



Documentation and Conservation of Life Stories of French-Speaking Elderly in Retirement Homes and in the Community

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Résumé :

« Documentation et conservation des récits de vie de personnes âgées francophones dans des maisons de retraite et dans la communauté » est un projet universitaire d'engagement communautaire financé par le Haut conseil israélien de l'évaluation de la recherche et de l'enseignement supérieur. Il vise à réunir des étudiants du département de français de l'Université Bar-Ilan avec des personnes âgées parlant le français. En accord avec l'hypothèse selon laquelle l'interaction personnelle est l'un des éléments clés pour soulager la solitude linguistique des personnes âgées, les étudiants s'adressent aux personnes âgées dans leur langue maternelle. En retour, en documentant des récits de vie des personnes âgées par le biais d'entretiens non-directifs, les apprenants du français pratiquent leur français oral dans un environnement détendu, dénué de jugement, alors que les étudiants francophones profitent des rencontres pour prendre conscience de la diversité linguistique et pour nouer contact avec leur propre héritage linguistique, culturel et historique. De surcroît, le dialogue entre les étudiants et les personnes âgées contribue à dissiper la représentation stéréotypée des personnes âgées en tant que fardeau pour la société.

Mots-clés : récits de vie, diversité linguistique, projet d'engagement communautaire, FLE, didactique du français, personnes âgées, histoire orale, entretien narratif, sociolinguistique

Abstract:

"Documentation and Conservation of Life Stories of French-Speaking Elderly People in Retirement Homes and in the Community" is a community-engagement academic project financed by the Israel Council for Higher Education. It seeks to bring together students from the Department of French culture at Bar-Ilan University and French-speaking senior citizens for mutual benefits. Based on the understanding that personal interaction is one of the key elements in relieving old people's linguistic solitude, students serve as "relievers of loneliness" and "enhancers" by speaking to the elderly in their native tongue. In return, by documenting the elderly's life stories through non-directive interviews, French learners (who take French as a foreign language) are given the rare opportunity to practice their oral French skills in a relaxed, non-judgmental environment, whereas Francophone students (mother tongue or near mother tongue language level) are given the chance to immerse in linguistic diversity and get in touch with their own linguistic, cultural, and historical heritage. In addition, the dialogue between the students and the elderly diminishes stereotypical beliefs representing the elderly as a burden to society.

Keywords: life stories, linguistic diversity, community-engagement project, French-language teaching, French as a foreign language, elderly, oral history, biographical interview, narrative interview, sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

"Documentation and Conservation of Life Stories of French-Speaking Elderly in Retirement Homes and in the Community" is a community-engagement academic project launched by the French Department at Bar-Ilan University, and financed twice by the Israel's Council for Higher Education (2015, 2016). It seeks to bring together students from the French department – French learners (advanced-level students) or native French speakers – who pursue a bachelor's or a master's degree in French linguistics or French culture and literature, and French-speaking senior citizens – old-time immigrants or newcomers – for mutual benefits.

The project is based on the understanding that personal interaction is one of the key elements in relieving old people's linguistic loneliness, caused by lack of native-language interaction in their current environment.¹ Students serve therefore as "relievers of loneliness" and "enhancers" by speaking to the elderly in their native tongue. In return, by documenting the elderly's life stories through non-directive interviews, French learners are given the rare opportunity to practice their oral French skills in a relaxed, non-judgmental environment, whereas Francophone students are given the chance to immerse themselves in linguistic diversity and get in touch with their own linguistic, cultural, and historical heritage. All students involved in the project – students from the French-as-a-foreign-language track as well as Francophone students – discover that contrary to stereotypical assumptions portraying the elderly as helpless and weak, as having impaired cognitive abilities, and as being a burden to society, senior citizens actually hold valuable resources: language and cultural knowledge, life experience, and a piece of history they can share with the students.²

The originality of this project resides in the reversal of prejudicial beliefs related to old age, according to which senior citizens are the only ones in need of these meetings. From early on in the project, as the elderly's stories begin to unfold, the students discover

¹ Because the old person is not proficient in Hebrew, he or she suffers from the lack or absence of communication with the staff or the surrounding persons who do not speak French.

