

6 How Thesis Writers Speak about their Experiences: A Linguistic Perspective

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This chapter presents a qualitative study of the ways in which European students share their thesis writing experiences. The data obtained through the interviews with students who recollect and discuss the process of writing bachelor's and master's theses will be interpreted from a linguistic perspective. Unlike other chapters in this book which concentrate on the content of interview accounts, this particular chapter will approach interviews not as details about what students do or think, but rather as objects for narrative and discursive analyses.

The chapter will begin with an overview of the transcribed research interview followed by an analysis of the global pattern of its organization. Then, the discursive strategies and most prominent linguistic means used by the students to communicate the significant events of their writing experience will be identified, categorized and discussed.

6.1 The Research Interview Account as a Tool and Genre

The interview is an interactional format which may be defined as 'a dyadic form of communication between two distinct parties, at least one of whom has a predetermined and serious purpose' (Stewart, 2009: 193). Nowadays, interviewing is a widespread practice and a standard tool used to make visible personas, experiences, opinions or ideas (Masschelein *et al.*, 2014).

According to Kvale (2006), the dissemination of interviewing in social sciences has been influenced not only by internal evolution of science but also by 'a general societal development toward a dialogical culture' (2006: 489). However, there exists another consideration that seems to be still more important: it is the interest in the 'self' and its construction characteristic of postmodern market society. This interest has located the 'self' at the center of social research 'as the enactment of ethical and ideological commitments' (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997: 313).

The qualitative research interview is a research method, or *tool*, and a format of communication, or *genre*. As a tool, it is ‘used for collecting data from the participants directly through a verbal interaction by making them respond to the purposefully framed questions aimed at serving the objectives of the study’ (Mangal & Mangal, 2013: 357). Interviewing stimulates the subjects to share, analyze and reflect on their personal stories, experiences and needs, and thus allows the researcher to delve into human life and to analyze and interpret it. In other words, the qualitative research interview ‘is based on the meanings that life experiences hold for the interviewees’ and pursues a goal of contributing ‘to a body of knowledge that is conceptual and theoretical’ (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006: 314).

As a genre, the research interview may be treated as a separate format of communication which aims at obtaining information, data or evidence necessary to implement a certain study. This communicative goal takes the form of a conversation between two parties, which can take place as a face-to-face interaction, over the telephone or via an electronic medium (e.g. Zoom).

Each of the parties involved in interviewing performs its own genre role. The interviewer is a researcher who asks questions predetermined by their research goals, interests and competence. They strive to get the answers which will further be used for the purposes of the study undertaken, that is, processed and interpreted. The interviewee answers the questions, being in a subordinate position, because it is the interviewer who sets the scene, shapes the content and form of the questions asked, and controls the interview. However, the interviewee may consciously or subconsciously undertake countermeasures, for instance, trying to avoid or soften answers, shifting some accents in the information told, showing reluctance to be open and sincere, or simply refusing to be interviewed further. Thus, the interview is asymmetrical in terms of dominance and power relations, with privileges provided to the interviewer (Kvale, 2006); at the same time, it is marked by certain power dynamics (Anyan, 2013) as the interviewee has some possibilities for resistance or manipulation.

A critical scrutiny of the communicative situation which gives birth to the interview and of the genre roles of its producers dethrones the myth of interviewing as ‘an authentic gaze into the soul of another’ (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997: 305). This ‘soul’, or rather ‘self’ (Bekar & Yakhontova, 2021), emerges as a discursive co-construction between the interviewer and interviewee in the context of an interview. Overall, the development of an interview is largely influenced by the context of interaction and the prominent aspects of the identity of the interviewer (Mann, 2011) as well as by subjective and evaluative interpretations produced by the interviewee. Also, a complex situation when interviewing is sensitivity to language issues which leads to a tendency ‘to monolingualise or more generally culturally neutralise what is by nature a linguistically and

culturally rich research environment' (Schembri & Jahić Jašić, this volume). Thus, the findings obtained as a result of interviewing do not precisely mirror social reality but rather yield representations built in the context of the interview situation in which social factors and subjective intentions interplay. This is well-exemplified by Harwood and Petrić (2012), who used the interview in their study to allow informants to discuss their specific citing practices, understandings and experiences related to writing, but emphasize that this method 'is not without limitations and weaknesses, not least in relation to reliability' (2012: 63).

The complex nature of the interview causes certain tensions within this format of communication, which become most obvious in its written form – a transcribed text. If in the oral interview its authorship is divided between two parties (Masschelein *et al.*, 2014: 2), in the transcribed form it becomes more diffused due to the intervention of the transcriber who, for example, may not show some important nonverbal features of the conversation or may intentionally edit inappropriate language. Also, the transcribed text implies a certain contradiction between the spontaneity of an interview conversation and the format which it acquires after being transcribed and edited. Because of this, there exist certain grounds for questioning the degree of authenticity or, conversely, the degree of simulation in the texts of transcribed interviews. And, finally, this form of interview possesses mixed, hybrid features of oral interaction and written communication.

