

The role of narrative perspective in the elaboration of individual and historical traumas

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The functions of life narratives and group narratives

Narratives are everyday forms of communication. At the same time they are a particular mode of knowing (Bruner, 1986) and the organizing principle of our knowledge about our life history and about the history of our groups. Following Erikson (1959), McAdams (1985) Antonovsky (1987), László (2003, 2008, 2011), László & Ehmann (this volume), Liu & László (2007) have argued that individual life narratives and group narratives are the building blocks of personal and group identity, respectively. By their power to construct reality (Bruner, 1986) narratives compose the significant life events in a manner to support the construction of an adaptive identity. Narratives facilitate historical continuity on both individual and group levels and also have a function in coping with the effects of threatening events (László, this book). They do not merely account for past events but construct identity in a sense that they define who we are, where are we from, how we deal with conflicts and what are our relations to significant others. Narratives have several structural-compositional features each having correlates with the identity organization and identity state of the narrator. To map these structural-compositional features, a content analytic program NarrCat has been developed which measures configurations or patterns of words instead of word frequency. NarrCat, by using advanced grammar which assigns these contents to the narrator or to each character, places psychological contents (e.g. emotions, evaluations, cognitions or agency) into identity relevant interpersonal and intergroup context (see László, 2008; László and Ehmann, this volume).

Definition of narrative perspective

Narrative perspective can be defined as a technical term. In this sense NP is a relational concept. It refers to the fact that story events are related from a position, sometimes called point of view or vantage point. As a relational concept, NP performs a modulator role in perception. It shapes perception and meaning of the narrative by encouraging a particular reading of the story. There are several dimensions to relate the event and the position to each other (Uspensky, 1974; Bal, 1985; Cohn, 1978). We will deal in this chapter with *spatio-temporal perspective* and *psychological perspective* in more detail.

Whereas NP has been discussed primarily by literary narratologists as narrative device that modulates literary reception, László, Ehmann, Péley & Pólya (2002) suggest that spatio-temporal perspective be considered an identity marker in life narratives. Similarly, adopting psychological perspective in historical narratives has been suggested as an indicator of group identity (Vincze, Tóth & László, 2007). This chapter examines how spatio-temporal and psychological perspectives relate to personal and group identity, particularly to coping with traumatic events.

Spatio-temporal perspective and coping with identity threats

Spatio-temporal perspective is performed by locating both the events and the narrator's position in time and space. It has three forms (Pólya, 2007). The Retrospective form of narrative perspective locates position in the present of narration, while the events are located in the past (e.g. *I was living with my mother.*). However, the position and the events can be located in the same way either to the past (e.g. *Come in mum!*) or to the present (e.g. *I remember well.*). These two forms are called Experiencing and Metanarrative forms respectively.

Although spatio-temporal perspective is an essential feature of the narrative structure there are only a limited number of studies on this feature. However, studies on verb tense are informative about the Spatio-temporal perspective, since the verb tense is systematically related to it. For example, Pennebaker et al., (1997) have found that the use of past tense predicts positive state after the loss of partners. Interestingly, they have not found the reverse relation between present verb time and negative state. This might be explained by considering that both Experiencing and Metanarrative forms use present time, but these two present times are different. The Experiencing form uses the historical present time, while the metanarrative form uses present time to refer to the here and now of the narration.

Our studies have investigated the role of spatio-temporal perspective in coping with identity threats. Results from four studies will be reviewed here.

The first study (Pólya, 2007) had 20 homosexual men and 20 women participating in In Vivo Fertilization treatment. Their social identities were under threat since being homosexual is valued negatively. Similarly, being not able to be a mother is also negatively valued at least for women who put up with the consequences of going through an In Vivo Fertilization treatment. Participants were asked to tell the story of how they accommodated their

homosexual identity or how they protect themselves from the stigma of not being able to be a mother. Three components of their experiences related to the sexual identity category were measured by questionnaires. The cognitive component was measured by the Purpose to Life Scale short version (Antonovsky, 1987), the emotional component was assessed by the Profile of Mood States (McNair, Lorr, Droppleman, 1971), and the self-esteem component was reflected by the State Self-esteem Scale (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991).