² Other projects of the kind, such as an inter-generational encounter between the elderly in retirement homes and students of the Sapir Academic College in the southern part of Israel, report mutual benefits for both the elderly and the students. <http://www.sauveteurs.org/shoah>

the extent to which they are the ones being empowered by the dialogue with the senior citizens.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Old age and linguistic solitude

Recent studies demonstrate that in Israel, nearly half of the elderly population suffers from loneliness.³ Studies in gerontology (cf., e.g., Pearlman and Uhlmann, 1988) show that among the significant independent variables in the elderly's quality of life are social components, finances, and interpersonal relationships. One of the ways to overcome solitude is by building social ties (*ibid.*). The need to relieve loneliness through the creation of a permanent social environment therefore explains the move to a retirement or assisted living home.

The French-speaking elderly community in Israel – in retirement homes and in the community – is composed of two main populations: veteran immigrants and newcomers who have made their Aliyah (immigration to Israel) following their retirement, in order to spend the rest of their lives in Israel. According to a census conducted by the French Consulate in 2012, at the time of the survey, around 8,000 French citizens over the age of 65 were living in Israel. In addition, according to the Ministry of Aliyah and Immigrant Absorption, each year, an average flow of 2,000 French immigrants arrive in Israel, among whom is a significant number of retired persons. At the end of 2014, immigration from France culminated at nearly 7,000 persons, accounting for almost a third (27%) of

³ Loneliness is defined as a social-emotional situation with entirely subjective characteristics. Old people suffering from solitude may lack a sense of belonging, may experience deterioration in assertiveness and in motivation, and may suffer from scarce opportunities for socializing and little physical contact. Loneliness may nurture itself in a sort of vicious circle to the point of a persisting willed isolation. Different reasons may lead to a feeling of loneliness, such as organic diseases like depression and health problems, detachment from an active professional life, the loss of partners and friends, and so forth (Fessman and Lester, 2000). Loneliness appears when individuals experience a gap between the desirable (the desire for social contacts) and the existing (the lack of such relationships). The dangers of loneliness in all its stages are aggravated within the elderly population because it contributes to the development of ailments such as chronic depression and cognitive deterioration. (http://www.60plus-israel.co.il/articles_in.asp?id=390; Cf. also Cohen-Mansfield, Shmotkin, and Goldberg (2009).

all immigrants. According to statistics conducted in 2015, the median age of immigrants from France was 50 for 2014, compared to 36 for the rest of the immigration population.⁴

However, as French immigrants arrive in Israel, some of them – especially the older ones – encounter difficulties of integration, related to cultural and linguistic reasons (André, 2012). Senior citizens who arrive to retirement homes without good knowledge of Hebrew find themselves in a situation of enhanced solitude. First, most often, no French speakers are among the staff. Second, many of them have arrived alone, and therefore do not enjoy visits from family. As a result, both veteran and recent immigrants' cultural background is silenced. This problem has brought about the establishment, in 2012, of a think tank for the foundation of French-speaking retirement homes.⁵ But to the best of our knowledge, this initiative has not yet been carried out.

2.2. A paradoxical situation: French as a nearly extinct cultural resource among North African immigrants to Israel, and as a cultural asset for French learners

As of 2013, about 350,000 French speakers who practice different variants of French (North African vernaculars, French of North African immigrants from France, other Francophone diaspora from France and Belgium) live in Israel (Ben-Rafael and Ben-Rafael, 2013). Ben-Rafael and Ben-Rafael's previous research shows that second- and third-generation North African immigrants – especially from less economically privileged social classes – do not preserve the linguistic resource, in the sense that they are inclined to move away from the family's language, and adopt English, rather than French, as their second language (Ben-Rafael and Ben-Rafael, 2011). Jewish Israelis of North African descent who learned French in their childhood, no longer use it when they become adults, even while maintaining business ties in Francophone countries (*ibid.*).

⁴Data on the immigration to Israel from France and the Ukraine, 2015, Ministry of Aliyah and Immigrant Absorption, http://main.knesset.gov.il/Activity/Info/MMMSummaries19/Immigration_1.pdf. Date accessed: 3 June 2016.

