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Ethnography of a textual representation: suspicious first person writing

Ethnographic study of first person writing is not a traditional topic for scholars like anthropologists, sociologists, ethnologists and others, who use ethnography in their fieldwork. Ethnography is born out of the concern to understand the „other” and to grasp the native’s point of view (Malinowsky, 1922 in Tedlock, 2000), however we do not have direct access to the individual experiences (Bruner, 1986, Denzin, Lincoln, 2000). Ethnographers use observations, interviews, life stories, visual data and documents to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given „field” or setting (Brewer, 2000). Initially ethnography explored oral and exotic societies, perhaps because anthropologists didn’t pay special attention to first person written texts – they simply were not available in these societies. However, since the 1970s, anthropologists more and more work with their own societies, and recognize that „literate subjects write their own autobiographies” (Ethnographic Research, Ellen, 1984: 256). At the same time in books and articles about ethnography and fieldwork methods it seems that even surveys are mentioned more often than written personal documents. Oral narratives dominate during fieldwork, and writing usually is seen as work of an ethnographer. Considering the focus of anthropology on the relationship between culture and the individual, how culture organizes individual experiences and self understanding, however, it is not very clear, why in ethnographic research interviews are used more often than first person writing. Both of them are textual sociocultural milieu, where the text implies the weaving of the language in the patterned compositions, whether spoken or written (Rapport and Overing, 2007). Is there any suspicious attitude or this is just research tradition?

In this paper I will discuss how do ethnographers investigate and interpret first-person written texts compared to oral narratives. First, the role of language will be discussed. Secondly, the similarities and differences between oral and written

organization of experience will be analyzed. Thirdly, similarities and differences of the organization and presentation of life experiences in particular oral and written text will be discussed. Analysis will be based on the discussions about language from the anthropological context and on my personal experience of more than 15 years of work in life story research, and particularly on the microanalysis of one life story, available in Latvian National Oral History collection in both forms – as written autobiography and as a life story interview.

Language and Experience

From micro perspective it is important to understand how the language organizes our experience and helps to comprehend it and to share it, because language is very crucial in how we understand the world and ourselves. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein compared language with glasses – you can see everything through them, but the glasses stays invisible. Anthropologist Hillard Eriksen (and many others as well, like Erik Fromm) pointed that there are very important connection between the construction of language and the ways people are able to comprehend and to feel the world and themselves (Eriksens, 2010:366).

Therefore, if anthropologists would like to understand the cultures and societies in the changing world from the participants' („natives") viewpoint, they have to pay close attention to the relationship between the reality, experience and its expressions. In case of diaries, memoirs and life stories the distinction is between life as lived (reality), life as experienced (experience) and life as told (expression) (Bruner 1984:7; Bruner 1986:6). Structured units of experience are socially constructed units of meaning (Bruner, 1986:7). Diaries, memoirs and life stories live in the language, therefore the question about language is of great importance in the research of narratives. Every telling and writing is interpretative and we have to understand the rules of interpretation – expression of experience is an activity, rooted in a particular social situation, in a particular place and time, in a particular culture and society. According to Michail Bakhtin, author of the story is situated in his unfinished presence, in explicit dialogue with the reader or

listener and in implicate dialogue with traditions of culture, and culture creates the context of his narrative and without it narrative would be not comprehensible (Bahtins, 1999). Autobiographical narrative is dual – at first, it is subjective message, at second, it's narrative actualization is possible only in case of shared references of culture, history, biography (Vēvere, 2002: 103). If this refers to both – written as well as oral narratives, why notwithstanding on that anthropologists prefer oral narratives?

Written or oral narratives

The oral and written forms of language both are means of communication, embedded in shared culture, and from such point of view there are no functional differences (Rozenbergs, 1995). However, there are important differences in construction of expressions in written and oral forms. And, what is very important for anthropology – there are different levels of control.

First, written language exists in graphic signs, but oral language in sounds. Means of expression are more diverse in oral communication – not only words, but also gestures, facial expressions, non verbal expressions, speed of speech, intonations and tone – it all together structures the meaning and actually makes the analysis of oral text more complicated.

Secondly, there is no direct communication between writer and reader in case of written language, but for oral communication the presence of at least two persons in particular circumstances is crucial. However even writing is dialogical – it is dialogue with culture, with imagined reader, but situational aspects and direct interrelationships is not so important. Author structures and censors the text according to her/his intentions. In case of ethnographic or life story interview the place, time, expectations, questions, reactions, relations between listener and teller – it all plays important role for content and form of the oral narrative. Oral speech is more spontaneous, there is no time to choose the best possible words or carefully structure the narrative, neither to perform elaborated self-censorship. However, researcher has greater control over the content of interview and can

get precisely what she/he wants. In the same time there always is the question – what dominates – agenda of the researcher or narrator?