Results revealed that the Spatio-temporal perspective forms used in the life-stories reflect the effectiveness of coping with threats. The frequent use of the Retrospective form is indicative on the successful coping. Those narrators use frequently this perspective form who tended to have high self-esteem and who are not depressed. The frequent use of the Retrospective form is also predicted by emotional non-involvement in the experiences. This result can be explained as showing a detached way to managing those experiences which are related to their sexual identity category.

The frequent use of Experiencing form is indicative of a failure in coping. This perspective form is used frequently by those narrators with low self-esteem and who are stressed. The low level of sense of coherence also predicts the frequent use of the Experiencing form.

Finally, the frequent use of the Metanarrative form was predicted by more severe failures in coping. The difficulties in coping were revealed by low scores on self-esteem and high scores on emotional embarrassment.

The second study (Pólya, László, Forgas, 2005) explored the same relationships between coping with threats and spatio-temporal perspective but approached from a different angle. This study investigated the effects of Spatio-temporal perspective on readers of short stories which describe significant life events. The significant life events were chosen from narrative interviews. Two events had been chosen from the first study. A homosexual man's coming out for his parents, and a woman who had learned about the failure of her IVF treatment. A third significant event was chosen from interviews on Jewish ethnic social identity. This story was about a boy learning about his Jewish ethnic origin.

Participants read short stories with manipulated spatio-temporal perspective. This study considered the Retrospective and the Experiencing forms, but omitted the Metanarrative form. The reason behind this exclusion was that in this study it was important to minimalise the differences in content between story variants and the Metanarrative form hardly meets this condition.

The results of this study have revealed that the Spatio-temporal perspective influences the perception of how narrators did cope with threats on their social identity.

More specifically, narrators of the stories which use the Retrospective form were perceived to have coped successfully with threats. They were perceived as more mentally adjusted and they were more positively evaluated socially than narrators of the stories with Experiencing form. On the contrary, narrators who take the Experiencing form were perceived as not coping successfully with threats, since they were perceived as more anxious than the narrators of stories with Retrospective form.

The third study (Pólya, Kis, et al., 2007) examined the contribution of the Spatio-temporal perspective to the process of emotion regulation. Eighty two participants were asked about important life events such as great achievement, a good and a bad episode with an important person. The emotion regulation was measured with questionnaires. The coherence of emotion regulation was measured by administering the Clarity factor of the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (Salovey, et al., 1995) which reflects on how clearly a person sees his or her feelings. The Purpose to Life Scale (Antonovsky, 1987) was again used to measure the sense of coherence construct. Stability of emotion regulation was reflected by administering the Emotion stability factor of the Big Five Questionnaire (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, 1993). This factor consists of two subfactors. The emotional control subfactor measures the capacity for coping with anxiety and emotions. The impulse control subfactor measures the capacity for managing irritability, discontent, and anger.

Associations were found only in stories about negative episodes, have confirming the relation between successful coping and the use of the Retrospective form. Results also are in line with the hypothesized relation between problems in coping and the use of the Experiencing form. People who used this form frequently had less clear experiences, were more reluctant to be involved emotionally in the search for coherence in experiences, and they were less efficient in controlling impulses. The strongest association was found between the use of Metanarrative form and emotion regulation measures.

Finally, the fourth study (Pólya, Kovács, 2011; Pólya, submitted) focused on the Spatio-temporal perspective on the elaboration process. Thirty five participants were asked to tell about everyday emotional episodes by cue words. The elaboration process was reflected by administering the Affective Grid (Russel, et al., 1989) with two instructions: How they did feel in the past? and How they did feel during narration? The elaboration process was reflected by the difference between past and present scores of the Affective Grid.

Type of elaboration had an effect on only one form of perspective, namely on Metanarrative. In line with the earlier results on the poor coping associated with the use of the Metanarrative

form, it was found that frequent use of this perspective indicates low elaboration of emotional experiences.

