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Learning and knowing

Narratives, memory and biographical knowledge in interview interaction¹

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Abstract

The qualitative research interview engages with experience of social reality in sites of social interaction. Research interview respondents provide insight in biographical interviews into the significance of critical change processes for their individual and collective learning. Auto/biographical narratives of learning, are emergent, evolving accounts produced in a learning space hedged in by the demands of the “reflexive project of the self” which throw the individual more than ever before in processes of lifelong or life-wide learning onto their biographical resources. These resources can be understood as representing individual learning processes which are capable of furthering the creation of new cultural and social structures of experience, new forms of biographical knowledge which emerge out of the precarious balancing-act between routines and learning transitions. Research interviews embedded in interaction and participant reflexivity, addressing the learning transitions told in talk, access the construction of knowledge as adults move on to new biographical spaces and position themselves anew.

Keywords: biographicity; knowledge; learning transitions; grammar of meaning

Introduction

The qualitative research interview engages with individual and group experience of social reality and observes, questions and records the testimony of the actors themselves in sites of social interaction chosen for the collection of data and its subsequent analysis. The relationship between social actors who are involved in processes of change and transformation in very different social, professional, personal contexts and the researcher has been central to the discussion of research methods and research aims throughout the various methodological *turns* of the last decades (see Merrill & West, 2009). That relationship can be both reflexive and participatory, and can spur change itself as well as demanding that we think about the nature of transformation in learning.

This is particularly true, as many of us have experienced, of interview-based research, particularly when the interview serves as a catalyst for narratives of change.

Research interview respondents participating in diverse life worlds provide insight in unstructured discursive interviews into the significance of critical change processes for their individual and collective learning. In so doing they can be heard building their own discourses of learning, shaped in the interdiscursive layering of interaction with (a) their own told narrative, (b) with the researcher agenda and (c) in the all-important dialogue with those significant Others whose voices and narratives give expression to the complexity and transacted meanings of individual and group learning contexts.

Incidents of recollection and knowledge sharing drawn from a research site involving an adult teaching professional will be examined here. With the help of a detailed example of linguistic analysis of interview data in the form of a micro-narrative related by the Egyptian university teacher Sherifa, the paper will discuss an instance of shared learning and knowledge constitution which takes place at the very limits of talk heard in the research interview. In this way, the theoretical and methodological potential of the interview as a space in which learning and knowledge-sharing can be questioned, chronicled and theorised, will be aired.

Life-wide biographical resources as subjective knowledge

Auto/biographical narratives of learning, unfolding in the interaction examined in qualitative interviews, are emergent, evolving accounts of motives, motivations, of choices, renunciations, blockages and liberation, even. They are stories of the self, and they chart the difficult process of the reflexive construction of a (potentially) more secure, cohesive self. In these auto/biographical stories which we “collect”, the context of the research interview is a learning space – West prefers to call it a ‘transitional space’ (Merrill & West, 2009, pp. 121-122) – in which the many stories of experience can be tried out, and new attempts at coherence and security can be made. Yet, this learning space is simultaneously hedged in by the demands of the “reflexive project of the self”, which dictate a constant attention to the wholeness and social “suitability” of the professional/personal/emotional biography. The peremptory nature of the demands on the individual to be able to recount a rich (interesting) *and* a *suitable* life story can be experienced as oppressive, resulting in a sense of inadequacy, in silence, or in a *blocked*, undeveloping biography. Indeed, Formenti has likened the demand to produce a story to the experience of giving birth (Formenti, 2006).

It has been convincingly argued (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) that the growing relevance of concepts of lifelong or life-wide learning and the redefinition of institutional and informal learning, throw the individual more than ever before onto their accumulated, layered and multifarious biographical resources. These resources can be understood as representing, put simply, the individual distillation of learning processes, the individual “twist” given to experience which brings forth subjective forms of knowledge, social, tacit, common-sense. These in their turn are capable of furthering the creation of new cultural and social structures of experience. This social practice of accessing (and constructing) life-wide biographical resources in order to meet the everyday requirements of a more individually steered life-course Alheit and Dausien call ‘biographicity’ (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 574).

The role of learning and knowledge acquisition for the so-called knowledge society has been transformed. The changing status of traditional institutions of learning (see Field, Merrill & West, 2012), the trend to “individualisation”, the transformation of the

meaning of work and the re-definition in the post-industrial age of the role of knowledge, are some of the most important signs of the transformation which Western society is currently in the grips of (Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Field, 2001; Jarvis, 2000).

