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Story alteration in oral history retellings

Methods of comparative work

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The digitalization of oral history (OH) has resulted in the availability of multiple interviews conducted with the same narrator under different circumstances. To explore the comparability of such materials, we analyze interviews with a Holocaust survivor from the Fortunoff Video Archive (1979) and the Visual History Archive (1997), focusing on instances in which she tells the “same” episode. We demonstrate that life-story segments before and after the episode provide clues for sense-making and reflexively constitute the narrative environment. The specific interactional features of OH as a situated practice contribute to the story’s recognizability and discursive alteration. Similarities and differences are detectable due to the coherence established by the social setting of OH, including its availability in a digital archive, which guarantees comparability and incorporates a broader chronology. The main contribution of our paper is methodological, as it outlines an apparatus for the comparative analysis of OH across multiple databases.

Keywords: comparative research, digital archives, ethnomethodology, genocide, holocaust, memory, narrative structure, oral history, remembering, visual history

1. Introduction

In his reflections on oral history (henceforth “OH”) from the perspective of an interviewee, Arthur Exell wrote: “I really love giving interviews and each one seems to be different, that is what makes it so interesting” (Exell, 1986, p.67). It is precisely the characteristic differences – and similarities – in OH interviews conducted with the same person that furnish the subject matter of this article. We provide an inquiry into some of the central questions that arise when one

engages in comparative analysis within OH: How is story resemblance and alteration achieved across multiple OH interviews with the same narrator? What provides the basis for attributing the status of the “same” life story to several instances of personal narrative materials, which are often separated by many years? Just what constitutes the recognizability of difference and similarity in retold OH interviews? By attending to these issues, we aim to contribute to the fields of memory studies and interactional narrative studies, developing their notable synergies (see, e.g., Jestic et al., 2023, and the special issue they introduce).

The central questions addressed by our contribution are rooted in our experience of working with multiple digital audiovisual oral history collections with various audiences. The locus of this experience is the Malach Center for Visual History (CVHM), which provides access to several large OH archives containing audiovisual interviews with historical witnesses. Now serving simultaneously as a transdisciplinary research hub, data access point, and education center, it began its operation at the Institute of Formal and Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Charles University (Prague, Czech Republic) in 2009. The reason for this somewhat unexpected merger of social sciences and computational linguistics was, at the time, to follow in the footsteps of the “Multilingual Access to Large Spoken Archives” research project, applying advanced natural language processing (NLP) techniques to Holocaust-related OH and other similar sources, forming a solid bridge between the humanities and digital technology. Relatively early on, CVHM became a key institution and infrastructural element in the development and application of machine-learning-based NLP methods for historical sources, providing its direct access to large archives of audiovisual OH testimonies of genocide survivors – mostly from the Holocaust: the USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive with around 55,000 interviews in 42 languages, the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies with around 4,400 interviews in 20 languages, and other smaller in-house collections with around 300 interviews in total. Over the years, CVHM has thus contributed in numerous ways to linguistic, historical, sociological, and other research, including their interdisciplinary branches (see, e.g., Kocián et al., 2020; Mlynář, 2015b).

This paper stems from our involvement in assisting visitors at CVHM with access to these parallel and overlapping collections of OH and working with them ourselves as part of our multidisciplinary research interests. The phenomenon we examine can be described as the natural recognizability of an “identity” in multiple life-story narratives, which emerges as an intertwining of sameness and difference: as Heidegger once noted, “[w]e can only say ‘the same’ if we think difference” (1971, p.218). This recognized identity of encountered audiovisual narratives is routinely attributed to their unified life-story background, thereby “treating an actual appearance as ‘the document of,’ as ‘pointing to,’ as ‘stand-

ing on behalf of' a presupposed underlying pattern" (Garfinkel, 1967, p.78). In this regard, although in principle "every story text differs from every other story text," repeated tellings "may reduce to the same underlying 'script'" (Polanyi, 1981, p.315). "Narrative repetitions" (Dailey & Browning, 2014) or "narrative retellings" (Lambrou, 2021), which constitute an established topic of professional inquiry, appear as part of social life in various forms (see, e.g., Lambrou, 2014; Linde 1993, 1997; Marsh, 2007). The one that is closest to our analysis below is "the telling of the same narrative content in one way for one purpose in one context and in a different way for another purpose in another context" (Sherzer, 1981, p.13).

From these bases, we aim to outline an analytical framework for systematic examination and comparison of the recurrent intrinsic organization of OH interviews, and related social/linguistic practices. From the outset, it needs to be stressed that it is not our aim to answer questions related to *why* the repeated tellings might be different or alike, but *how* they are different or alike. We believe that the questions of the latter kind epistemologically precede the former. Our question, then, is: What makes two instances of a life-story narrative recognizably different or similar in the first place? The systematic comparative approach we aim to outline in this article is grounded in seeing "comparison" primarily as an everyday members' practice (Watson, 2008) before exploring the possibility of its systematization for professional purposes in disciplines such as OH, narrative analysis, or sociology. From this point of view, we aim to turn the everyday comparative work involved in recognizing similarities and differences of OH narratives from an implicit resource to an explicit topic (Zimmerman & Pollner, 1970), and then to repurpose it again as a resource for professional analysis.

