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ONLINE MODE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REMINISCING:
DISCOURSE PRACTICES IN DIGITAL SOCIETY

Autobiographical memory is known to be unique to humans and play a key role in an individual's identity and self-development. Its unparalleled self-assessing nature and self-identification function make it an unmatched source of information about values and life dominants of both individuals and generations. In this paper, autobiographical reminiscing is studied in the digital discourse perspective. Digital communication is known to be affecting self-expression styles, causing transformations in regular formats, systems of genres, and discourse practices. The objective of the research is to examine general language-related trends in online sharing of autobiographical memories with a particular emphasis on discourse structure and varieties. To conduct the research, an appropriate corpus of English autobiographical reports was collected from Internet sources, including online diaries, blogs, newspaper articles, discussions, etc. The extracted memory accounts were analyzed on the discursive, structural, content, and axiological levels while the obtained results were compared with previous data on non-digital autobiographical memories and interpreted mostly in the discourse perspective.

Key words: autobiographical memory, digital society, discourse practices, memory and language, cyberculture.

1. Introduction: objectives and theoretical framework

The history of memory studies counts over two millennia, although this avenue of research has only recently merited its official status as an interdisciplinary field of study. As such, it umbrellas investigations into historical, philosophical, social, cultural, and anthropological aspects of memory. While the scholarly focus stably lies with different types of memory, one cannot deny that autobiographical phenomena have been in the avant-garde of memory studies since the second half of the 20th century when autobiographical reminiscing turned out to be of great interest to cognitive psychologists (cf. Robinson 1976, Rubin et al. 1986).

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As claimed by Skowronski and Walker (2004), autobiographical memory is an autonomous mnemonic subsystem responsible for individual recollections of high self-relevance. Experimental evidence suggests major differences between autobiographical and depersonalized memories (Nurkova 2006).

Autobiographical memory has been studied in its connection to various phenomena potentially affecting its structure and functioning, such as age (cf. Gallo et al. 2011), cognition (cf. Bluck 2003), spontaneity (cf. Schlagman et al. 2006), self-identity (cf. Wilson & Ross 2003), emotions (cf. Christianson & Safer 1996), culture (cf. Nelson & Fivush 2004), time (cf. Teghil et. al 2021) and others. A particular area of study has concentrated on linguistic aspects of autobiographical memory, such as cognitive and communicative types of autobiographical utterances, their content organization, discourse, lexical and structural markers. Despite the plurality of approaches taken by scholars representing different paradigms in linguistics and humanities in general and the wide scope of issues under examination lying within the memory – language problem area, research on autobiographical memory in its relation to language and speech focused mainly on autobiographical narratives as verbal reflections of personal past experiences (cf. Brockmeier 2000, Fivush & Nelson 2004, Voloshina & Demeshkina 2015, Shchedrina 2020). Exploring various dimensions of autobiographical narratives as language structures objectifying mnemonic phenomena, many scholars arrive at the conclusion that language plays a crucial role in organizing, structuring and developing of autobiographical memory (cf. Nelson & Fivush 2020, Bartoli & Smorti 2019, Tivyaeva 2021), thus providing conceptual support for the mind-structuring views of language (Sutton 2002).

With the discourse turn in the humanities, scholarly priorities shifted to the field of discourse analysis, so autobiographical discourse appeared on the stage and is still a major area of interest within the field of psychology, literature, culture studies, and linguistics. Autobiographical discourse is differentiated from other discourse varieties in accordance with the thematic principle, that is, the main topic of constituent texts. Relying on the definition of a thematic discourse type suggested by V.E. Chernyavskaya (2001), autobiographical discourse could be defined as a collection of thematically correlated texts with the concept of autobiographical memory underlying the key theme. Drawing on P. Lejeune's (1989) outline of four basic criteria differentiating autobiographical texts from other stories (form of language, subject treated, situation of the author and position of the narrator), an expanded definition

of autobiographical discourse would be as follows: a collection of thematically correlated past-oriented narratives treating mostly the narrator's individual life.