In this new situation, the layers of experience of accreted and consciously accessed biographical resources can – indeed, where institutions, communities or polities shift or fail, they *must* be looked upon – as a new form of knowledge. This biographical knowledge emerges out of the precarious balancing act between the life-being-lived, on the one hand, and un-lived or potentially-liveable life, on the other. For, following Alheit, the everyday-common sense impression shared by all is that we have our lives in our own hands, that we are the subjects – steering the plan – of our biographies (Alheit, 2006). This impression of control, of direction, is furnished us by the biographical knowledge we have stored up. This stock of experience is potentially accessible to us, yet no-one can make use of all the possibilities it contains. It represents more alternatives for filling out the social field we live our lives in than we can realistically grasp or take control of. Our biography, Alheit argues, ‘contains therefore a significant potential of “unlived life”’ (Alheit, 2006, p. 5). This is the “overspill” of potential lives we accumulate that feeds our knowledge of ourselves, our life stories and their meaning in relation to others.

Biographical narrative and shared grammars of meaning

Central to this understanding of biographical knowledge construction is the *relational* nature of biographical narratives and biographical *work*. Learning and knowledge acquisition, predicated as they are on biographical experience, are embedded in social learning environments. Such learning environments, *learning landscapes* or *ecologies of knowledge*, are characterised by shared, situation-specific meaning-making (Evans, 2009b; Evans & Kurantowicz, 2009; Miller, 1994). In these interactive environments, biographies, their narrative forms, and their subjects are often conspicuously constructed in relation to *others* (Mason, 2004). Memory, too, as Halbwachs (1997) has argued arises in the relationship to others, becoming collective memory, shared memory, in the physical and emotional company of others. Experience mediated by memory is voiced and constructed in narratives held together, too, by language which draws on *grammars* of telling. These *grammars* can be thought of as shared language-worlds for telling life-stories and co-constructing biographical knowledge. The narrative, as a vehicle of ‘shared knowledge’ (Tomasello, 2011, p. 235), created and employed for the purpose of speaking of events and things and people over and through time(s), and capable of producing ‘filigree time accounting’² (Tomasello, 2011, p. 304), performs this task with the aid of shared conventions of understanding and what Tomasello calls a truly ‘extravagant syntax’ (Tomasello, 2011, p. 302). Shared understanding of narrative practice (how to begin, how to finish, how to express judgement, emotion, reluctance, and so on) is used to build the theories and standpoints that emerge in narratives as pieces of such ongoing effective biographic knowledge (Capps & Ochs, 1995). The life (lived, un-lived, to be lived, re-called) told in the interview is essentially embodied experiential memory and as such ‘individual, un-reproducible – it dies with each person’ (Susan Sontag 2003, as cited in Assmann, 2008, p. 49; see also Steiner, 1998)³. While they cannot be *embodied* by another, Assmann adds, they can be shared, for as soon as ‘they are verbalized in the form of a narrative or represented by a visual image ... they can be exchanged, shared, corroborated, confirmed, corrected, disputed, and even appropriated’ (Assmann, 2008, p. 50).

Interaction and the construction of the social

Negotiating identities in interaction with others is the most basic communicative practice in our routine and non-routine existence, it is an ‘ongoing accomplishment of the concerted activities of daily life’ the accomplishment of which is ‘ordinary, artful’ and known and used by members of society (Garfinkel, 1967, p. vii). A prerequisite to successful interaction, clearly, is having access to learning spaces within which biographical resources can be acquired and deployed, and which, in turn, determine how experience and common sense are interpreted. Experience of oneself, as Luckmann has noted, is constructed in the intersubjective experience of others’ experience (Luckmann, 1981).

The overarching model of social experience I am advancing, then, means that orderly social interaction is accomplished in artful, common-sense fashion, involving accounts which combine particulars of the social and cultural practices of individuals as well as their conversational or more diffusely interactional practices (Silverman, 1997). The orderly accomplishment of everyday practices takes place in settings managed and *done* with an acknowledgement of conscious shaping and choice, with a recognition of the *becoming*, i.e. the contingency of settings as they unfold, and with a recognition of social context and culture as parts of those settings.