These studies show that spatio-temporal perspective is informative about the coping process in an individual setting. The use of the Retrospective form reflects the progress of the elaboration process, while the use of the Experiencing and the Metanarrative forms reflect difficulties of the elaboration process.

Psychological perspective

Psychological perspective or inner focalisation (Genette, 1980) takes place when events are presented from the character's point of view by citing her mental states. It is often performed by using verbs referring to cognitive and emotional processes (e.g. thinks or feels). The effect of psychological perspective on shaping and meaning formation is well known in experimental social psychology in relation to empathy and attribution studies where psychological perspective or inner focalization is often used either as independent or dependent variable. Concerning empathy, researchers agreed on the two components of empathy: cognitive and emotional (Davis, 2006; Gladstein, 1983; Hoffmann, 1984). Cognitive empathy is usually regarded as perspective-taking, an effortful process (Gilbert, 1988) by which the observer suppresses her own egocentric perspective and rather focuses on the actor's thoughts, feelings and the situational factors (Batson et al., 1997; Davis et al. 1996; Stephan & Finaly, 1999). By this means the observer adjusts to the actor on the level of emotional and cognitive understanding. This consequence of perspective-taking was also found in attribution research where a perspective-taking instruction eliminates actor-observer bias (Regan & Totten, 1975) hence transforming dispositional attributions to situational ones in behavioural explanations (Davis et al., 1996; Regan & Totten, 1975; Fiske & Taylor, 1991) and creating more positive evaluations of the target (Batson et al., 1997). A commonly held explanation of this phenomenon is that perspective taking produces an overlap of an observer's own self concept and the mental representations of a target (Aron et al., 1991; Batson, 1994; Davis et al., 1996). That is, the target's representation held by an observer becomes more similar to the observer's self-constructions.

Merging the self and the other's mental representation is also assumed to be the cognitive basis of group identification (Turner et al., 1987; Smith & Henry, 1996; Wright et al., 2001). In our self-definition we often use attributes we share with members of the ingroup (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). Self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987) introduced the concept of

depersonalization, which accounts for several intragroup and intergroup processes such as ingroup favouritism or stereotyping. Recent research demonstrates that overlap of self-ingroup representations do not merely extend to trait ascription (Smith & Henry, 1996; Otten & Epstude, 2006; Tropp & Wright, 2001) but also to ingroup attitudes (Coats et al., 2000). Moreover the degree of this merging goes together with a stronger ingroup' perspective and positively correlates with ethnocentric responses (Cadinu & Rothbart, 1996; Smith & Henry, 1996). Substantial evidence has shown that changing self-perspective of a group member and shifting her focus toward an outgroup target's point of view is a promising technique of decreasing outgroup stereotyping and prejudice (Galinsky & Ku, 2004; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003; Pettigrew, 1997) leading to a more positive view of the outgroup (Stephan & Finaly, 1999; Batson et al., 1997).

Psychological perspective and empathy in narratives

In narratives, modulation of empathy is partly performed by psychological perspective: that is presenting the character's mentally executed actions carried out by emotional and cognitive states-verbs and phrases. Presenting feeling and thoughts of a character in a narrative makes the psychological perspective directly accessible. It is not necessary to infer the inner cognitive and emotional states of a character because they are already visible. Narrative empathy is usually considered as a group-based empathy (Keen, 2006; Gerrig, 1990). This means that in the course of reception the reader conjoins the character and a group based on some trait or value similarities. This approach to group-based empathy held by narratologists implies the same processes underlying group identification established by self-ingroup representational overlap (Smith & Henry, 1996; Otten & Epstude, 2006). Hogan (2001) takes a similar standpoint when he holds group-based empathy as empathy with characters matching a reader' group identity. This "quick-match categorical empathy" easily allows for biases ie. ethnocentrism or exclusionary thinking based on reader's group identity (Keen, 2006, 218pp). In this respect psychological perspective can be considered as a pragmatic tool serving different transmitting purposes of group history. On the hand, presenting the psychological perspective of ingroup provides a vicarious experience tempting the reader to identification with the ingroup (Bruner, 1990). On the other hand, introducing the inner states of the outgroup at the same time enables the reader to enlarge this empathic circle, including the outgroup. While the former way of presentation can easily lead to an

exclusionary view of the events in the latter case a much more detached view prevails by gaining access to the outgroup's point of view, i.e. by taking the perspective of the outgroup.

