

A Linguistic Contribution to the Study of Resilience in Victims of Crime

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Resilience, it is claimed, is the answer to all problems which affect contemporary society (Rodin 2015). It is seen as the 'desired feature of modern societies' (Friggotto et al. 2022, p. 3). Whether it is in the field of developing and sustaining enduring economics (Eichengreen et al. 2024); establishing stable and secure societies (Pinheiro et al. 2022); functioning and effective organisations (Fotinos-Ventouratos et al. 2024); and environmentally friendly habitats (Hill & Martinez-Diaz 2019), resilience is a core feature which unites these diverse areas. As further evidence of the ubiquity of resilience it has been noted that a review of Google scholar from 2000 to May 2020 identified 1.27 million returns on resilience research and ninety-seven per-cent were undertaken in the last decade (Friggotto et al. 2022). Resilience research has grown to cover the global financial crisis, the rise of populism, migration, climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and international conflicts (Young & Pinheiro 2022). Research and policy initiatives have focused primarily on defining and characterising resilience (e.g. Guistiniano et al. 2018); identifying its chief characteristics (e.g. Gove 2018), and its application in practice (e.g. Pinheiro et al. 2022). Interest in resilience has also emerged in the field of what is broadly termed human services, which encompasses social work (van Heugten 2023).

In this paper we present a pilot study that aims at detecting linguistic markers of resilience in the language of one social work student named Noreen when she was interviewed on the topic of resilience by one of the present authors who is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the Department of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Huddersfield.

We look for linguistic markers of resilience in Noreen's language when she talks about her placement experience. In social work, resilience is an integral prerequisite for literally surviving and staying mentally healthy in the daily encounters and when witnessing extreme poverty, mental health issues etc. in clients. Resilience is, briefly speaking, the ability to 'bounce back' from challenging and/or disturbing experiences. One constituent element of resilience surely is emotional intelligence.

This pilot study enables us to sharpen our methodology with the aim of linguistically analysing the language of a variety of people we intend to interview about their experience of resilience in relation to crime, being it probation officers, social workers dealing with criminal offenders, family members of convicted and incarcerated criminals, victims of crime etc. This project is at the very early stages, at present we prepare a proposal for the ethics commission at Huddersfield in relation to the interviews we intend to conduct, we search for suitable individuals for our interviews and, thirdly, we test our linguistic approach towards analysing such texts. We therefore cannot present a full-blown study and its results yet but instead an overview of how resilience can be defined, how our social

work student Noreen talks about resilience and some preliminary findings from analysing her answers.

We begin with a definition of resilience which provides the first challenge in our project as there is no well-cut, all-encompassing definition of the term.

1. Definition of Resilience

Although resilience has become a ubiquitous term across many areas of social policy as well as social work, its meaning and application in practice is less clear (Chandler 2014). In order to address this challenge, it is important to consider already existing attempts to define and conceptualise resilience.

Resilience originates from the Latin *salire* which means to climb or jump. By extension, it draws upon the term *resilire*. The prefix 're' means 'back' and as 'silire' means to 'jump or leap', the literal meaning of resilience is 'to return (jump or leap) back to the original state'. Resilience is more generally defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity, or the capacity to carry on in the face of difficulties (Considine 2019) and avoid to cross 'a threshold into alternative and possibly irreversible new states' (Powell et al. 2014). A general characteristic of resilience is that it is not exclusive to individuals but can also be applied to groups, organisations and physical properties. It also encompasses the ability to adapt to new and emergent situations (Friggotto et al. 2022). Where it becomes problematic is, as Garrett (2015, p. 2) states, that it is a protean and rather promiscuous term available to sources as disparate as the military and the world of science and architecture as well as social work and other areas of the public services. Indeed, across the different disciplines, there is no one-agreed-definition of resilience, and research tends to focus on one aspect within an individual field. This is evident in the field of social work and professional care work more generally. Resilience has evolved to be a contested term with concerns as to how and who defines it as well as its deployment in practice (Considine 2023).

Take, for example, the field of physics where there is a precise definition of resilience which is available for objective measurement (Friggotto et al. 2022). Here, resilience relates to a specific type of disturbance and one can measure the ability of a system to absorb energy when subject to a force or shock before it breaks (Kalpakjun & Schmid 2016). Physicists can measure the degree of resilience materials have. If there is a high level of elasticity then the level of resilience is high, and if there is a low level of resistance then the material can be said to have fragility, which is the opposite of resilience (Kalpakjun & Schmid 2016). Materials that do not oppose forces or shocks but are able to absorb them are the most resilient.