Unpacking "the intuitive notion of being the same story" (Löwe, 2010), our goal is to make a story's elements and features visible and available as a background for a comparative methodology in working with audiovisual OH materials. The approach proposed in this article thus reaches towards a wider diachronic dynamic that takes apart not only the natural linearity of the narrative, but also the chronology of the OH work itself – so that the most recent interview can retrospectively shed new light on the very first one. This is reflected in our suggested simultaneous focus on the comparative analysis of OH interviews as narrative speech-exchange systems, situated interactive productions, and digitally archived objects that are being accessed by members of various audiences.

2. Seeing “similarities” and “differences”: Everyday comparative practices as a resource and a topic

The human ability to perceive the world in a structured way is arguably one of the central components of culture and social life. Organizational patterns such as repetition and recurrence are grounded in the identification of individual instances of phenomena as “firsts” or “seconds” of a certain kind, and in recognizing their “againness.” This can be said about the inanimate nature – as noted by the philosopher and logician Gottlob Frege, “[t]he discovery that the rising sun is not new every morning, but always the same, was one of the most fertile astronomical discoveries” (Frege, 1948, p.99). Yet also in a more general sense, any categorization of social objects is dependent on encountering the world around us as consisting of bounded and discernible entities. Harvey Sacks, the founder of ethnomethodological conversation analysis, mentioned this topic in one of his early lectures in 1964: “How do children learn to see ‘another bird’ when they saw a bird once, or to re-see a car or a friend? It’s a very obscure question, how it is that persons learn to see generalities, or see objects again, or see ‘another’ of an object. I really don’t know how they do it, though it’s an important thing to learn how they do it” (Sacks, 1992, p.30). This quote also provides us with an opportunity to distinguish between *vertical* and *horizontal* comparison (Zimmerman, 1999), the former being a synchronic comparison of objects – i.e., seeing *another* of an object – and the latter referring to diachronic comparison that makes it possible to “see objects *again*.”

For our present purposes, the crux of the matter is that the competence to see stability and change in various social phenomena – such as archived personal narratives – does not belong (solely) to the scientific armamentarium but is also an inherent part of the world of everyday life (see Mlynář & Arminen, 2023). Watson (2008) pointed out that before they are employed in professional analysis, comparing and contrasting are already known as methods by competent members of society: “we can see ordinary interlocutors as ‘practical comparative sociologists,’ making comparisons of categories or activities and working up contrasts on those bases” (p.210). As formalized methods, for instance, comparative and contrastive practices are involved in human and social sciences in the techniques of “coding.” In qualitative research, coding is established as an initial analytical step in “conceptualizing data” and developing “categories and their relations” (Strauss, 1987, pp.20–21). The very foundation of coding as a skillful research practice therefore lies in assembling different individual elements found in “the data” under the auspices of their argued similarity, which substantiates the use of a “code.” To be able to do coding, one already relies on the common-sense ability of doing comparative work – i.e., seeing similarities and differences as

“patterns” in the “data.” Our aim in this paper is to bring out this comparative work rather than taking it for granted. In this regard, we are taking inspiration from ethnomethodological studies of coding practices in social sciences. Reflecting on Garfinkel’s (1967) groundbreaking study of how researchers follow coding instructions, Button et al. (2022) point out that the practical accomplishment of coding “involves practical decisions for assigning equivalence to events, allocating instances to relevant categories, and excluding those instances that fail to ‘fit’ the available coding categories.” Therefore, although it is not made visible in the resulting reports, the competent coders’ work itself constitutes the reported coherence and patterning of the data (Button et al., 2022, p. 201).

Following such leads, in this paper, we lay out a methodical approach to comparing personal life stories obtained through OH procedures. We aim to treat comparability and comparison not as non-problematic *resources* but as *topics* that must be described and explicated in their situated details (see Zimmerman & Pollner, 1970). Before they become topics of professional analysis, life stories available in and as OH materials are already, first and foremost, being analyzed as objects through members’ comparative work. They can be seen as “similar” or “different” in many ways, e.g., with regard to what has been told as well as how it has been told. In the next section, we offer a brief overview of how such work of comparison might be done, and accounted for, in some of the existing literature on narrative studies, oral history, and digital humanities.

“Resemblances are the shadows of differences,” wrote Vladimir Nabokov in the novel *Pale Fire* (1962). In this paper, we investigate these “shadows,” asking how it is that life stories in OH retellings resemble each other despite their various manifest differences. The everyday ability to specify similarities and differences provides grounds for the procedures of comparing several OH interviews conducted with the same narrator. Focusing on routine practices in comparative work with such materials, we probe into the “Lebenswelt origins” (Garfinkel & Liberman, 2007) of professional comparative methods. We hope that it is clear that our approach does not depreciate, devalue, or criticize established scientific methods of comparing historical materials — these are indeed worthwhile ways of working that are constitutive of history as a domain of social practice. Conversely, our proposal is to take explicitly and seriously into account disciplinary methodologies’ tacit reliance on the taken-for-granted, everyday abilities that are always already part of the competences of historians, linguists, and other social scientists as members in ordinary society.