The process of reception is substantial in group narratives particularly in the case of those events which are already part of the cultural memory. The manner narratives of group history depict the events (e.g. ascribing psychological perspective exclusively or mutually to ingroup and outgroup) has an important effect on meaning formation.

Propositional content of cognitive processes

However, the mere presence of outgroup's psychological perspective is not sufficient for being empathic with or taking the perspective of the outgroup. As mentioned above narrative psychological perspective is carried out by mental phrases of the characters i.e. emotional and cognitive state-verbs. Among mental states, cognitive states-verbs usually do not stand alone in a sentence but are followed with propositional contents, which represent the subject-matter of beliefs (e.g. The Austrians believed *in reconciliations of Hungarians*). Propositional contents are often referred as an attitudinal or valuing position. Valence of the propositional contents following cognitive state-verbs can affect the evaluation of the actor in relation to the outcome of the behaviour. To test the effect of propositional contents (Vincze, Rein, László 2011) we provided subjects with different versions of a brief story about British colonization. Each version of the stories contained six cognitive sentences (cognitive verb + propositional content) related to the British differing only in valence of their propositional contents - except the control story, which does not presented cognitive phrases at all. Valence of the propositional contents was previously rated by another group of subjects. Applying Vescio and colleagues (2003) paradigm after presenting the story, subjects were asked to rate the relative importance of the situational and the dispositional causal factors and the degree of responsibility attributed to British colonizers. Finally a semantic bipolar scale (Hunyady, 1996) was used to measure intergroup attitudes. The results show that the more positive were the propositional contents the less responsibility was attributed to the British. Moreover the positive propositional contents increased the likelihood of using situational attributions and the subjects to evaluate more positively the target group. Interesting and opposite to our expectations, negative propositional contents did not significantly increased the responsibility comparing with the control story, which means that narratives without cognitivism behave in a manner similar to narratives presenting cognitive verbs with negative propositional contents. While in the experimental settings the observer is free to use her own mental representations

as an anchor-point during mental attribution processes induced by perspective-taking, in narratives it is strictly guided by cognitive state-verbs and their propositional contents. For that reason it matters whose point of view, whose belief will prevail especially concerning the valence of their propositional content. On the hand, the same intergroup distribution of cognitive phrases with positive propositional content strengthen ingroup identity and at the same time it allows the reader to form an entire picture of the event including the outgroup point of view. It leads the reader to overcome her previously held outgroup stereotypes and revalues the intergroup relation in question. While enhancing of outgroup's cognitive considerations with negative contents can be regard as a narrative tool of emphasizing their responsibility.

Cognitive processes in trauma elaboration

Demands for preserving group past (i.e., for having a sense of continuity with the past) is a fundamental requirement of group identity. It does not mean a simple conservation of past events but retaining it in acceptable way for the group (i.e., endowing their members with positive social identity). Constructing history this way provides an internal coherence of the past, which in turn strengthens the group's integration. Collective traumas, like individual traumas, disrupt this sense of continuity and impede the development of an adaptive group identity. Pennebaker and his colleagues (Pennebaker & Gonzales 2009; Pennebaker & Harber, 1993) have developed a three stage model of collective trauma elaboration. The core concept of this model is social sharing. That is talking and changing point of views promotes cognitive and emotional elaboration of upsetting experiences (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998; Pennebaker & Harber, 1993; Pennebaker et al., 2003). It also emerges from these studies that while talking promotes cognitive assimilation, retaining memory of the event decreases at the same time (Crow & Pennebaker, 1996 in Pennebaker, Páez, Rimé, 1997). In other words, once a traumatic event is elaborated there is no need for it to be remembered in detail. The effect of cognitive activity concerning health improvement was also demonstrated in personal disclosive writing. Those who wrote about traumas using a high number of cognitive words were more likely to elaborate them (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996; Pennebaker, 1997). Based on these results the authors suggest that cognitive activity play a significant role in narrative construction, advancing a coherent organization of the events. Consequently they are indicators of trauma elaboration. For elaborating group traumas, however, cognitive processes and states in historical narratives do not necessarily indicate elaboration. In historical texts,