In fact, the transcribed interview is an edited account of a conversation which took place in the past and thus produces 'an effect of narrativity' (Masschelein *et al.*, 2014: 29). As such, it turns into a coherent written text, which usually shows the presence of some organizational patterns. A number of researchers studying interviews (see, for example, De Fina, 2009; Hyvärinen, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Masschelein *et al.*, 2014; Mishler, 1997; Steuer & Wood, 2008; Wiles *et al.*, 2005) mention or emphasize the conspicuous presence of narratives in the interviews. As is known, a narrative is a story consisting of a sequence of connected events with a clear beginning and end. Interviewing provokes storytelling, since human experience is more easily rendered through narratives which possess an organizational force, 'make sense of a chaotic and senseless world' (Steuer & Wood, 2008: 575) and allow their authors to construct, invent and re-invent their identities. However, as Ylijoki emphasizes (2001: 23), narratives are sociocultural patterns, which are appropriated and transformed by individuals into personal storytelling experiences.

From a linguistic perspective, narratives are simultaneously frames and discourse practices which provide schemes for interpreting the world and thus facilitate this process. As such, they can become objects of combined studies, which involve both narrative and discourse analyses.

Being an interactional format, the interview creates its own context, to the enactment of which both interviewees and interviewers contribute

(Mann, 2011). Within this context, the interview data can be considered as *discourse of interviewing*, which manifests itself, first, as spoken interaction and then as texts of transcribed interviews. Viewed as discourse, interviews, in their transcribed textual form, can therefore become an object of discourse analysis ‘which provides evidence of the various ways in which a particular phenomenon can be approached’ (Talja, 1999: 472).

Thus, the transcribed interview account can be studied from a linguistic perspective which can provide deeper insights into discursive choices of participants and the management of interaction in interviews (Mann, 2016). In following such a disciplinary and methodological orientation, the present study differs from the previous research, Ylijoki’s (2001) in particular, which was aimed at identifying main types of narratives of thesis writing but not their linguistic construction. More specifically, the purpose of our analysis is to uncover textual structures and discursive practices through which interview participants create their versions of reality and build identities rather than revealing an objective meaning of their answers. The main methods used in this chapter to study the ways students choose to talk about their thesis writing experience will be described in detail in the following section.

6.2 Material and Methodology

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The details about the COST Action IS1401 of which this research was an integral part are presented in Chapter 2. Specifically, 10 interviews from eight European countries were analyzed: Romania (1), Norway (1), Republic of North Macedonia (1), Ukraine (1), Malta (1), Portugal (3), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1), and the UK (1). The corpus consisted of interviews conducted in English or where an English translation of the transcript was available (see Chapter 2). Table 6.1 provides information on the participants.

As we can see from the table, some of the students wrote their theses in English (as a foreign language), some in their L1. The participant from Bosnia, a master’s student at the time of the interview, wrote both his BA and MA theses in English in the field of Anglo-American Literary Studies and Gender Studies. The participant from Romania wrote his BA thesis in Romanian in the field of Public Policy and Advocacy. His study program and supervision were in Romanian, but he read most of the literature in English. The Norwegian participant’s native language was Italian but she wrote her thesis in English as an additional language (as perceived by her). The MA thesis was in the field of International Education. The Macedonian participant wrote her BA in Macedonian (her L1), in the field of Pedagogy. Her study program and supervision were all in Macedonian, and she speaks Serbian, English and Italian. The Ukrainian student did her MA in English Studies and wrote a thesis in English, her native

Table 6.1 Demographic data of interviewees

Participant	Age	Gender	L1	Discipline	Language of study/ instruction	Language of the thesis
MKD	Early 20s	F	Macedonian	Pedagogy/Social Sciences	Macedonian	Macedonian
BIH	Late 20s	F	Bosnian	Anglo-American Literary Studies	English	English
NOR2	Late 20s	F	Italian	International Education	English	English
GBR	Early 30s	M	English	Literature	English	English
UKR	Early 20s	F	Ukrainian	English Studies	Ukrainian. English	English
MLT	Early 20s	F	Maltese	Human Language Technology	English and Maltese	English
ROU2	Early 20s	M	Romanian	Public Policy and Advocacy	Romanian	Romanian
PRT1	Early 20s	M	Portuguese	Statistical Literacy	Portuguese	Portuguese
PRT2	Early 20s	F	Portuguese	Education/Social Sciences	Portuguese	Portuguese
PRT3	Early 30s	F	Portuguese	Literature	Portuguese	Portuguese

language being Ukrainian. The participants from Portugal studied at three different Portuguese universities in different fields: Literature, Education and Statistical Literacy. They wrote their theses in Portuguese. The participant from Malta wrote her BA in L1, but seems to be comfortable with writing both in English and in Maltese. Her field of study was Human Language Technology. The participant from the UK wrote his MA thesis in English, his native language, in the field of Literature.

Regardless of the languages used, the interviews shared common aspects which could serve as a basis for choosing the main categories of the analysis undertaken. It should be noted that five interviews were conducted in L1 (three in Portuguese, one in Romanian, and another one in Ukrainian) and then translated into English. The analysis was performed both on the English and translated texts, however, with the understanding of the limitations that translation imposes on linguistic analysis (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of translations in interview-based research). With due regard, the examples of figurative language, where equivalent expressions across languages may not exist, were considered only in the texts of interviews conducted in English. It is also important to mention that the study was not comparative.