Interactions of all kinds, then, family or work situations, social relations, social or cultural practice(s) must all be seen as sites in which *doing biography* is practiced, that is, working on the construction of, and deployment and use of, biographical resources. The discourse practices involved in the biographical co-work done in the auto/biographical research interview context range across past, present and future in the talk and connect up with the broader, larger materiality of social life, but their production – in the interview – is local. Engaging with the localness of biographic narratives is, however, as Schiffrin rightly remarks, fraught with difficulties. ‘Many aspects of discourse’, she writes, ‘are locally negotiated and co-constructed: identifying them and understanding why they appear, and how they do so, requires close attention to minute details of emergent properties and sequential contingencies of multi-functional units in discourse that are notoriously difficult to identify...’ (Schiffrin, 2006, p. 10).

The detail at the micro level serves to document openly how this meaning making takes place, how this is affected by group belonging, ethnic or cultural discourses, gender, age, professional and educational positioning, and so on. The detail gained through close analysis is generalizable over the length of a complete biographical narrative, and potentially to other narratives and the talk of that same person(s). The analysis, documented and directly linked to the interview transcript artefact, is falsifiable, as is the interview transcript and the theoretical and practical criteria drawn upon in its making (Ochs, 1979; Wengraf, 2001).

Detailed linguistic-discursive analysis of the life-story allows the focus to be directed to the culturally-known parameters of meaning-making in spoken interaction. The strong argument, for example, of the *objective* approach in life-history and biography research (e.g. Bertaux, 2005; Bourdieu, 1993; Wengraf, 2001) that the *told life* attains generalizability only through comparison and contrast with the *lived life*, validated through recourse to historical-social *fact*, runs the risk of reducing the string of narrative parts of a biographical-narrative interview to an informational mask against which the content of a life course is compared. Similarly, while another influential branch of biography research, the documentary method (Nohl, 2005) embraces the notion of interaction as ‘shared knowledge’ (or ‘conjunctive experience’) (Nohl, 2005,

paragraphs 4, 5), it leaves the told biography behind, I would argue, in its concern to ‘identify the essential framework of orientation’ of the life history and search for means of interpretation beyond the action of the interview interaction (Nohl, 2005, paragraphs 4, 5)⁴.

Memory and discursive identity

In fact, ambiguity and incompleteness characterise the autobiographical narrative. Linde points out how other peoples’ stories (related in reported speech, embedded and *layered* in the telling) become the speaker’s *own* stories through a process of appropriation or conversion (Linde, 1993). The discontinuous and unfinished state of the biographical narrative is embodied therefore in the discourse employed by the autobiographical narrator. Here Goffman’s concept of *embedding* can be used to describe this aspect of the speaker’s self. The words we speak, he points out, ‘are often not our own, at least our current “own”’ for ‘although who speaks is situationally circumscribed, in whose name words are spoken is certainly not’ (Goffman, 1981, p. 3). Thus embedding makes it possible to *enact* numerous voices over space and time within the interactive frame of the oral narrative and narrative interview (Goffman, 1981). This is a central feature of interactive talk in the research interview. Indeed, for the development of the speaker’s *own* discourses within an emergent learning biography, the *converted* and *enacted* words of others or a non-current *self* – what I have called elsewhere *embedded speech* (Evans, 2004) – are an important device for the contextualization of talk and serve as a powerful means of validating knowledge claims.

The tension between memory and recollection (i.e. the act of *re-calling* experiences, visions, images, sounds, etc., from among the accumulated *lived* stock of a person’s life) is developed in the embodied interaction of narrative practices. We have, as Ricoeur points out, only memory to help us make sense of our past: ‘Pour le dire brutalement, nous n’avons pas mieux que la mémoire pour signifier que quelque chose a eu lieu, est arrivé, s’est passé avant que nous déclarions nous en souvenir’⁵ (Ricoeur, 2000, p. 26). Before a memory can be understood as acquired, established, the act of recall must be brought to bear, and the *lived thing* must be salvaged, selected, and re-proposed in the new context of a coherent biographical account. Looking back, viewing where s/he has come from, pondering on where this is all leading, the biographical subject recreates past, present and future with the palette of the immediate now, whereby the *now* contains both temporal as well as spatial elements and current/non-current other perspectives.