Seemingly, the same understanding of the term is applied to individuals, organisations, and social systems (Friggotto et al. 2022) which is problematic. For example in the context of human relations, the meaning of resilience is too broad as it is impossible to say whether resilience should be seen as a feature, a process, a measure, a capability or even a concept or philosophy (Bharma 2016).

One possible way of approaching a definition is through negation, that is to ask the question, '*What is not resilience?*' (Roe & Shulman 2008, p. 163).

2. The role of Resilience in Social Work

Resilience has traditionally been associated with the 'strengths-based approach' (Saleebey 2006), central to which is the notion that all experiences of trauma and adversity are

potentially recoverable. In this context, resilience is characterised by the '*ability to bear up in spite of these ordeals*' (Saleebey, cited in Cree, p. 187). As such it fits well with the current principles and values of the dominant framework defining social work practice (Professional Capabilities Framework and Standards of Proficiency) which advocates practice that enhances growth and change in individuals, families and communities. It is presented as a highly influential and pervasive model (Collins 2017) and seemingly fits with the long-standing liberal humanist tradition in social work (Payne 2011). It is said to be respectful of the individual and is promoting a collaborative approach with service users (Norman 2006).

Social Work, along with other occupations concerned with human services, is seen as being especially stressful (van Heugten 2024). There are many varied, complex, and inter-related causes of stress in social work practice. This includes exposure to working with the effects of trauma, increasing workloads, trying to manage with fewer resources, dealing with aggressive people, increasing bureaucratic demands and lack of supportive supervision (van Heugten 2024). These factors have been exacerbated by the consequences of COVID-19 and lockdown on both working practices and effects on vulnerable people (Kranke et al. 2021).

The last ten years have seen an increase in research examining the relationship between resilience and social work practice (e.g. Kinman & Grant 2022). Broadly speaking there are three evolutionary concepts of resilience that have emerged during this period (Hitchcock et al. 2020) which we introduce next.

The first concept is the 'psychological' or 'individual' approach that draws significantly from the field of positive psychology (Seligman 2002). Resilience is seen as arising from an individual's ability to be flexible in the face of adversity and to adapt new beliefs and behaviours (Grant & Kinman 2014). Resilience is therefore seen as emanating from enabling personality traits and attributes that help individuals thrive in adversity (e.g. Beddoe et al. 2013). Such qualities include developing empathic and reflective skills (e.g. McAllister & McKinnon 2009); gaining competency in mindfulness (e.g. Lynn 2009); enhancing emotional intelligence (e.g. Adamson et al. 2014), and drawing upon positive emotions and existing strengths (e.g. Collins 2008). This perspective has been enhanced by a growing number of studies, guides and policies showing how individual social workers can learn to be resilient practitioners (e.g. Megele 2011, Grant & Kinman 2014, Greer 2016).

The focus on the resilient individual has attracted criticism in that it reflects the dominant ideology of neoliberalism and that it is a socially blind approach to adversity (Garrett 2015). The individual notion of resilience is open to exploitation of practitioners by their employers (Considine 2023). Others have seen resilience as part of a wider business culture which draws on therapeutic practices, such as mindfulness, and co-opts them as a means of making unpalatable working conditions more palatable (Boltanski & Chiapello 2007). The consequence is to make the 'self' a project to work on at the expense of broader concerns (Cederström & Spicer 2015).

The second concept is the 'interactional' category, closely linked to the aforementioned 'individual/psychological' approach. It seeks to identify factors in the immediate work environment that can sustain resilience (e.g. Collins 2017). Among the several qualities and skills identified is the use of supportive supervision that enables reflection and self-development (McAllister & McKinnon 2009); recognising the values of social networks, both formal and informal, which foster inter-personal skills (e.g. Kapoulitsas and Corcoran

2015; Noble & Irwin 2009); the use of peer-support (e.g. Jenson et al. 2008), and establishing a work-life balance (Kinman et al. 2014). Another key factor to help develop an interactional basis for resilience is to embed a clear and critical appreciation of the term within social work educational programmes (e.g. Hitchcock et al. 2020).

This second 'interactional' approach has its ideological underpinning in the Social Capital Theory (Peters 1992). This theory holds that people acquire marketable skills through their working experiences (Fleming 2017). There is the possibility of developing resilience as a marketable quality, which can set people apart from their colleagues. Such application, it is argued, is part of a strategy to ally the goals of an organisation to individual aspirations, which can constitute a subtle form of manipulation (Cedarström & Spicer 2015).