3. Narrative comparability and the “identity” of a life story

So far, we have been outlining some of the fundamental questions of natural narrative comparison in the context of OH, such as: in what sense can one speak of an “identity” of a life story, and what constitutes it? How is a narrative evidently “the same”? What are the specific elements and features that provide the basis of such “sameness” as a background against which “differences” can be discerned? In this section, we will further specify our inquiry by briefly reviewing selected literature on comparisons of retellings done by professional analysts in various social sciences – e.g., using retellings in a complementary manner to arrive at a more complete version of the original experience and its reflections (Cole, 2015). As noted above, our own concerns come out of the novel possibilities of comparing OH interviews in digital archive repositories. This leads to the emergence of new research questions and problems to be dealt with, such as those related to the digitalization of OH materials, their decontextualization in digital environments, and metadata as inherent parts of contemporary OH work (see, e.g., Saint Arnault & Sinko, 2021; Pagenstecher, 2018; Mlynář, 2022). The very orientation of our paper is therefore a result of new digital reconfigurations of existing materials, but various inspirations can be taken from other domains and existing research such as the scholarship on narrativity, conversational storytelling, and ethnography of speaking. While we have familiarized ourselves with the relevant literature, we do not claim that this section is a full review of the “state-of-the-art” – mainly because we do not aim to identify a “knowledge gap” or a “research question” but rather to illustrate how the taken-for-granted work of narrative comparison is done in the area of narrative analysis with a specific focus on OH retellings.

As an initial example – one that is also very close to our own orientation –, Pagenstecher’s (2018) comparison of two OH interviews with Holocaust survivor Anita Lasker-Wallfisch will allow us to gain some initial insights on the constitutive features of comparative work. Pagenstecher begins his comparison of the 1998 and 2006 retellings by identifying a common theme that is discussed in both interviews, namely the “criticism from other survivors” (p.115). He notes that the 1998 telling is formulated cautiously, with hesitations and pauses, while the 2006 telling is more “precise” and includes a “small thematic change” – while “in 1998 she talks about envy, in 2006 she discusses alleged collaboration” (ibid.). Moreover, the 2006 interview is seen as demonstrating “an intensified reflectivity and a grown self-confidence as survivor, narrator and expert.” This is illustrated by the fact that in the 2006 interview, the narrator more often uses direct reported speech, which confirms a “move towards performativity.” In this regard, Pagenstecher compares how two instances of the “same” episode are told as part of the narrated life story in both versions: “In 1998, she described her introduction to the

orchestra at Birkenau using indirect speech: ‘So, she asked me to play something.’ In 2006, however, she used a more direct reference: ‘And she gave me a cello and said: “Play something”’ (p.115). Also noteworthy is the fact that Pagenstecher’s descriptions are often followed by proposed explanations, such as considerations of the interviewing approach (which, in the later interview, may have allowed for more elaborate narrations) or the changes in a “societal discourse” (regarding the public debate about the women’s orchestra in Auschwitz).

Similar considerations of the social situatedness of storytelling can also be found in studies of contexts other than OH, which documents the crucial importance of this aspect. Storytelling is thus approached with regard to narrative organization (the structure of the story) and narrative evaluation (the tellability of the story). For instance, it has been documented in everyday conversations that retellings of the “same story” can serve to achieve various social actions (Niemelä & Rauniomaa, 2010). Working with similar materials, Norrick (2000) develops analytical methods based on a “distillation of a basic narrative” that facilitates comparison and “highlights ... similarities and differences” (p.67). It is precisely such a “distillation” that seems to be at the basis of the ordinary recognition of a story as the “same” – it is also tacitly employed (but not explicated) by Pagenstecher (2018) above in locating a repeated topic for closer comparison. Relatedly, other studies focus on the process of creating recognizable clusters of memory in retellings (Allison, 2004; Chafe, 1998; see Norrick, 1998).

Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2011) conceptualizes narrative as an interaction mode that constructs the lived reality as a plot for the interview, rooted in a world shared by the narrator and the interviewer. The intersubjective relationship between the (different) interviewer and the (same) interviewee, as delineated by Chand (2021), is instrumental in capturing transformations in conceptualizations of the “(de)composure” of memories. Through the manipulation of these conceptual constructs, the narrator guides the narrative to render memories more universally acknowledged and accepted at the moment of the telling. This is also illustrated by Schoofs and Van De Mieroop (2019) in their analysis of repeatedly written World War II testimonies (in 1946 and 1985), which highlights how the “truth” of the story is continuously adjusted to new social contexts and environments.