The language in which pieces of our life-stories and events which we have experienced directly (or vicariously through the narratives of others) are welded together is ‘multivocal’ (Schiffrin, 2006, p. 204) and multilayered. Alheit compares the spatial complexity of narratable biographical resources with a ‘landscape made up of different strata and regions of different levels of nearness and distance’ (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 578)⁶. The temporal organization of discourse, too, involves multiple time-planes, and non-linear trajectories through lives. True, embodied experiential memory, as we saw above is ‘individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person’ (Susan Sontag 2003, as cited in Assmann, 2008, p. 49), and the ineluctable progress of lives through time from the past to the future dominates our narratives, and forces form onto them. But narratives possess another singular characteristic: recollection, Ricoeur affirms, by its very selective, determined nature, inverts the so-called order of time. ‘En lisant la fin dans le commencement et le commencement dans la fin, nous

apprenons aussi à lire le temps à rebours, comme la récapitulation des conditions initiales d'un cours d'action dans ses conséquences terminales' (Ricoeur, 1983, p. 131). The *end*, in which knowledge claims and understanding are proposed, re-shapes retrospectively the *beginning*. Mishler similarly points out that if we wish to understand how individuals learn, change, and develop, then we 'must have an alternative to the linear temporal-order causal model, one that allows for their acting in the present toward a desirable or away from an undesirable future state of affairs' (Mishler, 2006, p. 36). And, he continues: 'it must also allow for their ways of reinterpreting the meaning of past events in terms of later consequences, through which they redefine who they are and revise the plots of their life stories' (Mishler, 2006, p. 36). In the following, the workings of multivocality and recollection in a biographical narrative will suggest how shared knowledge is shaped out of the ambiguities of past experience.

Sharing knowledge at the limit of talk

We shall look closely at an extract from a biographical narrative collected in Egypt with an Egyptian university teacher who had an Anglophone education. The content of her story is quickly told: Sherifa, 40-year-old, describes her development from, in her words, naive and inexperienced to more experience through contact with serious illness, as a witness of the suffering of two close women friends.

The following markup is used in the interview transcript extracts produced here:

Table 1. Interview markup

xx:: =	Word-lengthening
(.)	Pauses (audible breaks in flow of speech)
(1.0)	Pause timed in seconds (to nearest second)
hh	Out-breaths/laughter
.hh	In-breaths
°xxx°°	Quiet speech
+xxx++	Rapid speech
xxx:::	Drawn-out utterance, drawl

Source: Author

Sherifa speaks

when I now look back:: I I see that I was SO stu::pid (2) specially the first two years when I I knew NOTHING/ you know/ like (.) being SO naïve and judgeMENTal and (.) I I had for example no grey colouring between I just BLACK and WHITE/ and this is the effect or the influence of the nuns that I was uhh brought up .hh ahh:: amONG and:: uhm no I'm different (1) I'm more understanding now (2) the more you know the more (.) the better you become (4.0) well this is not like a clichéd thing but it is a fact the more I/ know the °more Sherifa develops°° the more experiences I go through/ like the first time when my my friend wa- died from cancer I mean had to go through that experience with all the pAIN/ And all the MEDicine and (.) the FEELINGS/ that she was going through and she was telling me about and I sometimes used in the writings the pieces that I wrote (.) ahhm the FEELINGS I had at that time not the same (xxx) like the ones I'm having now (1.0) a close friend of mine is suffering from cancer (2.0) °she's dying I think of (.) of it°° (2.0) so that's DIFFERENT/ (.) I'm now able to help her more and to support her more and now I understand the feelings they go through and I can (.) HELP her with these things (.) and I think that (.) strengthened me because I was so fragILE? at the beginning I was always scared of the smallest things I would PANic at the smallest event (.) now I'm differENT/ and the and the more I read about cancer and how people go through? and

stuff like that I'm helping her this is one aspect of it (.) so BASED on that I think I'm (.)
 you know this applies to all (.) the other things (2.0) the more you know the more::
 developed you become characterwise of course (1.0) I'm not necessarily (xxx) or better
 sometimes

The narrative has been divided into preamble, episode 1, episode 2, and coda. Each segment is analysed according to language structure (for more detail on this analytical approach see Capps & Ochs, 1995; Evans, 2009a) and an intertextual interpretation is provided.