⁵ French retirement homes in Israel. Interview with Gerontologist, Dr Joseph Zrihen, 18 March 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSP2_bRmBOY. Date accessed: 3 June 2016.

A different fate awaited the French spoken by North African immigrants who were integrated in the middle class along with immigrants from other Francophone diaspora. These immigrants commonly immigrated to Europe first (especially to France), and arrived to Israel only years later, mostly as students who have chosen to "make Aliyah" and study in Israel and as retired persons wishing to settle in Israel (cf. above).

In addition, Ben-Rafael and Ben-Rafael identify a third group of French speakers (*ibid.* pp. 12-13), which they dub the "Neo-French." This group consists of people for whom French is not the mother tongue, yet who are aware of the advantages of the acquisition of French as a foreign language.⁶

2.3. The biographical interview: an intermediate approach

Biographical interviews are a common method of inquiry in the social sciences (Schütze, 1976, 1983; Rosenthal, 1995, 2004; Bertaux, 1976; Portelli, 1985, 2003; Thompson 1988; Ochs, 2004; Bejerano 2005, 2010; Gilad, 2016), for diverse purposes. They vary from stories on significant events (cf. Portelli's interviews on narratives of war, 1997, and Rosenthal's interviews on Youth in Nazi Germany 1987, 1989, 1991) to everyday insignificant ones, with a looser and more dialogic structure (see Ochs' accounts on falling from bed or nearly drowning in a pool, 2004).

In oral history, the biographical interview is used for extracting and verifying facts from individual stories against the backdrop of historical events (Portelli, 2015; Bertaux, [1997] 2016), revealing subjective points of view on factual data (Beaud, 1996). Language is thus considered either "transparent" or a mere vessel for the transmission of data, and no special attention is paid to the discursive reconstruction of a past event (Nossik, 2014: 8), although Portelli points out that

[oral historians] must take care to leave at least a trace of the oral, narrative, dialogic origin of the materials we work with. This is why, beyond a matter of documentary accuracy, oral historians quote their sources and use montage to a much wider extent than other historians, anthropologists, sociologists. By quoting

⁶ Amit (2012) dubs it "un produit de luxe" ("French as a prestige language").

our narrators at length, we also achieve another result: that of retaining at least some of the complex polysemy of oral story-telling.

[...] by preserving, as much as it is possible in writing, the vernacular, colloquial language in which the stories are often told, **we insist that the meaning of an event cannot be separated from the language in which it is remembered and narrated [...]**. Orality, then, is not just the vehicle of information but also a component of its meaning. The dialogic and narrative form of oral sources culminate in the density and complexity of language itself. **The very tones and accents of the oral discourse convey the history and identity of the speakers, and transmit meanings well beyond the speakers' conscious intention.** (Portelli, 2015; our emphasis)

Oral history is made up of verbal constructs that are formalised, transmitted, and shared, whereas the historian's oral sources are individual, informal, dialogic narratives created in the encounter between the historian and the narrator:

Ultimately, oral history is about the historical significance of personal experience on the one hand, and the personal impact of historical matters on the other. The hard core of oral history lies exactly at this point, where history breaks into private lives (for instance: when war breaks into domestic space in the shape of a bomb dropped from an airplane) or when private lives are drawn into history (for instance: the experience of the trenches in World War I, the experience of Italian troops in Russian campaign in World War II...). (Portelli, 2015)

In sociolinguistic studies, however, attention is shifted toward the *telling* rather than the information extracted. Under such approaches, life stories (*récits de vie*) are viewed as discursive reconstructions of the world, simultaneously formatted (following ritual patterns, as Ochs (2004) would put it) and performative, produced in specific interactional and social contexts (Nossik, 2014; Rosenthal, 2004). They are solicited from interviewees, in order to create discourse on their life, their language, or on the learning of a language. Through a linguistic perspective, life stories are viewed as "discursive reconstructions" of the world (Guilhaumou, 2004, quoted in Nossik, 2014), and their value results not from the "factual data" they carry, but from the specific way they are

told, which is inseparable from what is said. Life stories are conceived as configuring activities that give a meaning to what is told, and whose interest resides precisely in the re-categorization of lived social experiences through the personal discursive choices of the narrator (Nossik, 2014, following Ricoeur, 1983).