However, researchers argue that there is much more to discourse than its functional aspect covering text collections already in circulation and potentially creatable (Beloshapkova 2016; Suleimanova 2018). Discourse could be regarded as key to the mental sphere – a form of using language here and now that represents a specific type of social activity and is meant to construct a model of an inner world fragment via its verbalized description (Kubryakova 2000). Applying this conception of discourse to the present research allows regarding autobiographical discourse practices currently in use in virtual contexts as reflections of autobiographical consciousness undergoing various changes induced by the extralinguistic environment. Autobiographical memory, being the core concept, generates new meanings and shades of meanings which, according to S.G. Vorkachev (2011), form the basis for new communicative events constituting thematic discourse. Therefore, autobiographical discourse relies upon verbal representation of autobiographical reminiscing in all possible forms, such as flashbulb memories, cringing memories, memories of momentous events, etc.

The variety of forms and meanings allows for a number of genres within autobiographical discourse, linguists pointing out that borders between them are quite flexible (Denkova 2015, Di Summa-Knoop 2017). Memoirs, diaries, autobiographies, letters and interviews are the most popular and frequent ones. On the structural level, all of the relevant genres are traditionally represented as an autobiographical narrative often regarded by scholars as a basic discourse unit (cf. Labov 1972). In this capacity, it occupies the position above the sentence in the hierarchy and has two important properties: clear limits and a transparent internal structure.

Despite more or less predictable content and a stable form of expression, as pointed out by Voloshina (2014), one cannot fail to notice the flexibility with which autobiographical discourse responds to social change and adapts itself to trends of the era. The digital age is known to have created new contexts for sharing all types of content, autobiographical discourse also being subject to the general trend. Scholars across various fields note significant transformations in ways of presenting one's autobiographical reports, stating a transition to new narrative formats characterized by fragmentary nature, discontinuity, and incompleteness.

Autobiographical reminiscing and reporting no longer remain within the limits of conventional forms. As pointed out by L. Di Summa-Knoop (2017), in the past two

decades, autobiographies have gone "through a complete make over", which results in emergence of new autobiographical genres and significant modification of conventional ones. While autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries are still in place, both offline (sticking to habitual patterns) and online (trying on new experiences), digital era-driven formats for sharing mnemonic content are increasingly gaining weight. Online autobiographical reports feature new dimensions, following communication practices prescribed by cyberculture, which in this study is understood as defined by P.N. Vincente and I. Amaral (2019), specifically, as "an umbrella term for the emergent and evolving forms of engagement with the Internet, the World Wide Web, and the vast array of virtual environments, digital networks, devices, interfaces, formats, and software known as cyberspace". Being communicated via Internet channels, autobiographical content gets to be translated in unconventional ways not fitting into any of the canonical reminiscing genre schemes and still to be examined and cataloguized.

The present study seeks to examine in what ways online autobiographical reports are different from their non-virtual counterparts. It particularly aims to determine digitally inspired transformations in sharing of autobiographical memories as regards the formal structure of relevant verbalizer utterances and their content specifics. Two types of transformations are relevant here: web-motivated changes of "pre-Internet" formats and emergence of new digital discourse practices in response to the changing social and technological context.

This major objective is coupled with the intention to approach methodological issues that unavoidably arise whenever attempts to study online memory reports are undertaken. For the past decades, mnemonic texts have gone under close scrutiny in the humanities (cf. Brockmeier 2015), each discipline developing its own approaches to studying verbalized memory reports. The diversity and complexity of content under analysis as well as field-specific practices made it next to impossible to work out any universal procedures, however, the existent sets of methods rely on some common principles: they are mostly of the qualitative nature, interview- or questionnaire-based and largely dependent on the researcher's interpretation. The interdisciplinary methodological status-quo is another issue addressed in this study. Since autobiographical reports as linguocultural phenomena circulate in digital space, the paper also attempts to introduce some digital procedures as part of the methodological framework used in linguistic and linguocultural memory studies as this avenue remains largely unexplored while cognitive psychology, for example, has developed a number

of web-based techniques servicing different areas of autobiographical memory research (cf. Kleinberg & Verschuere 2015). In this study, digital methods were employed as supporting tools complementing other firmly established research practices in the course of collecting empirical evidence and processing it to obtain relevant analytical data. Specific application ways are presented in the following section.