Preamble

1. When I now look back::
2. I I see that I was SO stu::pid (2)
3. specially the first two years when I I knew NOTHING!
4. you know like (.) being SO naïve and judgeMENTal and (.)
5. I I had no grey colouring between
6. I just (.) BLACK and WHITE/
7. and this is the effect or the influence of the nuns that I was uhh brought up .hh ahh::
amONG
8. and:: uhm no I'm different (1)
9. I'm more understanding now (2)

Adverbs of routine time with present tense epistemic verbs of looking back and seeing (understanding) are expressed with the aid of agentic first person. The epistemic verbs suggest confidence and knowledge. While L.4 repeats the intensified structure of L.2, the avoidance of first person, using “being”, generalizes beyond Sherifa herself. Her prosody is interesting: through the parallelism of 2 adjectives in LL.4 and 6, balance is achieved. Careful semantic choices here (the play between “effect” or “influence”) can be seen as an example of intellectual hedging, tailored perhaps for the researcher. Sherifa also avoids completing the idea in a non-agentic fashion: “brought up” suggests perhaps, “by”, which would heighten the sense of disempowerment, and would intensify the conclusion that her lack of balance and judgement was the result of the nuns’ teaching. By hesitating and prolonging the search for a “correct” term, the resulting “among” arouses some surprise; the overall image of the learning environment is however refocused and given, if possible, an even more all-encroaching habitus.

In L.8 the drawn-out pronunciation and the hesitation serve to mark the separation from the previous statement, preparing the delivery of contrasting information and signal, too, a precautionary hedge before Sherifa makes an evaluation of her character; the pause frames the statement and may be to allow the listener to take in her evaluation as well as to prepare for the following detail in L.9. Sherifa makes it clear that there has been a change and she defines that change. The verb changes, too, are interesting: Sherifa moves across a stretch of talk, and succeeds in modulating her account from past (*I was*) to the immediate and affirmed present (*I'm now*), via a generalizing state

(*being*). As already remarked, Sherifa's generalization can be heard as seeking to lend her evaluation of herself greater "macro" level justification, which she backs up skilfully and surprisingly by the locution "brought up among" the nuns at the convent school she attended in Cairo.

The following segment introduces an interesting play with a figure of speech which will be employed several times. In fact, Sherifa here introduces the ordering and the composition of this micro-narrative. With the help of the fixed expression (*the more - the more*) she is able to construct a discrete narrative comprising evaluation, development, (complicating) detail, critical events, dénouement and a generalising coda (Labov, 1999). Let us recall Tannen's remark: for her repetition represents 'ways that meaning is created by the recurrence and re-contextualization of words and phrases in discourse' (Tannen, 2007, p. 9). The intertextuality practiced by Sherifa on her own words through the repetition of pieces of language has the effect, following Tannen, of creating 'layers of meaning' (Tannen, 2007, p. 13). The repetition of sounds, the reiterations, and the phonetic and rhythmic similarities of her talk are pervasive phenomena in all forms of interaction, and attending to 'the sound level of discourse', Tannen writes, 'gets us closer to the way people use and perceive language in conversation' (Tannen, 2007, p. 16).

10. the more you know the more (.) the better you become (4.0)

11. well this is not like a clichéd thing but it is a fact

Evidently under a certain feeling of pressure to explain or justify her remarks, Sherifa adopts a cautious hedging approach and fends off the judgement that what she has just said is in fact a cliché of the worst sort. She rebuts categorically:

12. the more I/ know the °more Sherifa develops°°

13. the more experiences I go through/

This reprise of the figure of speech referred to already is a curious example of redundancy. For, after having used in L.10 the universalizing and impersonal form (*you*), Sherifa effectuates a complete turn-around by taking up the figure of speech, but this time in the first person. As if that were not enough, she personalizes the utterance still more: the "I" becomes "Sherifa". The phrase is whispered (see the symbols ° and °° at the start and finish of her words to denote the quiet articulation of the words). So light, almost inaudible is her voice at this point. This way of personalizing her words may represent here a mark of confidence towards the researcher. We may see or rather hear it as alignment to the "Other" as a way of disarming the potential criticism coming from the researcher that Sherifa may have sensed or anticipated when she felt obliged to deny the clichés in L.11 above. Here Sherifa sets out evidently to continue and complete her rhetorical aside. The figure of speech remains only half-finished, however, to be taken up again and completed after the following two inserted micro-narratives.