The study was conducted based on two methodological approaches grounded in linguistic theories, which have already been used by other researchers for studies of interview accounts – narrative and discourse analyses.

The first one, narrative analysis, ‘focuses on the stories told during an interview and works out their structures and their plots’ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009: 222). This analysis was applied with due regard for the findings of previous studies, which pointed at the frequent presence of personal stories in different types of interviews (for relevant references, see the above section). In our research, we consider transcribed interviews with thesis writers as *narrative accounts* since, according to De Fina (2009), they report past events as answers to ‘why’ or ‘how’ questions by an interviewer. In the communicative situations of interviewing, the interviewer is tacitly assumed to be granted with certain responsibility to evaluate the objectivity and validity of the story narrated. Because of this, accounts, which unfold as responses to explicit or implied evaluative inquiry, are shaped to address it. Interview accounts are therefore inherently ‘explanatory and dialogic’, and ‘the way the narrator shapes the narrative’ is more important than the original intention of the interviewer, this quality being fundamental for differentiating narrative accounts ‘from other types of elicited narratives’ (De Fina, 2009: 240).

In interviews, particular structures and features of narrative accounts, commonly assigned to respondents, ‘are produced through the interaction of the two speakers’ (Mishler, 1997: 223). Following this perspective, we used narrative analysis to reveal the *overall structure* of the thesis writing stories told by students, assuming that such stories are very much likely to be first-person narrative accounts. In this respect, the present study differs from those previous ones which have also applied narrative analysis, but focused on the respondents’ answers (Frost, 2009; Wiles *et al.*, 2005) rather than on a global organization of the interviews.

The narrative analysis conducted is theoretically and methodologically framed by a well-known formal interpretative scheme suggested by Labov (Labov, 1997, 2006; Labov & Waletzky, 1997), who defined narrative ‘as a particular way of reporting past events, in which the order of a sequence of independent clauses is interpreted as the order of the events referred to’ (Labov, 2006: 37). According to this definition, the narrative is treated in this chapter as an overall pattern of textual organization, which can be utilized by different genres, the transcribed interview in particular.

Labov’s framework helps to reveal the structure of the narrative by deconstructing it into constitutive and consecutive elements, which he appropriately labeled (see Table 6.2).

It is important to emphasize that Labov treats stories as representing ‘an animate protagonist’s goal-directed behavior in relation to the unfolding and resolution of a problem’, as ‘*goal-directed problem-solving episodes*’ (Klapproth, 2004: 9) signaled by the presence of the complicating action and resolution structural elements. Also, he pointed out that in order to effectively convey the narrated experience, personal narratives must necessarily possess a number of characteristic features, among them

Table 6.2 Structure of the narrative

Element	Description
Abstract	Introduces the story to be told
Orientation	Presents preliminary information on participants, space and time settings, and relevant previous actions
Complicating action	Disrupts the usual chain of events leading to a crisis
Evaluation	Creates a feeling of suspense by providing evaluation of narrative events
Resolution	Shows how the crisis is resolved
Coda	Produces a sense of completion by bringing a reader back to the starting point of a story

evaluation (i.e. information on the effects of a reported event on human needs), credibility (asserting that reported events have indeed taken place), causality (allowing to build a chain of events) and assignment of praise and blame to the presented events (Labov, 1997).

Within the framework of this approach, the transcripts of the interviews were segmented based on detailed reading of the texts for sequences of events. The identified textual segments were then coded with the use of the labels suggested by Labov. It should be noted that, in utilizing Labov's model, we followed those researchers who have already used it to analyze the stories told by interview respondents (see, for example, Bischooping & Gazso, 2016; Frost, 2009; Wiles *et al.*, 2005). However, as has been previously mentioned, in this chapter the model is used for the first time (to the best of our knowledge) to identify and describe the global organizational pattern of transcribed interview accounts.

Further, the texts of the transcribed interviews were analyzed within the framework of discourse analysis which has previously been applied to the study of interviews (see Akinwotu, 2014; Cruickshank, 2012; Steuer & Wood, 2008; Talja, 1999). The theory of discourse assumes that the contexts where subjects are placed produce discourses which construct their versions of reality. Thus, the context of interviewing gives rise to a particular discourse which can be analyzed for the strategies which interviewees use to communicate the significant events of their life and experience in the context of the interview (Cruickshank, 2012). Discursive strategies may be defined as plans or intentions implemented through a special organization of discourse and use of linguistic means. Such strategies usually permeate the texts through which they are realized.

The discursive strategies employed by the students talking about their thesis writing experience were revealed based on the interconnection between the content of discourse and linguistic means manifesting it. In the process of the identification of strategies, the coded textual fragments (representing elements of the narrative structure) were scrutinized for content features, specific topics and related characteristics, as suggested

by Labov. This top-down analysis allowed us to assume the presence of a number of discursive strategies, used by interviewees to present their writing stories. Then, through a linguistic scrutiny, we tried, first, to find and disclose verbal mechanisms realizing the strategies and, second, to capture those linguistic elements which might lead to revealing other strategies, not determined during the consideration of the content and topics of the discourse of interviewing. The linguistic stage of the analysis focused on the levels of lexis, grammar and style, with due regard for those devices (e.g. deixis, tropes, indirect speech) which are most salient for the objectification of discursive strategies, as shown in Wodak (2015). As a result of top-down and bottom-up procedures, four discursive strategies were finally identified, two of them dealing with interviewees' self-presentation, and another two with organizing their stories. The revealed strategies were conceptualized and appropriately labeled, as will be shown below.