Life story of Oto Irbe

Long time I also believed that oral narratives are natural data for ethnography. Recently I have been researching the power and agency in Soviet Latvia using written memoirs and oral life story of Oto Irbe. During research, I have changed my mind. Now I would like to advocate triangulation of data whenever possible. Not only structure of the story and language repertoire is different, but also different aspects of everyday life events come to the forefront of each narrative.

Oto Irbe (1916–1998) represents the generation that grew up when Latvia gained independence in 1918. The Soviet occupation of Latvia on June 17, 1940, dashed the dreams and plans of this generation and forced not only Irbe, but almost two million citizens of Latvia to take on new roles and directions for the rest of their lives. Research of subjective experience of these events is of great importance because it sheds light on everyday life strategies and feelings of people, how they coped with dramatic turning points. However, Oto Irbe's experience is not typical, but unique in many ways – he has been a farmer, a militiaman, a legionnaire, a deserter, a partisan (forest brother), a black-marketer, a prisoner in Mordovia and finally he lived peaceful family and working life.

The life story of Oto Irbe was recorded in Riga in 1996 and preserved in LNOH archive (as LNOH 327) as an oral narrative (approximately six hours of recordings), as well as in the form of handwritten memories (two notebooks, recompiled as 79 pages of computer printout). Memoirs were written during the late Soviet period – 1980s. Today I will compare his written and oral memories in order to show their different logic, advantages and disadvantages for research. First I will compare the general characteristics of both personal documents and then I will do microanalysis of one excerpt.

Initially Otto Irbe wanted to hand in to archive only his written memories. We knew that written memories are more structured and self-censored, therefore tried to persuade Irbe also to tell his life story. Unwillingly he agreed and followed two interviews. It is often noted that there are important differences between the literary genres, where author and reader has no direct contact, and oral genres, where author and listener has direct contact and where narration itself can be important social activity. I was surprised how different the representation of experience was in oral and written form.

Irbe's oral narrative covers his entire life, is more spontaneous, sometimes less detailed, but sometimes more detailed than the written, uses simpler language, nonverbal expressions and abrupt sentences, as well as contains other typical characteristics of speech. Life story starts with events of Second World War, moves to his forest brother's life, goes there and back between different life events (including life in the woods, imprisonment and life after) and finishes with childhood memories. Sometimes his wife accompanies our dialogue. Her voice is included in the story about their dating and family life in the middle part of interview.

Irbe's written memories are well-structured according linear chronology, the language is more complicated and poetic, follows the rules of formal language, with specific stylistics. Memoirs are written in the genre of testimony (and oral narrative initially follows the same line) - author focuses on historically significant events in order to show heroic Latvian patriotism and cruelty of Soviet rule. Written memories start with the narrative about parents' escape from Zemgale to Vidzeme during First World War, harsh conditions of life after Oto was born and in one paragraph is summarized life from 1920 - 1939. This is like four page introduction for further very detailed narrative, which starts from occupation of Latvia during 1940 and ends with the experience of imprisonment in the Gulag from 1956 to 1962. There narrative speed is 75 pages for 20 years.

Not only structure of narrative, language means and language repertoire differs. Some events are included in both texts, some only in oral or written form. Detailed childhood memories and narrative about years of peaceful family and working life are included only in oral narrative, initiated by the interviewer's questions. Narrative about life as forest brother and life in imprisonment is described in more detail in the memoirs – with clear historical context, greater number of events, elaborated details in description of each event (like names, activities and locality). Meaning of events is stressed also by specific stylistic means. For example, episode about arrest and violent interrogation of his parents ends with following sentence: “The symbol of patriotism and perseverance of Latvian nation have to be inscribed with blood for ever. And, if once our nation will regain real freedom, then next generations have to know, how their ancestors suffered and drenched in their holy blood”. Irbe's memoirs are very interesting source to study construction of patriotism in popular culture, but in his oral narrative pathetic expressions are missing.

Also description of the same events differs – in written text narrative is more structured, contains more context information, also includes more politicized accents and biased construction of characters. Latvian patriots usually are portrayed with high moral values (negative aspects are silenced or discussed), but soviet activists (and soldiers) are portrayed clearly negative (positive or neutral aspects are silenced).

I would like to demonstrate these differences in the episode of homecoming, how it is depicted in oral and written narratives. For the context: at the end of 2 WW Irbe joined Latvian legion and Latvian School of Aviation. In 1944, Irbe on his first flying mission from Koenigsberg (now Kaliningrad), was shot down somewhere in Lithuania and though parachuting to ground was injured on landing. Irbe left for Latvia and spend some time in one farmstead, where was restored to health by the locals, and several months later returned to his parents' home.