Episode 1: The first time

14. like the first time when my my friend wa- died from cancer

Connecting up with the experiences she has had, Sherifa introduces here a *first time* experience of cancer, signalling that this is the initial of a series of comparable experiences. Such signals are an important signpost for a coming structuring of events and are crucial for the contextualisation of the interaction, and uphold the sequential coherence of the narrative flow (see Schiffrin, 1993). Harvey Sachs, too, highlights this phenomenon, drawing our attention to the *work* prefacing does in preparing the co-speaker for the outcome yet to be unrolled. First stories implicate the telling of second stories and ‘second stories are different than first stories’ (Sacks, 1992, pp. II 19-21). Here Sherifa is demonstrating the force of the restructuring of time within the narrative she is in the process of constructing. Ricoeur has called this type of narrative temporality ‘configurational’ (Ricoeur, 1983, p. 130) time: the end of the narrative is read in the beginning and the beginning in the end, i.e. we learn to read time backward, recapitulating the beginnings of action in the ultimate consequences, which are here Sherifa’s learning experience and her state of greater maturity in the present (Mishler, 2006). Sherifa seems to hesitate as to how she will name or describe her friend. Sherifa opted for “died”, thereby revealing the end of the micro-narrative she is in the process of telling.

- 15. and they had to go through that experience
- 16. with all the pAIN/ and all the MED/icine and (.) the FEELINGS/
- 17. that she was going through
- 18. and she was telling me about

The switch to an unspecified “they” in L.15 seems to generalise and widen the tragedy, extending the scope of the event to others also involved. The modal verb of necessity (*they had to*) hammers home the inescapability of the situation. It is a process that had to be gone through. The illness, interestingly, is not named. This is not simply a question of economy of language. The euphemism of the event – it becomes “that experience” – is unnamed, but there for all to see or feel. L.16 demonstrates the power of repetition. The repetition of the same structure (*all the*) together with the regularly rising intonation on three significant nouns aids the scansion of the utterance. There is a rhythm of events here: we can perhaps hear this as a series of blows. Those involved, we may feel, are struck by the waves of troubles – pain, medicines, feelings. In L.17 Sherifa then shifts the view directly to her suffering friend. No longer is it those involved who are suffering, but the sick friend in 3rd person. The same verb is employed as in L.15 (*going through*) and the shift of verb tense to the continuous form *prolongs* the suffering as well as foregrounding it more. In L.18, the immediacy of the continuous tense from L.17 is continued here, and Sherifa places herself in the picture she is creating. Sherifa is validating her right to possible knowledge of the illness via the communications of her dying friend. The interactive frame Sherifa is thus actively constructing here is based on her direct experience of cancer, fatal illness and the feelings of the dying.

- 19. I sometimes used in the writings the pieces that I wrote (.)
- 20. ahhm the FEELINGS I had at that time
- 21. not the same (xxx) like the ones I’m having now (1.0)

In L.19 Sherifa relates that she (her agency is foregrounded) has used the experiences shared with her dying friend in pieces of writing she has done. The process of writing is placed in a past relative to the narrative present, is presented as discontinued (*used, wrote*). Her writing is further qualified as occasional and what she wrote down is subject to a semantic uncertainty. Were they “writings” or “pieces”? What does Sherifa intend to convey? What seems plausible is that though downplaying the significance of her writing practices as a hedge against possible questioning or criticism, she nevertheless includes this detail in order to develop the interactive frame she is involved in constructing: she wishes to underline her knowledge claims, warranting them through the example of writing as a product of experiential learning, and as a cultural marker of the catharsis she has gone through. In LL.20-21, Sherifa moves from “that time” to the immediate present along the axis of her changed feelings.

Episode 2: A close friend

22. a close friend of mine is suffering from cancer (2.0)

23. °she’s dying I think of (.) of it°° (2.0)

Here in LL.22-23 we hear the paired verbs *suffering/dying*, both of them in the present continuous, accompanied by a drop of voice pitch and volume in L.23 with the hedging “I think”. Again we hear how Sherifa’s voice almost disappears (again the symbols ° and °°). This is a passage that steps out of the dominant frame of this narrative. It is an example of *out of frame* discourse (Schiffrin, 1993). Sherifa passes for a moment outside the narrative and changes voice, and in doing this, she transfers the attention of the interactants away from her narrative towards themselves in order to cement the coherence of this moment of shared knowledge and awareness (Tannen, 2007).

24. so that’s DIFFERENT! (.)

25. I’m now able to help her more

26. and to support her more

27. and now I understand the feelings they go through

28. and I can (.) HELP her with these things (.)