6.3 Thesis Writers' Experience as a Narrative

Analysis of the student interviews has shown that their overall pattern of organization follows the structure of a narrative. This underlying pattern, revealed through many episodes dissipated throughout interviews, can further be reconstructed into a global narrative model viewed 'as a richer, more condensed and coherent story than the scattered stories of single interviews' (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009: 222). As Labov (2006: 37) mentions, 'a narrative is initiated when a person is impelled to tell others about something'.

In the case of the student interviews, the external stimulus was provided by the interviewer who obtained the consent of the respondent to participate, introduced himself or herself and explained the purposes of the interview, e.g.:

- (1) ... we are part of an international research group which, as you know, conducts a research study on the experiences of bachelor and master thesis writers. This interview is part of a pilot study... it involves interviewing students who have completed their thesis in several countries in Europe, so it's a big project. The goals of the interview are to identify and analyze the significant experiences you faced during the process of writing of your thesis and also how you felt about the experiences, so you should think also about your feelings during the process, all your ups and downs, pleasures and disappointments. (MKD)

In Labov's terms, the initial part of the interview articulated by the interviewer can be treated as an initial element, or the 'abstract', which answers the question 'What was the narrative about?'.

The narrative perspective is further shaped by the first question of the interviewer who draws the interviewees' attention to the beginning of their

writing story, asking about the time it started. Such a question creates a situation of accountability which triggers the unfolding of a narrative account. The immediately following questions have a general scene-setting character, allowing the interviewee to provide a picture of the starting point of the writing story, with temporal and spatial parameters and actors involved:

- (2) For me this process started way after the moment I actually started thinking about writing the thesis, which actually means that when I passed my exams, I got a job, moved, and started this new job. It took me a year to think which, which topic I would like to write about. (BIH)
- (3) I could start with the beginning, I could say that in October I only clarified some things with my supervisor, what topic to focus on, I discovered... some fields in which I could write it, but my supervisor suggested it was too general, so I chose to focus on some cases of migration in Sweden, and I was told OK, that's perfect, so in October we settled on the topic and beginning with early December I began writing, because November was dedicated to collecting materials... (ROU2).

Such fragments of transcripts comprise the 'orientation' – the second constitutive component of a narrative, which answers the questions 'Who, when, what, where?'.

These initial elements are followed by the next three ones ('complicating action', 'evaluation' and 'resolution') which comprise the main part of storytelling. However, in the texts of the interviews we observe 'a narrative-in-the narrative' structure, when a certain episode of the interview appears to be a complete narrative in itself, with all Labov's elements. In the majority of interviews, for example, the story of choosing a topic for the thesis is presented by students as a classical narrative, with complicating actions and a happy ending. Thus, it should be noted that not only do the transcribed interviews display a narrative pattern of organization, but also particular events, embedded into a general thesis writing story, are presented as recursive series of short narratives.

The 'skeletal' element of any narrative, according to Labov, is the third one – the 'complicating action', which answers the question 'Then what happened?'. It appears when the chain of reported events is disrupted by another event which does not constitute the focus of the story told (Labov, 2006). The answers of interviewees show this sequence outlined by Labov, e.g.:

- (4) ... I was on Erasmus at the time and... the faculty forgot about me, and they didn't tell me that I needed to write a proposal. So the day before the deadline for the proposals we received an email reminding us to do the proposal and I had not done anything, of course, because I was not informed. (MLT)

- (5) ... I graduated in 2009, the same year the economy crashed in the United States. And the jobs just were gone. There was just nothing there. I didn't even have enough money at the time to move on with my education... (GBR)

Here we see how two side events – forgetting to inform the student and the start of economic collapse – break the course of the story and complicate it.

At the 'complicating action' stage, a certain problem appears which leads to a crisis. However, before its resolution there is always another element, which has been labeled by Labov as the 'evaluation'. It answers the question 'So what?' and provides information on the consequences of the complication of the feelings, needs and desires of a subject. A characteristic feature of the 'evaluation' structural element is the expression of surprise, apprehension or other emotional attitude to what has happened, often through the use of evaluation devices or embedded speech. As Labov puts it, 'Evaluation devices say to us: this was terrifying, dangerous, weird, wild, crazy: or amusing, hilarious, wonderful; more generally, that it was strange, uncommon, or unusual – that is, worth reporting' (Labov, 1972: 371). The 'evaluation' produces the effect of tension and suspense, which can be traced in the following examples:

- (6) This was my biggest problem as I first felt a lot of pressure at my new job. Then, I felt completely *empty* and totally *uninspired* to write about anything, and that all led to a *vicious* circle: how I could not have the inspiration because I need to find it and create it, how I could not have it, I need to find it, create it, and so on and so on, which was very, very *unproductive*. (BIH)
- (7) For me it was a moment of *anxiety* because I wanted things to change. ... The *uncertainty*, it had made me very *anxious*. I wanted to start moving forward and could not because I did not have the theme set. (PRT2)

Both of the above fragments describe the emotional reactions to difficult situations in which the students found themselves while preparing their theses. Their attitudes are expressed through the words of negative evaluation, often being reinforced by intensifiers (*completely, totally, very*). Also, in excerpt (6), we see two consecutive, almost similar sentences (*I could not have the inspiration because I need to find it and create it; I could not have it, I need to find it, create it*). This repetition, involving the predicates in simple present tense which interrupt the flow of narration, provides additional emotional coloring to the interviewee's discourse.

