

Life History's Discourse

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1.

In this text¹ I would like to present some preliminary results of an interdisciplinary research. A specific contemporary Bulgarian community is observed in which the informants are above the age of 70. Here some of the interviews taken from females will be described. These women have spent a large part of their lives in their families and among colleagues, often without even knowing their neighbours from across the street. They have led a comparatively reticent way of life. Their female friends, neighbors and relatives define them as talkative and capable of managing their affairs as well as women who have had difficult lives. This was what attracted my attention to them. I will present the results of more than twenty recordings of life histories, going into greater detail on fragments of several of them, since each life history is extraordinarily rich in observations and conclusions.

The social role of this female group in the small community is peripheral, which is typical of women who have devoted their lives to their families. Nevertheless, their social identification, judging by their life history, is quite distinct and meaningful, although realized as marginal for the community and society in general. Their role in the family has been accepted as completely satisfactory and worthy.

2.

The socio-cultural and political context of these stories covers the last few years in Bulgaria. Their most salient feature is the 'post-totalitarian time'. This is a very complex phenomenon (concept) and here I will confine myself to the explanation which is relevant to this paper: the story, told by the informants, is free of the fears typical of the times before 1989 that talking to a complete stranger (the researcher in this case) could lead to negative consequences. Those fears have always been less in smaller communities, compared with the reticence of informants in large cities. Therefore I have not established any particular contrast with respect to fear between the words uttered before 1989 and since. But I have established that the willingness to talk and tell about oneself is completely conscious and dependent only on the personal wish of the informant. Moreover, people belonging to this generation have left the

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active age bracket and have enough time to talk, mostly about themselves. Prior to 1989, I made such recordings either when informants were not aware that I was recording or when informants were very close to me and had no doubt about my intention to use the recordings for research purposes only. Today, such methodological difficulties are non-existent; research is easier from this perspective and communication depends only on the personal wish of informants.

3.

Methodologically, the approach is interdisciplinary. The first part of the *Life History's Discourse* consists of continuous story-telling. This is the classical narrative (which is an anthropocentric genre) of the monologue type. From the linguistic viewpoint, the remaining two components consist of a dialogue between the researcher and the informant, the contents of which complement the life-history picture and highlight the major events. The third component is the contrastive sociological method, in which a person close to the informant (a neighbor, a relative, a friend) comments on her behavior during the interview and afterwards and gives general explanations for some of the facts mentioned. This contrastive method is applicable in principle only in a small community which is relatively closed and where social contacts are limited in space and sufficiently long over time. That helps the interpretation in different ways in the context of temporal and personal detachment. As a matter of fact, I have no reason to doubt the good intentions of the close friend supplying me with the comments, because the very choice of the informant by the commentator has provided me with her positive recommendations about the informant a priori. The comments are more or less addressed to a stranger (a younger person) who is not acquainted with the realities of their time and place (i.e. the researcher in this case). The comments are also made with the clear understanding of their usefulness to the scientific research or spontaneously — prompted by the wish to have the interviewee's narrative continued. The average duration of a life history telling in my study is approximately 70 minutes.

4.

At the outset, it is necessary to offer an explanation concerning the linguistic aspects of the story, i.e. the grammatical forms of verbs used. The Bulgarian language has a rich verbal system with many tenses and modes. Among these modes, the Imperceptive Mode, a non-witness mode (in Latin — imperceptivus) is of major importance for the Life History's Discourse in general. It is used, for example, in cases when the narrator has not participated in a particular event and has no direct personal impressions of it. Using the verb in that mode, the speaker marks grammatically such pragmatic factors as witness and conscious participation in event. The forms of the imperceptive mode differ from the usual forms of all tenses, including the Past Tenses (which are the most commonly used in my stories). As a matter of fact, these forms are also

connected with the Perfect Tenses, and they are different for the different tenses. The use of this mode is much wider, but for my purposes it is important to point out the fact that the narrator uses it when she has not been present at a particular event she describes. In other words, the semantic context of this mode is: *I don't know whether...; I don't remember whether...; I am not sure whether...*, etc.

The last stipulation in this introduction is related to the non-statistical character of the research, because it is not purely sociological or statistical. It is a qualitative analysis of specific textual facts.

5.

The informant is asked an initial general question: *Tell me about your life, since your childhood — whatever you remember up till now.*

The answer to this question is a narrative monologue, which generally reproduces the sequence of events in the informant's life, so a classical narrative is observed (Beaugrande & Dressler 1981: 184 ff). The narrative strategy is chronological and induced by the researcher with the initial question. Stories begin in the classical way, very similar to each other, with few exceptions. They sound almost formulaic (*I was born...; My parents were...; There were... children in my family*). Besides, the beginning is quite detailed in most cases, unlike other fragments and subsequent facts. It contains not only the date and place of birth, but points to circumstances as well (*It was winter, my mother was afraid that I might not survive in the freezing cold, and my aunts told her that...*).

