Implicit and explicit identity constructions in the life story of one of Hitler’s elite soldiers

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Abstract

We study the life story of a former *SS Leibstandarte* soldier and we focus on the way the narrator deals with face threats by negotiating his identity constructions. The interviewee positions himself as a sportsman and an ignorant soldier, thus constructing denial of knowledge of and of agreement with Hitler’s ideology. These identities can be considered to be complementary, but they are built in quite different ways: the narrator explicitly presents himself as a sportsman, but mitigates his implicit construction of ignorance. Given the social and historical context, this contrast in degree of explicitness is expected since the ignorance claim has been the subject of many previous discourses and debates of this subject.

Keywords: discourse analysis, narrative, life story, interview, context, identity construction, Second World War

1. Introduction

Telling stories about the events that occurred in your life and the situations you have found yourself in, seems to be one of the fundamental aspects of human nature. Narratives are “universal and emerge early in the communicative development of children” (Ochs and Capps 1996: 19), they are “pervasive form[s] of text[s] through which we construct, interpret, and share experience” (Schiffrin 1996: 167), and they can even be considered necessary for an individual in order to “exist in the social world” (Linde 1993: 3). Being such an essential aspect of human life, it is not surprising that this subject has been widely studied in many fields, including linguistics, where analyses started almost forty years ago (Labov and Waletzky 1966). Interest in narrative also became linked to the study of the self and identity (Dyer and Keller-Cohen 2000: 283) since “it is precisely in narrative that people’s individuality is expressed most obviously, because the purpose of narrating is precisely the creation of an autonomous, unique self in discourse” (Johnstone 1996: 56). This self however, should not be regarded as a perfect reflection of one’s personality, since as social constructionists argued, this idea of personality has been replaced by the concept of “a multiplicity of potential selves which are not necessarily consistent with each other” (Burr 1995: 29). What actually surfaces in discourse is a ‘version’ of oneself, which is usually constructed “in a way that both speaker and hearer demonstrably recognize as ‘appropriate’ or ‘acceptable’” (McKinlay and Dunnett 1998: 37) and which, in the end, proves the narrator to be “a good person who behaved correctly” (Linde 1993: 31). The ‘socially acceptable’ character of this version of oneself will be a key focus in this paper.

Furthermore, narratives cannot be studied in isolation, but instead they should be regarded as discourse practices that are not only context-changing, since “through them people modify aspects of the extra-linguistic reality” (De Fina 2000: 133), but they are also context-reflecting, since “they are produced from a specific social locus and in specific social situations” (De Fina 2000: 133). As Schiffrin (2000) discusses, the identities that are constructed in narratives may differ from those constructed in life stories and oral histories because these cover a much wider temporal span and may thus include a important changes in identity construction for example. So the analysis of life stories in relation to their context becomes quite complex:

(...) all life stories (and oral histories) are situated in a complex interaction between past and present: although ostensibly about the past, they are firmly located in the public world of the present. Knowledge accrued from numerous “pasts” and continuing “presents” creates complex, nonlinear relationships between what we think of as “past” and what we view as “present,” and these relationships intrude on the linear chronology of “events” that we might assume to actually underlie a life story. (Schiffrin 2002: 315)

Among examples of such knowledge that can influence life stories, Schiffrin discerns the language that is used in the interview, facts that are not personally experienced by the interviewee and social, cultural and political changes. The extent to which these elements interfere with the life story of course depends on the type of information that is being narrated and the specific context within which the story is told. We aim at providing a case study that illustrates the importance of contextual elements and their interference with the way identities are constructed. We focus especially on the influence the historical and social context has on the differing degree of explicitness between two identity constructions that occur in our data. We start by describing the data under study here before going into a more detailed discussion of these identity constructions and their complex relationships with the context.

2. Data description

In the course of 2005 and 2006, one of the researchers interviewed her grandfather in a series of interviews about his life, resulting in a corpus of approximately 18,000 words. We especially chose this interviewee because of the “reportability” (cf Labov 1982) of his past, which can be regarded as containing a landmark event (cf Linde 1993) which, we suspected, was likely to result in interesting forms of identity management. The interviewee is an 86 year old German who was part of the *SS Leibstandarte*¹ during the Second World War. During the war, he fell in love with a Belgian woman and has lived in Belgium for the rest of his life. A more detailed chronological account of the interviewee’s life is given in table 1. For the scope of this paper, only the interview session that focused on the Second World War years was used as data.