As highlighted by Mildorf, “people are able to retell stories – whether fictional or non-fictional ones, and also from one medium to another – which means that they not only recognize story elements but are able to draw on narrative-discursive means to recreate them. If these means were not shared, it would be hard to explain how such a recreation should be possible in the first place” (Mildorf, 2023, p.45). Overall, in considering the narrative comparability and its grounding in the sameness or difference of a life story being told, existing studies

often account for the discursive, situational, and social aspects of narratives produced in interactive social environments. The institutional framework points to the genre of OH and the structural elements of an OH interview, approaching the interview both as an ongoing interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer and as a concrete instance of OH research. Although excerpts from OH interviews are often presented in a single voice (of the narrator), and the interviewer might be virtually absent in the transcript or even in the video recordings (see Mondada, 2006), the collaborative achievement of OH remains its central feature: even quiet listening, or giving silent go-ahead responses, is an interactional achievement (Sacks, 1992; Broth, 2008). At the narrative level, the interviewee embodies the interactional structural elements through particular content, and this specifically establishes the narrative as a “story told” through its similarities to and/or differences from other narratives produced in comparable settings. In order to further explore these various layers, the following section offers a case study of story alteration in two video recorded OH interviews conducted with the same narrator, a Holocaust survivor, in 1979 and 1997, and currently available in two large digital repositories — the Fortunoff Video Archive and the VHA.

4. Story alteration in content, discourse, and context: A case study

Repeated OH interviews with Holocaust survivors are not uncommon; however, only a handful of these occurrences are, in fact, a result of methodological intent (see Greenspan, 2014, 2019). The mere fact that dozens of interview collection projects have been carried out worldwide over the past five decades means that certain narrators have sometimes been approached by different organizations independently of each other. Consequently, there are probably a few hundred¹ cases in which multiple interviews, now accessible in the large digital OH databases, were conducted in various time periods with the same narrator by different interviewers. For the purposes of this article, we chose to focus on the interviews with Eva B. (born in 1924 in Berlin), who shared her story with the Fortunoff Video Archive, with the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for the Visual History Archive (VHA), and with Brad Zarlin, a private researcher who later donated the audio recording to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). Neither the narrative content of the interview itself nor the general biographical features were our primary selection criterion; rather, it was the temporal scope

1. We have tried to produce a list of multiple interviews with the same narrator in the data accessible to us, which suggests such a count; however, for multiple reasons, this exploration cannot be summarized in a conclusive way.

of this set of OH materials. Despite the fact that the Fortunoff database does not provide narrators' full names but only their initials, identifying the corresponding interview across various databases was relatively straightforward – the metadata has proven to be sufficient, combined with the year, place of birth, and the visual appearance of the narrator (see Figures 1, 3, and 4 below). As displayed in Table 1 below, the available interviews were conducted over a span of 41 years: from 1979, the first time she publicly spoke about her Holocaust experience for the Fortunoff Video Archive,² to 2010, when she participated in the telephone interview with Zarlin. The second matter for consideration is the striking difference in length among the three interviews, which stems from multiple factors (such as technological affordances at the time of recording and institutional guidelines of the different OH projects). By selecting such a perspicuous case, and in line with the previous sections, we aim to explore the common-sense foundations of comparative work in order to outline a methodological framework that makes it possible to move beyond these nominal differences and capture the story alterations that can be encountered in individual instances of OH interviews. The remainder of this section explicates the routine grounds of professional comparative methodologies, enabling a detailed and complex description of audiovisual personal narratives and their relationships.

Table 1. Three interviews with Eva B. selected for close comparison

Archive database name	Date of recording	Length
Yale University Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies	May 1979	0:44:00
USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive	April 1997	3:02:56
USHMM Collection (gift of Brad Zarlin)	December 2010	4:45:00

4.1 Similarities and differences in a recurrent episode

After we located these three interviews, the next step was to carry out their comparison, starting by identifying potentially comparable elements or features of the life story, such as distinctly delineated episodes. For the purposes of our inquiry,

2. It is worth noting that the interview with Eva B. in the Fortunoff Video Archive has obtained serial identifier HVT0001; based on sorting with database facets, it is the first interview ever recorded in the collection. This allows us to claim that her OH narrative could, with a high degree of probability, be the first ever visual history interview of this kind with a Holocaust survivor. Fortunoff also contains a re-interview with her from 1988 by the same interviewer, for which reason we omit it from this analysis for the sake of maintaining a symmetrical variation (Fortunoff, 2023).

we understand “episode” as a discursive object that presents itself to the audience as a compositional item of the life story and that developmentally contributes to its structure, while being a relatively self-contained event in the narrative with a distinctive beginning and end (see Miall, 2004). First, we have obtained a sense of a broader structure of the life story’s chronological organization as presented in the interview. This overall chronology of the story is established by an intertwining of biographical and historical time, related to the “parallelism of the ‘great history’ and ‘personal history’” through which “people narrate their pasts on the background of political events” (Mlynář, 2015a, p.122). Such a story chronology can be composed of biographical elements such as “childhood” or “university attendance,” spatial identifiers such as “Berlin” or “Czechoslovakia,” and (ethno)historical periodizations such as “the war” or “communism.” In our case, they make it possible to identify comparable narrative episodes that are nested in these chronological structures, such as the two instances of the “same episode” analyzed below, or to notice their absence in a specific structural position in the chronology of the life story. This procedure of arriving at a set of comparable elements of the OH telling is related to an initial general insight obtained through our research, in which we have identified two classes of story alteration. They entail the details of form and content in different iterations of the “same” life story. *Content-level alteration* points to similarities and differences in the way components of the life story are sequentially ordered and linked. *Discourse-level alteration* has to do with the ways each narrative component is locally produced (linguistically and multimodally) in the course of the interview.



