

Performing (non)memories Communicative Strategies in Oral History Interviews

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Starting from the paradox of saying the unsayable, this study explores strategies to communicate (non-)memories in testimonies of Shoa and forced labor survivors. The paradox reflects the discussion of whether the memories of Nazi atrocities, the horrors of forced labor and concentration camps, can be conveyed at all in autobiographical narratives (e.g. Boothe, 2015, 199). In the present study, we use videotaped oral history interviews to investigate how witnesses narrate their experiences in former Nazi labor and concentration camps. We ask how narrators meet the challenge of telling the unsayable and making it present, by creating specific forms of recipient design (e.g. Deppermann & Schmidt 2016, Gülich 2020, Martinez & Scheffel 2020). Previous research has pointed out the importance of a multimodal perspective to understand the role of verbal and bodily resources in such oral history narratives (e.g. Pagenstecher & Pfänder 2017; Gülich & Pfänder 2022).

In order to contribute to this field of research, our study focuses on sequences of ‘indescribable’, ‘unspeakable’ or ‘unimaginable’ events. In these sequences, contemporary witnesses do not simply recount facts: they mobilize different verbal, prosodic and bodily resources to reconstruct a – sometimes incomplete – memory. By observing witnesses’ discursive and bodily strategies, we highlight the processes by which memory is reconfigured throughout the interaction, thus revealing its emergent and co-constructed character.

Our multimodal analysis (e.g. Mondada 2018/2022, Freyburger 2023) of these sequences shows, firstly, that witnesses emphasize their epistemic authority and provide insight into ‘unsayable’ experiences in the interviews through the use of markers of (non-)memory (in French, for example, they do this with *dire*, *savoir*, *se rappeler*, *se souvenir*, among others). Secondly, our analysis shows the importance of the narrator’s body language. The use of multimodal resources (gaze, facial expressions, gestures and upper body movements) highlights the role of the narrating body in sequences, where verbal utterances reach their limits. Thirdly, we show that these bodily resources open up a specific recipient design, because they a) allow the audience to visually participate in the experiences. Moreover, they b) serve to structure narrative levels, for example when the narrators switch back and forth between the story world and ongoing situation of the interview. Finally, they c) provide insight into the affective displays and attitudes in the here and now (narrating self), as the witnesses develop their stories about their experiences in the there and then (narrated self).

In sum, witnesses do not simply narrate what they remember or do not longer remember; on the contrary, they make the very process of remembering itself visible and enrich their testimony with unsolicited elements, in order to transmit a more complete experience, despite the paradox of saying the unsayable.

Our contribution presents the results of the SNSF/DFG-funded research project ‘Emergent Remembering II: Saying the Unsayable’. The data comes from the oral history corpus “Forced

Labor 1939-1945 – Memory and History” (<https://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de>). In our study, we focus on the sub-corpus containing German and French speaking interviews.

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