2. Methodology

Traditionally, autobiographical memory in the humanities has been approached by two types of methods: quantitative and qualitative case studies as well as various combinations of the two with one of the components dominating the other. While quantitative investigations prevail in psychology, cognitive and neuroscience (allowing for numerical assessment of mnemonic phenomena), anthropological, philosophical, and cultural memory studies rely mostly on qualitative techniques. The present paper drawing on cultural and linguistic concepts of memory is based on the multivariate method meant to make use of the advantages offered by the two well-established paradigms while also employing present-day digital methods and evidence-based interpretation of language facts. As it has been stated above, this paper is also concerned with methodology options for researching into digital reminiscing styles, so these opportunities have also been explored.

The qualitative component of the research procedure first comes to the foreground at the stage of collecting empirical data and employs continuous sampling, linguistic observation, content and discourse analysis procedures. This stage was preceded by some preliminary investigation relying on search engines, such as Google and Yandex. To find relevant web resources hosting text arrays that could be used as the basis for continuous sampling, linguistic observation and content analysis, search results returned by Google and Yandex were analyzed in the first place. The pool of search words included the following items: 'online memories', 'online recollections', 'online reminiscing', 'memory reports', 'memories online', 'recollections online', 'autobiographical memories', 'autobiographies', 'autobiographies online', 'remembering', 'remembering online'. This procedure yielded a number of platforms relevant to the study, specifically, Unit When Free, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Memories.net, Six-Word Memoirs, Birmingham's Memories of COVID-19, The Lothian Diary Project, Wedding Bee, as well as personal blogs and thematic groups on social media. The search results also returned a number of items that could not be

used for the purposes of this research as sources of empirical data, for instance, research articles or memory project websites.

Whenever a particular resource was in my focus, to check whether it is relevant for the research purpose and detect fragments representing autobiographical reminiscing, I relied on memory-related key words which were used to formulate parameters of search operations along with online website scanner services, such as WordStream and Yo Motherboard, returning lists of the most frequent words which were also used to evaluate the semantic core of textual data. The use of keyword tools allowed for automatic processing of potential sources of online memories. If the top twenty positions on the most frequent words list featured at least one memory-related word, such as, 'remember', 'recall', 'recollect', reminisce', 'memory', 'memories', 'autobiographic', the resource was further examined to check whether it could be used as a source of online recollections. If no memory-related words could be found on the frequency list, the website was no longer regarded as a potential source of empirical data. Specific words and word combinations relevant for the analysis include the following items: 'I remember', 'I recall', 'I recollect', 'my memories', 'I have a memory of'.

Similar search operations featuring the same keywords were employed in Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to find communities keen on sharing self-relevant mnemonic content manifested in online memoirs, blog posts, discussions, comments, projects and events. Initially, the same pool of key words was used with more items being added in the course of searching as new thematically relevant hashtags were revealed (#iremember, #remember, #icanrecall, #instamemories, #memoriesmade, #memorieslastforever, #memoriesforlife, #sweetmemories).

Digital methods along with post-automatic manual processing provided a representative corpus of online autobiographical reports, including thematically consistent text fragments. Digital tools, such as search engines and website scanners, were used at the stage of searching for relevant empirical data while further data selection was performed on the basis of content analysis. In other words, each text fragment that met formal requirements, that is, had relevant keywords, was double-checked before it was included into the research corpus. Each entry in the corpus was a text fragment selected from a digital resource in English complying with the following principles: 1) autobiographical content, 2) first-person narration mode; 3) online origin and manifestation. The result of online autobiographical content screening performed in three steps described above, that is, search engine operations, online keyword-

based website screening, and content-analysis, was a corpus of autobiographical reports containing about 1,000 items extracted from web-based resources listed above, both exclusively hosting mnemonic content (for example, international memory projects, thematic discussions, online memoirs, and COVID-19 memorials) and featuring some autobiographical insertions, for instance, such as off-topic comments in forums on the Wedding Bee community. Consider Example 1:

(1) *Most bobbies remember their first arrest. Normally under the careful eye of their tutor, akin to a small child in a school play who has their lines fed to them by teacher when they falter, and usually for something very mundane and stupid. They soon realise that most of their arrests will be for more mundane, stupid things, but first arrest feels like a stepping stone, a rite of passage to better things, and that's why you remember it. It's like the first time you fall in love, only smellier and more aggressive.*

