



Wiktorja KUDELA-ŚWIĄTEK

## Marriage of convenience... In search of new analytical methods in oral history

---

*Abstract: I believe that a combination of perspectives deriving from a variety of disciplines leads to a more convincing, truthful, and richer reconstruction of the image of the past. The main goal of this paper is to present the ways in which the methodologies of various disciplines within the humanities have so far been combined in oral history, as well as to discuss a new proposal, inspired by the methodology of ethnolinguistics and fully compatible with the needs of the field I represent. In the first part of this paper I present the paradigmatic changes that have taken place in oral history, as well as the discipline's current assumptions and research questions. After that, relating to my own research, I propose to apply the methodology of reconstructing the linguistic worldview in analyses of oral narratives.*

*Key words: ethnolinguistics – oral history – linguistic – worldview – methodology – Kazakhstani Poles*

---

I owe it to the reader to explain the metaphor in the title. I have compared my attempt to ground oral history in the methodology of the humanities with a marriage of convenience for a simple reason. The line of reasoning followed by researchers in oral history is usually connected with their desire to discover, in an unambiguous and consistent fashion, the hidden meanings contained in stories of the past. But because oral history has not proposed appropriate methods in this respect, the researcher is forced to take advantage of the experience of other disciplines, with the interview as a data elicitation technique in their methodological repertoire.

The goal of this study is to present the ways in which the methodologies of various disciplines within the humanities have so far been combined in oral history, as well as to discuss a new proposal, inspired by the methodology of ethnolinguistics and fully compatible with the needs of the field I represent. I begin by discussing the paradigmatic changes that have taken place in oral history, as well as the discipline's current assumptions and research questions. Next, relating to my own research, I propose to apply the methodology of reconstructing the linguistic worldview in analyses of oral narratives: the methodology is a powerful tool in a search for and in an identification of the meanings that the narrator ascribes to his or her past while constructing a biographical story.



## The birth of contemporary oral history

The last decade has seen a change in the status of oral history: from a mere exotic toy in the hands of inexperienced researchers to a mature scholarly discipline.<sup>1</sup> While originally its goal was to use people's recollections in order to reconstruct the past, now the memory itself has become the main focus of interest.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the matter which used to lie at the margin of traditional historical research has begun to occupy the central position in modern oral history.<sup>3</sup>

Narrative sources, at first playing a secondary or merely a complimentary role, have become the driving force in the enterprise.<sup>4</sup> They are now appreciated as "independent" and "valid" research material, rather than being considered supplementary in discovering historical facts omitted or distorted in known documents. The actual story in modern oral history is no longer viewed as an instrument which allows one only to verify the accounts of witnesses by comparing them with other sources or by making judgements as to their truthfulness.<sup>5</sup> Oral testimony, whose purpose had previously been to corroborate or disprove the contents of historical documents, has obtained rights equal to those of other historical sources – it is also subject to the same critical evaluation. A life story, i.e. the narrator's attempt to express and convey his or her experience, is not therefore appropriated by the historian, whose goals differ from those of the narrator. The modern researcher treats (auto)biography as a social construct.<sup>6</sup>

Although biographical accounts have always been important to oral historians, now the scholars' approach to them accounts has changed substantially. Currently the object of interest in the (auto)biography of an ordinary person is his or her everyday life, social

1 See more: Thomas L. CHARLTON – Lois E. MYERS – Rebecca SHARPLESS (eds.), *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, Lanham 2007; Barry A. LANMAN – Laura M. WENDLING (eds.), *Preparing the Next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education*, Lanham 2006.

2 According to Alistair Thomson, at least four paradigmatic changes are involved. They result from the evolution of data elicitation techniques, from the expectations of researchers towards the material thus obtained, from the objectives of specific research projects, and from the roles played by the researcher and the narrator during the interview. Thomson discusses them in chronological order, see: Alistair THOMSON, *Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History*, *The Oral History Review* 34, 2007, no. 1, pp. 49–71; EADEM, *Fifty Years On: An International Perspective on Oral History*, *The Journal of American History* 85, 1998, no. 2, pp. 581–595.

3 Marta KURKOWSKA-BUDZAN, *Historia zwykłych ludzi. Współczesna angielska historiografia dziejów społecznych*, Kraków 2003, pp. 176–186.

4 A. THOMSON, *Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History*.

5 Eric HOBBSAWM, *On History from Below*, in: E. Hobsbawm (ed.), *On History*, London 1997, p. 206.

6 Marta KURKOWSKA-BUDZAN, *Antykomunistyczne podziemie zbrojne na Białostocczyźnie. Analiza współczesnej symbolizacji przeszłości*, Kraków 2009, p. 93.



and cultural reality, values, political views, social norms of the given culture, and linguistic conventions. Therefore methodological principles of the reconstruction of life stories based on oral sources are still being developed: biographical studies attempt on the one hand to deal with the social functions of biographies, and on the other hand with the social processes decisive for the shape of the biographies.

This approach was first expressed by Alessandro Portelli in the early 1980s in *History Workshop Journal*.<sup>7</sup> The Italian researcher suggested looking at oral history as a tool in studying collective memory and identity, thus initiating a discussion on the roles of the participants in the interview, and the importance of the time period in which the ensuing narrative is grounded.