Time span	Major events
30 April 1920	The interviewee was born in Sahledden, East-Prussia
1920-1937	Childhood years in East-Prussia
1937	Voluntary enlistment in the <i>Arbeitsdienst</i> ²
1938-1940	Voluntary enlistment in the <i>Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler</i> in Berlin

1941	Beginning of the Second World War – his troop was moved to Russia The interviewee joined the <i>Second Sanitätskompanie</i> ³ of the <i>SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler</i>
1942-1943	The interviewee's troops were relocated to France and Italy, then back to Russia
Spring 1944	The interviewee moved to Turnhout, Belgium, to start a new <i>Sanitätskompanie</i>
August 1944	The interviewee was relocated to Normandy, France
End of 1944-1945	The interviewee moved back to Germany, Belgium and eventually to Hungary
8 May 1945	Voluntary surrender of the <i>SS Leibstandarte</i>
1945-1946	Imprisonment in several different prisons in Germany and Belgium 4 December 1945: marriage to a Belgian woman he met in Turnhout in 1944
1946-1952	The interviewee and his wife moved several times, before settling in Turnhout, Belgium.
1952-...	The couple still lives in the northern part of Belgium. They have had three children and nine grandchildren.

Table 1: chronological overview of the major events in the life of the interviewee

Eliciting the story of his life during the Second World War, was something that could only be done through interviewing since the narrator was not prone to talk about this subject spontaneously (cf Linde 1993: 58), especially because he was on the ‘wrong side’. Under the circumstances, we tried to ensure a maximal degree of relaxedness by having the interview being carried out at the home of the interviewee by his granddaughter only. Furthermore, the interviewee frequently discussed his War-time experience within a family context and thus answering questions about this subject was not so unusual to him. During the entire interview, he never let typical family related or personal topics interfere with his story. Although the scope of the interview was larger than just the period of the Second World War, the majority of the interview was dedicated to this aspect of his life, which is fairly logical considering the “reportability” (cf Labov 1982) of the events, as was mentioned above.

In spite of the familiarity of the setting, it is fairly logical that the interviewee felt that his face was being threatened. Goffman, who introduced the notion of face, describes it as “an image of self delineated in terms of approval social attributes” (Goffman 1967: 5). Brown and Levinson, who base their politeness theory on Goffman (1959), identified a number of typical intrinsic Face Threatening Acts, among which they list the “raising of dangerously emotional or divisive topics, e.g. politics, race, (...)” and the “mention of taboo topics” (1987: 67) as typical “acts that threaten the positive-face want” (1987: 66). Given the historical facts concerning the Second World War, the interviewee’s membership of an organization such as the *SS Leibstandarte* is definitely a taboo topic and answering questions about this may incite him to try to save his face, especially since the current view of the *SS* is typically a very negative one, consisting of – sometimes extreme – stereotypes and associations with murder and the Holocaust. Furthermore, after

having lived for such a long time in Belgium and after having experienced many critical questions and remarks from his new fellow countrymen, of which the vast majority shares this negative view on the SS, the interviewee realizes the face threatening nature of the interview. The story he tells is negotiated and renegotiated over time, situating itself not only in the past, but also in the many years between the Second World War and the present time, and finally in the specific context of the recorded interview as well. Being aware of the taboo topic and the many listeners and readers of his discussion of his own contribution to this historical fact, the threat to the interviewee's face should not be underestimated. Thus it is not surprising that we see many attempts to save face and many proofs of extensive face management in this interview. As Hall, Sarangi and Slembrouck discuss for the notion of face and identity in institutional contexts: "Face management is (...) linked to role differentiation and identity construction" (Hall et al 1999: 297). Saving face in one respect may imply losing face in another and thus face management is crucial to maintain one's position. In this article, we will demonstrate that the interviewee tries to establish two 'acceptable', but also quite differing, identities, which he sometimes contradicts in the rest of the interview. We see him presenting himself as an apolitical sportsman and as a person with no knowledge and an extremely low-level, and thus minor position in the SS *Leibstandarte*. By building such identities, he implicitly constructs denial of agreement with and knowledge of the historical truth of Hitler's ideology.