In France, a thematic issue of *Semen* on oral autobiographical stories (Nossik [ed.], 2014) deals with the discursive materiality of the stories, as well as with their emergence in interactions. The linguistic approach to life histories takes into account the "chronological narrative molds" (Nossik 2014: 9), that is, of the fact that story plots are not necessarily faithful accounts of lived realities/lived experience. From a methodological perspective, then, viewing discourse as performative and not as strictly informative, as do some currents of oral history, has raised awareness of the necessity of taking into account the discursive materiality of the stories (Pêcheux, 1981, quoted by Nossik, 2014): scholars are now interested in the way the narrators put social reality into words. The second methodological implication of such framework is the need to consider the social, interactional, and material contexts in which a story is produced. The story thus needs to be reproduced by integrating the communicational event (Mondada, 2001: 197, quoted in Nossik, 2014), the shared experience (Guilhaumou, 1998: 93, quoted in Nossik, *ibid.*), the dialogical exchange, and the social expectations in which it is inscribed (*ibid.*).⁷

Despite the differences, both approaches – oral history and linguistically oriented biographical approaches – emphasise the emancipatory power of individual stories that – when told – may uncover elements missing from official historical accounts:

Narrators may not always be aware of the historical relevance of their personal experience. They may wish to guard them as too intimate to be revealed, or may be reluctant to discuss things that are important to them lest they be dismissed by the historian as irrelevant. (Portelli, *op. cit.*).

⁷ All research quoted follows Labov and Waletzky's seminal work on oral stories recorded in Harlem (1967), Labov's continued research, and further studies of autobiographical oral stories interested in narrative structure and in their conversational functions (Ochs and Capps, 2001).

Although they may be bound to culturally determined, ritualised forms of telling, for instance, or to a tendency to tell things chronologically (Nossik, *op. cit.*, Ochs 2004), room still exists for personal creativity and style.

In addition, both approaches – historical and linguistic – pay attention to the gap between the event and what is told (*narré*), to the way the event is told in the present (*narrer*), and to the importance it may have for the present or the construction of the present (Portelli, 2015; Rosenthal, 2004). Also, attention is paid to the labor of memory and the reconstruction of the past in the present and by the present (Fischer, 1978; Rosenthal, 1995, 2004). According to Portelli (2015, *ibid.*), "memory, in fact, is not a mere depository of information, but rather an ongoing process of elaboration and re/construction of meaning." Therefore, Portelli prefers using terms such as "testimony" and "witness," and speaks of "narratives" and "narrators," "stories" and "story-tellers," or, in fact, "history tellers."

Both approaches are also sensitive to the performative aspect of oral narrative:

Just like memory, the narrative itself is not a fixed text and depository of information, but rather a process and a performance. As Walter J. Ong writes, orality does not generate texts, but performances: in orality, we are not dealing with finished discourse but with discourse in the making (indeed, dialogic discourse in the making). Thus, when we talk of oral history we ought to think in terms of verbs rather than nouns – remembering rather than memory; telling rather than tale. In this way, we can think of oral sources as something happening in the present, rather than just as a testimony of the past. Most importantly, when we look at the act of speech, rather than at its outcome, we realize that remembering and telling are indeed influenced by the historical context and by the social frameworks of memory, but they are also filtered by individual responsibility. (Portelli, 2015)

Finally, both approaches to life stories are sensitive to the dialogical construction or the influence the presence and the input of the interviewer exert on the story. For both approaches, the oral history or the life story is a result of a collaborative effort by the present parties (Nossik, 2014: 11). Portelli views oral history as a listening art, based on

dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee. Oral sources are co-created by the active role played by the historian in the field interview (Portelli, 2015).

Oral history and the linguistically oriented narrative interview both nurture our method. We are interested in the life story of the interviewee, yet we do not necessarily seek to compare it with factual historical events. We view life storytelling as an *interactive* endeavor, where young and old persons engage in a relaxed conversation. The life story recorded and transcribed⁸ is perhaps the resulting physical material of the encounter, but it is also a sort of *byproduct* of the exchange itself, designed to help the students ameliorate their language skills and to relieve the old persons' loneliness. Furthermore, like the linguistic approaches, we pay more attention to the *way* the story is told, concentrating on linguistic variants and idiosyncratic aspects of the utterances. In addition, we also pay special attention not only to the interviewees' way of telling, but also to the manner in which the interviewee's story will be reconstructed in the transition from the oral to the written form.