29. and I think that (.) strengthened me

The very strong repetition of the 1st person in this evaluation is evident. Sherifa stresses her agency and orchestrates it with the aid of differentiated modal verbs: “I’m able” (L.25), implicit in (L.26), “I can” (L.28). We hear also the rhythmic repetition of *help – support – HELP*. Other language is re-introduced from above and re-deployed discursively: *DIFFERENT* (from L.8 above); the experience verb “go through”, now in conjunction with feelings (LL.16 and 17 above), but also connecting with “go through experiences” (L.13 and L.15 above). The epistemic verbs “understand” (L.27) and “think” (L.29) further assert her knowledge and identity claim as a knowing, more mature person.

30. because I was so fragILE? at the beginning

31. I was always scared of the smallest things

32. I would PANic at the smallest event (.)

We have the striking directness of a semantic trio: “fragile”, “scared”, “PANic”, underscored twice by raised pitch. There is emphasis, too, of her previous state of *weakness* through prosodic repetition of the adjective “smallest”. This is a clear example of that use of prosodic speech referred to by Günthner as ‘hyperbolic use of adverbs and quantifiers’ (Günthner, 1997, p. 187) as a ‘rhetoric device to communicate emotional stances.’ (Günthner, 1997, p. 187), sharing knowledge acquired and making knowledge claims in situ.

33. now I’m differENT?

34. and the and the more I read about cancer and how people go through?

35. and stuff like that

36. I’m helping her this is one aspect of it (.)

The repetition of “different” (see L.8) in conjunction with the adverb of time “now” and present and present continuous verbs return us to the broader contemporary frame of her 1st person narrative. In L.34 Sherifa picks up the “the more – the more” figure of speech last heard at L.13 jointly with the experience verb phrase used already five times above (*go through*). The hesitation element here is pervasive, however. Sherifa’s mitigation of her narrative through a false start (L.34), a hedging generic (L.35) and a mitigating expression (*this is one aspect of it*) suggest uncertainty about the effect of her example.

Coda

37. so BASED on that I think I’m (.)

38. you know this applies to all (.) the other things (2.0)

39. the more you know the more:: developed you become

The logical consequential “so” and the strong epistemic verb “think” and 1st person agency in L.37 gives way to a generalising 2nd person “you” in LL.38 and 39. We have a final reprise of the figure of speech begun in L.10 with evolution from “better” (L.10) via “develops” (L.12) to “developed” here.

Regarding the coda, Labov says that this final segment of the narrative is *one* of the options the narrator has for signalling the end of the story. In addition, the coda ‘may also contain general observations or show the effects of the events on the narrator’ (Labov, 1999, p. 229). Sherifa succeeds in her coda in creating a bridge between the memories and emotions of her account and the present. By framing her words with the determining “so BASED on that”, she brings the researcher and herself back to the start of this narrative. She signals the overall gain that has been made by the telling. She signals, too, that recollection of diverse own lived experiences, bedded with each other and with others’ lives, creates a space for tentative knowledge, for cautious understanding. Something has been developed in talk, in a dialogue with, on one level,

the researcher, but perhaps more importantly, in a dialogue with herself in the narrative of her experience. Something of the experience has been developed and passed on.

Verbalization of knowledge in the everyday

The life stories in which self and identity are produced in a *story-world* are ‘a pervasive form of text through which we construct, interpret, and share experience’ (Schiffrin, 1996, p. 167). Schiffrin argues that what she terms ‘verbalization’ (Schiffrin, 1996, p. 168), represents: ‘the way we symbolize, transform, and displace a stretch of experience from our past ... into linguistically represented episodes, events, processes, and states’ (Schiffrin, 1996, p. 168). This process of verbalization of stretches of experience into a linguistic representation recognisable as an oral history or oral autobiography, is a process of creation of coherence in an individual’s life story, according to Charlotte Linde (Linde, 1993). ‘In order to exist in the social world’ (Linde, 1993, p. 219) she maintains, ‘an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story’ (Linde, 1993, p. 219).

Life stories are essentially occupied with the necessity to synchronise two disparate levels of experienced time: firstly, the dimension of events and experiences which usually have a routine, daily, everyday frame, and secondly, those which operate on the life-time scale/horizon, which ‘links long past events with past experiences, past with present experience and ultimately present with conceivable future events’ (Alheit, 1983, p. 189). The cyclical, routine, repeated character of the everyday offers security and provides sets of “frames” for communication and interpretation (Tannen, 1993). Stepping out of the everyday frame to *tell* a story of the past, to recall something, to reminisce, is a trigger to retrospective (self-) analysis, no matter how casual it may be. It may be seen as a need to re-establish *order* or *balance* each time the secure frame of the everyday is departed from, for however brief a moment.