3. Research questions

In this article, we aim to describe the way the interviewee switches his different roles from one question to another as a way of dealing with face management. Furthermore, we integrate the historical context in our analysis, as a means to interpret the data further, put them in a realistic perspective and investigate the interviewee's positioning towards his former self. To do this, we use a discourse analytical qualitative approach focusing not only on face, but also on other perspectives such as positioning and the management of interactional resources (cf. De Fina et al 2006). Another essential part in our analysis is the role of the interviewer: because the purpose of the interview was to raise a very particular topic, the interviewer is quite goal-oriented and this sometimes results in suggestive ways of asking questions. Since this fact has an important influence on the interview, we study how the interviewee constructs his identities in relation to the questions the interviewer asks and the face saving or face threatening nature of her part in the interview is thus an important part of the analysis. Instead of looking only at the words of the interviewee, we discuss the whole interaction. However, our focus of analysis remains on the management of face and identities of the interviewee and consequently the analysis of the interviewer's words is only provided when relevant and in relation to its effect on the interviewee's social positioning.

4. Analysis

A complex intertwining of identities is to be expected in the discourse of the interviewee given the social and political implications of his words. We will first go into the many face saving techniques that are linked to his different – but politically correct – identities. We will discuss how these identities are constructed and how they are sometimes

contradicted in the course of the interview. After that, we will draw some conclusions regarding the way these identities are used in the interviewee's ideological distancing from the implications his categorization as a former *SS Leibstandarte*-soldier entails.

Even though "all practices involve (...) the construction of social identities" (Fairclough 2000: 168) and "no matter how crucial language is for understanding social identity and social identity for understanding the social meaning of language" (Ochs 1993: 288), "the relation between language and social identity is predominantly a sociolinguistically distant one." (Ochs 1993: 288). This implicit and distant link between language and identity makes it difficult to fully grasp the notion of identity in language in practice. In order to get a view of identity that is as complete as possible, we think one should incorporate many different elements of language, situated on varying levels of analysis. De Fina discerns three basic levels:

The lexical level refers to the use of specific words or expressions. The textual pragmatic level refers to textual logical and argumentative relationships both explicit and implicit. The interactional level refers to the devices and strategies used by narrators to index their stances and attitudes both towards their own texts and other interlocutors. (De Fina 2003: 23)

We follow De Fina's view and propose to integrate all these levels in the textual analysis in order to get a holistic interpretation of the construction of identity in the interview data under study. The first part of the analysis, in which the interviewee constructs the identity of the sportsman in quite a straightforward way, is mainly situated at the textual pragmatic level since our analysis focuses mainly on the content and on the arguments that are used. In the second part, in which the interviewee presents himself as the ignorant soldier, we see that the identity is much more implicitly constructed and this analysis therefore integrates the three different levels as discussed by De Fina. For example, we will discuss the use of boosting particles, generalizations, repairs and contrastive conjunctions which sometimes oppose partially contradicting information in the interviewee's answers against one another. The difference in degree of explicitness between the two identity constructions is quite emblematic for the wider context within which the interview is situated: presenting yourself as a sportsman is quite a neutral endeavour which can be undertaken in an explicit way, but distancing yourself from Hitler's ideology and constructing denial of knowledge is much more face threatening and so we see that this social positioning is achieved by a number of subtle and mitigated means. This difference thus reflects the socio-historical context of the interview, a point to which we will come back in the conclusions.