Written narrative is very concentrated, in good literary language, clearly explains context for readers. Narrative is told in more simple manner, it just continues previous

events, is more chaotic, but depicts interesting details of everyday life and relations with Soviet soldiers (both positive and negative), which is completely escaped in written form. There are few things in common – 1) after Russian army arrived they was whisked out of house and 2) when Irbe returned to his parent's farm, everything was destroyed there, mother stayed near the water well and didn't recognize him, so dog too. All other things are described differently and only together show the event in its complicity.

Conclusion

I would like to encourage scholars, who use ethnography in their research, to pay attention to both – interviews as well as first person writing. Triangulation of both data allows:

(1) analyze more completely how the genre and content of the text is influenced by its context (direct, indirect communication with listener / reader);

(2) compare different cultural resources and language repertoire for expression of experience in speech and writing;

(3) get more full understanding of events in a particular society in particular historical moment and

(4) get more full understanding of interpretation of events and its meaning from participants point of view.

Episode from the story of Oto Irbe (LNOH 327)

Oral narrative	Written narrative
<p>OI. The shooting came again upon us, Germans came, and we could not move. <u>Then we were whisked to another farm,</u> there Russians were drinking <i>samagon</i> and things were jovial during evenings. In one such evening one Russian, a sort of sergeant-major, said to me: “What kind of hymn could you have in your Latvia? Did you have a hymn at all?” Well, I have to sing for him. Well, why would I have to flinch, I started to sing “God bless Latvia”. The landlady was looking through door chink, waving her hand, afraid to death, that all will be shot.</p> <p>BB: She doesn’t know that you were asked to sing...</p> <p>OI: Well, probably didn’t. That’s so, by the way.</p> <p>BB: But interesting, what these Russians thought in their minds...</p> <p>OI: I don’t know, what their thought was. They don’t seem so cruel. They didn’t do anything like that. Well, as for steeling... Pauzers had a pocket watch, as did the old ones - it’s chain fall out the west. One had pulled it out. What will he then do? They knocked over the bee hive, in clear day, and it fell apart...</p> <p>BB: They wanted honey.</p>	<p>I started to think, that I have to do something. The merciless war was still going on. Swirling and turning in this horrid sup pot of war goes on...</p> <p>Within this family lived an old farmer Pauzers and his wife, her daughter Millija with few month old baby Airīte and son-in-law Alberts Caune (now a well-known writer). They took care of me. I was dressed in civilian closes, and some weeks lived with these beautiful people, to get back my strength and I recovered well.</p> <p>We could hear that <i>Aizsargi</i> or legioneers are fighting heroically near Nīgrande. It was some 20 km to east direction from Pauzers’ farm. I decided next day to say goodbye to my well-wishers, but nothing went out of that. Russians tanks arrived the next day. <u>Everyone was whisked out of house.</u> Alberts, Millija, small Airīte and I – we went to small house in some swampy place near river Luša, but old Pauzers with livestock went to some bigger farm. I couldn’t stay long there, because the Russian regular army troops came in, the German air raids appeared and situation was quite dangerous. After few weeks situation stabilized. I felt inexpressible wish to go home to my dear parents.</p>

OI: O yes, honey. It is autumn, all the bees died. It all right, there wasn't anything...

BB: And then you went further after that, to Birzgale, to your home?

O.I. Yes, yes, I went. With all kinds of difficulties. I had... There was a sentry dig in, buried artillery.

BB: Germans or Russians?

OI: No, Russians. And on a sentry post a Russian soldier standing with a riffle on that road. And I am walking and he stops me. Stop – where am I going? I say, there and there. Do I have some kind of documents? I had a chauffeur's license from the Ulmanis' time. And somehow I always kept it close. And he is looking and looking at me for a long time. And all of a sudden he says to me in Latvian: "That is the chauffeurs license that you are showing me." And I say: "I don't have anything else. That's only document I have". Then he says to me: "Just go along the road. What the heck... In the worst case you will get stopped, you won't be believed, some kind of investigation will take place, but nobody will shoot you."

BB: But you were in civilian close?

O.I: Yes, yes, I was... But he says: "Better not go in the forest. When you will be in the forest.."

BB: It will be suspicious?

OI: Yes, like a bandid.. "...roaming through the woods by yourself, a spy or something, they will shoot you and that's it." [...] I went home, my house wasn't that far. The second or third day from that location. Everything was burned down. Everything was burned down. My mother was by the water well. It was sundown. She did not recognize me, I had a beard, I was a dirty, my closes were torn. The dog also didn't recognizes me, he was barking angrily...

With many difficulties and with many risks, within a week I arrived home.

A sad evening! Everything there was destroyed, burnt down. I met my mother by the water well. She did not recognize me and also the dog angrily barking at me.