This situation of vivid emotional tension naturally leads to the 'resolution' stage, which answers the question 'What finally happened?' and shows that the crisis has been overcome and balance restored, e.g.:

- (8) And suddenly, I was already close to the dissertation submission and moving... to a new house, I had to solve things related to electricity

and water and I had to finish my last chapters. But it gave me such an adrenaline that my production was great, and, as I had little time, it was the highest moment. So I submitted the dissertation in my best mood, as 'delivery'. And everything went well, the advisor was present in these last moments, anyway. (PRT3)

As we see, example (8) describes how a student suddenly attains an impetus to overcome his problems and successfully reaches the completion of the thesis.

Although the 'resolution' is semantically the final element of any narrative, it may be followed by the 'coda', which prevents any further questions on the reported story since all the necessary information has already been provided. The 'coda' sends the listener back to the beginning of a story, that is, to its 'abstract'. In our interviews, it finalizes the stories told by generalizing students' experiences or emotions. For example,

- (9) It was something I did on my own, this was the thesis at my own time... regardless of everything... I would turn back time and write it again. It was really a positive experience when I knew that there is something I have to do and something that occupies me in a way that is most productive. (BIH)
- (10) I was very happy. First, when I took my thesis bound into my hands, I realized: 'This is my work!' It had additional materials in appendices, all those tables which I did myself. It was cool! It was a very cool feeling. I was so happy! (UKR)

In both of the above examples we observe the linguistic markers that signal the finality of the story: a summarizing clause (*It was really a positive experience*), use of the present tense (*there is something I have to do, occupies me in a way that is most productive*) which implies certain generalization, and direct speech and exclamatory sentences expressing the overall feelings of an interview respondent (*'This is my work!'*, *It was cool! It was a very cool feeling. I was so happy!*).

Thus, the analysis undertaken through the lens of the narrative framework allowed us to identify all of its elements in the transcribed interviews, which implies that the structure suggested by Labov can be treated as a global pattern of organization of the interview texts. It should be noted that the writing stories naturally come to a happy end, as all of the interviewed students report the successful completion and defense of their theses. What is more interesting is that the respondents obviously depict themselves as victors. This is possibly due to the impact of the context of the interview, which influences the ways in which students shape their stories: looking back at their writing experiences and disclosing them to an interviewer, they want, consciously or subconsciously, to present themselves as the winners who managed to effectively overcome all the difficulties encountered on the thorny path of writing their theses.

It is also of interest that this narrative nature of the writing story has been captured by one of the interviewed students who told the following to the interviewer:

- (11) Yes, it is perhaps a classic narrative, the climax was at the end, it begins at a high level, then there are some variables or certain antagonisms, right? Difficult times, small recoveries. It's a classic narrative because it ends well, right? In the end I meet an enchanted prince. (PRT3)

Thus, students see their writing experience as a story with a sequence of pleasant and unpleasant events, a culmination and a final reward in the form of a completed thesis (metaphorically, 'an enchanted prince', as a Portuguese student mentions in the above example).

6.4 Discursive Strategies in the Texts of Interview Accounts

The most commonly used discursive strategy identified in the interview accounts was termed as *creating a positive self-image*. It aims to present the subject of the interview as a serious student possessing a number of good (if not outstanding) qualities, able to overcome various difficulties and to take control over their life and circumstances. This strategy, present in all interview texts under analysis, is manifested through a set of linguistic features, which primarily include explicit positive evaluation of the student's own qualities, e.g.:

- (12) I am *self-conscious* and I don't really like making mistakes. (MKD)
 (13) I'm very *perfectionist*; I was *really persistent*. (PRT2)

As we can see, in both of the quoted fragments, students use adjectives to express positive evaluation when characterizing themselves. Also, they tend to evaluate in the same manner their attitudes and actions or activities they have undertaken in the process of writing. In some cases, a positive self-image seems to be built upon their relationship with their supervisor whose personal characteristics and influence upon the student are also described in the most positive terms (this being rather typical of interview situations when students do not challenge supervisors' comments, see Bekar, 2022):

- (14) Reading the books *went well*, the bibliography I had was *very good*, it was provided by the supervisor, and my writing was *good*. (PRT3)
 (15) I managed *to keep a positive attitude* towards the situation. (PRT1)

Students also use various implicit means to present themselves in the most favorable light, as the two examples below demonstrate:

- (16) I knew that I would come, on my hands and knees, and defend my thesis precisely because of that money [provided by the family]. (BIH)