4.1. The sportsman

The interviewee was a fairly successful boxer before the war and he makes use of this talent to account for the choices he made. When being asked why he voluntarily joined the *Arbeitsdienst*, he refers to his love of sports and his fear of unemployment as the main reasons. These reasons are shielded from criticism by means of an accumulation of Extreme Case Formulations, which are typical ways to defend against accusations and

legitimize his choice (Pomerantz 1986) since they suggest and repeat the generally accepted nature of the interviewee's views on the subject. In this case, we see many expressions that describe "the prevalence of the practice", which "speaks for the rightness of [this] practice" (Pomerantz 1986: 225) (*In het algemeen*, 'In general'; *iedereen*, 'everyone', *in heel Oost-Pruisen en ook in het Rijk*, 'in the whole of East Prussia and also in the *Reich*'):

(1) (turn by the interviewee)

3 *In het algemeen heeft iedereen in heel Oost-Pruisen en ook in het Rijk de buik vol gehad*
 4 *van de werkloosheid. Je kon ook bijna geen sport doen. Sinds Hitler aan de Regierung,*
 5 *kwam, hebben we geen werklozen mee gehad. Elke gemeente is verplicht geweest op te*
 6 *schrijven wat er in orde gemaakt moest worden. We hebben grote bossen gehad.*
 7 *Die moesten we bijvoorbeeld proper maken. Ik heb kanalen gebouwd. 's Morgens*
 → 8 *blonken onze spades. We hebben goed eten gehad, we hebben sport gehad.*

3 In general, everyone in the whole of East Prussia and also in the *Reich* was sick and tired
 4 of unemployment. You could also almost do no sports. When Hitler came to the
 5 *Regierung*⁴ we didn't have unemployed people anymore. Every community was obliged
 6 to write down what had to be fixed. We had big woods.
 7 We had to clean those for example. I built canals. In the morning,
 → 8 our spades shone. We had good food, we had sports.^{5 6}

The interviewee starts his answer with a description of the downsides of the regime before Hitler in lines 3-4 ('unemployment', 'no sports') and contrasts this with the positive reforms that were implemented when Hitler became the national leader. In his description of the projects the interviewee was personally involved in during his service in the *Arbeitsdienst*, we see that he implicitly demonstrates that the beginning of his military career was extremely peaceful. The examples that he gives are almost immune to criticism, since cleaning woods and building canals are obviously presently considered to be ethically correct endeavors. His depiction of the work is vivid and lyrical (e.g. 'In the morning, our spades shone'), which justifies the fact that he concludes his answer to this face threatening question with the interpretation of this work as a kind of sport (cf line 8). Although this story shows us the good deeds that were done, we already see an implicit reference to Hitler's politics of enforcement through the modality of obligation: *Elke gemeente is verplicht geweest op te schrijven (...)* ('Every community was obliged to write down (...)').

The interviewee continues along the same lines in the rest of this story, light-heartedly elaborating on the innocent fun they had during their service. In example 2, we see an illustrative narrative (Schiffrin 2002: 318) in which the interviewee jokingly talks about his encounter with girls as a young man. In his story, he illustrates the innocent life they led at the *Arbeitsdienst* and he also implicitly demonstrates the sporty character of their adventures. In this example, we see this in the addition of the word *ver* ('far') which stresses the distance of their nightly walks:

(2) (turn by the interviewee)

- 14 *We hebben bij de Arbeitsdienst groot plezier gehad.*
 15 *En wat bij ons het mooiste was: de meisjes hadden ook Arbeitsdienst gehad.*
 16 *En dan hebben wij 's avonds, je zijt ne jonge mens, wat doen wij?*
 → 17 *We gaan 4 à 5 kilometer ver naar de meisjes.*
 18 *Die hadden al slim geweest en hadden de tent al opengedaan!*
- 14 *We had great fun at the Arbeitsdienst.*
 15 *And what was the most beautiful for us: the girls also had Arbeitsdienst.*
 16 *And then we have at night, you are a youngster, what do we do?*
 → 17 *We walk 4 to 5 kilometers far to the girls.*
 18 *They had already been smart and had already opened their tent!*

Even when answering a direct question about the actual reason why he eventually joined the *SS Leibstandarte* the interviewee holds on to this initial reason.

