WHOSE LANGUAGE? MEMORY, THE BODY AND DISCURSIVE PRACTICES

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When Jacob Mey ([1990] 2001) revised his introduction to pragmatics, he included an extra section on the role of body moves in communication. Here he argues that body movements and posture can fulfill complex pragmatic functions and may constitute an integral part of the action in the total context of the pragmatic act (2001: 223–227). Thus, ‘[p]ragmatic acts engage the whole individual in communication, not just the speech portion of his or her contribution’ (2001: 223). In this short paper, I want to discuss another role the whole, embodied, individual may play in communication.

In his contribution to te Molder and Potter’s (2005) volume ‘Conversation and Cognition’, Robin Wooffitt presents a reanalysis of a genuinely cognitive notion, memory, from an entirely discursive point of view. Wooffitt’s focus is on so-called flashbulb memories, and he starts off by considering the psychological literature on the issue. Most importantly, psychologists have found that certain incidents are memorized in much greater detail than others, allowing the recall of seemingly trivial aspects not only of the traumatic but also of the receptive situation, memorizing, for instance, posture, smell, what was said or done, who was present, and other details of the environment. Brown and Kulik (1977), who coined the term ‘flashbulb memory’, suggest that pre-conditions for events to be stored in this peculiar way are both the negative evaluation of the event and the judgement of high importance. Brown and Kulik propose a special encoding mechanism for this kind of memory, such as different brain regions being involved in their storage (see, for instance, Davidson et al., 2005). These peculiar storing mechanisms have been suggested to protect this kind of information because of its high survival value for the individual, against forgetting, which is accompanied by subjects’ high confidence in the correctness of their memories.
Subsequent studies, carried out on events with negative value and high importance for large groups of people, such as the terrorist attacks on 9/11, 2001, the O. J. Simpson verdict, the sinking of the Estonia or the death of former French President Mitterand, underline subjects’ high confidence in their memories but reveal that flashbulb memories are by no means immune against decay. Instead, they are not different from other kinds of memories in terms of accuracy and consistency (e.g. Schmolck et al., 2000). Thus, subjects may have strong feelings of knowing the details of both the tragic event and the circumstances of learning about it, but these may change over time. For this reason, researchers have begun to investigate the role of rehearsal and media for the memory of such events. For instance, Curci et al. (2001) found that two groups of French-speaking people in Belgium and in France perceived the death of former French President François Mitterrand as equally negative and as equally consequential. Moreover, participants’ estimations about how intensely the matter was discussed in the media were similar. However, there was a difference with respect to how often it was discussed in private contexts, which was significantly related to the flashbulb memory effects, in particular, participants’ degree of conviction of their knowing. Thus, personal ‘rehearsal’, that is, frequent telling about the event, one’s perception of it and attitude towards it, may contribute to flashbulb memory effects. This is supported by a study by Luminet et al. (2004), who investigated reactions to the terrorist attacks on 9/11 in nine different countries. They, too, find considerable socio-cultural differences in flashbulb memory effects, not only due to different amounts of rehearsal but also due to differences in judgements of novelty and surprise (2004: 219). On the basis of these results, researchers have concluded that there is no special way of encoding negative high-importance events in memory and that memory is strongly influenced by social factors instead (e.g. Hyman and Loftus, 1998: 940; Curci et al., 2001: 98).

Now, Wooffitt turns to speakers’ own descriptions of memorized events. The corpus he uses consists of narrations about mysterious events, such as seeing a ghost. What is noteworthy about the accounts provided by the narrators is that shortly before the major event is reported, the speakers turn to very detailed descriptions of seemingly irrelevant details, such as how they sat, where they looked, what they were doing or even what they were thinking at the time. Wooffitt’s proposal is to regard these kinds of descriptions as a discursive practice of the form: ‘I was just doing X, when Y’ (2005: 208). That is, reproducing memories of strange events conventionally takes a particular discursive form, which includes the production of detailed information about the reception event. These practices, Wooffitt suggests, may give rise to the findings psychologists obtain in their studies, such that the way of talking about such events may influence how it is stored in memory: ‘why bother with underlying memory organization at all?’ (2005: 222). Thus, Wooffitt takes the constructivist approach employed by many psychologists further by suggesting that narrative practices contribute to constituting memory and thus cause the effects reported on in the psychological literature.

This constructivist interpretation is supported by findings on the persuasive function of descriptive detail. Bell and Loftus (1989) show that descriptions with (even irrelevant) (Pizarro et al., 2006) details are considered as more convincing than the same descriptions without such details.