3. Project design and description

3.1. Academic structure and accreditation

Let us point out that projects such as ours, financed by the Ministry of Higher Education, are designed to build a bridge between academia and society, by encouraging faculties and university departments to include in their curricula courses aspects of community involvement. Whereas Law or Social Work departments are typical candidates for such projects (offering, e.g., legal clinics or counseling for the socio-economically challenged), French departments are not. We therefore needed to think of a creative way to establish a reciprocal and ongoing relationship with factions of society.

⁸ Here, "transcription" is not to be taken in the traditional linguistic sense. Rather, it is to be understood as an additional exercise and tool to track oral comprehension. Because our students have a very limited linguistic background, transcriptions were restricted to speech content (we avoided exact transcription of speech fluency). The purpose of the transcription was to develop awareness of syntactic structures among students from the French-as-a-foreign-language track, to expand their vocabulary, to help them gain a better understanding of what they heard (i.e., the oral data), and to help us pick up on difficulties in oral comprehension. For the native speakers of French among our students, the transcriptions proved to be a powerful tool for identifying variants of French in a foreign context: they allowed the students, for instance, to identify interviewees' idiosyncrasies (variants of French immersed in the Hebrew context).

Second, community-involvement projects of this kind are not research oriented and therefore do not necessarily lead to outcomes related to research (theses, academic articles, etc.). Finally, the Ministry of Higher Education demands that community-involvement projects meet academic standards. They therefore need to be backed up – apart from fieldwork – by academic modules, in order to be graded according to academic requirements.

Our one-year project involved four academic credits over two semesters and included three components: theoretical modules, fieldwork, and a reflective workshop.

A. The theoretical component consisted of two modules, the first dealing with life stories (autobiography, biography, documentary, questions of identity, and narration); the second involved the study of interview practices and genres (definition, types, patterns, characteristics, and analysis).

B. Fieldwork: this component consisted of individual interviews with senior citizens living independently or in retirement homes. The oral stories were recorded on tape and transcribed, and then developed in writing⁹ by the students over a time period of two semesters. At the end of the academic year – after further editing¹⁰ – the students presented the transcripts in the form of a brochure to the persons with whom they had conversed. With the interviewees' full and formal permission, the recorded materials and the accompanying texts were archived at the Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry and Oral History (Jerusalem).

Fieldwork was conducted once every two weeks on average, during the semester period. Each encounter lasted between two to three hours. During the first year, in addition to individual meetings between students and target elderly subjects, group meetings were also held occasionally, especially with elderly volunteers operating in retirement homes, as well as with a group of senior citizens living independently and attending a creative writing workshop. In several cases, these meetings have created interviewing

⁹ For more information on developing the story in writing, see below section 3.2.2., "Reconstructing the life story."

¹⁰ We went over the final text to clear it of linguistic errors in order to make it "presentable."

opportunities, especially for shyer students who found these forums a more comfortable setting for getting to know persons whom they would later interview.

C. A tutorial combining class assembly and personal meetings to discuss and analyze linguistic outcomes, narrative strategies, and – in light of the dilemmas and the various unpredictable setbacks encountered during field days – a reflection component. This last component was backed up by reflective reports issued after every field day, summarizing the meeting's procedure and evaluating it (weaknesses, hindrances, drawbacks, assets, strengths, etc., but also "ideal vs. praxis"), but also planning the next meeting, in light of the conclusions drawn from the reflective process.

During the project's first year, a French placement student (stagiaire) assisted us, guiding non-native French speakers (students from the French-learning track) on all aspects related to French-language skills (grammar, syntax, oral aspects) or to story processing.

3.2. Methodology

3.2.1. Interview method

Our project was designed for a group of 10 students each year.¹¹ Our interviewees – mostly women of both North African and European origin living in Netanya, Jerusalem, and Rishon Le-Tzion – were age 70 years or older.