(3)

- 33 *IR Dus ge bent dan eerder bij de Leibstandarte gegaan gewoon omdat [ge*
 34 *IE [uit*
 35 *sportiviteit. Ik ik zag in de Leibstandarte vurtkomen in euh in de sport. In*
 36 *IR Hoe bedoelde?*
 37 *IE Vurtkomen. Also vooruitkomen*
 38 *IR Ah ja, door de Leibstandarte*
 39 *IE Door de Leibstandarte in de sport. En ik docht ok dat da meer sport soll*
 40 *gedreven worden als drill.*
- 33 *IR So then you went to the Leibstandarte just because [you*
 34 *IE [out of*
 35 *sportmanship. I I saw in the Leibstandarte vurtkomen in erm in the sports. In*
 36 *IR What do you mean?*
 37 *IE To advance. Also to get somewhere*
 38 *IR Ah yes, by means of the*
Leibstandarte
 39 *IE Through the Leibstandarte in the sports. And I also*
 40 *thought that that more sports soll⁷ be done than drill.*

In this example we see that the interviewer pushes the interviewee to give his main reason for joining the *SS Leibstandarte*. She does this not by asking a question, but by preformulating the answer in a face saving way by adding the softener *gewoon* ('just'). The interviewee does not give the interviewer the chance to finish her sentence and in line 34 he interrupts her right before she can give a possible – potentially face threatening – reason. As expected, his interruption directly focuses on his love of sports again, which is of course a prototypical example of an innocent, morally uncharged – or even positively evaluated – motive for joining the *SS Leibstandarte*. In this interruption, we see that the interviewee reformulates (*ik, ik*, 'I, I'), hesitates (*euh*, 'erm') and mispronounces (*vurtkomen*). All these contextualization cues (Gumperz 1992) show that the interviewee is searching for the correct words. When he finds the correct words, he manages to make his point in line 39, where he expresses that he believed he would get somewhere in sport by joining the *SS Leibstandarte*.

Throughout his discussion, we see that the interviewee protects himself from criticism by coming back to his interest in sport. For example, when he is being asked about the daily activities of the *SS Leibstandarte*, he starts to talk about the marching classes they had how they were punished. These punishments for disobedience consisted of having to do additional exercises, of which the interviewee stresses that he did not consider that to be a punishment.

(4) (turn by the interviewee)

94 *Dan moest ik 50 kere met het geweer pompe.*
95 *Maar dat gaaf me niks, dat was voor mij trainink.*

94 Then I had to do press ups 50 times with the rifle.
95 But that did not bother me, that was training for me.

In most parts of the interview, we see that the interviewee positions himself as a man who considers work as a hobby and who even likes to be punished by physical exercise. In his discussion of the jobs of the SS-soldiers however, there is one fragment that contradicts this sports-loving identity construction:

(5) (turn by the interviewee)

- 151 *Ik heb er 'n schoon leven gehad, ik heb er alleen motte de wacht henbringen en de*
152 *wacht terugbringen. En mijne autobus heb ik wel moete propermake, mar ik heb er*
153 *altijd twee manne gekrege die 't gedaan hebbe. Zo ik heb dan motte ruste ne.*
- 151 I had a beautiful life there, I only had to bring in the guards and
151 bring the guards back. And I had to clean my bus, but I always got
152 two men who did that. So I had to rest then, *ne*.

In summing up what he actually had to do as his main job, it turns out that he only drove the guards to and from their guard shelters and that he did not even have to clean his own bus since he got a small work force for that. As an introduction to this job description, he positively evaluates his lazy life and by doing so, he contradicts his previous identity construction as a physical labor enthusiast.

4.2. The ignorant soldier

The phrase '*Wir haben es nicht gewusst*' ('we didn't know') became famous after the Second World War: many Germans claimed not to have known what had happened in the camps and to the Jews. The interviewee also positions himself as somebody who was totally ignorant of what was going on. After many years of having to justify his acts, he is so familiar with this positioning that he unsolicitedly starts to voice this reasoning. The fragment is part of the answer to the question how he heard about the *SS Leibstandarte*. He starts his answer by giving a confused explanation about how the *SS Leibstandarte*