not only the narrator and the ingroup, but also the outgroups can be and are endowed with cognitive states, and it is the distribution of cognitive states between ingroups and outgroups rather than the total amount of cognitive processes and states that indicates the stage of trauma elaboration. Therefore we suggest the term *perspective composition*. Moreover, the propositional content of the cognitive processes also matters. If only positive propositional content leads to more favourable attributions for outgroups as Vincze, Rein and László (2011) suggest, then using outgroups' perspective in historical narratives reflects trauma elaboration in the sense of decreasing emotional turbulence and hostility towards perpetrator outgroups only when cognitive processes contain positive propositional content. In other cases, when outgroups' thoughts and intentions have primarily negative content, it suggest truncation of the elaboration process.

Having in mind these considerations, we conducted content analytic studies on three text corpora, each dealing with the Trianon Peace Treaty, a major historical trauma of Hungarians. The Trianon Peace Treaty was the peace agreement between the Allied powers and Hungary at the end of World War I (04. July 1920). This event represents a landmark in national history since the agreement reduced the territory and population of Hungary by about two thirds.

Intergroup distribution of cognitive verbs and phrases with their propositional contents were analyzed in schoolbooks published between 1920 and 2000 (sample texts selected from 22 school history books, 17884 words), in contemporary folk histories (brief narratives on the Trianon Peace Treaty collected form a stratified sample of 500 subjects, 8441 words) and newspaper articles published between 1920 and 2010 (N=354, 142492 words). Content analysis was performed with NarrCat's cognitive algorithm. Each hit was subjected to secondary manual content analysis performed by three independent coders so as to decide on the valence of the propositional content.

Trianon Peace Treaty and trauma elaboration in schoolbooks and in folk history

The results showed that the pattern of assigning cognitive phrases varies in different periods. During the two decades after the event school books show a very low level of cognitivisation both for ingroup and otgroups. These results are in accord with the assumption that the Peace Treaty exerted a traumatic effect, indeed. (Figure 1.).

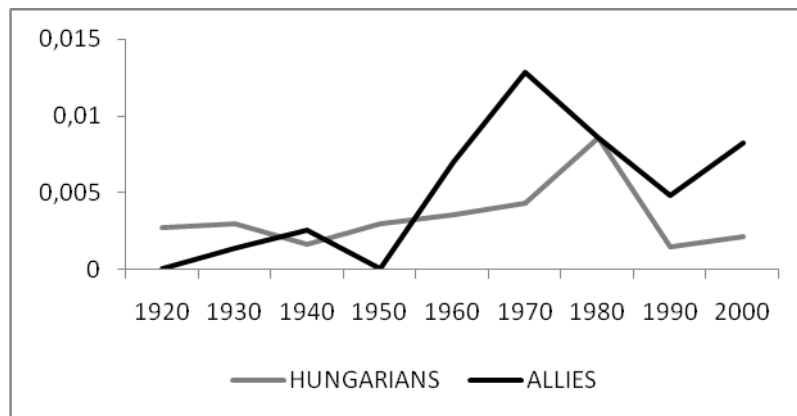


Figure 1. Intergroup distribution of cognitive verbs and phrases in schoolbooks (in relative frequency)

After the World War II there is a considerable displacement in attribution of psychological perspective showing high frequencies of cognitive verbs with negative propositional content assigned to the outgroup (83% of the cognitive verbs belongs to outgroups in the seventies). This presentation of the event in the first post-war decades suggests a failure of elaboration. Shortly after the WW2, a communist dictatorship prevailed in Hungary whose internationalist ideology prevented public discussion of national traumas. Schoolbooks were not devoid of reference to the Peace Treaty, but placing imperialist hegemonic ambitions at the forefront served the legitimacy needs of the ruling communist elite. In the eighties and particularly after the System's Change (1989), the outgroup's perspective has also been emphasized but in this case cognitive verbs attributed to outgroups are related to positive propositional contents (76% in 2000). This way of presentation allows reader to inspect the broad context of events and she becomes by this mean enabled to familiarise with the considerations of outgroups. As compared to schoolbooks, folk narratives which expressions of the communicative memory of the society (Assmann, 1992), show a different picture.

