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The Linguistic Mechanisms of Trauma Discourse

Mădălina-Georgiana Matei^a *

^aSenior Lecturer, PhD, "Transilvania" University of Brasov, Faculty of Letters, Eroilor Street, no.25, Brasov, 500030, Romania

Abstract

Trauma discourse is the instance in which linguistic mechanisms reveal the speaker's evaluation of their traumatic experience. Language can also vary according to the distance of the subject in relation to the traumatic event. The aim of this study is to detect the discursive mechanisms that speakers use when narrating traumatic events and to discover the roles that certain language items might have in the construction of trauma discourse. For this purpose, interviews in which speakers recount traumatic experiences, such as political persecution or deportation, are studied in order to single out the discursive patterns that emerge within trauma discourse.

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1. Introduction

Providing a definition of trauma is a very difficult undertaking, but among the definitions furnished by the literature on the subject, the following is the most complete and will therefore constitute the basis of this article:

By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defences so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively. (...) By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with "trauma". But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +4-072-325-2685;

E-mail address: mateimg@yahoo.com

community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. (Erikson, 1976:153, 154)

This definition is essential for this article because it takes into account several types of trauma. Because our analysis is conducted on interviews that deal with both *individual trauma* and *collective trauma*, or *cultural trauma*, according to Alexander (2004), this definition is particularly relevant.

Apart from the psychological coordinates of traumatic events that can be analysed in order to discover the hidden mechanisms of such painful experiences, the discourse of trauma is another facet of which analysis may offer a valuable insight into how individuals situate themselves in relation to the events that they narrate.

This article tackles the linguistic mechanisms of trauma discourse, namely the linguistic coordinates that the narrators (sometimes also subjects) of traumatic events may consciously or unconsciously insert into their discourse. The object of study is therefore the construction of this type of discourse from the point of view of discourse marking, the presence of silence and its contextual functions, cultural trauma, and the construction of identity through narration.

2. Theoretical Background

The interdisciplinary character of this research requires analysis tools provided by several fields of language study, such as conversation analysis, which postulates that identities are created by the local and situational coordinates. Identities become apparent if those involved in the verbal exchange “orient” towards them, according to Antaki and Widdicombe (1998:195). The same authors draw attention to the fact that we have to direct our inquiries towards “*whether, when, and how* identities are used” (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998:195). In the narration of traumatic events, identity is an important coordinate that inevitably emerges from discourse. Either linguistic or ontological, identity is bound to make its presence manifest in trauma discourse.

Important theorists in sociolinguistics emphasise the inextricable connection between language choices and the narrators’ gender, class and ethnicity as identity coordinates that are communicatively produced. Therefore, inferential processes are triggered by situational factors and social presuppositions, as well as by discourse conventions that generate and reinforce the narrator’s social identity (Gumperz, 1982a, 1982b).

Bamberg, De Fina and Schiffrin (2007:5) describe narratives as a sort of glue that allows human life to transcend the incoherence and discontinuity of everyday life by creating a certain point of departure, a definite direction and a resolution or closure. Thus, the meaningful nature of every individual’s existence is restored. In this sense one of our assumptions was that the final role of narration in trauma discourse is to bring closure and surpass the negative effects that a certain traumatic event had had upon the narrator. Therefore, the restoration of meaning might be said to coincide with a stage of the healing process. Language can therefore furnish proof that such a process is in progress.

Janet Holmes (1997:286) talks of *the functions that narratives could fulfill*. She states that narratives could *entertain, amuse, amaze, socialize, instruct, indicate appropriate ways of behaviour, contest societal norms, praise others, establish or consolidate connections/links, flatter, build up the narrator’s ego or that of the addressees*.

Goodwin (cited in Ochs, 1997:187) adds another function of narratives, namely that they involve the accurate evocation of visual representations. This function is enacted in the discourse units analysed in this paper. The narration of trauma in our interviews mostly aims at re-creating, as accurately as possible, the visual as well as the emotional background of the evoked traumatic event.

Discourse markers are generally very frequently used in narratives, especially with the function of adding new units of discourse. For instance, discourse markers such as *and, but* and *so* are used by narrators that have to defend their multi-turn unit.

3. Research Methodology and Data Collection

This paper relies on two interviews of subjects who experienced traumatic events. The first interview subjected to analysis is taken from a larger corpus on interviews recorded by the Department of Literature and Cultural Studies within the Transilvania University of Braşov, as part of a research project on the life of the Saxon Community of Braşov. The research project is focused on the past and present life of the Saxon community and investigates issues such as customs, traditions, members of the community, trauma and persecution. The corpus is comprised of one-hour interviews of five people selected according to the following criteria: age (interviewees had to be over 70 years old, so as to have experienced first-hand the persecution of the Saxon community during the war period), a witness or subject of persecution, active involvement in the Saxon community life, and permanent residence in Râşnov. All respondents are retired employees but still have an active role in the present day Saxon community. Being part of an ongoing research project, R.M.'s consent for the publication of the interview had been obtained by the project coordinators.