was linked to the *Wehrmacht*⁸, and then there is an abrupt topic transition when the interviewee starts talking about Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*, which is anticipated by a strong disclaimer in line 27 in the form of a rhetorically charged three times repeated and augmented claim that not everybody was in favor of Hitler's regime. The temporal succession within this claim is highly interesting, since it does not follow the logical, chronological order. The speaker starts his claim within the time frame of the story itself (*oender de oorlog*, 'during the war') to continue with the post-war period (*na de oorlog*, 'after the war'), which is of course situated closest to the time of telling, and to conclude with the prewar time (*voor de oorlog*, 'before the war'). This absence of chronology is quite emblematic for the way the story is constructed in present time and it proves the non-linearity of the relationships between past and present (Schiffrin 2002: 315) when telling a life story.

(6) (turn by the interviewee)

23 *Dat zo te zeggen de vrijwillige SS euh ingegliedert worden ist, euh wordt, bij de*
 24 *Wehrmacht ja. Natuurlijk hebben de Wehrmacht efkes tegen geweest ja.*
 25 *Ja en da zate al die generalen von de Kaiser nog. En da was iets nuuf un Hitler was, zo te*
 26 *zeggen, ook vijf jaar in de Festink euh euh vastgezete. En is euh, ja het zijn nich allemol*
 27 *Hitler gezind geweest ja, ook ook nich oender de oorlog, ook nich na de oorlog, ook nich.*
 → 28 *voor de oorlog Enneuh hij [= Hitler] had ge ook 'n boek geschreve.: Mein Kampf.*
 29 *Ik heb het nooit geleze. Ik wil het ook nich leze, ja. Dat interesseert mij nich. Ik was nooit*
 30 *nich, trotz dat ik bij de Leibstandarte ge geweest ben, nooit nich zo'n overtuigd anhangen*
 31 *von euh par partijen, ook nu zeg het mij niks. Euh voor mij send dat alles geldmaker*
 32 *en de mense dom verkope, en en en niks als strijd un onrust en alle. Nee, ik kan da nich*
 33 *mee om.*

23 That so to speak the voluntary SS erm is being *ingegliedert*,⁹ erm was, in the
 24 *Wehrmacht* ja. Of course, the *Wehrmacht* was against it for a while ja.
 25 Ja and all those generals of the *Kaiser* were still there. And that was something new and
 Hitler was, so to
 26 speak, also locked up for five years in the *Festink*¹⁰ erm erm. And is erm, ja it was not all
 27 disposed to Hitler ja, also also not during the war, also not after the war, also not
 → 28 before the war. And-erm he [= Hitler] had wr also written a book: *Mein Kampf*.
 29 I never read it. I don't want to read it, ja¹¹. That does not interest me. I was never
 30 ever, *trotz*¹² that I have be- been with the *Leibstandarte*, never ever such a convinced
 adherent
 31 von erm par parties, also now I am not interested. Erm for me they are all moneymakers
 32 and sell the people stupid¹³, and and and nothing like battle and unrest and all. No, I
 cannot
 33 deal with that.

Although strongly disclaimed beforehand, the choice of the interviewee to self-initiate the topic of the book in line 28 remains highly suspect: he starts talking about the taboo subject without being asked for it! But immediately after introducing the subject, he distances himself from the book, and thus also the ideology it represents, by explicitly stating that he has not read it. He stresses this by augmenting his display of aversion through a rhetorical rhythmic repetition in three parts (*Ik heb het nooit geleze. Ik wil het ook nich leze, ja. Dat interesseert mij nich.*, 'I have never read it. I don't want to read it,

ja. That does not interest me.’). The insertion of the boosting modal particle *ja* adds stress and affirmation. He pursues this topic by elaborating on his lack of interest in politics which he underlines through the repeated use of the Extreme Case Formulation *nooit nich* (‘never ever’). Realizing though that this may seem unlikely for a member of the *SS Leibstandarte*, he adds a *disclaimer* introduced by the German conjunction *trotz* on line 30. The *disclaimer* is reversed though, since it is not the case that he tries to “ward off and defeat in advance doubts and negative typifications which may result from intended conduct” (Hewitt & Stokes 1975: 3), but instead, he tries to make his conduct and political lack of interest credible in spite of the implications of his categorization as an *SS Leibstandarte*-soldier. Furthermore, the interviewee stresses throughout this fragment the temporal constancy of his political lack of interest by always referring to his viewpoints in the past and their unchanged nature in the present (lines 27-28; 30-31). He supports his claim further by voicing his negative views on all politicians (*send dat alles geldmaker*, ‘they are all moneymakers’), again by means of an Extreme Case Formulation that conveys a generalization, in lines 31-32, and he concludes his ideas by means of a general negative evaluation which vaguely refers to all politicians. Again, a particle reinforces the meaning of the sentence, but this time it underlines his strong aversion by means of the use of *nee* (‘no’).