Although perspectivisation through cognitive processes and the propositional content of the cognitive processes show elaboration attempts in the beginning of the XXI century in schoolbooks, the high frequency of outgroup's cognitive states or processes with negative propositional content (78%) found in folk history suggests that lay people remain bound to the traumatic experience of Trianon (Figure 2.).

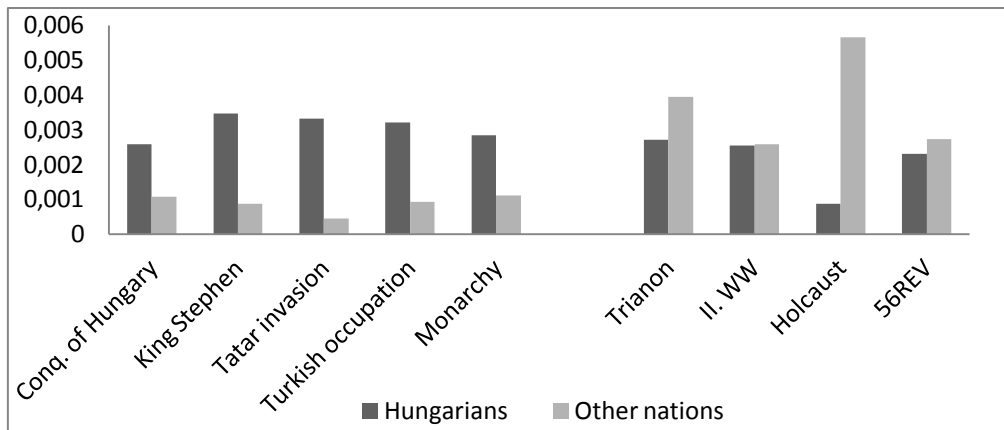


Figure 2. Intergroup distribution of cognitive verbs and phrases in contemporary folk history narratives

Trianon Peace Treaty and trauma elaboration in newspapers

Media is a primary forum of public memory; therefore, it seems to be particularly apt for tracing changes in remembering historical events. Although there are differences between newspapers having left wing or right wing ideological orientations, for a rough analysis we collapsed all media texts (see Fig. 3.) As far as the ingroup cognitive processes are concerned, they reach a relatively high level immediately after the Peace Treaty (revolving around the opportunities for revision), but they decrease in the subsequent decades and show an ascending tendency only in the recent decade. It is important to note that during the communist dictatorship the Trianon Treaty was a taboo in public talk and newspapers were forbidden to talk about it. There was a much more pressure for silence than the local governmental expectation in Dallas for not speaking about the Kennedy assassination described by Pennebaker and Banasik (1997), consequently, it thwarted the trauma elaboration process to a greater extent. Outgroup cognitivisations show an increasing tendency until the WW2, but their almost exclusively negative content (76% in 1930), still reflects a deep absorption in the traumatic experience. This Outgroup's inner considerations rather represent their self-serving interests in the events. The demand for revision continues in the newspapers published in 1935. From the existing negative cognitivization of outgroup only those nations' considerations (e.g. USA and Italy) are presented with positive contents

(32% in 1935) who also protested against this peace conditions. Presenting their supportive point of view confirms the belief that the peace was unjust. (Figure 3.)