As opposed to the structured method of extraction typical of the biographical interview (cf. Rosenthal, 1995: 186-207 and 2004, following Schütze, 1976, 1983), we opted for a looser structure of the narrative interview. Rosenthal suggests dividing the narrative interview into two parts, the first being more passive for the interviewer, and the second – the questioning period – more active, where the interviewer asks questions related to topics brought up by the interviewee or topics the interviewer is interested in

¹¹ This number is adaptable to the needs of every given project. In our opinion, though, working with a group larger than 15 students per project would be difficult, due to the intensive work on a one-to-one basis in the reconstruction of the life story.

within the objectives of the research.¹² Rosenthal also suggests orienting the questions in a specific manner, that is, with reference to the interviewee's life or indicating interest in the process, addressing a single theme in the interviewee's life (by opening a temporal space), addressing a specific situation already mentioned in the interview, eliciting a narration to clarify an argument already made before, or by addressing transmitted knowledge. We instructed our students to converse with their interviewees in an unconstrained manner. We provided no specific indications with regard to the time frame, but each encounter typically lasted two to three hours. We also advised the students to tell the interviewees about the project, giving special attention to the fact that their life stories were going to be recorded and, with their permission, transcribed, developed, and archived. We instructed the students to talk with the interviewees about their past, but also about their present. We encouraged them to listen to the elderly's wishes, and to learn to read signs of interest or fatigue.

In contrast to the narrative interview, the students did not meet with their interviewee only once: they were encouraged, as in the oral history interview, to meet up with their interviewee several times to establish trust and a relationship. They were told, in the first year cycle of the project, to start recording after they had established trust. In the second year, we asked the students to introduce the tape almost immediately. In some cases, the interviews were not limited to one person, and interviewees' partners, who took an active role in the interview, sometimes joined them.¹³

3.2.2. Reconstructing the life story

Because our purpose in this project was twofold—to assist the elderly, but also help our students improve their language skills (French-learner track) or to come in contact with their heritage language (native French speakers)—we looked for a way to activate the students' language skills. A good solution was not to remain with the mere transcription of the oral data, but to use it as a starting point for writing.

¹²For example, the student could ask about the interviewee's war experience, his/her relationship with friends from the past, and so on.

¹³ In another context, Gilad (2016) shows the potential effects of the presence of a companion on storytelling (clarification, amplification, etc.).

Each student was responsible for transcribing his/her interviewee's conversations. The transcription was only the starting point of an elaboration process of the life story, involving the understanding of the "plot," narrative structures, and identities (Bamberg, 2012; Tracy and Robles, 2013 [2002]), the piecing together of information in a coherent manner, and the decision of the best form for its written presentation. In some cases, the students chose to add a historical background that coincided with the period of the story told. In no way, however, did we ask them to "verify" the facts the interviewees brought up, or to compare them with official history. No comparison was established between different life stories, unless brought up in the workshop for the sake of encouraging students to speak about their experience. In addition, we paid special attention to linguistic elements of the story. We required the students to identify the "linguistic footprint" of the interviewee, that is, to describe a certain style, identify their idiolect, and examine the way their Hebrew and French interface.

3.3. Products

3.3.1. Life story – presented and archived

The main outcome of the project is the life story submitted as an integral, coherent product, namely, a printed and bound brochure, sometimes containing additional data supplied to the student by the person he or she had interviewed, such as official documents, supporting photographs, poems, and correspondence. The student presents the brochure to the interviewee at the end of the academic year. In addition, a copy is preserved at the Bar-Ilan University French library, and another copy is archived at the Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry in Jerusalem, alongside the raw material (the recordings). In both cases, the idea to give the interview to the interviewee and to archive it corresponds with Portelli's observation that

the important thing about the dialogic nature of oral history work is that it does not end with the interview, or even with the publication, but must find ways of being useful to the individuals and the communities involved. This is the process that goes under the generic labels of “restitution” and “dissemination”.

Restitution, of course, begins with the interview itself – in the first place, at least returning a copy of the tape to the interviewee, or to the family. (Portelli, 2015)

The act of "handing back" the story to the interviewee helps create, in some cases, family memories, and in our case, enables enrichment of the collection of oral stories in the Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry.