The second interview is part of a documentary presented by MDV Film, produced by Manuela Morar and broadcast on the internet on the *Ziartisti Online* channel on YouTube (see References). Of the several interviewees from the documentary we chose a fragment of E.C.'s interview because of the numerous linguistic mechanisms that indicated a traumatic event and the subject's reaction towards it.

Given the number of interviews, the present paper's extent is limited, and therefore future research will continue this topic. In future research we would like to tackle the linguistic coordinates of trauma discourse in narratives of political imprisonment.

4. Deportation

The narrator of the following account is R.M., one of the members of the now rather small Saxon community of Râşnov, Braşov. The narrative is focused on the Saxon community, its past and present traditions, and its hardships during the war period. Deportation is the subject of the following fragment taken from a longer interview:

I: *Ce s-a întâmplat în perioada războiului că am aflat că mulți sași au fost deportați. De ce au fost deportați?*

R.M: *Păi* au zis că ei au fost de vină că s-a distrus Rusia și să refacă țara care ei au distrus-o. *Și* era tineretul, până la (.) de la 16 ani, i-a luat și i-a distrus. *Și* cei care veneau dintr-o familie mai bună sau erau fete care făcuseră și atunci școala medie, *că* erau și atunci școli, *și* ei au fost primii care a trebuit să moară că ei n-au fost învățați nici cu clima, nici cu munca aia și nici cu mâncarea aia, care nu era mâncare, și nici cu transportul care a durat, ca animalele, zile întregi, femei, copii ce au fost acolo adunați toți fără...

Fratele meu, în vagonul care-i ducea în Rusia, a făcut o gaură ca să își facă lumea necesitățile, că n-avea unde, a făcut o gaură în vagon (.) că nu era destul de frig, că era 13 ianuarie (.) au fost toți deportați. *Și* au mai fost o dată și aștia care aveau pământ mai mult, au mai fost duși pân (.) nu știu pe unde, pe la Dunăre.

I: *What happened during the war because I found out that many Saxons had been deported. Why were they deported?*

R.M: *Well* they said that they were to blame for the destruction of Russia and that they had to rebuild the country that they had destroyed. *And* there was the youth, up to (.) from 16 years old, they took them and they destroyed them. *And* those who came from a better family or girls who attended secondary school then, *because* there were schools then as well, *and* they were the first to die because they hadn't been used to the weather, to that kind of work and food, which wasn't really food nor with the lengthy transport, like animals, for days, women, children all gathered there without ...

My brother, in the train carriage on their way to Russia, made a hole so that people could relieve themselves, because they couldn't elsewhere, he made a hole in the carriage (.) because it wasn't cold enough, because it was the 13th of January (.) they were all deported. *And* again there were those that possessed more land, they were taken to (.) I don't know where, near the Danube.

First and foremost, in this fragment we are dealing with both *individual* and *collective trauma* because the account portrays, on the one hand, the trauma suffered the entire Saxon community whose members had been deported and their property taken away, and on the other hand, the individual trauma of the narrator's immediate family being deported to Russia.

The linguistic mechanisms present in the narration are discourse markers that fulfill various functions at the discourse level. *Păi* (*well*) is used for the prefacing of answers (Matei, 2012:182), and therefore appears in the

initial position right after the question formulated by the interviewer. Then, the discourse marking *și* (*and*) is used to connect idea units in the narrative, as well as signalling the progression of events and the story. The discourse marking *că* (*because*) brackets the insertion of a personal comment, as well as a clarification that the narrator feels compelled to give.

In the narration of trauma discourse, silence is one of the most important discursive indicators of various phenomena. According to the positioning of the pause, in the narrative above we only have *in-turn pauses*, which occur during the utterance of a single speaker only (Walker, 1985:61). Even though it does not involve wording, silence should be considered a linguistic mechanism because, as Saville-Troike explains, silence is endowed with meaning defined as “silent communicative acts which are entirely dependent on adjacent vocalisations for interpretation, and which carry their own illocutionary force” (Saville-Troike, 1985:6).

Nakane (2007:11,12) talks of the functions that silence can fulfil at the discourse level: *the cognitive function* (pauses, hesitations for cognitive/language processing), *the discursive function*, *the social function* and *the affective function* as a means of emotion management.

In the narrative rendered above we have the following types of silence:

- cognitive: - *Și* era tineretul, până la () de la 16 ani; **And** there was the youth, up to (.) from 16 years old.
- au mai fost duși până (.) nu știu pe unde; they were taken to (.) I don't know where.
- affective: - a făcut o gaură în vagon (.) că nu era destul de frig; he made a hole in the carriage (.) because it wasn't cold enough.
- că era 13 ianuarie (.) au fost toți deportați; because it was the 13th of January (.) they were all deported.

As we can see, the affective function of silence manifests itself when the narrator is closer to the traumatic event, namely when she starts talking about her brother's deportation. As we have mentioned, the construction of identity becomes apparent when the narrator orients towards it (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998:195). Hence, at first, this passage illustrates the female narrator's trauma regarding her status as a member of the Saxon community during the war and, implicitly, her condition as a victim of a collective trauma. Then, the narration is oriented towards the representation of her individual trauma, namely her brother's deportation.