Postmodernism has enriched oral history with an interest in meanings ascribed by the narrators to the memories they entertain. Therefore, narratives are viewed as people's reflections on the past, created in cooperation with historians at a specific point in time. Their meaning also depends on what the life the narrator looks like at the time of the recording – with the figure of the researcher-interlocutor as a significant persona.<sup>8</sup>

The Danish researcher Steinar Kvale notes that the interview is a living social interaction, within which the dynamics of the conversation, the tone of voice and body language are directly available to its participants. These direct experiences are not available to someone who deals only with the record of the conversation, deprived of any context. To record interviews means to abstract away from the physical presence of the speakers, including their gestures and posture.<sup>9</sup> At the transcription stage, the researcher faces the problem of recreating, in a written form, the idiosyncrasies of pronunciation, intonation patterns, the rhythm of speech, etc., all of which are often important for an appropriate understanding of what is being said. Moreover, every transcription bears a mark of the researcher's subjectivity: it reflects his or her personal viewpoint on a given interview. This does not,

7 In 1979 A. Portelli defined his research objectives for the first time in the Italian periodical *Primo Maggio*. See: Alessandro PORTELLI, *Sulla specificità della storia orale*, *Primo Maggio* 1979, no. 13, pp. 54–60. a few years later he wrote an in-depth article in English: IDEM, *The Peculiarities of Oral History*, *History Workshop Journal* 1981, no. 12, pp. 96–107. In one of the chapters of the American edition of *L'assassinio di Luigi Trastulli. Terni 17 marzo 1949. La memoria e l'evento* he also included an updated version of his manifesto, titled *What Makes Oral History Different?* See: IDEM, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, New York 1991, pp. 45–59. This version of the article was used by the editors of *The Oral History Reader*. See: IDEM, *What Makes Oral History Different?*, in: Robert Perks – Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, London 1998, pp. 63–74.

8 Оксана КІСЬ, *Усна історія: становлення, проблематика, методологічні засади*, Україна модерна 2007, no. 11, p. 11.

9 Steinar KVALE, *Doing Interviews*, London 2007, p. 93.



however, diminish the value of the memories being recorded; indeed, it points to the interpretive potential of oral sources.<sup>10</sup>

An especially topical problem today is to find the optimum combination of the various forms of recording and preserving narrative sources at the level of interpretation and synthesis. The possibilities of each method are equally important for the historian, therefore radical preference given to written transcription at the expense of audio and video recording diminishes the value of the data. When recorded with audio-video equipment, in contrast to bare transcription, the narration remains open to a more profound analysis. As early as in the 1970s Alessandro Portelli compared the work of a historian dealing only with written transcripts to an analysis of literary works in translation, or to an evaluation of a painting on the basis of its copy.<sup>11</sup>

Portelli's manifesto also assumes that historians would turn kinder eye towards the "oral" character of oral sources and either completely resign from transcribing them, or at least appreciate the differences between the written and oral forms of presentation. A further insight into these issues can be found in the work of Michael Frisch, according to whom the digital revolution will finally allow researchers to rejuvenate the "orality" of oral sources through the use of modern technology (e.g. by digital indexation). It provides researchers with an opportunity to directly experience the original image and sound, which was not possible in earlier transcript-based indexes. Moreover, the use of digital search engines makes it possible to search through and to replay not only the researcher's own collections of interviews, but also records from other sources. The narrations can thus be considered in their various aspects, and eventually interpreted in novel and unpredictable ways. Frisch advocates appreciating the value of the so called "*post documental sensibility*", which may bring balance to the differences between the "*raw script*" and the "*final document*", i.e. the transcript presented in the research report.<sup>12</sup> The new digital tools allow the researchers to create non-standardised databases, which can be constantly modified depending on the current needs of the researcher.<sup>13</sup> Every record can be interpreted in multiple ways but its original shape would remain intact.

10 Oksana KIS, *Telling the Untold: Representations of Ethnic and Regional Identities in Ukrainian Women's Autobiographies*, in: Keith T. Carlson – Natalia Khanenko-Friesen – Kristina Fagan (eds.), *Orality and Literacy: Reflections Across Disciplines and Cultures*, Toronto 2009, pp. 290–292.

11 A. PORTELLI, *What Makes Oral History Different?*, p. 64.

12 Michael FRISCH, *Oral History and the Digital Revolution: Toward a Post-Documentary Sensibility*, in: Robert Perks – Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, 2ed., London – New York 2006, pp. 102–114.

13 An interesting, although a very simple illustration of the idea is a domestic video archive, usually in the form of DVDs, tagged and shelved. It would be much better to build a database in which, upon request from a visiting relative, one could easily and quickly find records such as "new baby" or



The modern researcher in a way “goes back to basics” by rediscovering the richness of meanings in the interview, trying to “tune in” to his or her interlocutor, to see their point of view and better understand the culture or the specific issue being studied. In this context, research interests include:

- the process of adding new meanings by the interviewees to their own past;
- the ways in which the narrators connect their individual experiences with the social context;
- the processes of the past becoming elements of the present;
- the ways in which the narrators use elements of the past to interpret their own current lives.

In order to investigate these aspects of oral narratives, analysts follow a variety of approaches: narrative, linguistic, ethnological, psycho-social, and cultural.<sup>14</sup> In oral history we deal with a story in the first person singular, which underlines the difference between the events of the outside world and whatever is happening in the narrator’s soul, between what affects the whole social group and what is important for the individual life: an individual’s vision may overlap with the collective image, as well as differing from it.<sup>15</sup>

In this approach to an interpretation of oral biographies it is not possible to apply the traditional kinds of critique practiced in historical studies. According to Alessandro Portelli, a uniqueness of oral sources, in contrast from the written documents, lies in the fact that: “*As a matter of fact, written and oral sources are not mutually exclusive. They have common as well as autonomous characteristics, and specific functions which only either one can fill (or which one set of sources fills better than the other). Therefore, they require different specific interpretative instruments. But the undervaluing and the overvaluing of oral sources end up by cancelling out specific qualities, turning these sources either into mere supports for traditional written sources, or into an illusory cure for all ills.*”<sup>16</sup>

When talking about their own lives, people sometimes lie, forget, exaggerate, confuse, and misinterpret events. But they still can – and do – reveal “the truth about the past”, although it is not a story of how it *used to be*, but about the significance of events for them at the time of the interview. In interpreting such accounts, it is therefore important

---

“grandpa’s funeral”, rather than having to browse through hours of recordings. Browsing itself would also be easier and a reproduction of a separate file (e.g. for the sake of family reunions) would be possible. Ibidem, pp. 112–114.