- (17) I'm not the type that stands in front of them [*pupils*] and is only talking, no, never, that never happens, usually I ask questions, usually, I have toys or materials that I need for them to create something for me and in the process of creating to learn. (MKD)

We see that in example (16) an interviewed student emphasized the exceptional persistence she displayed to reach her goals, feeling morally obliged to the only member of the family – her mother – who helped her to pay for her studies. In example (17), an interviewee described herself as a competent teacher who used interactive and up-to-date pedagogical methods. Overall, students' accounts show few traces of 'academic modesty', presenting an image of a person, successful in various respects, and producing 'a sense of accomplishment', which seems to be prominent in student interviews (see Odena & Burgess, 2017: 580). And this is not surprising, if we look deeper into the nature of the interview as a genre and the whole discursive situation of the conducted interviews. As Atkinson and Silverman (1997: 315) stress, the interview is 'a prime technique for the affirmation of selves'. In our case, interviewing empowered the students by granting them an opportunity to construct their thesis writing stories and to build and publicize (at least in the presence of an interviewer) the images of themselves they would like to project.

This construction of a positive image is further facilitated in the transcripts through the use of the interviewee's discursive strategy of *establishing emotional credibility*. The presence of such a strategy in all the texts of students' accounts is related to their overall narrative character, which requires that the audience believe in the truthfulness, occurrence, and form of the events described in the story (Labov, 1997) and, thus, trust the narrator (otherwise, the narration loses its sense). It is natural, therefore, that the students try to establish rapport with the interviewer by implicitly persuading them to emotionally share the student's experience of writing a thesis. This is achieved by a number of rhetorical and linguistic means, one of the most prominent and interesting ones being the use of the second-person pronoun *you*, e.g.:

- (18) Of course, the supervisor tried to help me find the right direction, but I picked up what I wanted to write. Of course, the supervisor helps *you* with warnings and suggestions, but not really forcing *you* to choose one way or another. (NOR2)
- (19) Because if *you* have some minimum experience, *you* know what is useful and what is not useful, when to read and when to write, what to add, and what citation to use. (UKR)

From these examples, we may assume that the pronoun *you* refers to the speaker and to a certain imaginary group of thesis writers. By positioning themselves (via *you*) as members of this group, the interviewed students show that their experience is not unique but shared by others and, thus,

raise the level of credibility of their writing stories. At the same time, *you* refers, at least partially, to the interviewer, since the main function of the second person pronoun is to communicate directly with an addressee by asking questions and influencing them in various ways (Hoop & de Hogeweg, 2014). This direct reference to researchers-interviewers has obvious grounds as the students may presume that they also possess experience of writing and can understand students' concerns. Such an engagement of the interviewer into the storytelling provokes empathy and feelings of solidarity and inclusion, increasing the trustworthy character of the information told. At the same time, we realize that our interpretation of the role of *you* and other pronouns in the interview accounts may have been affected by translation due to the differences in their use in different European languages.

The same effect is produced and sustained by the use of another pronoun – the first-person pronoun *we*, which often aims 'to get the readers to see things their way' (Harwood, 2005: 347). Its presence is also noticeable in the transcripts of the interviews, e.g.:

- (20) I think it is through the conclusion that *we* realize a little how the process was for *us*, that *we* let other people know how *we* see this process. Because as objective and clear as *we* are, it always passes a little of the self *we* are, even by the way *we* do. (PRT2)

This inclusive '*we*' also encompasses other possible interlocutors (including the interviewer) who can potentially share and understand the student's experience, although the degree of emotional involvement created by its use is somewhat lower as compared with that produced by *you*. As Hoop and de Hogeweg (2014: 4) emphasize, 'speakers who use a second person pronoun referring to themselves generalize from their own stance' and, thus, better provoke the ability of the addressee to understand and share the feelings of another.

The credibility of the narration is also supported by the frequent use of tag questions which are prominent in the transcripts:

- (21) So, I'm going to make sure that if going forward, I mean going into academia, I'm going to be working with writing, I'm going to be working as an editor, work with publishers, things like that, something where I'm not just totally outside of my, of my, my, my goals and my, my true desires, right? (GBR)
- (22) So I did not have that need anymore, did I? (PRT3)

In example (21), the tag question performs a confirmatory function as the student seems to look for approval from the interviewer while in example (22) its use is more attitudinal, aimed at emphasizing the words of the speaker (Baker, 2015: 314). Both types of functions intensify the interactional features of the students' answers and contribute to creating a context of trust and confidence. Furthermore, this emotional

atmosphere of the interviews is continuously sustained by students' self-quoting, e.g.:

- (23) When I was writing, after reading all the literature, I experienced great emotions. Because I felt: *'Wow! I understand and I am able to write! How cool it is!'* (UKR)

When self-quoting, speakers, on the one hand, more effectively convey their thoughts and feelings and, on the other, distance themselves from the situation of quoting and present it as reported by multiple voices (Maynard, 2007: 123). Self-quoting thus adds expressivity to the discourse of interviewing, making listeners emotionally believe in what they hear. The same role is played by figurative language, which, according to Wodak (2015), appears to be prominent in the discursive construction and qualification of social actors, phenomena, processes, events and actions. The analysis has shown that students rather abundantly employ such tropes as metaphors and similes:

- (24) She *cracked the whip* a bit to make sure I was still working. (GBR)

- (25) So I am *like a peacock* that walks through that workplace. (BIH)

The above instances, which contain conventional metaphors (example 24) and a simile (example 25) show that students tend to narrate their thesis writing experience in an expressive, emotional and engaging way.

