

Whose language? Memory, the body, and discursive practices

Kerstin Fischer – University of Southern Denmark

When Jacob revised his introduction to pragmatics (Mey [1990] 2001), he included an extra section on the role of body moves in communication. Here he argues that body movements and posture can fulfil 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 on 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 example, 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 preconditions 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 the storage (see, for instance, Davidson et al. 2005). These peculiar storing mechanisms have been suggested to protect this, due to its high survival value, important information 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, Buffalo and Squire 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) have found that for two groups of people, speakers of French in Belgium and in France, the death of former French President François Mitterand was perceived 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, 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 detail, such as how they sat, where they looked, what they were doing or even 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 taken 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)) detail are considered as more convincing than the same descriptions without such

details. Thus, especially in situations in which speakers report about supernatural experiences, as it is the case in Wooffitt's data, reporting detail about the reception situation may fulfil an important function in creating credibility.

There are, however, a few findings that cast doubt on this constructivist view. In several studies, researchers report that the degree of negative evaluation and importance of the event has an impact on flashbulb memory effects. In particular, Luminet et al. (2004) find a direct relationship between negative evaluation and judgements of novelty and surprise on the one hand and flashbulb memory effects on the other. More importantly, there is a strong role of visceral responses; Talarico and Rubin (2003) report that the more the participants' reactions were embodied, for instance, if they felt like "knots, cramps, or butterflies in my stomach" or "tense all over" (2003: 219), the more flashbulb memory effects were found. Besides flashbulb memory effects, the authors also tested for symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They conclude "the more negative the initial reaction, and the more that reaction is felt visceral, the more PTSD symptoms one will display later" (2003: 459). Similarly, Hyman and Billings (1998) find that people with a higher level of dissociation¹ are more likely to create false memories. Consequently, the degree to which the reaction to the respective event is embodied plays an important role for memorizing the event. Therefore, when considering the results reported on in the flashbulb memory literature, it needs to be kept in mind that the public events investigated may lead to embodied reactions to different degrees.

That flashbulb memories are susceptible to change during time and can be influenced by rehearsal may furthermore not necessarily be a reason to assume that they are not specially encoded. For traumatizing events, i.e. overwhelming and thus potentially life-threatening experiences, Scaer (2001), in his investigations of the whiplash syndrome, finds that the symptoms patients experience can often not be explained by the current event but are due to a previous traumatic experience the patient may not be aware of. Trauma may often occur in different interdependent layers; for instance, PTSD may only seemingly be caused by a minor event, such as a low velocity motor vehicle accident (Scaer 2001: 43-48, cf. also Morris 2006: 2843). Patients may thus construe their current condition from experiences with a similar emotional quality (Hyman and Loftus 1998: 941), but which will be judged as "inaccurate" (Schmolck et al. 2000) or "inconsistent" (Talarico and Rubin 2003) by an objective observer. Errors of this type have been referred to as time-slice errors (Brewer 1988).

¹ Dissociation is a state of disattachment from the body, usually a result of previous trauma (Levine 1997).

Regarding encoding, trauma theorists have isolated particular physiological processes involved in the storage of traumatic experiences (Scaer 2001: 36): In particular, sensory input from all senses is processed by the amygdala with regard to its arousal or emotional value. The hippocampus will then form 'a cognitive matrix' for that event. Certain areas of the cortex may then involve the brain stem and motor centres for appropriate defensive behavioural patterns that will assure survival. Yet in order to allow immediate reaction, such as fight or flight, for instance, jumping away from a snake, there are 'shortcuts' between these different locations, which may get caught in uninhibited automatic cycles between hyperarousal and freeze (2001: 44). In that case, the body remains in a state of alertness and stress (2001: 72). The autonomic nervous system remains activated, reproducing cycles of arousal, unsuccessful escape, experience of helplessness and immobility (Levine 1997: 110).

Although the physiology of interrupted fight/flight – freeze responses provides the physiological basis for trauma, it is the meaning the situation has for the experiencer that makes it traumatic. In particular, the experience of helplessness (Scaer 2001: 41) leads to complex physiological reactions in the brain, affecting also the vegetative nervous system in various complex ways. Since the system will try to avoid a similar situation by all means, it stores as much of the sensory information available about the situation as possible, including information about its own motor controls. Especially if the system remained in an alert state after a traumatic experience, encountering similar sensory information will lead to those reactions that helped the organism survive in the first incident. Thus, storing every detail available about an event increases the chance to learn from the incident and to avoid similarly threatening situations in the future. Given the complexity of the brain (Koch and Laurent 1999), it can be expected that the body will store information of such a great impact as a traumatic experience in different, redundant ways and by means of a variety of mechanisms.