This fragment of the story is filled with completely inconsistent usage of verbal forms, such as tense and mode. The usual mode of presenting the fact of birth is the imperceptive and the tense is past. Hence only Imperceptive Mode and Past Tenses are supposed to function here. But this is so only when the parents of the informant are described or their lives before the speaker's birth. In many stories, the birth itself is presented in the indicative non-evidential past mode, giving the impression of a conscious participation in the act of birth. The women describe the event as if they remember everything from that moment onwards. Obviously, the event has been retold so many times, shared and added to by some participants, that it has become an inseparable part of the speaker's conscious life. This marks the significance of the beginning of the speaker's life, its uniqueness for her and inseparability from everything that has happened throughout her life. As human experience has proven, the fact of our own birth is not imprinted in our memory.

Further on in the life history, an abrupt jump through the real memories is made; these are connected with late childhood from the age of 6 to 12 years. This is a completely normal transition towards the forms of the Indicative Past Tenses. That period of life is very thoroughly covered and, in one form or another, as far as the contents are concerned, it is connected with another initiation — school, for example:

I wanted to go to school so much but my family was poor and I was sent to work for a rich man in the city, because there was a school in the city; I was a good student; in the summer time I used to work and in winters I used to go to school, but I wasn't good at school and made only primary grade four.

It is the indicative mode that those of the women who state their positive attitude towards books, school and studying use, returning to this subject later on in their life history when they start talking about their own children (*Most difficult of all was to educate my children, I sent them to Sofia and every week I used to send them two loaves of bread and a bit of bacon; Both of my children graduated from the University* — this is heavily accentuated with obvious pride). Conversely, those informants who say almost nothing about their education, share nothing about their children's education: obviously, this fact is inessential for them.

Further on in the Life History's Discourse different events are presented — work, wedding, children, house, grandchildren etc. In the case of women, these are the expected events and their number is limited. All histories end in completely different ways.

The linguistic markers of the narrative are characterized by abrupt change of tenses. The Life History's Discourse involves primarily the usage of Past Tenses — Aorist, Imperfect or Perfect; these are active verbal forms in the contemporary Bulgarian language, making reference to events experienced in the past. In practice, however, the usage of these Past Tenses is limited only to the chronological presentation of the events (*Then we moved to the city, started building a house and finished it within two years*). When more detailed events from the life of the informant are presented, they are given as pictures, switching to the Present Tense. The narrative seems to halt (*I go to her, she makes me a cup of coffee and serves it with a piece of cake*). The Present Tense is used also to convey recurrent events (*The teachers come, I make them coffee, then we talk*). These examples show that narrativity is denoted with different markers — grammatical-temporal, contents, logically-chronological (modifications of Tz. Todorov 1969: 459-460). The temporal component of the narrative text is pointed out by many researchers. In this aspect, the life history is a typical narrative (in the narrow sense of the term) — with typical temporal markers, space-limited and oriented towards the participants in the conversation (Longacre 1990: 2, Longacre 1989: 415, Virtanen 1992: 305-306).

The Bulgarian narrative, demonstrated by life history, is notable not only for the usage and change of several Past Tenses, but also for the frequent switching to Present Tense. Such is the case with imperative verbs in the Imperfective Aspect (Praes. hist.) as well as with perfective verbs. The Non-evidential Mode is observed in the fragment related to the beginning of the story and that fragment consists of all kinds of verbal forms; it is most non-homogeneous with respect to the verbal forms. In practice, I have not observed temporality using lexical shifts. The events in the narrative follow one after another, connected to each other only by silent pauses, hesitation and (possibly) contemplation.

Here is an example of a fragment with inconsistent usage of Past Tenses and Modes: *My Grandmother had come, my mother says I look at you and cover you with the blanket, and so I survived when I was born, or The children ask us what these things are: sea, ship, we explain to them, every child wishes to go to sea.* The last verb is in the Present Gnomonic Tense.

Obviously it is not possible to fit memories from the whole life of a person with equal vividness within the limits of an one-hour story. There is active selection, and the process of selection itself is an interpretation of facts of life. Thus the selection transforms itself into a result through the fact of including certain elements in the Life History. These self-interpretations of major events in the person's life are later confirmed in the second part of the Life History's Discourse.

6.

The second component of the Life History's Discourse is the dialogue between the researcher and the informant. This methodological approach is applied when the story is comparatively concise. Then events are presented in their chronological sequence (with predominating parataxis in the linguistic aspect), without any hierarchical order of events.