Figure 1. The structural positioning of the policeman episode. The photo on the left shows the narrator during the VHA interview in 1997, while the photo on the right shows her during the Fortunoff interview in 1979

Following the described procedure, we identified a specific component of Eva B.'s life story, which can be called *the policeman episode*. With regard to the broader narrative structure of the life story, this episode is positioned in a similar way in the VHA and Fortunoff recordings (see Figure 1), while it is not mentioned at all in the USHMM recording. In what follows, we will therefore focus on a comparison of the two instances of this episode's telling in the VHA and Fortunoff. The next step in our comparative procedure, after identifying a recognizably "same" element of the story, consists of matching the detailed discursive features of its two tellings, focusing on the specifics of the local production of the episode itself in the situated setting of the recorded OH interview. To this end, below we first present simplified transcripts of the two versions of the policeman episode, and we then offer a close analysis of their similarities and differences.

Transcript 1 – "The policeman episode" in the Fortunoff interview with Eva B. (1979)

But then in... The Germans marched in on March 15, '39. That was kind of a shock to the system. I remember that day very vividly, I don't know why, I went to the post office, and it was sleeting, and on the corner of the street there was standing a Czech policeman directing traffic, and a German soldier next to him who took over, and the Czech policeman stood there and he didn't know what to do. Because the German had taken over directing the traffic, and it was kind of a really plastic illustration of the conflict of power. The two of them standing there and the German taking over. We have had no warning at all.

Transcript 2 – "The policeman episode" in the VHA interview with Eva B. (1997)

And on March 15th, 1939, it was a snowy sleety day, I remember it very vividly, my mother sent me to the post office. That's how unaware we were what was going on. And there I stood— to the main office. The main post office is at the side street of the [Wenceslas] square. (...) And so the German army marched in on a sleety cold day, and there was this German soldier who took over directing traffic from the Czech policeman, and the Czech policeman stood there and didn't know what to do. So, nobody had known, we had no warning, I do not know why, because we had radios, but I guess the Germans didn't announce it and the Czechs didn't announce it...

First, we focused on directly available similarities in the two excerpts, marked below in Table 2. These features are ordinarily available to any audience member without special training after an attentive reading of the transcripts. Both stories are introduced by the precise historical date – March 15, 1939 –, a very important day in Czechoslovak history and the history of World War II because this is

when Germany invaded the Czech provinces of Bohemia and Moravia. In both excerpts, the narrator frames the story as a “vivid memory,” describes the weather (snowy and sleety), and says that she went to the post office. These recurrent features contribute to the recognizability of the particular narrative components as parts of the “same” episode. Later on, the core element of the episode is notably told in exactly the same way, word for word: “the Czech policeman stood there and didn’t know what to do.” This seems to confirm Norrick’s (2000) conclusion that “[t]he virtual identity of certain phrases from one telling to the next suggests significant nearly verbatim recall of whole chunks or a consistent use of specific narrative techniques at crucial points in a story” (p.83).

Table 2. Marked similarities in the two tellings of the policeman episode. Bold parts are present in both versions, but in a slightly different formulation. Bold and underlined parts occur identically in both versions

VHA (1997)	Fortunoff (1979)
And on March 15th, 1939 , it was a snowy sleety day , I remember it very vividly , my mother sent me to the post office . That’s how unaware we were what was going on. And there I stood – to the main office. The main post office is at the side street of the [Wenceslas] square. (...) And so the German army marched in on a sleety cold day, and there was this German soldier who took over directing traffic from the Czech policeman, and the Czech policeman stood there and didn’t know what to do . So, nobody had known, we had no warning , I do not know why, because we had radios...	But then in... The Germans marched in on March 15, ‘39 . That was kind of a shock to the system. I remember that day very vividly , I don’t know why, I went to the post office , and it was sleeting , and on the corner of the street there was standing a Czech policeman directing traffic, and a German soldier next to him who took over, and the Czech policeman stood there and he didn’t know what to do . Because the German had taken over directing the traffic, and it was kind of a really plastic illustration of the conflict of power. The two of them standing there and the German taking over. We have had no warning at all .