Mine was Jonathan. Jonathan was 12, and was simultaneously reported missing from his secure care home, and also wanted on warrant as he hadn't turned up at court. Jonathan was a heroin addicted car thief and burglar, and didn't like going to court. I was in my first week of being tutored, I had 3 days, 1 hour and about 15 minutes on 'the streets' when my tutor and I came across a group of kids messing about on a local industrial estate. […] (Retrieved from https://unitwhenfree.wordpress.com/2016/06/05/jonathan/)

The passage above is an extract from a blog post on a public resource providing virtual space for police officers to share their job experience. The narrator recalls her first arrest as a law enforcement official, describing her thoughts and feelings. Although the Unit When Free blog is not designed as part of a memory project but rather a thematic resource, being of most interest to the professional security forces community, it hosts a significant number of autobiographical reports presenting officers' personal memories related to their law enforcement duties. The text under analysis meets all of the criteria mentioned above: being a blog post featured on a web resource, it is of exclusively online origin, the narrator is the reminiscing subject reproducing her autobiographical memories in first-person mode. Other entries in my empirical dataset follow a similar pattern.

3. Results and discussion

The study focused mainly on discourse and genre stratification of autobiographical memory 'products' shared online, their content, narrative structure

and the narrator's evaluation. One broad pattern emerged from the analysis: web-based autobiographical reports demonstrated significant digressions from the offline invariant on all levels – discursive, structural, contensive, and axiological.

In conventional communication (in other words, beyond the cyberspace) autobiographical reminiscing takes a form correlating to one of the genres of autobiographical discourse (e.g., memoirs, diaries, etc.) and obeys relevant regulations prescribing that autobiographical content be the dominant communicative center of the utterance. In computer-mediated communication, autobiographical reports either do not fall under any of the conventional genre categories (e.g., an autobiographical comment to a blog post) or, if they formally do, undergo serious transformations (cf. twittography vs. autobiography, six-word memoir vs. memoirs, etc.). Examples 2 and 3 illustrate the two varieties respectively.

(2) Iona Mandal, 14 Says:

01/07/2020MY BIRMINGHAM

MEMORIES OF COVID-19

The Covid-19 lockdown has undoubtedly been one of the most surreal experiences for me so far in my existence of fourteen years on this planet. With school closing with hardly any notice, masks becoming an item of everyday attire, myself even celebrating a lockdown birthday, it is certainly something I never thought I would see. Never in my life have I been so conscious of my health and wellbeing, washing my hands after every half hour, treating hand sanitisers and toilet paper rolls as luxury. At times it feels like a scene from an apocalyptic Hollywood blockbuster, but I know, this 'new normal' as we call it now, is here to stay! I am so grateful I survived when many of the loved ones I know lost this battle. […]

(Retrieved from https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/blog/memories/post/440/birminghams-memories-of-covid-19)

(3) Our bed. My pillow. Wrong cologne.

(Retrieved from https://www.sixwordmemoirs.com/story/?did=1272054)

Example 2 is a fragment of a comment posted in Birmingham's virtual book of memories, which is an online project of the Birmingham City Council designed to help the local community remember all aspects of the city life in the pandemic times. An autobiographical comment is a genre variety which is unique to online communication and unparalleled in conventional offline memory discourse. Unlike traditional memory genres, an autobiographical comment is not a monologue utterance; it functions as an

installment in a polylogue the first utterance in which initiates a group discussion devoted to a specific topic.

Example 3 is a sample of a discourse variety which has a correlate in the conventional genre system of the autobiographic discourse. However, this correlation is quite formal as the autobiographical account limited to the six-word format differs from classical memoirs in many aspects, including plot development, narrative structure, narration mode, chronotopos, etc.

