeed, in *Nobody Nowhere* Donna could only "function" in the outer world if she knew she could dissociate from herself, as when she was child and insisted that she was to be called by her middle name, Lee, or when it was not Donna with whom people interacted, but her anger (Willie) and her "ability to perform and communicate, embodied in the emotionless and empty shell I secretly called Carol" (Williams, 1992, p. 56), since she "feared becoming possessed by the real me" (Williams, 1992, p. 95). Thanks to her sessions with a psychiatrist, Donna became aware of her coping mechanisms: "I referred to myself as 'you.' . . . One develops an 'I' in interaction with 'the world.' Donna didn't interact; the characters did" (Williams, 1992, p. 103). Conversely, in *Somebody Somewhere*, Donna learnt how to control her reactions, allowing herself to experience emotions, including friendship and love, anger and fear, until she "felt like an alien suddenly acquiring humanness" (Williams, 1994, p. 258), when she could actually perceive her body. These experiences, alongside with her sessions with a psychiatrist specialised in ASD, helped her better understand her condition and needs (e), eventually realising that "AUTISM IS NOT ME. Autism is just an information-processing problem that controls who I appear to be. . . . I CAN FIGHT AUTISM . . . I WILL CONTROL IT . . . IT WILL NOT CONTROL ME." (Williams, 1994, p. 255).

To sum up, the analysis of metaphorical language showed that while it is almost totally absent in the Auties-Subcorpus, probably due to the aim and nature of the website, it is considerable in the other corpora, being more strictly connected to Donna Williams' personal life.

6. Conclusion

This study has investigated how Williams used language to negotiate her own identity as a child and teenager deemed as 'retarded' first, and as a high-functioning autistic woman later on, with specific attention devoted to the distribution of collocations and metaphors. The way she could describe her condition in such detail highlights how useful language can be to better understand oneself; indeed, despite having always experienced difficulties in expressing her thoughts and feelings, Donna Williams used writing to delve deeply into herself, and it was precisely thanks to her first novel, *Nobody Nowhere*, and to the specialists who read it, that she could be officially diagnosed with autism.

Recourse to the Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis approach in the analysis of data allowed for the identification of numerous patterns. The frequency and collocational analysis carried out on the two novels showed a correspondence between Donna Williams's experiences and the linguistic choices made, such as recourse to the so-called characters and how they helped her fit in 'the world', or the complex relationships with her family, particularly with her mother. The publication of *Nobody Nowhere* represented a real turning point in Donna Williams' life, as demonstrated not only by her life account, but also by the language she used, where reference to her diagnosis and feelings occurs. The analysis of *donnawilliams.net* is to some extent similar to that performed on the novels, with regards to her personal life, in spite of some differences: the website is more detailed and medically accurate, also reporting information about other health issues, so it can be inferred that the idea behind the website itself was to have a public space which could also be useful to other autistic people and their loved ones. However, *donnawilliams.net* was also a platform on which Donna Williams could share her artworks and information about her consulting work, similarly to how social media are used nowadays. This could explain the reason why Donna and her husband founded *auties.org*, whose language is radically different both from the books and from the author's personal website: it is more practical, target-oriented, and draws from the lexica of sociality, economics, and work.

The analysis of metaphorical language showed that Williams verbally negotiated her identity as an autistic person by relying on the typical metaphors for autism identified by Broderick and Ne'eman (2008); however, she also created her own metaphors, such as 'fruit salad', thus confirming the theory that, despite their difficulties with pragmatics, autistic people can still create novel metaphors (Rucińska et al., 2021).

To conclude, the present study has tried to explore the social and inner world of autism based on the analysis of direct accounts by an autistic person. Further research could investigate the use of language in identity negotiation processes by autistic people on modern social media platforms, which would also allow for an analysis of interactional exchanges. On a more practical level, storytelling could be considered, for example in schools, also relying on forms of computer mediated communication, thus encouraging children on the autistic spectrum to read and/or write about similar/their own experiences.

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