Despite the overall resemblance and notable similarities in detail, differences between the two instances of the policeman episode are numerous. Focusing on them allows us to highlight what is uniquely characteristic to each of the two OH tellings. For that purpose, Table 3 below marks how the “same experience” is told “differently.” One can note, perhaps most significantly, that the coda of the policeman episode is different: in the VHA version, the story serves to illustrate the vernacularly known historical fact that nobody in Czechoslovakia was aware in advance of the Nazi invasion – not even officials such as policemen. On the other hand, in the Fortunoff version, the story is used to account for a much broader sociological topic – in other words, it is given as an example (Lee & Mlynář, 2023)

– of “a shock to the system.” The narrated episode is interpreted as a “plastic illustration of the conflict of power,” which is a framing that is not present at all in the VHA version. Furthermore, although the mention of “no warning” appears in both renditions, it seems to be a rather supplementary feature in the Fortunoff version of the telling.

Table 3. Marked differences in the two tellings of the policeman episode. Bold parts are present in only one of the two versions

VHA (1997)	Fortunoff (1979)
<p>And on March 15th, 1939, it was a snowy sleety day, I remember it very vividly, my mother sent me to the post office. That’s how unaware we were what was going on. And there I stood– to the main office. The main post office is at the side street of the [Wenceslas] square. (...) And so the German army marched in on a sleety cold day, and there was this German soldier who took over directing traffic from the Czech policeman, and the Czech policeman stood there and didn’t know what to do. So, nobody had known, we had no warning, I do not know why, because we had radios...</p>	<p>But then in... The Germans marched in on March 15, ‘39. That was kind of a shock to the system. I remember that day very vividly, I don’t know why, I went to the post office, and it was sleeting, and on the corner of the street there was standing a Czech policeman directing traffic, and a German soldier next to him who took over, and the Czech policeman stood there and he didn’t know what to do. Because the German had taken over directing the traffic, and it was kind of a really plastic illustration of the conflict of power. The two of them standing there and the German taking over. We have had no warning at all.</p>

4.2 The episode’s location in the life story

Our analysis has so far demonstrated how content-level and discourse-level alteration in repeated OH tellings can be used to account for the recognized identity of life-story narratives. To offer a more comprehensive account, it is important to consider not only the linguistic and textual features of the interviews but also their interactional and socio-cultural aspects. To elaborate on these issues, one should take into account the broader sequential environment of the policeman episode (see also Mlynář, 2020). *When* does it appear in the course of the interview, and what precedes it?

As shown in Figure 2, the excerpt from the VHA interview revolves more explicitly around family-related categories (and the plural pronoun “we”). This could be related to the fact that one full 30-minute tape of childhood experiences precedes the policeman episode in the VHA recording – it was a standard practice of the Shoah Foundation interviewers to focus in more detail on family matters. The narrator’s mother is therefore a character that was already introduced

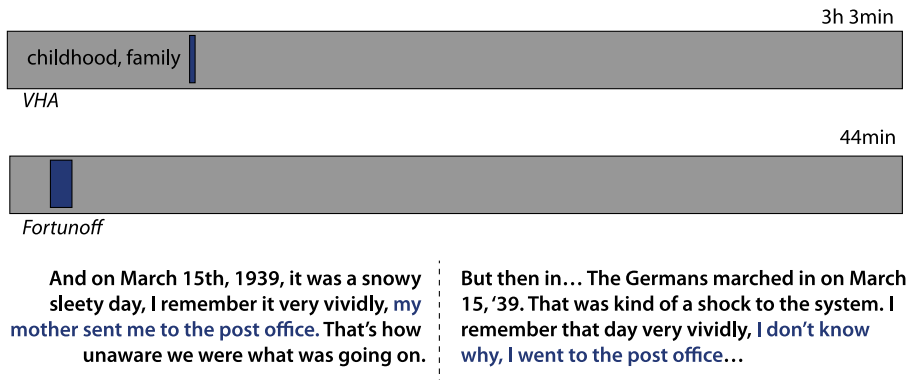


Figure 2. The sequential position of each telling of the policeman episode with regard to the rest of the interview and its relative length. The excerpt at the bottom left is from the VHA, while the excerpt at the bottom right is from the Fortunoff Video Archive

and talked about in the VHA interview – in fact, the narrator dedicates a lot of time to examining the complex relationship with her mother and the policeman episode is intertwined with this theme.

In contrast, in the Fortunoff interview, the policeman episode occurs only three minutes after the beginning, and it is framed primarily by changes introduced by the historical events (i.e., the outbreak of WWII). Reflections related to the narrator's mother are omitted in the Fortunoff interview – instead, the narrator says that she “doesn't know why” she went to the post office. And so, perhaps due to the relative position of the episode in the topical structure of the interview as an ongoing interaction, we find a significant detail in the VHA version that is not mentioned in the Fortunoff recording. This is so even though the chronological position and location of the policeman episode is approximately the same in both interviews, as we noted earlier, and in both tellings the episode can be described as positioned relatively close to “the beginning” of the life story as a whole.