14 See: Joan SANGSTER, *Telling our Stories. Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History*, *Women’s History Review* 3, 1994, no 1, p. 13; Alistair THOMSON – Michael FRISCH – Paula HAMILTON, *The Memory and History Debates: Some International Perspective*, *Oral History* 22, 1994, pp. 82–108.

15 Ronald J. GRELE, *Oral History as Evidence*, in: Th. L. Charlton – L. E. Myers – R. Sharpless (eds.), *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, Lanham 2007, pp. 33–91.

16 A. PORTELLI, *What Makes Oral History Different?*, p. 64.





to emphasize the cultural, social, and biographical context of their creation. While reading autobiographies as social and cultural constructs, the oral historian makes use of the developments in modern qualitative sociology, cultural anthropology, ethnolinguistics, and the methodology of folklore studies.

### Interpretive tools: possibilities and previous methodology

In order to understand another person and their inner world, to merely approximate the proper understanding of meanings he or she gives to their past, it is necessary to appreciate the fact that literal, direct understanding is not possible. To analyse biographical narrations means to produce repeated, clear explanations of their contents in an attempt to understand the narrator. The narrator can create his or her own interpretation of the story told before. The researcher, although unable to “*step into someone else’s shoes*”, can still analyse, and consequently systematise the meanings of past events, usually offered by the narrator in a chaotic manner. Especially relevant here is Clifford Geertz’s comparison: “*In the country of the blind, who are not as unobservant as they look, the one-eyed is not king, he is spectator.*”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, through an analysis of the text and the context provided by the narrator, the researcher can discover, one after another, the secrets of the individual interpretation, or even inspire the narrator to a deeper reflection upon his or her own past.

In spite of the development of computer software, which facilitates the study of oral sources, it is not possible to mark up a specific path for the researcher to follow in his or her struggle to find, as a “*spectator in the country of the blind*”, the most important messages and hidden meanings of what the narrator intended to say. In the literature on the subject there are many interesting methodological studies on various techniques of interview analysis. Steinar Kvale divides these techniques into two fundamental groups: the first one concentrates on studying the meaning (meaning encryption, meaning condensation, and meaning interpretation), while the other on studying the language of narration (linguistic analysis, conversational analysis, narration analysis, and discourse analysis). Outside this division there lies the *bricolage* and theoretical interpretation.<sup>18</sup> The division is extremely useful in sociological research; for a historian, however, it may be insufficient

17 Clifford GEERTZ, *From the Native’s Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding*, in: Paul Rabinow – William M. Sullivan (eds.), *Interpretive Social Science: a Reader*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1979, p. 228. The comparison alludes to the words of Erasmus of Rotterdam: “*In the country of the blind, a one-eyed man is a king*” (from *Adagia*, 1500 and subsequent editions through 1536, III, IV, 96).

18 S. KVALE, *Doing Interviews*, pp. 101–120.





in that it lacks the aspect of evaluation of the historical context in which the narration is grounded.

According to Paul Thompson, especially important for a historian is narrative analysis at the sociological and literary level, as it focuses on the meaning and the linguistic form of the narrative. While analysing individual stories, one should also keep in mind the relation between the memory of an individual and the memory of the group. In the newest edition of *The Voice of the Past*, Thompson presents a number of options used by oral historians in the recent years.<sup>19</sup> The examples of research reports provided by the author can be considered from three different perspectives: as monologues, dialogues, or polilogues.

In the first case the researcher regards the narration as a specific form of self-creation. The researcher, then, plays the role of an attentive student (listener), trying, among a multitude of tangled meanings, to find and analyse the author's intentions, to isolate images and "*the myths the narrator lives by*", and to discover the ways in which the form (genre and convention of storytelling) has influenced the contents. Representatives of this approach include Ronald Grele, Luisa Passerini, Vieda Skultans, Alessandro Portelli, William Labov, Stefan Bohman, and Isabelle Bertaux-Wiame. These researchers have been mainly interested in the peculiarities of oral biography, with its poetics, and with the stylistic figures used by the narrators. By underlining the differences between groups of subjects rooted in written vs. oral culture, with an additional parameter of race, the researchers have identified the various ways in which their narrators talk about the past.

In opposition to perceiving an interview as a one-person creation, there is the dialogic perspective, where the narration is viewed as a form of discourse, a joint effort of the interviewer and the interviewee. Representatives of this trend, Elliot Mischler and Pat Caplan, have underlined the advantages of analysing not only the answers given by the narrator, but also the questions asked by the researcher. In their opinion, the narrator instinctively reacts to the historian's behaviour and modifies his or her narration in the course of the interview, both in terms of verbal and non-verbal communication. This is an important perspective because the researcher and the narrator are unequal participants in the act of communication: the researcher chooses the subject matter and his or her interlocutors, organises the meeting, closes it, decides on the manner in which a given account will be analysed, which contents will be considered essential and which will remain unknown to the reader. It may therefore be beneficial to examine the interview "as a whole", without eliminating the researcher.

