

## Representing Agency in Trauma Narratives: Sociocultural Motivations for Variability in Verbalization

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In working to understand the relationship between language and memory, much insight has been gained from examining the patterned variability found in verbalizations of the same events, such as a film (Chafe 1977a, b, 1980), or repeated tellings of a personal narrative (Chafe 1998). This paper draws out the role of sociocultural processes in such variability, demonstrating the centrality of representations of agency (Ahearn 2001, Duranti 2004) through an analysis of alternations between generic and specific framings in the verbalization of the lived experience of events.

The data for this paper are drawn from six extended narratives in which undocumented Salvadoran migrants recount the traumatic experiences of their journeys to the United States. The narratives often report the same type of events; for example, every story began with a mention of leaving El Salvador, e.g. “salí de aquí, en el 2003, en noviembre. el quince de noviembre del 2003.” (‘I left here, in 2003, in November. the fifteenth of November of 2003.’). Although in this example, the use of the first person singular and the past tense fit the canonical definition of personal narrative (Labov 1997, Labov & Waltesky 1967), many events were not verbalized with such specificity, as in the following examples.

(1)

Speaker	Object	Verb:Subject	Location
IVAN;	los	meten	en trailers
	3.PL	put:3.PL	in trailer trucks
	they put them in the trailer trucks		
TINA;	lo	echan	a las trocas
	3.SG	throw:3.PL	in the trucks
	they throw one in the trucks		

These verbalizations all use generic third-person referents and the present tense, despite Labov’s contention that such generalized clauses cannot support narratives of personal experience (1972, 362). While subsequent scholarship has criticized the Labovian model as overly restrictive (Hermans 1997, Langellier 1989, Nelson 2001), the function of such “generic rememberings” (Chafe 1994, 203) in personal narratives remains unclear.

Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative analysis, I demonstrate that generic constructions work to manage representations of narrator agency in verbalizing experiences of extreme vulnerability. In (1), the physically vulnerable migrants are treated as grammatical object and semantic patient; using generic resources allows the migrant narrators to distance themselves from this experience. The role of agency is even clearer in (2), which moves from a specific verbalization of the arrival (290) to a generic representation (293), distancing the narrator from ‘the people’ who were unable to control their bodies.

(2)

290. TANCHÓ;	Cuando íbamos llegado allá al lu^ga:r,	<i>When we were arriving there at the place,</i>
291.	(.) ^No:mbre!	<i>Jeez!</i>
292.	Si,	<i>They,</i>
293.	si no se podía pa^ra:r,	<i>they couldn’t stand up,</i>
294.	(0.2)	
295.	la gente.	<i>the people.</i>

This analysis of alternations between specific and generic framings in narratives of personal experience reveals that speakers work to manage representations of their own agency when recounting traumatic experiences, distancing themselves from vulnerable events by presenting a generic account. These findings underscore Chafe’s (1994) emphasis on the importance of generic remembering in verbalization, suggesting moreover that such processes may be strongly shaped by sociocultural concerns.