Self-knowledge, others’ knowledge, biographical knowledge

Biographical narratives, then, are to a large extent reliant both on the cluttering details of the everyday and the ambiguous and re-cyclable words and frames of layered accounts offered in interaction by others. An important aspect of this joint biography work is that the discourses involved are not merely ambiguous and in need of validation but that the interaction is played out in a potentially threatening environment where the biographical self, - however difficult it is to formulate sufficiently clearly the theoretical demarcations here between the discourses of self and the construction of emergent identity - is in a state of becoming/changing.

The analysis in extenso of a piece of talk embedded within a biographical interview around Sherifa’s learning processes in general, in the family, in her profession, etc., demonstrated the workings of the following: we hear moves across *time* axes, involving plausibly historical and created, interdiscursive time frames. These are knowable and controllable via control of real life data, and unknowable unaccounted-for connections which are the product of this telling and are tailored for the understanding of the correspondent – or for what the teller takes to be understanding. The “success” of the knowledge-sharing taking place can be measured by the sequential flow and direction of the further talk.

Here, with detailed linguistic-discursive analysis of the life-story, the focus is directed to the culturally-known parameters of meaning-making in spoken interaction. The detailed linguistic analysis of parts of a biographical narrative provides evidence of the local construction of social action. Further, the comparison of specific language phenomena across the whole told life (i.e. the whole current narrative) with phenomena observed in other narratives (same or other narrators), i.e. a corpus-based approach (Bauer & Aarts, 2000; Evans, 2004), is able to provide a certain degree of insight into lives and the communicated, *language*d, form their telling takes.

As each narrated life is filled or inundated with the dialogue(s) of and with others, of the near and distant contexts in which they are embedded - discursively, temporally, near/far - knowing remains a contingent experience. This knowledge is more suspected, grasped at by intuition and feeling, sifted and guessed at in language, than sorted by certainty. Ex post facto recollection of biographical experience – the inclusion of the absent past in the communicated present – provides, Schiffrin points out, ‘gradual understanding of what happened’ (Schiffrin, 2006, p. 205) and leads to reconstruction of the meanings of past experiences. A research interview, embedded in interaction and participant reflexivity, and addressing the learning transitions told in talk, can “tap into” the construction of new knowledge adults acquire (Alheit, 2007) as they break with routines of everyday experience and move on to new biographical spaces in which they can position themselves anew. A limited vision of knowledge construction, perhaps, but one of the small things, nevertheless, of great importance in narrated lives.

Notes

¹ A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the ESREA Life History and Biographical Research Network Conference *Wisdom and knowledge in researching and learning lives: diversity, difference and commonalities*, Milano, Italy, March 12-15, 2009.

² [“filigrane zeitliche Buchhaltung”]

³ George Steiner has expressed this in a similar fashion: ‘No two human beings share an identical associative context. Because such a context is made up of the totality of an individual existence, because it comprehends not only the sum of personal memory and experience but also the reservoir of the particular subconscious, it will differ from person to person’ (Steiner, 1998, p. 178).

⁴ Nohl puts it thus: ‘Denn es ist nicht die Aufgabe des Forschenden, einen Fall besonders gut zu kennen, sondern seine wesentlichen Orientierungsrahmen zu identifizieren, die sich zugleich vom Fall abheben und auch in anderen Fällen finden lassen. Typen lassen sich herausbilden, wenn man herausarbeitet, mit welchen spezifischen Erfahrungshintergründen bestimmte Orientierungsrahmen systematisch – und das heißt nicht nur im einem Einzelfall – zusammenhängen’ (Nohl, 2005, paragraph 4) [For it is not the job of the researcher to be familiar with one particular case. Rather it is to identify the essential frames of reference which are independent of the one case and which can be found in other cases. Types can be built up by working out which experiences certain frames of reference are connected to in a systematic fashion – and that means not only in one individual case. – My translation]

⁵ [‘To put it brutally, we have nothing other than memory to signify that something took place, occurred, happened before we declare that we can remember it’ (My translation)]

⁶ [‘Landschaft aus verschiedenen Schichten und Regionen abgestufter Nähe und Ferne’ (Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 578)]

⁷ [‘...der vorvergangene mit vergangenen Ereignissen, vergangene mit gegenwärtigen und schließlich gegenwärtige mit zukünftig denkbaren verbindet’ (Alheit, 1983, p. 189)]

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