The questions in the dialogue are quite independent of the preceding story-telling. For example: *Which were the best years in your life?; What do you think most often about?; What do you talk with your female friends about?* The answers to these questions are placed outside time, so all of the verbs are in the Present Tense. Nevertheless, both the most positive and the most negative moments of the informant's life have taken place in the past and never in the present moment, and yet they are continuously described as events which are being experienced at the present moment, accompanied by an emotional assessment. (As to the actual present-day events, the only negative mark is placed upon the high cost of living).

The assessment of events presented in this section of the discourse can be linked to a number of various values: emotional, instrumental, usual, stated, implicit and absolute. The aim of this research is not to systematize them. (I adhere to a comparatively limited period of time in which the dynamics of my informants' values could not possibly be observed.) Much more interesting in this case are the values of life, which attach a distinguishing mark of belonging to the observed social group. In this aspect all informants have experienced the same events (birth, childhood, youth, work, wedding, children, grandchildren), but not all of them verbalize the scheme. Furthermore, different informants allocate different places to those events. For example, speaking about the children means that the informant had already been married because children were rarely born out of wedlock in those communities in the past. Very often illness or building of one's own house takes a more important place in the woman's narrative than the birth of her own child. The same phenomenon is also observed with respect to the death of her husband. For some women that is the crucial point of the last few years, while for others it does not exist as

a factor of life which may change her stereotype of living, her attitudes or way of thinking. It is a different matter that there may be some informants who are not willing to share a too personal and intimate issue with a stranger. That is also part of the system of values of life.

When the narrative in the first segment of LHD is being complicated by events, repetitions, interpolations or additional newer or later events, happenings and comments, these are all transferred to the present-day dimension and then the informant presents her axiological point of view. These cases are, however, less in number among the total number of interviews. That makes the second component of the Life History's Discourse an indispensable, intrinsic element.

7.

The third component of the discourse under examination is significantly more peculiar in form and methods. It is not recorded. Close friends or relatives of the informant present their informal commentary on the events in the story. They give additional information and additional facts complementing the story told just minutes before or repeated many times. Although it has no linguistic character, this commentary is valuable because it adds to the interpretation aspect and upgrades of the importance of events for the community (not for the individual). The social environment is the factor which accepts or renounces the individual behavior and manner of speech, and generates its own system of life values. This component provides the researcher with the general axiological context of the specific story. Particularly interesting are events omitted in the story (gaps). Most often the omitted events (which we learn about from the commentator) are such significant moments as a second marriage (of the person interviewed or of her children), death of her own child or husband, political affiliation (personal or of some other member of the family). The speaker expects the community to sanction them with a negative marker, therefore she does not mention them. Nothing is said about an unsuccessful marriage of the daughter, nor about the son-in-law's aberrations. Keeping silent about the husband's death had not been approved by the 'commentator'. When analyzing such moments in the story, different psychoanalytical means could be employed, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. Here the contrastive point of view is being used in order to clarify the interpretation of events experienced in life. In some authors' opinion, the brevity of the story-telling, and even the presence of gaps in it, is proof of a non-alienated attitude towards the fact (Bernold 1993).

8.

All three components of the story-telling about one's life provide for the postulation of a construct such as the Life History's Discourse. The concept of 'discourse' is usually used with different meaning in different theoretical frames: from a text containing features [+suprasentential], [+use] (Edmondson

1981: 4) up to a communicative event (T.A. van Dijk 1989: 113). I use the concept in this wider meaning.

The strategy of the story is the basic feature of the Life History's Discourse. It is motivated by a thematical unity of contents (a chronology of life events) and, in linguistic terms, by the shifts from Past Tenses to Present Tenses and by switching from the Indicative to Imperceptive Mode which is a specific feature of the Bulgarian language. The beginning of the narrative is characterized by chaotic changes and switches linked to (1) the shaping of the narrative strategy itself in textual terms, and (2) the lack of personal memories about the first stage of life, resulting in a chaos, which has emerged due to the substantial amount of information about that period added later on.

9.

Postulating the Life History's Discourse enables the researcher to use linguistic components (the still picture is a distinct memory of an event) in order to extract the values of life which have been formed in this particular Bulgarian community over the last one hundred years (that is the period when such values have been developed and imprinted into the informants' minds and later passed on to their children).

As can be seen, life events localized in the time covering their whole life, as well as in the space of the narrative, form the Life History's Discourse both explicitly and implicitly.

A further study of male informants from the same generation will enable me to present the overall system of life values of the Bulgarian community of this generation.

This paper presents only the life values of Bulgarian women from small towns, which informants themselves consider to be important and presented in the following sequence: family, home, work, children.

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