Both of the strategies considered above are related to the self-presentation of respondents in the interview accounts. The following two seem to be more relevant to organizing and managing their stories. The first of them, linguistically visible in all interview transcripts, may be called the discursive strategy of *sustaining the objectivity of the narration*. This strategy counterbalances, to a certain extent, the expressivity and emotionality of the students' answers by providing more objective evidence supporting the truthfulness of their stories. In many cases, the strategy is implemented through extremely detailed accounts of events or descriptions of activities, e.g.:

- (26) I had a notebook where I put down everything what I had to do every hour. That is, every day – Monday, Tuesday, and so on – at a certain hour. For example, there I had a class, then I had to meet with my supervisor, then I wrote a report on school practice, and then I had to prepare for a class. Everything was noted step by step. (UKR)

As seen from the above excerpt, the student scrupulously explains her routine life during the preparation of a thesis and supplies appropriate examples. In some other cases, the interviewees refer to everyday, trivial situations which, however, gave rise to the thoughts or ideas related to their theses, e.g.:

- (27) For example, I once rode in a tram in the city where I live, which is really terrible and I was thinking how the public transport is rather

limiting and how at the same time it speeds up but also limits your movement for many reasons. And I couldn't stop thinking about it at all, thinking about the fact that if you are disabled you are not able to get into a tram... and at that moment I somehow started thinking about the premises of a nursing home in the context of a city, where it is situated... all finally contributed to the nursing home in the literature, with the focus on the old age and illness and a kind of a tabooed approach. (BIH1)

In the above example, the student explains how a routine activity of riding the tram helped her to find a necessary research focus. Such references to real-life situations rationally explain and support emotional aspects of the stories told and thus emphasize the objective character of the narration.

Furthermore, the objectivity in students' answers is maintained through quotations:

- (28) She said, for example: 'If you do this or that, wouldn't it be better? What's your opinion?' That is, she was not imposing her opinion on me. (UKR)

In the majority of cases, the interviewed students quote (as in the above example) their supervisors, often presenting them as reliable sources of trustworthy information or opinions, although students' peers may also be cited. The quotations support the thoughts and decisions of interviewees allowing the listener to interpret them as honest and unbiased.

Finally, the presentation of the story as a truthful and authentic one is supported by the use of various lexical devices which express logical relationships of cause and effect, e.g.:

- (29) Then I read something else and then wrote it, then I let some two days pass until I forgot what I had written, *because* if I looked at it immediately, I'd say that it is wrong but if I forget a little I might think 'well this might not be the worst thing a student ever wrote' and then again and again and again. (BIH)
- (30) I had an age range from eighteen to thirty... and the *reason* that I chose this age gap is *because*... my dissertation was about gestures as I said but I focused a lot on the hearing aspect and the seeing and I know that after around thirty there would be a kind of problem maybe you know some people start losing a bit of their hearing *so* I wanted a specific age of a young gap. *So* for the prototype I had used a friend of mine ... two of my friends. (MLT)

By establishing causal relations, students build, either consciously or subconsciously, a chain of actual or desirable events, which, due to its logical character, is more likely to be interpreted as an objective account. The last strategy revealed in the majority of transcripts may be called a discursive strategy of *dramatizing the narrative*. The purpose of this strategy is to add drama and tension to the writing story in order to present its

happy end – the successful completion and defense of a thesis. The presence of the strategy is predetermined by the narrative structure of the interview which includes the ‘evaluation’ – an obligatory element which expresses tension and suspense. It should be noted, however, that linguistic traces of dramatization can be found throughout various parts of the transcripts, its most conspicuous representatives being words of negative evaluation, e.g.:

- (31) I was having so much *trouble*, I was very *poor*, I had no job, I felt a little *betrayed* by the whole process for a while. (GBP)
- (32) The fact was that I was doing my internship, so it was very *complicated* to deal with both situations and maybe that’s why I was not as emotionally well. (PRT2)
- (33) I’ve used references before, but here it is like you almost get *panic*, I mean like you don’t reference a sentence... (NOR2)

All of the above excerpts characterize various situations which occurred in the students’ life during the process of writing their theses. They are marked by explicit negative coloring which brings tension and even drama to the stories. Such parts of the transcripts create a certain thrilling effect as they provoke the feeling of anticipation which will be fully satisfied at the end of interviews when students will announce a happy end and, in some case, even praise themselves for gaining an academic victory!

6.5 Discussion and Conclusion

The qualitative research interview is both a method, or research tool, and a format of communication, or genre, with a discourse enacted by the context of interviewing, to which both interviewees and interviewers contribute. With this ‘genre-related tool’, in-depth evidence of people’s opinions, experiences, ideas and thoughts as well as of emotions and feelings can be gathered.

