

Narrative coping in response to dramatic life-events experienced by a returnee in his German and Turkish life-worlds

Introduction and aim of the study

In my pilot study “Deutsch-Türkische Migration: Die Darstellung narrativer Identitäten von Studentinnen in Istanbul” (German-Turkish migration: depicting the narrative identities of female students in Istanbul) (Devran 2017), which analysed the biographies and interactions of the participants, I investigated the social and linguistic experiences of three young women who had grown up in Germany or Austria and who had migrated to Turkey as adolescents or young women. Experiences which were typical of the female “returnees” included prejudices against Turks at school and in society as a whole in Germany while in Turkey, my informants were marginalized because they stood out linguistically and socially; as “Almancı” (“Germanized Turks”) they felt rejected and unappreciated. On the basis of linguistic and socio-cultural similarities, they felt most at home among groups of “returnees” of a similar age, where they managed to localize themselves socially as German-Turks or citizens of the world (Devran 2017, p. 17 ff.).

Furkan, the informant whom I would like to present below, also described how he experienced ethnic marginalization at school in Germany but, equally, linguistic and cultural problems when trying to fit in in Turkey. For him, too, it was only as a member of the German-Turkish group of “returnees” in Turkey that he managed to develop a feeling of belonging and to develop ambitious work-related perspectives.

What is interesting about Furkan’s narratives is that he depicts what can be identified as pretty dramatic experiences in Germany in a different way to his experiences in Turkey. His memories of his German life-world are informed by violence and marginalization, described as traumatic experiences, while his experiences in Turkey are rather seen as adjustment problems, as a painful process of settling down in a foreign life-world.

The goal of my analysis is to describe the different phases in Furkan’s life-story in both life-worlds, to reconstruct the links between experiences of being marginalized, their interpretation and their narrative coping and to map out the differences between the depictions of both life-worlds. In this way his narrative coping in response to experiences in his childhood and early adolescence in Germany can be related to narrative forms of traumata.

Theoretical and methodical framework: positioning, agency and trauma analysis

This paper presents a qualitative study which draws on biographical and interactionist approaches. The data are based on a life-story, told retrospectively, which focuses on migration experienced first-hand.

In order to analyse the interview, I made use of concepts developed in narrative research which attempt to record the depiction of narrative identity and especially the concept of positioning, which Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann (2004) and Deppermann (2013) propose as a tool for the empirical study of narrative identities using autobiographical narratives.

The authors argue that “positioning is [...] an especially adequate way of conceiving of identities in narratives because it allows for a re-construction of discursive actions by which identities are accomplished, be it by description or by action” (Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann 2004, p. 166). Several layers and forms are differentiated, between self- and other-positioning in the narrated time and the relations between the narrating self and the narrated self. Other-positioning is usually associated complementarily with self-positioning. Self- and other-positioning take place on two levels: depicting events from the past and interaction in the here and now in the interview. They relate to both the narrated and the narrating self and can emerge from the dissimilarity between the diachronic and the interactional perspective.

One of the central components of positioning is agency. According to Lucius-Hoene/Deppermann (2002), agency is a concept in which linguistically constructed scopes of action become visible (*ibid.*, p. 59). It includes what the narrator does when linguistically assigning authorship to the occurrences in his/her narrative sentences. When analysing the linguistic representation of experiences and events, those narrative sentences are of interest which, on the one hand, show that something is happening which is driving forward the plot or the sequence of events in the narrative and, on the other hand, convey that somebody or something allows this occurrence to happen and is involved in it. In such sentences, the predicate expressions and the semantic roles they express are important analytic instruments. With the help of such instruments, the predicate expressions and the semantic roles, the analyses of agentivity can be described very precisely in relation to the experience of the narrator and the other persons who have a role to play in the narrative.

In their paper, Deppermann/Lucius-Hoene (2005) explore procedures for depicting traumatic experiences, using biographical experiences which came about in detrimental circumstances such as war, accidents, illness and loss, pointing out the broad range of trauma-related depiction phenomena. They correspond to the very different types of moral and cognitive-interpretative relevance which traumas can have for the afflicted, including emotional concern and coping strategies in the past and present, the linguistic depictability of what was experienced and the ability, as a traumatized person, to locate it descriptively and performatively in an intersubjective-discursive field.