The third and most recent development is 'ecological' or 'social' resilience. Here, the environment as a whole is central to developing resilience. The most significant pioneer of this approach is Michael Ungar (2019). This approach is based upon a latent critique of the above approaches in that although it recognises that individuals can possess and develop resilient qualities, it is the environment as a whole that is central to developing resilience. In other words, resilience resides in the networks and kinship that have and can be developed and that help people face adversity. It is about building communities on shared ideas, principles, concerns, and objectives and seeking to challenge the social causes of such problems (Hall & Lamont 2013). An ecological or social model of resilience shifts the focus from the individual to the wider social environment and the capacity to allow human flourishing (van Breda 2018). Such an approach can afford a political dimension to the notion of resilience in that it interrogates the social context in which reliance is defined and used (Garrett 2018).

A social model of resilience, it has been argued, fits within a long tradition in social work, which relates the individual to the social context (van Breda 2018). The 1920s, for example, saw the development of the 'person-in-environment' model of social work (Richmond 1922). This involves identifying the interplay between individual and family tensions and the structural factors impacting on the person (Weiss-Gal 2008). A number of researchers have developed various ecological theories or models, which embrace the interaction between the person and the social context which shapes their lives (e.g. Frost 2008; Hart et al. 2016).

3. Resilience as a Metaphor, Methodology

Most studies in resilience seek to address the puzzle as to why some people seem unscathed by traumatic events and other experience significant harm (Traynor 2017). Resilience can be seen as a metaphor in order to explain this phenomenon. Metaphors, as Lakoff and Johnson (2003) suggest that metaphors enable people to make sense of the more abstract aspects of life such as experiences and social relations. The dominant metaphor of resilience, according to Traynor, is the plucky, heroic individual overcoming adversity to achieve their goals. Analysing the metaphorical dimensions of resilience opens it up to new meanings and possibilities. Returning to the above mentioned possibility in physics to objectively measure the ability of a system to absorb energy before it breaks, one such standardised measurement is known as the Charpy pendulum. This is a scaling measure to identify the level of shock an entity can endure. However, the attempt to transpose a scientific feature to a non-scientific setting is problematic. Therefore finding a 'Charpy pendulum' for objectively measuring the human ability to 'bounce back' shows the limits of metaphorical meaning. In the context of human relations, the meaning of resilience is too broad to have any clear meaning and as such it is impossible to say

whether resilience should be seen as a feature, a process, a measure, a capability or even a concept or philosophy (Bhamra 2015).

In our study, we therefore do not wish to limit ourselves to metaphor identification. Instead, we hypothesise that there are other linguistic markers of resilience and we aim to detect them. As a starting point, we find it necessary to methodologically separate our aim of detecting linguistic markers of resilience from patterns of idiosyncratic language use unique to a specific person and relevant in forensic authorship analysis. Secondly, we need to mention mind style analysis and how our research differs from it. In short, we need to place our research methodologically and, furthermore, we need to determine what methods are best suited for our intended analysis.

Idiolect, to present a definition, is 'not merely what a speaker says at one time: it is everything that he could say in a given language' (Bloch 1948, p. 7) or an individual's unique use of language. Idiolect manifests itself through 'distinctive and idiosyncratic choices in speech and writing' (Coulthard et al. 2017, p. 15). The more idiolectic patterns can be identified, the more accurate authorship identification becomes. The shorter the text, however, the less idiolectic features show as a rule. Identifying idiolectic features is about detecting a comprehensive pattern in the language somebody uses and to compare this with a target text in order to determine whether the pattern in a target text and a reference text match. Instead of identifying enough 'peculiarities' in Noreen's language use, our objective is slightly different. We ask the question what traces of resilience we can find in Noreen's language that might be unique to her but are foremost indicative of her ability to 'bounce back'.

Secondly, we wish to place our research in relation to mind style analysis. The term was introduced by Fowler (1977, p. 103). According to Nuttall (2018, p. 16), mind style is to be regarded as 'a specific manifestation of a wider narrative phenomenon of point of view'. Mind style was developed with a focus on the fictional character but can be applied to the writings of a real life person like an offender suffering from a schizophrenic disorder as one of the present authors has shown elsewhere (Tabbert 2023, p. 253ff). Mind style can be evoked by various linguistic patterns ranging from the use of personal pronouns, transitivity patterns, metaphors and recurring source domains, syntactic and sentence structure through to preferred semantic fields or a character's idiosyncratic use of inductive logic. The linguistic patterns indicative of a mind style are as varied as the different possible mind styles themselves. With mind style analysis, the aim is again to discover a picture as comprehensive as possible of a character's or a person's peculiar world view or, in other words, their point of view.