3.3.2. Reflexive work on linguistic aspects

Students were required to complete an additional assignment on linguistic observations, consisting of an account of the linguistic "identity" of the French-speaking senior citizen interviewed. Even French native speakers were surprised to discover how diverse the French language can be when spoken by immigrants – both senior and new – from different French-speaking countries. In addition, they discovered the extent to which the use of language reflects generational gaps and to which the contact with other languages “metamorphoses” mother tongues.¹⁴

Our challenge was to have students with little or no linguistic background to develop consciousness of the existence of linguistic variants, code-switching, registers, and so forth. Here are some of their insights:

- a. From a narrative point of view, the students identified a gap between the narrator and the subject of description (the protagonist, i.e., the same person). For instance, in the following example, Patty refers to herself in the third person as "*La petite Patricia*" (Little Patricia).¹⁵ In another instance, she says, "*Ma mère ne peut plus vivre sans sa petite fille.*" (My mother can no longer live without her little girl.)
- b. Post-processing of the materials collected through fieldwork (during the interviews) allowed students to develop awareness of the rhetorical strategies involved in storytelling and reliability. For instance, the students identified a combination of *ad verecundiam* (appeal to authority) and *ad populum* (appeal to the people) in the following utterance: "*Vers le quartier de la rue Saint Catherine,*

¹⁴ Ben Rafael and Ben Rafael (2014) dub this type of French mixed with Hebrew "Franbreu".

¹⁵ For reasons of privacy, we changed the name of the interviewee.

- les Lyonnais connaissent*" (Somewhere around Saint Catherine's street, the people of Lyon know [connaissent]).
- c. On the conversational level, students were exposed to dialogical dimensions of narrating within an interview context, where the interlocutor is taken into account on the metadiscursive level of the story. Examples such as "*Parce qu'il faut vous dire*" and "*Il faut vous dire aussi*" showed interviewee awareness of the interviewer's presence, and enhanced discussion on the interviewer's active role in producing life stories.
- d. Examples such as the following, directly related to language structure and idiosyncratic properties, served as a basis for discussion in class on the expression of intensity and degree (intensifiers and downtoners) or approximation in French:
- "*On a pu vivre à peu près normalement,*"
 - "*Assez minable, assez atroce;*" "*A peu près bien,*"
 - "*Très approximatif.*"
- e. Other examples triggered a discussion on synonyms and antonyms. Synonyms and antonyms were a very common means for negotiating the meaning, especially in interviews conducted by students for whom French is a foreign language:
- Ils étaient très méfiants... soupçonneux [They were very suspicious... distrustful]
 - On nous a dit d'arrêter [...], mais nous avons décidé de continuer [they told us to stop [...] but we decided to go on]
- f. On another level, analysis revealed code-switching¹⁶ even among newcomers lacking language proficiency in Hebrew. For instance:
- "*Tout est pour le bien, vraiment gam zou le tova*" [everything is for the best, honestly *gam zou le tova* [=even this is for the best]]
 - "*Ce n'est pas de sa faute dans le la'hats*" (*dans le stress*) [It is not his fault, in the pressure [he was under pressure]]

¹⁶ Interviewees, veteran immigrants or newcomers, integrate features of their acquired language (Hebrew) into their mother tongue (language interface).

- "*Enfin, leavdil*" (= il faut faire la différence)
- "*Ils font une 'houpa kadisha*" (= ils se sont mariés)

3.3.3. Master's degrees

Although such projects do not require research products, two Master's dissertations are currently under preparation, dealing with different insights gained during the project's first round: one is on linguistic, narrative, and rhetorical traces in "Aliyah" discourse of retired immigrants from North Africa. Another is on stories of elderly French-speaking women participating in social clubs. In addition, the French placement student who worked with the students during the project's first stage completed a Master's thesis on the project (Rozier, 2015).