Interviews can thus serve both as a source of research data and an object of study, or ‘resource’ and ‘topic’, in Lee and Roth’s (2004) terms. In this chapter (and in contrast to the other ones in this volume), we considered the interview data as an *object* of a two-dimensional linguistic study, involving narrative and discourse analyses. In particular, we attempted to disclose how students, stimulated by interviewing, tell their thesis-writing stories and reflect on their experiences, as well as on their personal and academic achievements and the problems encountered.

First, our study of 10 interview transcripts has shown that the global pattern underlying them is a classic, in terms of Labov’s understanding, first-person narrative account which possesses and reveals its elements in the interview texts. The pattern, enacted in the communicative situation of a qualitative research interview, foregrounds the narrator, in our case

the thesis writer, who is driven to represent themselves as pursuing and reaching a goal in a struggle with different circumstances. Since narrative is 'both a mode of representation and a mode of reasoning' (Wiles *et al.*, 2005: 90), it may therefore be assumed to influence and shape students' ways of reporting and evaluating the events of their thesis writing endeavors.

Second, the study has revealed that while telling their writing stories, students choose, consciously or subconsciously, four main discursive strategies – creating a positive self-image, establishing emotional credibility, sustaining objectivity of the narration, and dramatizing it. The presence of these strategies in the texts of interviews correlates with certain features of the narratives, disclosed by Labov (1997). In particular, the strategies of establishing emotional credibility and sustaining objectivity of the narration seem to be related to the characteristics of credibility, while the sustaining objectivity strategy is also linked to causality as an inherent aspect of narratives. Such correlations testify to the potential benefits of the *combined, narrative-discursive perspective* on interviewing as a communicative phenomenon and social practice.

Thus, narrative analysis and conceptualization of discursive strategies has allowed us to see how students discursively and linguistically present and understand themselves while being interviewed and, consecutively, to contribute, first, to the research on the interview as a topic of analysis, and second, to the understanding of how thesis authors construct and share their writing stories. As has been shown above, in the communicative situation and context of the interview, students demonstrate themselves as successful individuals with a number of positive or even exceptional qualities, able to overcome difficulties and attain the goals set. Their writing experience is discursively constructed as a story with dramatic and even thrilling moments, which, however, lead to an inevitable happy end, i.e. unproblematic completion and defense of a thesis.

The findings of this study, however, give rise to three major questions. The first concerns those (potential) interviews, in which respondents report a negative writing experience, for example, a failure to complete and defend a thesis. If students recounted a negative experience of not completing a thesis, would they depict themselves as unsuccessful? We need appropriate data and analysis to be able to answer such a question but, following Ylijoki (2001), we can assume that they build their narratives on the unhappy-end narrative pattern. At the same time, it is worth paying attention to the phenomenon of downplaying in the 'nothing much happened' sense (Wiles *et al.*, 2005: 93) in storytelling. For example, an unsuccessful writer can choose a face-saving strategy of presenting themselves as able to survive and recover after a dramatic failure or as someone who afterwards managed to identify new life prospects. Such discursive choices are almost inevitably driven by the communicative situation of an

interview, which places the respondent in a condition which may metaphorically be described as being in the limelight. Such circumstances seem to influence the shaping of the interviewee's discourse in such a way that they could produce a favorable impression even when reporting failures or unsuccessful experiences.

The other two questions concern the objectivity and validity of interview data. As Talmy (2010: 132) notes, investigation of the interview as the process 'involved in the co-construction of meaning' possesses 'significant implications for data analysis'. In other words, if all 10 writing stories considered in this chapter show the same inner structure, employ similar discursive strategies and construct similar identities, the following questions are inevitable: To what extent do these interviews represent real experience? And to what extent can such interviews reliably serve as research data?

In considering these questions, we agree with Hammersley (2003: 120) who rightly indicates that specific circumstances of interviewing give rise to the interviewee's 'preoccupation with self-presentation and/or with persuasion of others, rather than being concerned primarily with presenting facts about the world'. Therefore, the interview talk 'may say more about role-playing and adapting to social standards in the name of impression management – including how to appear authentic – than about how people really feel' (Alvesson, 2011: 3). Interviews do not hide, distort or misrepresent some 'objective truth': what we get from them, according to Randall and Phoenix (2009: 137), is neither 'raw' facts nor impartial writing histories but subjective interpretations, or, in our case, *thesis writers' stories*, which 'have the opportunity to unfold and deepen in the midst of, indeed *because of*, the unfolding interactions that occur within the interview relationship itself'.

Such stories are, certainly, resources which can provide valuable observations and glimpses of yet unknown learning experiences, as other chapters in this volume demonstrate. They help researchers, according to Atkinson and Sohn (2013), to understand the academic and disciplinary culture as represented in the lives of its individual users in particular settings and from their own perspectives.

This study has revealed that in the context of a qualitative research interview, student writers *present* and *interpret* their experience as a difficult journey and a trial crowned at the end by a victory – the thesis defense. By having disclosed the ways in which thesis writers choose to talk in interviews, we hope to contribute to the understanding of interviews as situated and co-constructed accounts rather than straightforward sources of 'objective truth'.

The use of L1 or L2 in thesis writing and its effect on the expression of students' personal opinions about the writing process can become another avenue for future research.

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