The third perspective – the interview as a polylogue – is at present the most popular one, as it allows to explore the hidden contents of the narration and the interplay of

---

<sup>19</sup> Paul THOMPSON, *The Voice of the Past*, Oxford 2003, pp. 265–309.



individual and collective memories. In analytical practice, researchers use the method of narrative interview proposed by the German sociologist Fritz Schütze. Its popularity stems from the fact that it allows for a combination of symbolic interactionism, modern phenomenology and ethnomethodology with the hermeneutic, linguistic rules of narrative analysis. Besides the carefully developed technique of data elicitation, it is characterised by consistent theoretical assumptions.<sup>20</sup> The objective of the narrative interview is to obtain from the narrator an account his or her life or its portion. The analytical part involves several phases and eventually leads to the construction of a theory grounded in autobiographical material. In this manner, the researcher is able to grasp the key elements of the description, the individual ways of argumentation, the characteristic features of the worldview of the narrators, as well as the narrator's own interpretation of the past.<sup>21</sup>

The last type of analysis, although the most fruitful for a historian, is time-consuming and difficult to implement in individual research. However, because it involves two levels (textual and extra-textual analysis), it can be modified and adjusted to the requirements of specific research tasks.<sup>22</sup> Most commonly, the method is limited to a data elicitation technique or to an analysis of the (auto)biographical material collected otherwise.

An equally popular concept in modern oral history is that of sequential analysis of narrative interview, proposed on the basis of Fritz Schütze's method by another German researcher, Gabriele Rosenthal. The goal of this method is to consider the whole of the narration in order to restore the sense the narrator has given to this or her biography in the course of narration, and to analyse the narrative construction process. According to Rosenthal, in the interview the narrator places his or her own story in a specific topical context, depending on what both the narrator and the researcher consider important in the dialogic process. The story unfolds around a given subject, usually defined by the researcher in the initial question. The dialogue proceeds in a way that in the narrator's view can be interesting for the listener, and in a manner available to the narrator.<sup>23</sup>

20 Mieczysław MARCINIAK, *Metoda biograficzna: między awangardą a secesją*, in: Kaja Kaźmierska (ed.), *Socjologia i społeczeństwo polskie*, Łódź 1998, p. 37.

21 See: Fritz SCHÜTZE, *Pressure and Guilt: War Experiences of a Young German Soldier and Their Biographical Implications*, *International Sociology* 7, 1992, no. 2, pp. 187–208 and no. 3, pp. 347–367.

22 Kaja KAŹMIERSKA, *Wywiad narracyjny – technika i pojęcia analityczne*, in: Marek Czyżewski – Andrzej Piotrowski – Alicja Rokuszewska-Pawelek (red.), *Biografia a tożsamość narodowa*, Łódź 1996, p. 35.

23 See: Gabriele ROSENTHAL, *Reconstruction of Life Stories. Principles of Selection in Generating Stories for Narrative Biographical Interviews*, in: *The Narrative Study of Lives* 1993, no. 1, pp. 59–91; EADEM, *Social Transformation in the Context of Familial Experience: Biographical Consequences of a Denied Past in the Soviet Union*, in: R. Bruckner – D. Kalekin-Fishman – I. Miethe (eds.), *Biographies and the Division Europe*, Olpanden 2000, pp. 115–137.





It is important to remember, however, that there is an additional aspect to the interdisciplinary character of modern oral history, especially in the context of further use of the oral material in research. The methods of analysis and citation depend on the discipline that the researcher represents.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, depending on the paradigm, a number of rather diverse analyses can arise from a single source. At the same time, the researchers have a chance to look at a given phenomenon or problem from different perspectives, e.g. from the point of view of different disciplines within the humanities. They also point out that the mere enhancement of their analytical technique is valuable, regardless of the procedural advantages or the practice of adapting the methods and ideas from related disciplines. It is worth recommending as a way to broaden one's professional horizon.<sup>25</sup>

In my opinion the combination of perspectives is also remarkable because it helps the researcher to treat the narrator as someone with a living history, rather than as a mere source of information on an interesting subject. Moreover, to look at human memory as an interaction of the subjective with the objective is to grasp the diversity of human lives, enhanced by the interlacing of every individual narration with collective experience.<sup>26</sup>

## The Narratives of Kazakhstani Poles

In my research practice I treat my interlocutors not as depersonalised “witnesses of history”, whose status in historical studies has so far been marginal, but as central figures in the process of creation of autobiographical narratives. Each narrator is a unique human being, who, through the narration, seeks the meaning of his or her own life, discovers or even shapes his or her identity. I am therefore interested in the process of creating the narrative, as well as in its contents and poetics. As an example, I propose to refer to the research that I carried out among Kazakhstani Poles.<sup>27</sup> The goal of my research was to

24 Vieda SKULTANS, *Between Experience and Text in Ethnography and Oral History*, ELORE 13, 2006, URL: <[http://www.elore.fi/arkisto/1\\_06/sku1\\_06.pdf](http://www.elore.fi/arkisto/1_06/sku1_06.pdf)> [accessed 2014-10-02].

25 Ibidem, p. 101.

26 See: O. КІСЬ, *Усна історія*, p. 17; Sidney MINTZ, *The Anthropological Interview and the Life History*, in: David K. Dunaway – Willa K. Baum (eds.), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, Nashville 1984, p. 306.