3.3.4. Additional community-/language-oriented activities we had not initially predicted

During the project's first stage, we worked in full cooperation with the French speaking volunteers' organization *Eched Hahaim*, from the city of Netanya, Israel, founded by immigrants from France who made their Aliyah some 20 years ago. Its volunteers are by now all retired, age 65 or older, and have been working with the organization since its inception. The organization helped us locate potential candidates in retirement homes willing to participate in the project. Working together closely with the organization created precious ties with its volunteers, all of whom lead an active life in the community. In addition to meeting with the volunteers several times, some of our students had the rare opportunity to publish an article or a column in the organization's magazine in French. This experience has been good practice for their written French. Interestingly, they were asked to write about themselves or the project.

4. Discussion

From an academic point of view, the two theoretical modules (on narrative and interview) exposed students to a large spectrum related both to storytelling and to the practice of interviews: genres, conventions of telling about oneself and transmitting

others' life stories, as well as to theories in narrative-based interviews. During the workshop, we held several lectures and mini-workshops, conducted by specialists on oral history or the narrative interview, in order to address specific questions such as approaching interviewees, technical aspects related to interview conducting, transcriptions, and narrative strategies.

Generally speaking, we feel the theoretical and practical components provided a supportive framework for fieldwork. We do acknowledge, however, the relatively heavy load it is for students, who need to invest more time and effort in this project than in any average parallel academic course. Nonetheless, feedback obtained during and after the project's completion revealed a generally positive attitude among the students, who felt the project was rewarding.

From a practical point of view, beyond the project's contribution to language acquisition and practice, both oral and written,¹⁷ strong points consist, as suggested above, of the inter-generational encounter and the chance to overcome potential prejudices.¹⁸ But not everything went smoothly. For some of the students, interaction with the target population proved to be trying. Some students experienced unpredictable availability issues that disturbed the natural flow of the interviewing process.¹⁹ Other students, for instance, faced a sudden deterioration in the interviewee's physical or mental state, which disrupted the meetings' regularity. Our policy has been – in every such case – to exploit to the fullest the raw material in the life-story production: we compensated for the lack of regularity by adopting different narrative strategies to overcome gaps, fragmentary information, or abruptly interrupted sessions. For example, one of the students who worked with a person with a deteriorating dementia condition ended up with interview material that was often fuzzy, full of repetitions and blanks. The student

¹⁷ Adler and Yanoshevsky (in preparation) discuss this point: "A community project involving learning French through interaction with the elderly: A communicative language teaching approach."

¹⁸ On this matter, cf. Dovidio and Gaertner (1999, 2003).

¹⁹ Another unpredictable problem was the fact that many students were reluctant to operate within the retirement homes, where every interview had to be officially coordinated with the staff. Therefore, we had to enlarge the scope of the project so as to allow students to interview senior citizens living independently in the community.

compensated by producing a life story resembling a mosaic, rather than a linear narrative, which would be incompatible with the way the actual story was told.

The relative openness of the final narrative structure was made possible by the fact that we chose *not* to adopt a strict oral history perspective, neither were we limited by the conventions of the narrative interview. We were neither bound to historical truth nor to descriptive accuracy of the data collected. Because our goals were multiple (relieving linguistic solitude, French-language acquisition, developing consciousness of oral-language transformation into written language, the discovery of Francophone legacies and heritage, developing consciousness of the diversity of French language, and a discussion on language interface or languages in contact), we encouraged methodological flexibility among students to help them complete the project and produce a coherent result. An interesting outcome for the interviewees was that for some of them, this project was the first time they had ever told their story, and they were proud to present it to their relatives in written form. In other cases, this experience proved to be an opportunity to reveal hitherto suppressed chapters of their past.

5. Conclusions

The project's value lies in its multidimensionality: it provided students with insights on culture, community, society, language, immigration, and perceptions of old age. As such, it should not be viewed as specific to the Israeli social context. Immigration is a global issue and so is population aging. Every state needs to deal on an everyday basis with immigrant integration and keeping old people busy in retirement. If adapted to meet the specific cultural and personal needs, typical of different societies, this project is suitable for such tasks.

At a higher level, the project suggests universities and institutions of higher education can and should be active agents in endorsing social agendas and engagement in social life, especially in responding to concerns that are central to our era. Despite the modest scope of our project, we were able to mobilise theoretical insights and practical tools to the benefit of society, and instil in our students the message of social responsibility.

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