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‘You’ve just got to walk away’: Mixed viewpoints in radio call-in trauma narratives

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Abstract

Starting from the idea that multiplicity of viewpoint is the norm in discourse (Mey, 1999; Verhagen, 2005; Dancygier, 2012b), this paper presents an analysis of viewpoint in radio narratives in terms of Mental Spaces and Conceptual Integration Theory (MSCIT). More specifically, it studies the linguistic and cognitive strategies used by narrators of late night call-in radio programmes to disclose intimate experiences; that is, the strategies used to solve the tension between the need to share their traumatic experiences and the need to protect themselves from strangers, between *what* they want to say and *how* they can say it within this specific medial setting. A thorough integration of MSCIT theoretical and analytical tools, based on the notion of *mixed viewpoint discourse* (Dancygier, 2012b; Dancygier and Vandelanotte, 2016), helps to better understand the fragmented and complex structure of the text under study, the idiosyncratic features of the communicative medium, as well as how the narrator manages to turn an individual, intimate experience into a global story shared by the community.

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1. Introduction

We¹ tend to believe that personal experiences are told in the first person, from a purely personal perspective, in the past tense, and, if possible, in a chronological order. However, narrators sometimes try to mark distance vis-à-vis the events narrated, or to involve their audience in their stories, or both. Disclosing intimate information as a victim of domestic violence is a difficult, painful effort, even more so if performed to complete strangers, who are not physically present – i.e. the audience of a radio call-in programme. This paper analyses some of the strategies used in this particular communicative situation. Following Mey's (1999) and Dancygier's (2012b) argument that multiplicity of viewpoint is the norm in discourse, as well as the well-known cognitive premise that linguistic meaning and function influence the linguistic forms chosen by speakers (Langacker, 1990, among others), this paper analyses how the narrative content and the communicative medium influence the linguistic strategies used by the narrator. More specifically, our aim is to analyze how viewpoint shifts are used by the narrator in an apparently monological narrative of traumatic events in order to increase the audience's involvement and empathy. In addition, we explore how listeners are able to build the overall meaning of the narrative through the continuous viewpoint shifts and through the constant interactions between the

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narrative itself and the radio programme format. Both the highly emotional content of the narrative and the specific contextual characteristics of late night radio programmes result in a highly complex, fragmented structure in which the narrator constantly zooms in and out of self-disclosure, as the analysis shows.

To this aim, the analytical tools developed within Mental Spaces and Conceptual Integration Theory (MSCIT), as applied to the analysis of viewpoint in narrative discourse, have been especially useful, since they start out from the tenet that meaning emerges online, that it is co-constructed and negotiated, and that it is a dynamic process that emerges from the interactions taking place in real, specific communicative situations (Verhagen, 2005; Enfield and Levinson, 2006; among others). MSCIT can best explain how the radio narrative *Domestic Violence*, chosen for our case study, is constructed online by the narrator, the host and the ‘invisible’ audience, and how all the flashbacks, background information and emotional responses contained in the different mental spaces of the story merge into the final blend or emergent narrative. In addition, the latest applications of this theoretical model to the analysis of viewpoint in narrative discourse (Sanders and Redeker, 1996; Dancygier, 2005, 2012a; Sanders, 2010) provide a set of finer-grained concepts, such as *mixed viewpoint network*, *viewpoint markers* and *viewpoint shifts*, which help to link the specific linguistic and cognitive strategies used by the speaker throughout the narrative process. This approach also helps to understand how listeners are able to navigate the apparently chaotic maze of mental spaces and viewpoint shifts, empathizing with the speaker (Habermas, 2006; Habermas and Diel, 2010), until they finally build their own global meaning.

In short, this study assumes a socio-cognitive conception of narrative (Fludernik, 1996; Tomasello, 2008; Dancygier, 2012a), approaching narrative as a natural, socially embodied process on a par with other forms of conceptualization. Within this approach, narratives rely on the same social and cognitive strategies, namely the human basic need to share information and emotions, to organize this information into coherent temporal and causal chunks, and to frame it within culturally shared knowledge.

After describing the corpus of radio narratives analyzed, as well as the specific features of the narrative genre under study in Section 2, this paper turns to the latest theoretical notions coming from MSCIT models of viewpoint analysis in the study of narratives in Section 3. Then, in Section 4, these notions are applied to the case study, the radio narrative *Domestic Violence*. The main results are summarized in Section 5.

2. Radio narratives of traumatic events

The radio narrative under study, *Domestic Violence*, belongs to a small corpus of 40 oral narratives (20 British and 20 Spanish) research-collected and transcribed from 2006 to 2012 from two late night call-in programmes: the British *Late Night Love* and the Spanish *Hablar por Hablar*.² This type of programme was chosen for the analysis of oral traumatic narratives because of its particular format: it contains highly emotional, non-planned, naturally occurring discourse in which speakers feel free to talk about their concerns in an anonymous setting and which is therefore very close to natural, face-to-face narrative discourse (Norrick, 2000; Georgakopoulou, 2007). Previous research has shown that even though these narratives are quasi-natural, the contextual features of the discourse situation, the specific communicative medium in which narratives emerge, together with their highly emotional contents, influence the cognitive and linguistic strategies used by narrators (Habermas, 2006; Hoffmann, 2007; Habermas and Diel, 2010; Moder, 2010; Porto and Romano, 2010; Romano and Porto, 2013; Herman, 2013; Ryan and Thon, 2014).

In the following paragraphs, the main contextual-medial and discursive-textual features of this narrative genre are described.³ Then, the narrative under study is presented.

The main aim of people participating in these call-in radio programmes can best be described as *socio-emotional*. People phone in voluntarily to tell their stories either to vent feelings or to give advice to people in similar situations; two aims that are very frequently mixed. The range of topics covered in these narratives is very wide, all related to highly intimate, emotional matters such as love, infidelity, illnesses, bullying, sex, unemployment, etc. These texts can be considered ‘small stories’ (Georgakopoulou, 2007) narrating private worries, but are told with a globalizing purpose, to exemplify the many similar stories of ordinary people (Porto and Alonso Belmonte, 2014). We will see how this dichotomy is reflected in the viewpoint shifts triggered both by the emotional events being narrated, and by the interaction between the narrative process and the radio programme layout.

Moreover, these narratives are space and time bound, and their *emotional* purpose cannot be fulfilled instantly, as listeners are not physically present and thus cannot respond immediately; they can only provide indirect feedback by

² The average length of the texts is 300–600 words, the total corpus comprising 18,073 words (9314 LNL and 8759 HpH). In addition, no details (place of origin, age, job, socio-cultural background, etc.) are accessible, only speakers’ gender (16 men and 24 women) and dialectal varieties.

³ For a full account of the features of the genre, see also Porto and Romano (2010), Romano and Porto (2013), Romano and Cuenca (2013), and Romano et al. (2013).

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