27 Poles in Kazakhstan constitute one portion of the Polish diaspora in the former Soviet Union. Slightly less than half of Kazakhstan's Poles live in the Karaganda region, with another 2,500 in Astana, 1,200 in Almaty, and the rest scattered throughout rural regions. The Poles of Kazakhstan represent a special case: its formation as a social group is largely connected with the painful history of the relationships between Poland and the Russian Empire – later the Soviet Union, with its attempt to solve “the Polish question” during the World War II. The Poles' struggle to preserve their identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union, either in Kazakhstan or by returning to their mythical motherland, is extremely interesting and worthy of investigation. See more: Catherine POUJOL, *Poles in Kazakhstan*:



study the ways in which they perceive their past experiences, as manifested through the linguistic aspect of their biographical narratives.<sup>28</sup>

The source material for my analysis consists of 51 interviews collected in Northern Kazakhstan and Akmola Provinces (in Oziernoje, Stepnoje, Petropavlovsk, Tayinsha, Chkalovo, Krasnokyeвка, Novoberezovka, Podolskoye, Kellerovka, Dragomirovka, Donetskoye, Litovochnoye, and Shchuchinsk) in July and August 2009. I will also relate to the results of field research (32 narrative interviews) carried out among the same community a year earlier by the Warsaw-based centre KARTA.

For the majority of my interlocutors, the repressions due to nationality and religion are the main interpretive key to their biography, to a broader family history, or to the history of the Polish minority in Kazakhstan as a whole. Most narratives centre around memories of the 1936 deportation, a prelude to the real suffering in the new conditions. Other elements of repression were also presented: the life in the kolkhoz, the brutality of the commanders, restrictions to people's basic rights. In some narratives, one of the elements of oppression was the contemptuous attitude to educated people who were not members of the Communist Party, as well as to those who manifested their religious beliefs. In short, the narratives contain the interviewees' interpretations of the subject matter.

The stories of the Kazakhstani Poles I have recorded are rather homogeneous in terms of subject matter and grammatical structure. The interviewees used similar narrative patterns, and regardless of their individual biographical experiences constructed their stories around the same events: these constitute the general framework characteristic of the whole group. My interlocutors were mainly concerned with memories of sombre past events, suffering, the hardships of everyday life – in this situation mere survival was a value in itself. By using such expressions as *we made it*, *we survived*, *afterwards it became much easier*, *that's what our parents went through*, etc., the narrators tried to express and interpret their experience of repression and discrimination due to their nationality and religion. The accounts can more appropriately be compared to paintings than to photographs. In the majority of cases they are completely unrealistic and unemotional: the emotions of shame, embarrassment, anger, despair, or bitterness, undoubtedly present “there and then”, were lost in the formalised genre of (auto)biographical narrative. The speakers often used gestures or voice modulation to render the accounts of the suffering

---

*Between Integration and the Imagined Motherland*, Space, Populations, Societies 2007, no. 4 (1), pp. 91–100.

28 Wiktoria KUDELA-ŚWIĄTEK, *Odpamiętane... O historii mówionej na przykładzie narracji biograficznych kazachstańskich Polaków o doświadczeniu represji na tle narodowościowym i religijnym*, Kraków 2013 + CD.



more convincing. These attempts, however, were not always successful: the final effect depended mainly on the individual oratory abilities of the narrator.

While searching for an appropriate methodological approach in this kind of research, one often wonders whether, by dissecting the experience of repression into more specific experiences, the interviewer is able to penetrate the world of the interviewees, so as to be able to convincingly present it to the readers. For this purpose I decided to make use of the modern paradigm of oral history in my research practice, which is why my focus was not on well-known historical facts but rather on the images and interpretations of very personal and painful experiences of individuals. The key issue in this context is the question of the language of narration. An inquiry into the linguistic worldview of my interlocutors has been instrumental in recognising the means they use to categorize and interpret past events.<sup>29</sup>

In the narratives, unsurprisingly, past experiences are described and judged from the point of view of the present. The accounts can be viewed as a form of self-creation – this allows the researcher to focus on more than mere biographical data, specifically on the structural and genological aspects of each storyline. However, this has proved insufficient for considerations of identity, one of the major motifs in the interviews. It is therefore as important to study the linguistic aspects of the narratives, since in a spontaneous conversation an interlocutor is more likely to reveal their identity, or rather: their interpretation of it, than even after a moment's reflection.<sup>30</sup> The particular language used by the narrator is thus decisive for the process of constructing the view of the past, while the specific lexis being used positions the account in a concrete socio-cultural environment, reflecting the speaker's attitude towards the events.<sup>31</sup>

## The linguistic worldview in oral-history narratives

To properly interpret oral narratives it is essential to apply not so much historical but rather linguistic methodology, since a consideration of mere facts in a decontextualised fashion is insufficient. The oral history interview combines various disciplines and allows for a multi-layered interpretation of reports on the events being described. The traditional approach towards oral-history sources, without the linguistic considerations, cannot reveal

29 Marta KOPINŃSKA, *Język jako narzędzie interpretacji rzeczywistości – językowy obraz świata*, Inicjo 2009, no. 2, p. 55.

30 Wiktorja KUDELA-ŚWIĄTEK, *Niežnośny ciężar przekazu, czyli o przekładzie źródeł oral history*, Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej 2012, no. 2, pp. 5–35.

31 Olga LENKIEWICZ, *Źródła wywołane w badaniu prywatności*, in: ed. Adam Walaszek – Anna Żarnowska – Dobrochna Kałwa (eds.), *Rodzina, prywatność, intymność*, Warszawa 2005, p. 193.



how Kazakhstani Poles interpret past reality or what images of their life events they maintain and pass on to the next generations.