As for their discourse distribution, online autobiographical reports recur throughout all discourse varieties. The corpus of web-published autobiographical memories collected for this study includes samples of ritual, confessional, marketing, mass media, documentary, social network and other types of discourse (e.g., obituaries, confessions, commercials, collective memories, online diaries, memory blogs, etc. respectively). Discourse-wise, in cyberspace autobiographical content circulates as hybrid formations displaying properties typical of other discourse varieties as well. In other words, on the discourse level, autobiographical content does not get manifested only within the borders of the thematically correlated discourse variety, but is rather dispersed throughout cyberspace. Overall, these results indicate that the sphere of autobiographical discourse is limited to non-virtual communication, while in cyberspace hybrid autobiographical discursive practices emerge. This trend is illustrated by Example 4 below, which is a fragment of a coffee travelogue presenting memorable moments of the narrator's life in relation to coffee-centered locations. Thus, online autobiographical accounts are integrated into a thematic travelogue.

(4) Some of the most memorable moments of my life have centered around coffee (coffee, that is, in one of its many forms…i.e. black, with cream, espresso, cappuccino, latte, and even instant). With that in mind, I've decided to write a coffee travelog…

It's been more than thirty years, but I still recall the bold, smooth, creamy flavor of Milchkaffee (coffee with hot milk) I enjoyed while studying abroad in Austria. To this day, Austrian coffee remains the gold standard by which I judge all other cups of coffee.

In that same study abroad period, I visited Germany, and am proud to recall ordering coffee (not beer) at the Hofbräuhaus in Münch. (I also remember dancing on tables and a few other decisions that had little to do with coffee.)

One of my fondest memories is about meeting a young and (obviously) handsome Italian boy while traveling from Naples to Rome. Honestly, I don't recall

what he looked like, but I do remember that he produced an espresso maker from his backpack and proceeded to make me a steaming cup of espresso right there on the train. (Want to impress a girl? Carry an espresso maker in your backpack!) […] (Retrieved from https://ljmetz.com/coffee-travelog/)

Whatever specific discursive properties of online autobiographical memories may be, they all share a number of features conditioned by communication in cyberspace, namely, multimodality, interactivity, and modifiability. Multimodality as a feature of web-published autobiographical content refers to the mode of sharing one's mnemonic experience. The computer-mediated channel supports autobiographical reporting in textual, audio, and visual forms which can be used in various combinations and enter relations either on equal or non-equal terms (cf. an online diary entry (text, audiovisual components are optional) vs. an Instagram post (images, hashtags and text are optional)).

Interactivity in autobiographical reporting reveals itself at least in two ways: 1) interactional nature of autobiographical content providing for embedded hyperlinks, hashtags and other elements that allow interaction with the virtual participant(s) of the recall situation; 2) mainly context-triggered nature of recall (vs. self-triggered memories in offline communication) finding manifestation in post comments, discussion responses, interest communities, social net-based flash mobs, etc. Self-initiated autobiographical forms (e.g. six-word memoirs and online diaries) are open to comments and discussion.

Modifiability as a feature of autobiographical reporting in cyberspace presupposes post-publishing editing options motivated either by external (e.g., the audience's reaction) or internal (e.g., lack of confidence on the part of the reminiscing subject) factors.

A number of issues were identified in relation to structural properties of autobiographical reports. Life stories are conventionally interpreted as narratives constructed in accordance with a basic model as described in by W. Labov (1972). According to the Labovian model, the canonical narrative structure includes six elements: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda (Labov & Waletzky 1966). Thus, an autobiographical narrative is expected to recount events, localized in time and space, in an arranged succession, elaborate on their development and present the narrator's evaluation of the situation. The results, however, reveal recurring autobiographical reports breaking up with the canonical narrative structure. The surfaced modifications of the original narrative model are as

follows: 1) omission of an element, 2) insertion of an element, 3) modified order of elements. As a result, the narrative structure of web-based recollections is, on the one hand, more focused on narrated events, abstract and coda being often left out, while, on the other, the narrative focus may be dispersed as the autobiographical report is produced in parts separated by time gaps or contributions of other participants to the online recall act. The said modifications flow organically from communication patterns typical of cyberspace (fragmentarity, asynchronous interaction, freedom of self-expression, etc.) and are in line with the discursive features of web-based autobiographical reports.