To conclude, the detailed nature of both discursive practices, as identified by Wooffitt (2005), and flashbulb memories, as investigated by psychologists, may indeed have an embodied basis. Consequently, the discursive practices Wooffitt describes may play an important, but not the only causal role in memory formation. Although from a methodological perspective it is necessary to ask whether the categories employed in the analysis are indeed given or socially construed and whether they really play the explanatory role attributed to them, we cannot exclude the conditions of our embodied human existence *a priori* from the analysis.

Thus, returning to Jacob's book section on body moves, in addition to body moves and

postures, which may have communicative potential as pragmatic acts in a given speech situation, the body may also contribute in other ways to the communicative process so that we indeed have to consider the whole individual in a given situation (Mey 2001: 223). We should be sensitive to the possibility that sometimes the answer to Jacob's (2001: 229 and 1985) question "Whose language are we speaking?" may be: the body's.

References

- Bell, Brad E. & Loftus, Elizabeth F. (1989): Trivial Persuasion in the Courtroom: The Power of (a Few) Minor Details. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 56, 5: 669-679.
- Brewer, W.F. (1988): Memory for Randomly-selected Autobiographical Events. In: U. Neisser & E. Winograd (eds.): *Remembering Reconsidered: Ecological and Traditional Approaches to the Study of Memory*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 21-90.
- Brown, Roger & Kulik, James (1977): Flashbulb memories. *Cognition* 5: 73-99.
- Curci, Antonietta, Luninet, Oliver, Finkenauer, Catrin & Gisle, Lydia (2001): Flashbulb memories in social groups: A comparative test-retest study of the memory of French President Mitterand's death in a French and a Belgian group. *Memory* 9, 2: 81-101.
- Davidson, Patrick S.R., Cook, Shaun P., Glisky, Elizabeth L., Verfaellie, Mieke & Rapsak, Steven Z. (2005): Source Memory in the Real World: A Neuropsychological Study of Flashbulb Memory. *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Neuropsychology* 27: 915-929.
- Hyman, Ira E. Jr. & Billings, F.J. (1998): Individual Differences and the Creation of False Childhood memories. *Memory* 6: 1-20.
- Hyman, Ira E. Jr. & Loftus, Elizabeth (1998): Errors in Autobiographic Memory. *Clinical Psychology Review* 18, 8: 933-947.
- Koch, Christof & Laurent, Gilles (1999): Complexity and the Nervous System. *Science* 284: 96-98.
- Levine, Peter (1997): *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences*. Berkeley, CA.: North Atlantic Books.
- Luninet, Oliver, Curci, Antonietta, Marsh, Elizabeth J., Wessel, Ineke, Constantin, Ticu, Gencoz, Faruk & Yogo, Masao (2004): The Cognitive, Emotional, and Social Impacts of the September 11 Attacks: Group Differences in Memory for the Reception Context and the Determinants of Flashbulb Memory. *The Journal of General Psychology* 13, 3: 197-224.
- Mey, Jacob L. (2001 [1990]): *Pragmatics. An Introduction*. Oxford & Malden, M.A.: Blackwell (second edition).
- Mey, Jacob L. (1985): *Whose Language? A Study in Linguistic Pragmatics*. Amsterdam &

Philadelphia: Benjamins.

- Morris, R.G.M. (2006): Elements of a Neurobiological Theory of Hippocampal Function: The Role of Synaptic Plasticity, Synaptic Tagging and Schemas. *European Journal of Neuroscience* 23: 2829-2846.
- Pizarro, David A., Laney, Cara, Morris, Erin K. & Loftus, Elizabeth F. (2006): Ripple Effects in Memory: Judgments of Moral Blame Can Distort Memory for Events. *Memory & Cognition* 34, 4: 550-555.
- Scaer, Robert C. (2001): *The Body Bears the Burden. Trauma, Dissociation, and Disease*. Binghamton, N.Y.: The Haworth Medical Press.
- Schmolck, H., Buffalo, E.A. & Squire, L.R. (2000): Memory Distortions Develop over Time: Recollections of the O.J. Simpson Trial Verdict after 15 and 32 Months. *Psychological Science* 11, 1: 39-45.
- Talarico, Jennifer M. & Rubin, David C. (2003): Confidence, not consistency, characterizes flashbulb memories. *Psychological Science* 14, 5: 455-461.
- Wooffitt, Robin (2005): From Process to Practice: Language, Interaction and 'Flashbulb' Memories. In: te Molder, Hedwig and Potter, Jonathan (eds.): *Conversation and Cognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 203-225.