4.3 The digital situatedness of OH narratives

In addition to the content- and discourse-level features of the OH interview and the sequential structure of the interviewing situation, it is also relevant to consider that audiences of the archived recordings typically do not encounter the recorded interviews or their sections as isolated media objects. The video files are embedded in the digital environment of the archival platform, and they are encountered after platform-specific searching procedures (see also Mlynář et al., 2022). This digital environment is reflexively tied to the “content” of the

video recording, and it may be consequential for how the users interact with the interview as a digital archival object. For example, specific ways of playing, re-playing, or skipping through the video (see also Mlynář, 2021) might be enabled or precluded by the design of the archival platform. Furthermore, additional metadata such as the keywords or transcripts are available to the user as yet another layer of context in which the video itself is embedded while being watched. Through such re-framing, retold stories in digital environments may “involve a reflexive process through which the original story becomes embedded or ‘nested’ in a meta-story” (De Fina & Toscano Gore, 2017, p.257), such as the parallel story of the online archives’ creation and maintenance.

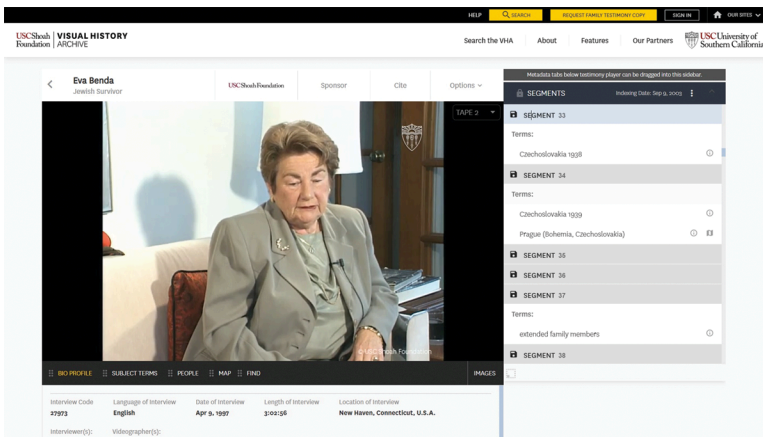


Figure 3. The VHA online archival interface that a user sees while watching the interview with Eva B

In the case of the VHA (Figure 3), the interview is visually presented on the screen as divided into “segments” (usually one minute long) with topical keywords assigned to them. While watching the video, the viewer therefore also has simultaneous access to a synopsis of the “whole story” in its chronological organization and the broader topics that it covers. The keywords introduce another level of sense-making conducted by an unknown person who has acted as a “coder,” imposed on the recording, and framing the recording itself as its digital environment for VHA users, who can listen to the recording while looking at the previous and upcoming “keywords,” exploring their thesaurus definitions, and engaging with other kinds of metadata (such as personal names mentioned in the interview recording). These sequentially ordered keywords are available to audience members as routine sense-making tools they can use to orient themselves in the life story and its ordered episodes, and therefore also as an additional resource for the comparative work described in the previous two subsections.

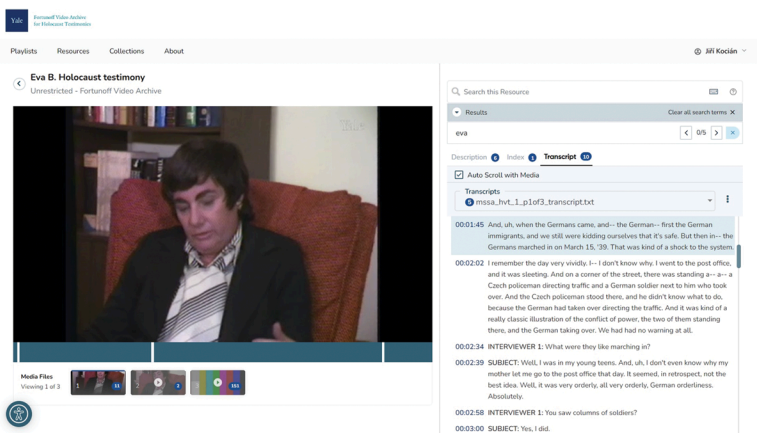


Figure 4. The Fortunoff online archival interface that a user sees while watching the interview with Eva B

The Fortunoff interface (Figure 4) is similar to the VHA's in terms of its basic features (e.g., the prominence of the video frame and its placement on the left side of the page), but the interview recording is presented alongside a verbatim transcript. Of course, transcribing is not a neutral procedure that presents a transparent reality, and it comes with its own analytical decisions (see, e.g., Ochs, 1979; Psathas & Anderson, 1990). Nevertheless, it is arguably a kind of work that involves less abstract interpretation than coding with keywords. Moreover, the inevitably situated and interactional nature of the interview is highlighted in the transcript – some utterances are assigned to the “Interviewer” and some to the “Subject” (while keywords do not show this distinction and can be seen as an outcome of the situated collaboration of both speakers). Compared to the keyword-based synopsis, having a transcript available not only establishes a different digital context for the viewer to interact with the interview in, but also allows for different ways of working through the materials – one can, for example, read ahead, while the original auditory layer of the recording becomes secondary to the written text running alongside the video frame. This may contribute to the “written language bias” (Linell, 2004) that is inherently present in working with transcripts, and also increase confluences between written and spoken modes in discourse (Kress, 1979).