5. Political Persecution

If the analysis above revealed that the narrator was the subject of a collective trauma and the witness of an individual one, in the following narrative we are dealing primarily with a severe individual trauma. The narrator is E.C., a survivor of the massacre that took place in the Transylvanian village Ip, whose inhabitants were executed by the Hungarian Horthyst troops in September 1940. The interview is part of a documentary (see References) on the persecution of Romanian nationals by the Hungarian army.

Și era trupa care venise – trupa de(::<) mm horthysti care trebuiau să – probabil că ei – nu probabil – ei erau cei care executau. Au intrat după noi și ne-au zvârlit pe toți afară *și* ne-o spus să ne asezăm toți unul lângă altul, să ridicăm mâinile (.) și să nu ne mișcăm, *și* am început să plângem. *Și* tata, în momentul în care a tras *și* eu plângeam “Tată, ne împușcă!” *și* dam din picioare, s-a întors, l-a nimerit glonțul *și* m-a tras sub el. Toți erau morți hhhh (.) l-am zgâlțâit puțin pe tata, tata era căzut pe burtă .hhh Mama, care era lângă mine, era tot cu mâinile ridicate dar îi curgea o șuviță de sânge din gură. (.) Am încercat, nimic. Lângă ea era Domnica, avea 18 ani. Și ea era liniștită, culcată, căzută pe spate hhh *și* cu dăra de sânge (.) din gură.

And there was the troop who arrived – the troop o(::<)f mm Horthysts who were supposed to – probably they – not probably – they were the ones who carried out the executions. They came in after us and threw us all outside and they told us to line up next to each other, to raise our arms (.) and not to move, and we started to cry. **And** father, when they fired **and** I was crying “Father, they're going to shoot us!” **and** I was stamping my feet, he turned to me, the bullet hit him **and** he pulled me underneath him. Everyone was dead hhhh (.) I shook my father a bit, father was lying on his stomach. hhh My mother, who was next to me, had her arms still raised but there was a blood thread coming out of her mouth. (.) I tried, but nothing. Next to her there was Domnica, she was 18. She was also quiet, lying down, fallen on her back hhh **and** with the blood thread (.) coming out of her mouth.

The degree of narrator involvement, as well as the intensity of the traumatic event, increase in this interview. The orality of the discourse is more poignant and represented by reformulations and self-interruptions with glottal stops (e.g. *trebuiau să – probabil că ei – nu probabil – ei erau cei care executau*), direct speech (e.g. *plângeam “ Tată, ne împușcă!”*), fillers (e.g. *mm*), and many discourse markers that connect idea units (e.g. *Și tata, în momentul în care a tras și eu plângeam “ Tată, ne împușcă!” și dam din picioare, s-a întors, l-a nimerit glonțul și m-a tras sub el.*).

If the role of silence in the previous interview was concomitantly *cognitive* and *affective*, in this narration the role of silence is exclusively *affective*. The atrocity that the narrator, who is also a victim of trauma and not merely a witness to it, is trying to cope with leaves visible discursive traces. The role of silence is identical to that of paralinguistic gasps, namely an affective role that presupposes the projection of emotions. In E.C.’s narrative, gasps indicate the events, images or emotions with the highest degree of trauma that the narrator has experienced.

To a certain extent we are dealing with a *collective trauma* (Erikson, 1976:153,154) as well. Given the fact that the topic of this narrative is the executions of and atrocities committed against Romanian nationals by the Hungarian troops in September 1940, the collective and cultural dimension of this unit of trauma discourse is obvious if we contextualise the fragment and conduct a sociolinguistic analysis. However, at least in this narration, the stress falls on the *individual trauma*, which was more salient for the narrator due to the higher degree of personal involvement. Throughout the whole interview E.C. makes several references to cultural and collective trauma, but these are always filtered through, or associated with, the individual trauma. For instance, she pleads for the permanent remembrance of this collective suffering while showing her own golden pendant on which the message “*Nu uita!*” (*Do not forget!*) was engraved in capital letters; on the back of the pendant there were the names and ages of all her family members who had been executed.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the linguistic coordinates of trauma discourse performed in this article reveal that, according to the intensity of the traumatic event or to the extent of the narrator’s involvement in the trauma, one type of trauma can discursively manifest itself more than another. In both of the interviews that the present research was conducted on, the discursive rendering of *individual trauma* was more marked from the point of view of linguistic and paralinguistic mechanisms. The narratives of trauma discourse involve numerous linguistic and paralinguistic devices that require lengthy analyses due to the complexity of this type of expression. Moreover, aspects such as the impact of gender, age, social class or level of education on this type of discourse could be the object of future research.

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Appendix

Transcription conventions

- | | |
|-----|---|
| (.) | - pause without falling intonation |
| - | - self interruption with glottal stop |
| : | - prolonged final vowel or syllable |
| hhh | - in-breath or out-breath, the number of 'h' indicated the length |