Content analysis of the collected corpus revealed two trends that recurred throughout the dataset. Conclusions regarding the content structure rely on results of automated key word search that allowed determining the semantic core of autobiographical reports based on lexical units arranged in the order of frequency. The recurring topics are not different from those that are registered for offline autobiographical reporting and include 'family', 'feelings', 'love', 'friendship', 'school', 'education', 'work', 'travel', 'outstanding event', 'illness', 'parenthood', 'tragedy', 'traumatic experience', 'death', etc. However, offline autobiographical memories normally elaborate on a number of topics selected by the reminiscing narrator, the most common choice following the chronological order of life events and structuring the content of the narrative in accordance with the sequence of life periods. In cyberspace, the structure of autobiographical content expressed in language forms undergoes changes: the nature of narration becomes more episode-oriented, the narrative focusing on one or two relevant episodes rather than presenting a comprehensive mature autobiography. Life stories are still available, but they are concentrated mainly on thematic Internet platforms, designed specifically to share and discuss memories. The majority of online autobiographical reports registered in the corpus are focused on a single event gaining relevance in the given context, in other words, online autobiographical practices, as a rule, are predetermined by internal communicative factors triggering mental reconstruction of a past event stored in memory.

The context-driven nature of online autobiographical remembering generates a two-mode narration in which personal past is opposed to social present. The memory of a past self-relevant episode comes as a reaction to an external (i.e. contextual) verbal or non-verbal stimulus which could be a direct trigger (if it contains an explicit request for autobiographical information) or an indirect trigger (if memories are

elicited unintentionally, for instance, via associations). The presence of the trigger and episode-oriented content are instrumental in two-mode narration featuring parallel temporal planes.

The same trend is observed in evaluations of autobiographical experience. Reminiscing individuals sharing their recollections online evaluate their memories relying on mnemonic accounts of other narrators rather than their own life experience. Data yielded by axiological analysis does not show any significant discrepancies between online and offline autobiographical reports. Personal evaluation of mnemonic content (positive, negative, neutral, and ambivalent) is within the same scope as registered earlier for offline memory texts. A cyberculturally conditioned axiological novelty of autobiographical reporting online consists in evaluation expectations. While in autobiographical discourse the reminiscing narrator does not normally expect any (or at least immediate) feedback, cyberculture makes evaluation an important cognitive-communicative element of any interaction that can be expressed in various forms, including likes, comments, reposts, etc.

Overall, evidence suggests that digitally conditioned communication patterns alter autobiographical discourse practices, transformations being observed in discourse distribution and the genre system of recall accounts, their content, narrative and axiological dimensions. It should be noted that these findings are in general agreement with prior research exploring the relationship between social context and autobiographical memory that, among other things, demonstrated effects various social and cultural factors may produce on remembering self-relevant events (cf. de la Mata Benítez, et al. 2011).

4. Concluding remarks

Digital society provides space for various expression forms, the sphere of self-relevant past experience being no exception. One of the major obstacles computer-mediated communication and cyberculture researchers are facing is related to determining applicable analysis parameters, adequate to the research object and relevant to research objectives. Since cyberspace hosts manifold phenomena, they require different approaches that would allow detecting and describing their properties.

In this paper, I attempted to articulate my view of the possible impact of digital space on English autobiographical reminiscing styles. A full discussion of all web-related cognitive, social and cultural influences on autobiographical discourse practices was beyond the scope of the present study since it engaged in detecting major digitally

conditioned features of online self-relevant reminiscing as opposed to the conventional offline format. A comprehensive review of all possible verbal and non-verbal, mono- and multimodal manifestations of autobiographical memory in cyberspace is yet to be provided.

Relying on language data, I argue that the choice of a self-relevant past episode to share, the plot structure of the online autobiographical narrative, the amount of detail, the emotional assessment are to a great extent predetermined by cyberculture, its communication formats, interaction scenarios, and protocols. Evidence suggests that cyberculture creates social and cultural contexts for sharing personal memories: participants to a web-based communicative act select, structure, narrate and interpret individual autobiographical content following preset patterns of computer-mediated communication. I do not claim to account for all possible impacts cybercultural phenomena may have on autobiographical reporting – this will certainly make a broad avenue for future research along with explorations into the applicative potential of digital methods for studying autobiographical discourse practices. Nonetheless, my hope is that this attempt will be a timely contribution to linguocultural memory studies.

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