4.4 An apparatus for comparative work with OH narratives

By reflecting upon our own common-sense procedures for systematically comparing two OH interviews with one narrator, we have offered an outline of a

method for systematic comparison of multiple narratives attributable to the “same” speaker as a “same” story. Unlike most approaches to the topic, our aim here has been to offer a description of the *how* of comparative work, eschewing attempts to explain *why* such differences and similarities occur — such as, e.g., speaking of “interviewing style,” employing the notion of “meta-narratives,” or attributing story alterations to differences in gender or age. This caution is informed by ethnomethodology/conversation analysis (e.g., Sacks, 1984), as well as the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, who proposed that “[a]ll explanation must disappear, and description alone must take its place” (2009, § 109). Rooted in these traditions of thought, our approach orients to descriptive explication rather than hypothetical explanation. We have aimed to explicate the methodical character of comparative work with OH materials as exemplified in this section through the case study of interviews with Eva B. in the VHA and the Fortunoff Video Archive.

We have found that the methodical character of an intuitive comparative procedure is based on identifying a structural element of the life story, such as an episode, that is recognizably present in both interviews. This element is then analyzed for its content-level and discourse-level alteration. Investigating content-level alteration captures the similarities and differences in the way the narrative element is incorporated in the broader organization of the life story, and its incorporation into larger chronological items of personal biography (e.g., childhood, education) or a nation’s history (e.g., the Slovak national uprising). Examining content-level alteration captures how the episode is told in each instance and what kind of narrative detail is present or absent (e.g., persons mentioned, motives given for actions, or descriptions of places). As a next step, the comparison takes into account the inevitably situated and interactional character of OH interviewing, i.e., the sequential environment in which the narrative element has been produced. Last but not least, the digital environment of the video recording is also to be compared, as long as it is an integral part of the gestalt contexture in which the life story is encountered by the viewer (e.g., the presence of transcripts, keywords, or other metadata next to the video frame).

5. Conclusion

In the 20th century, the collection of oral histories (OH) became a very effective way to connect personal stories with historical events. One result of its digitalization at the beginning of the 21st century is the simultaneous accessibility of several interviews conducted with the same narrator under different circumstances. This paper has examined the “identity” of a life story in such repeated OH tellings.

Rather than an “essence” of a told narrative, we have started looking for “thisness” of OH materials – how can this particular instance of a life story told in an OH interview be recognized as the “same” as, or in some respects “different” from, its other versions? Our exploration into comparative work in OH has highlighted the close relationship between “what” is being said and “how” it is being said, allowing for a deeply grounded critical reflection on historical sources, while responding to the necessity of multifaceted analysis of OH interviews as archived digital objects that not only span various historical periods but are also transferred among them. The main contribution of our paper is methodological, elaborating the foundations of a conceptual apparatus for grasping the similarities and differences in OH interviews across databases collected in different time periods and geographical locations. Compared to previous work in the research area, our article has developed the novel angle of the inductive, empirical specification of *just how* retellings are recognized and what makes comparison possible, grounded in the ordinary comparative competences that are used as taken-for-granted resources.

To explore the systematic features of comparative work, by way of a case study, we have provided a detailed analysis of two interviews with Eva B., a Holocaust survivor who had narrated her life story for both the Fortunoff Video Archive (1979) and the Visual History Archive (1997), focusing on instances in which she recognizably tells the “same” episode on both occasions. We have shown that on the narrative level, the life-story segments before and after the episode give clues facilitating the analysts’ sense-making and reflexively constitute the narrative environment, leading to *content-level alteration* in the life story. Interactionally, the specific features of OH as situated praxis contribute to the story’s identity, leading to *discourse-level alteration* in the life story. On the one hand, content-level alteration highlights variance in the sequential ordering of the life-story components; on the other hand, discourse-level alteration regards each narrative component as locally produced during the interview. The alteration along these dimensions is detectable due to the coherence established through the institutional framework, including its embodiment in the digital environments of the OH archives, which enables natural comparability and incorporates the development on a broader temporal scale.

Our findings not only clarify the background of the comparative analysis of OH interviews but also open up new avenues for interdisciplinary research. By systematically examining the nuances of narrative similarity and alteration across different temporal and situational contexts, our approach provides a reflexive tool for historians, sociologists, and the digital humanities alike. It can be relevant to a wide range of OH projects, facilitating a deeper understanding of how personal narratives evolve and are shaped by their recording and archiving

environments. As digital archives continue to grow, our paper underscores the importance of preserving the integrity and comparability of OH, ensuring that these invaluable personal stories remain accessible and meaningful for future audiences. Ultimately, our work contributes to the broader discourse on social memory, narrative identity, and the digital preservation of human experience, highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual recollections and collective histories.

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