Of course, if we look at the language Noreen uses when talking about resilience, we are interested in her world view but only in relation to resilience. And of course, we have to take idiolectic features in her language use into account which might be confused with resilience markers.

We argue that a way to identify resilience markers in Noreen's language begins with the 'element of choice over how to say something' (Jeffries & McIntyre 2010, p. 25) that is at the core of any stylistic analysis.

4. First Results

For this initial pilot study and in order to test our method, we extracted all instances of direct speech from the transcript of Noreen's interview, a female white British undergraduate student interviewed on June 28th, 2017 as quoted in one of the present author's thesis (Considine 2019, p. 101ff). The resulting document consists of 437 word tokens and 207 word types, calculated by using AntConc (Anthony 2022).

What is striking when reading Noreen's answers is her understanding of time, like in the following example:

Example 1

I mean, where do you want me to start? I have been here before you know what I mean.... and it is like... I think i am resilient... because I am still here and I keep going with it and it does feel completely frustrating because the context does not change

In this sentence, Noreen constructs the past, the present and the future, all by using present verb tense only (present perfect and simple present). Although the verb tense indicates present, the time adverb 'before' and the use of the present progressive serve as time deixis, indicating past and future respectively. This way, Noreen evokes a continuum or a time line on which she 'keeps going'. What constructs her movement as an endurance or burden even are the adverbs 'still' and 'frustrating' as well as the negation 'not'. Especially 'still' is worth a second look as it only becomes negatively connotated in this phrase through the interplay with 'frustrating'. In terms of Gestalt psychology and cognitive grammar, Noreen utilises a type of perceptual grouping known as figure-ground organisation: she is the moving figure against a ground that is the unchanged context in which she works. She thus adds further 'prominence to aspects of a whole text at the expense of others' (Giovanelli & Harrison 2018, p. 46).

Noreen uses the verb phrase 'keep going' twice in the document under scrutiny which consists of 437 word tokens. Here is the second instance:

Example 2

The ability to keep coming back, to keep going back in situations that can appear quite desperate, or helpless and go back with positivity, a sort of problem-solving approach, rather than a cynical 'been here before, seen it all before', kind of approach

Noreen appears to present her definition of resilience in this example but what we find linguistically is multi-layered repetition which has a foregrounding effect. Noreen uses the phrase 'to keep ...-ing back' twice and only changes the verb (come/go) which in itself presents a canonical opposition (Jeffries 2010). The head noun 'The ability' is being omitted in the second phrase, an ellipsis. The foregrounding effect lies on the process of returning to a difficult situation and constructs persistence. Noreen by using the adverb 'back' three times even makes use of the rhetorical device of a three-part-list (to keep coming back, to keep going back, go back) that indicates completeness (Jeffries 2010, p. 73) and might even hint at perfectionism.

As outlined earlier, resilience can be seen as a target domain in a conceptual metaphor, to explain the unknown (the target domain) with the known (source domain). Resilience being understood as 'bouncing back' is a dead metaphor due to the frequency this metaphorical expression is being used in the relevant literature. In the short document under scrutiny, Noreen presents two innovative metaphors.

Example 3

... on my placement I've really had to dig deep in my resilience bank because ...

Example 4

How do we exercise the resilience muscle in relation to challenging some of that bigger picture?

Noreen conceptualises resilience in terms of a bank account one can withdraw resilience from like money. We argue that Noreen uses the metaphor RESILIENCE IS MONEY STORED IN A BANK ACCOUNT. This relates to the psychological/individual and thus neoliberal approach to resilience where it is up to the individual to store resilience points in a bank account and withdraw when needed for spending. This leaves aside any social or governmental reasons for the predicament Noreen finds herself in in her placement and also ignores any networking or interactional approach possible to build up mindfulness or peer-group interaction. In Example 4, Noreen constructs resilience as a muscle that grows when being trained and that can be used to do 'muscle work' (RESILIENCE IS A HUMAN MUSCLE). This again fits with the individual approach but at the same time hints at the interactional approach because of the inclusive pronoun 'we'.

In summing up this presentation of our pilot study and some preliminary findings, it becomes clear that the search for resilience markers in the language encompasses all stylistic tools available to us but might be a foremost cognitive approach. It also becomes clear that although some of the methods overlap with mind style analysis and/or forensic authorship identification, our search for linguistic patterns is dictated by the topic and led by the question of how the interviewee constructs resilience and their understanding of it.

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