In search of suitable methods I came across a linguistic worldview concepts. Among the many definitions of the linguistic worldview, I have followed the approach proposed by Jerzy Bartmiński, according to whom it means a language-entrenched interpretation of reality, expressed in the form of judgements about the world. These judgements can be coded through grammar, vocabulary, or stereotyped texts (e.g. proverbs), but can also be implied by linguistic forms at the level of social knowledge, beliefs, myths, and rituals.<sup>32</sup> The linguistic worldview is also a common interpretation of reality from the point of view of an average language speaker, which reflects their mentality and is compatible with their needs.<sup>33</sup> An analysis of the linguistic view of the past in the narratives of Poles from Kazakhstan reveals the viewpoint of the narrators, their emotional attitude towards the past events they describe, as well as their judgements of the people they mention in their stories. Understanding these concepts is not, however, possible without explaining the socio-cultural context in which the narratives are based. I have therefore emphasised in my study the issue of bilingualism and its particular types among my narrators, as well as their level of education and social position.

In one of my previous works I consider how my interlocutors understand and interpret the terms *freedom* and *enslavement*. The linguistic-worldview methodology makes it possible to reveal the understanding of coercion among Kazakhstani Poles as, on the one hand, speakers of Russian, and on the other hand, speakers of the expatriate variety of Polish. I also concentrate on the content of the narratives and the personal attitude of my interlocutors both to the experience of repression and to the way they themselves describe it. The subject matter are descriptions of communist repressions – a regular element of the Soviet government's policy. Each narrator, in judging his or her life in the context of the past, is treated as a unique individual, with a unique body of experiences of the kolkhoz settlement.<sup>34</sup>

The vast majority of the narrators centred their life stories around reflections on their own identity as well as the identity of other community members. The narratives have also revealed the difficult choices faced by Kazakhstani Poles as a result of their Polish identity. By asking the question “*Where is the homeland of the Kazakhstani Poles?*”, I attempt

32 Jerzy BARTMIŃSKI, *Aspects of Cognitive Ethnolinguistics*, ed. Jörg Zinken, Sheffield & Oacville 2009, p. 24.

33 See more: Adam GŁAZ – Przemysław ŁOZOWSKI – David DANAHER (eds.), *The Linguistic Worldview: Ethnolinguistics, Cognition and Culture*, London 2013.

34 Wiktoria KUDELA-ŚWIĄTEK, *Linguistic images of enslavement in biographical narratives of Poles in Kazakhstan*, in: A. Głaz – P. Łozowski – D. Danaher (eds.), *The Linguistic Worldview*, pp. 459–473.



to shed light on the main identity-related dilemmas of my interlocutors and on the way in which they were affected by their biographical experience. An analysis of the word *homeland*, as it used in the narratives, is therefore of vital importance.<sup>35</sup>

At this juncture I would like to illustrate my theoretical divagations with an analysis of changes in the mentality of Kazakhstani Poles, as a result of the repressions they experienced in a totalitarian system. The persecutions my interlocutors experienced due to their nationality or religion are presented, through diction, as situations that are both irreversible and without a solution. The narrator reports on the repressions from his or her point of view, argues for the validity of specific interpretations, and even imposes a given perspective on the listener. In this way the interviewer perceives the past through the prism of the narrator's system of values because it is the narrator who selects the characters for his or her story and evaluates them as "good" or "bad". Through lexis, then, views and convictions of speakers are incorporated into linguistic meaning; in this way mutual understanding is blocked, unless the interlocutors share the same feelings and experiences. Especially powerful in this respect are axiologically loaded items, such as *lie, steal, betray*, etc. According to Renata Grzegorzczkova, these words name specific actions: telling the untruth, taking someone else's possessions, not keeping one's word. The majority of the narrators evaluate them negatively. However, the judgements vary depending on the social background of the speaker: for some the negative evaluation is absent.<sup>36</sup>

Stories of theft and hurtful informing can function as attempts to understand a given deed or, more rarely, to condemn the doer. They can also function as explanations of why a theft was committed. The researcher must then make his or her own judgement, in relation to the specifics of the life-threatening situations. The reader, when presented with the researcher's report, classifies a particular action as social degradation or as adaptation to the extreme living conditions. One of the narrators tells her story thus:

[Feliksa:] "... *even before the war.. Not during the war, they brought some Ingush to us. In 1944 they brought the Ingush to us and they were quartered here as well, but they were better off because we were already here and there was the kolkhoz and you could in the kolkhoz, you know, **maybe not earn money**, because they*

35 EADEM, *Między wyobrażeniem a rzeczywistością. Obraz ojczyzny w pamięci zbiorowej kazachtańskich Polaków i repatriantów z Kazachstanu*, in: Leon Dyczewski – Justyna Szulich-Kałuża – Robert Szwed (eds.), *Stażność i zmienność tożsamości*, Lublin 2010, pp. 189–207.

36 Renata GRZEGORCZYKOWA, *Władanie o świecie a wiedza językowa*, in: Jerzy Bartmiński (ed.), *Konotacja*, Lublin 1988, p. 122.



would give..., they wrote down the daily wages but they didn't actually pay you anything. Maybe a hundred grams or half a sack or maybe the whole sack but there are ten people in the family. Abortion was unknown then, women gave birth to children. God has given you the child so you must give birth to him. So it was like that, like the people survived. And so it's like that..."

[Feliksa's husband:] "about the Ingush..."

[Feliksa:] "ah, the Ingush... When they came, we began to close ourselves off a little. You know, I didn't see the "real thieves", but you know..."

[Husband:] "the poverty..."

[Feliksa:] "yes, the shortages... helplessness. It's not like they would steal or anything... Like he has ten and would steal one more, no. **They would steal in their helplessness.** When my father was made foreman... My stepfather was made foreman, he would turn a blind eye to what they took home. Yes, they... They are all dead now... When they left for the Caucasus, every year they would send us something like a packet out of gratitude that we, that my father had been helping them out..."<sup>37</sup>

Feliksa makes every effort to avoid using the word *steal*: she knows that beside the very special situational context it is usually evaluated negatively. When she does use this or related words, she tries to "correct herself" immediately.