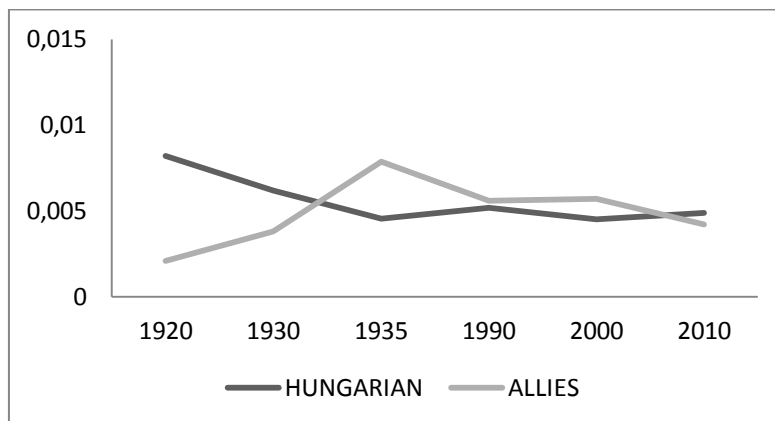


Figure 3. Intergroup distribution of cognitive verbs and phrases in newspapers

From the System's Change (1989) a balanced intergroup distribution of cognitive verbs appears. The appearance of a mutual intergroup cognitive perspective represents a need for a new sense making process, reorganizing the event based upon the documents coming the light (Ormos, 1983). Even though this sense making process continues today, the decreasing tendency of outgroup's perspective and its dominantly negative propositional content (62% in 2010) particularly in contemporary newspapers imply a slowdown in trauma elaboration due to the political-ideological orientation of the current Hungarian government that is reflected also in the media.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have tried to build a close connection between coping with identity threats and identity traumas on the one hand and narrative language on the other. For coping with individual identity threats we have shown that the spatio-temporal perspective which is expressed in a configuration of the linguistic markers can give a more differentiated picture of a person's identity state than simple past tense indicators. For tracing the elaboration of group traumas we adopted the concept of psychological perspective and introduced the concept of perspective composition of historical narratives, which involves not only ingroup but also outgroups perspectives and differentiates between them. We used cognitive states and processes for linguistically operationalizing psychological perspective, and also considered their propositional content when inferring the stages of the elaboration process.

Significant group events have a long lasting effect on the group life. It is particularly true for the traumatic events which disrupt the sense of continuity and impede the development of an adaptive group identity. Studies on collective trauma elaboration have demonstrated the relevance of sensemaking and reorganization process (Pennebaker & Gonzales, 2009). These studies also pointed out the linguistic forms of elaboration assuming that these linguistic markers (i.e. cognitive activity, the frequency and quality of emotional states) facilitate a coherent and acceptable narrative about the event (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996). Narrative construction is considered as basis in scientific narrative psychology (László, 2008), which takes the relation between language and psychology seriously and stresses that structural-compositional qualities of narratives reveal psychological qualities of identity states. The present study, in accord with other narrative psychological investigations (e.g., Fülöp et. al. in this volume), focuses on the narrative-linguistic indicators of trauma elaboration. Besides the presence of the character's mental processes indicated by the frequency of cognitive states we have also demonstrated the relevance of the propositional contents in trauma elaboration. The exclusive expression of the ingroup's cognitivisations and the presence of outgroup' considerations with negative contents are considered as low level trauma elaboration. While the former prevents the extension of the interpretational context to points of view that of the ingroup, the latter enhances outgroup's responsibility, thus inhibiting reconciliation. According to the findings on trauma elaboration (Pennebaker& Harber, 1993) initial intensive emotional involvement is usually followed by cognitive processes which help to reorganize the event. Our results with contemporary newspapers and particularly with folk stories, consistent with the study by Fülöp and her colleague (in this volume) - show a moderate cognitivisation with a strong emotional impregnation, which indicates that the Trianon trauma in the Hungarian collective memory is far from being resolved.

The changing pattern of intergroup distribution of cognitivisation concerning Trianon shows that trauma elaboration is not merely a question of time. . Group history is a dynamic narrative genre, which has constructional power to modify the frame of reference of the event without root-changes in facts (White,1981). According to Ricoeur (2006) elaboration of collective traumas proceed in the public sphere. Thus, the elaboration process is subjected to the political-ideological demands of a given period which, by prescribing particular interpretational contexts rule the public sphere and may thwart or accelerate the process.

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