The study focuses on narrative structure and dynamics as well as on the linguistic and communicative strategies of the narrator and his prosodic, vocal and non-verbal means of expression, emotional involvement, the subjective perspective and evaluation being of particular interest. The depictability of what has been experienced can range from a total inability to recount the traumatic situation to an extended narrative which allows and requires numerous practices of expressing a subjective perspective and concern.

In conversation with Furkan, two different types of narrative were identified relating to experiences during his childhood in Germany and as an adolescent and adult in Turkey:

- His depiction of what he experienced in Germany consistently has the character of a narrative processing of traumatic experiences, with the main focus on the helpless child subject to inexplicable marginalization and violence.
- In the course of several narrative episodes, he gradually draws closer to the threats and marginalization he experienced.
- His experiences in Turkey, in contrast, are depicted as adjustment problems and experiences of marginalization as a reaction to not (yet) having adjusted successfully.

Conclusions

Comparing the depictions of problematic experiences in Germany and Turkey makes it possible to subsume the experiences in Germany under the trauma concept. The following characteristics are typical:

- The singling out of children from a migration background in primary school: due to the unfathomable process of being singled out, Furkan experiences a feeling of absolute helplessness and of being at the mercy of a higher power.
- The experiencing of aggression and violence at the hands of one's peers: the violent actions crop up without cause; Furkan experiences them as a threat to his own existence.
- The attacks are initiative and are aimed at the person as a whole. There is no chance for the victim to change his relationship to the others.
- The motivation behind the attacks is not related to the person's behaviour but to unalterable characteristics of him as an individual: his country of origin.
- There is no way for him to stop or counteract the attacks.

In contrast, the problems occurring in Turkey which Furkan describes are not seen as traumatic experiences but as difficulties adjusting to his new social world, albeit sometimes quite painful ones. The following characteristics are typical:

- Furkan recognizes his personal deficits which cause him to stand out.
- He realizes that it lies within his power and responsibility to reduce the reasons for being marginalized.
- The others' attempts to marginalize him are reactive: they relate to Furkan's behaviour standing out.
- The reasons for being marginalized do not lie in unalterable characteristics of him as an individual (his country of origin, the colour of his skin, his religion, etc.) but rather in his inappropriate conduct.
- As soon as he manages to change his behaviour and to adjust himself to the others, he earns their respect and admiration.

In contrast to the way he describes his problematic experiences in Germany and in the first few years of being in Turkey, Furkan's depiction of his current life situation and his positive view of himself can be characterized as follows:

- Self-attribution is formulated in a strongly agentivistic manner.
- Many utterances consist of positive versions of what he expressed negatively elsewhere, e. g. "I can now do X" or "Now I don't have any more problems".
- In terms of content and formulation, there is a very strong contrast to earlier forms of depiction.

References

- Deppermann, Arnulf (2013): How to get a grip on identities-in-interaction. (What) Does 'Positioning' offer more than 'Membership Categorization'? Evidence from a mock story. In: Bamberg, Michael (ed.): *Narrative Inquiry. A forum for theoretical, empirical, and methodological work on narrative*, 23, 1. Amsterdam: Benjamins, pp. 62–88.

- Deppermann, Arnulf/Lucius-Hoene, Gabriele (2005): Trauma erzählen – kommunikative, sprachliche und stimmliche Verfahren der Darstellung traumatischer Ergebnisse. In: *Psychotherapie und Sozialwissenschaft*, 7, 1, pp. 35–73.
- Devran, Serap (2017): *Deutsch-türkische Migration. Die Darstellung narrativer Identitäten von Studentinnen in Istanbul. Eine biografie- und interaktionsanalytische Pilotstudie*. Mannheim: Institut für Deutsche Sprache. (= *amades* 51).
- Lucius-Hoene, Gabriele/Deppermann, Arnulf (2002): *Rekonstruktion narrativer Identität. Ein Arbeitsbuch zur Analyse narrativer Interviews*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.
- Lucius-Hoene, Gabriele/Deppermann, Arnulf (2004): *Narrative Identität und Positionierung*. In: *Gesprächsforschung. Online-Zeitschrift zur verbalen Interaktion*. Vol. 5, pp. 166–183. www.gespraechsforschung-ozs.de (last accessed: 22.7.2018).