The stories of theft committed by the narrators themselves or members of their families, when told now, are totally decontextualized and are not compatible with the current social situation of either interlocutor. Starvation is no longer a real threat, so the interviewer's degree of empathy is lower than what would allow him or her to avoid negative judgement of the narrator. Therefore, stories of theft are meant to justify the deeds of the persons involved. Indeed, acts of informing on the "thieves" are evaluated negatively. If stealing kolkhoz equipment was unproblematic, to report the thefts to the authorities was considered outrageous ("I didn't steal from your field, why have you reported on me?", "Why do you feel cheated and tell the foreman?").

It is important to realize that in the times of Khrushchev workers in the Soviet Union were paid in kind, which made their situation very difficult.<sup>38</sup> To belong to a kolkhoz was a social duty, without financial gains. Moreover, forced assignment to a particular kolkhoz and the lack of personal identification documents until 1956 made it impossible

37 Interview with Feliksa K. and her husband, August 3, 2009, Tayinsha, 11:25 – 13:18.

38 Т. ЩЕГЛОВА, *Деревня и крестьянство Алтайского края в XX веке. Устная история: монография*, Барнаул 2008, p. 311.

to alleviate the dire material conditions.<sup>39</sup> Theft was thus viewed as compensation payment, the most frequently stolen commodities being food and fodder.

The interviewees express their gratitude to those kolkhoz directors who pretended not to notice these acts and even reproached informers for their lack of compassion for the ones in a worse situation. Frequently used expressions include: *the director/foreman was a human being, he would let others live*:

[W. K.-Ś.:] “*the kolkhoz director was a Pole, too. You say that the kolkhoz helped raise the church*”

[Petronela:] “*yes, they were all Polish. I don’t even know who in those times was...*”

[Piotr:] “*the director?*”

[Petronela:] “*the director*”

[Piotr:] “*the kolkhoz director was a khakhol<sup>40</sup> – a Ukrainian!*”

[Petronela:] “*yeah, a Ukrainian... from Moscow, actually...*”

[Piotr:] “*he worked in Moscow. He was in the rank of major. I don’t know [his name]. There wasn’t any payment.*”

[Petronela:] “*what a good man he was!*”

[Piotr:] “*and better than the Poles, too...*”

[Petronela:] “*his wife would even come here to church... that’s what it was*”

[Piotr:] “*and him? He was very good, he let people live... taught them how to survive*”

[Petronela:] “*take it and live... he was helpful, that’s what it was*”

[Piotr:] “*take it and live... make sure I don’t see it... and live*”

[Petronela:] “*and what did our people do? [indignation]*”

[Piotr:] “*go on building... our own men were even worse... Poles [in the communist party], mean... [clenches his fists]*”

[Petronela:] “*Róžański in particular...*”

[Piotr:] “*he would beat his people*”

[Petronela:] “*beat*”

[Piotr:] “*and the other one was a good man*”<sup>41</sup>

The living conditions in the kolkhoz, especially in the Stalinist era, were truly unbearable and caused an erosion of several social norms. The poverty obliterated the boundaries of integrity and lawfulness: to meet elementary existential needs one had to resort to

39 Ibidem, p. 313.

40 a derogatory Russian term for Ukrainians.

41 Interview with Petronela M. and Piotr J., August 1, 2009, Tayinsha, 15:05 – 16:10.

lying and stealing. The system of values had to be restructured accordingly, so that a crime was viewed as a necessity and even as heroism. Hence there are differences between the researcher and the interviewee in the understanding of several notions used to describe the past reality. Many morally dubious deeds, and especially the narrators' evaluations of these deeds, are labelled with euphemistic vocabulary: theft in the workplace is called "offset payment", while a report on this to the kolkhoz authorities is regarded as "betrayal".

A separate issue is semantic vagueness, especially conspicuous in the sphere of abstract notions or people's attitudes and behaviours – differences in how they are understood or explicated are very clear.<sup>42</sup> a contentious notion of this kind in the accounts of Kazakhstani Poles is among others the notion of "welfare". Semantic vagueness, however, must not be confused with differences in the judgements of what actually happened. Misunderstandings frequently stem from different interpretations of the same phenomenon. Depending on a person's system of values, different acts can be treated as betrayal, cadging, or dishonesty. This is not, however, a matter of understanding word meanings but of convictions and beliefs relating to the phenomena in question.<sup>43</sup>

In their stories, Kazakhstani Poles never mention welfare directly. The relative nature of the concept's meaning can be discovered by analysing fragments of the narratives – the relevant contexts point to the judgements of the past events in this respect.

For some of the narrators, welfare meant satisfying basic needs, such as food and shelter, for others it was an accumulation of many more material goods, typically connected with the Soviet consumerist ideal: an apartment, a car, an allotment (Rus. *квартира – машина – дача*).<sup>44</sup> The oldest of my interlocutors usually mentioned the possibility of eating to one's fill, symbolised by bread. While describing the time after the deportation, the creation of the kolkhozes and the neighbouring housing estates, my interlocutors emphasised the human cost of the endeavours. Frequently after such expressions as *it was hard*, they say *it was better later on, our parents had a very hard time – our situation was easier, we managed to bear it, we made up*. These are followed by accounts of WWII, which is usually described as an extreme kind of experience. References to hard, exhausting work are accompanied by descriptions of encounters with deportees from the Second Polish Republic. Then there was a relative improvement of the material situation from

42 R. GRZEGORCZYKOWA, *Władanie o świecie a wiedza językowa*, p. 124.

43 Ibidem.

44 The ideal, referred to as the "Soviet dream", became especially popular in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s – most citizens did not have access to all three commodities. See more: М. РУТКЕВИЧ, *О социальной структуре советского общества*, Социологические исследования 1999, № 4, pp. 19–28.





the 1950s to the 1970s, especially when the first secretary of the Soviet communist party was Leonid Brezhnev.

What I found surprising was the use of the expression *we began to have a better life* (Rus. *жизнь стало лучше*) in many narratives. This means that the expression, originally used as a slogan in Soviet propaganda, entered the general idiom. My interlocutors use it as a key word to describe their lives. What matters here are not illustrations of past experiences but pointing to the necessity of discovering the deeper meanings which individual narrators ascribe to the expression in the context of their life stories. The only reference frame for them are the times before and after the deportation from the territory of Ukraine, which means that they only rely on the experience of their own group. In comparison to the Stalinist era, when work in the kolkhozes was remunerated in kind and the kolkhoz inhabitants were not allowed to travel to towns, even minor reforms would seem revolutionary progress on the way to communism. The frequent expressions of the kind *after the war it was better* must be viewed relative to descriptions of earlier events and situations – *better* usually means ‘not so bad as during the deportation or the war’. Our contemporary understanding of welfare is not compatible with these attitudes. Feliksa of Tayinsha says: “*you know, I remember it well, I was maybe seven or eight when the war began and we would build dug-outs. We called them Stalin’s dug-outs – these were Stalin’s times. You know, a wall here and a wall here and a place to live there, it’s just that some lived on one side and others on the other side. They were considered billionaires. And you know, we survived thanks to the cow...*”<sup>45</sup>

It seems that uncritical acceptance of the statement that after Stalin’s death life became better, leads to the belief that the event marks the end of the persecution of Poles in the Soviet Union. This is not the case: my interlocutors intend to make it clear in this way that the repressions in the Stalinist era were unparalleled in their severity by what was happening before and after it. This does not mean, however, that in earlier or later periods the people felt free.

This illustrates the statement from Renata Grzegorzczkova: “[T]he world of culture permeates language, so that the people who do not participate in a given culture cannot understand many semantic layers or conceptual spheres hidden behind the linguistic meanings of words.”<sup>46</sup> The knowledge of the cultural contexts is necessary to fully understand the linguistically coded messages.<sup>47</sup> This includes sharing life experiences and a similar cultural background, the knowledge of the same concepts, their evaluations, and the emotional

45 Interview with Feliksa K., 3 August, 2009, Tayinsha, 4:52 – 5:38.

46 R. GRZEGORCZYKOWA, *Władanie o świecie a wiedza językowa*, p. 127.

47 Teresa DOBRZYŃSKA, *Uwarunkowania kulturowe metafory*, in: J. Bartmiński (ed.), *Konotacja*, pp. 155–168.





attitude to them. a peculiar aspect of this body of knowledge is at least a satisfactory command of the language of the group concerned, as well as passive participation in post-Soviet culture.

## Final remarks

Oral sources reveal to the historian the significance of a given event for the narrator, rather than factual information about the event as such. The narrators have a chance, not to say something about history in general, not about “what life was to be like”, but about what they experienced. Oral history interviews do not therefore contribute to a textbook-type version of history but are narrative interpretations of the speakers’ past experiences. Memory is treated here as an active process of adding meanings, not a reservoir for events.<sup>48</sup> It is true that oral sources may facilitate a reconstruction of past events – it is, however, risky to rely on them for the purpose because one is unable to achieve a higher level of generalisation. This can lead to serious shortcomings in analyses and scholarly synthesis.<sup>49</sup>

Combining, within a single study, the self-presentations by the narrators with an analysis of social discourse, of which they are both a part and co-creators, allows one to consider the narratives from the social perspective. Therefore, it is worthwhile for a modern historian to look at the autobiographies of ordinary people as a system of individually created meanings, rather than a sequence of historical events. The narrator constructs his or her story by using specific discursive strategies, based on the existing cultural patterns, the set of values accepted in a given culture, the models of social behaviour, etc. The task of the historian is to meticulously study the form and content of the collected narrative material. I therefore believe that the manner in which this is performed depends mainly on the scholar’s specific needs and research objectives. I further believe that for a modern historian, the use of interdisciplinary methods is probably the only way to discover how past events are being remembered by their participants and witnesses, why a particular interlocutor constructs his or her story in a specific manner.

A combination of perspectives deriving from a variety of disciplines leads to a more convincing, truthful, and richer reconstruction of the image of the past. In my research practice I make use of the idea of the linguistic worldview, as understood by Jerzy Bartmiński. This is because traditional historical research methods are ineffective in

48 Piotr FILIPKOWSKI, *Historia mówiona i wojna*, in: Sławomir Buryła – Paweł Rodak (eds.), *Wojna. Doświadczenie i zapis. Nowe źródła, problemy, metody badawcze*, Kraków 2006, p. 21.

49 P. THOMPSON, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 162.





reconstructing everyday lives of Soviet Poles, especially because the group did not leave any permanent intellectual legacy such as memoirs or other researchable texts. Only by reaching for the “live” source material in the form of recorded interviews, by systematically relating to the issues of language, narration and its interpretation, is it possible to uncover the nature of the repressions faced by Poles in the Soviet Union. What’s more for me as an oral historian this concept is very important because it help to debunk the myth that history is objective and points to the uniqueness of the human experience of the past.