When being directly asked for his knowledge of Hitler’s theories (lines 169-170), the interviewee answers evasively by shifting the subject to what the soldiers were forced to do when they were punished. After this side sequence of the description of the humiliating jobs they had to do, he shifts back to the actual subject of the question, clearly demonstrating that his change of subject was not caused by a lack of concentration, but by the face threatening nature of the theme of the question:

(7)

169	IR	<i>Want euhm, dus jullie hebbe ook nooit geen lessen gekrege van “het Arische ras is</i>
170		<i>het goeie ras en de andere zijn slecht en”=</i>
171	IE	<i>= Ik heb er nooit nich gewete. Eh bij ons, wij</i>
172		<i>send Wachbatallion geweest. Wij, wij, wij solle doch, ik solle doch zeker me, ja,</i>
173		<i>patatte schelle hebbe we motte ja. ((lacht)) Uit straf als wij, als wij euh. Of de WC</i>
174		<i>motte staan un un presentere als mense ginge pipi doen of kaka doen, of met de</i>
175		<i>taanburstel de de vloere schure enzo. Die dinge heb ik meegemaakt ja, maar poli-</i>
176		<i>politische lesse heb ik nooit gehad. En en mijne compagnie of batallion eh. Ik weet er</i>
177		<i>niks van, eerlijk ja. Als het soll zijn, soll ik het zegge. Wat kan, wat kan mij nog al</i>
178		<i>gebeure met, met bijna 86 jaar! ((lacht))</i>
169	IR	Because, erm, so, you have also never had any lessons like “the Aryan race is
170		the good race and the others are bad and”=
171	IE	= I have never ever known. And with us, we
172		were Wachbatallion. We, we, we solle doch, I solle doch surely my, ja,
173		peeling potatoes is what we had to do, ja ((laughs)) As punishment when we, when
		we, erm,. Or at the wc
174		we had to stand and and present when people went to do pee or to do shit, or with the
175		toothbrush scrubbing the the floors etcetera. Those things, I went through ja, but
		poli-
176		political classes I never had. And and my company or battalion erm. I don’t know

177 anything of that, honestly *ja*. If it *soll* be, I *soll* say it.¹⁴ What can, what can still
 178 happen to me, with almost 86 years! ((*laughs*))

This fragment is interesting for many reasons: first of all, it shows the relativity of what is face saving and what is face threatening depending on the context. In most cases, one would be reluctant to talk about the humiliating task of paying respect to people who are going to the toilet or cleaning floors with toothbrushes. This fragment is clearly used to prove that the interviewee held a bottom rank position in the army, even though he was part of the *SS Leibstandarte* which is generally regarded as Hitler's elite troop. Being at the bottom of the hierarchy is usually not information people would voluntarily provide, but in this case, it is the face saving option to answer such a face threatening question. By illustrating the stupidity of the jobs he had to do and by limiting his task to merely physical labor, the interviewee aims to show that he was not involved with Hitler's ideology. In his answer, the interviewee first strongly denies his knowledge of what was really going on. He underlines this by repeating his negation (*nooit nich*, 'never ever'). This repetition functions as a booster that "convey[s] the speaker's attitude to the content of the proposition" (Holmes 1984a: 348), namely that he strongly wishes to distance himself from Hitler and his ideology. In what follows, the interviewee describes the alternative job content and he first takes on a group perspective (line 172: *Wij, wij, wij solle doch*, 'But we, we, we were supposed to'¹⁵) after which he quickly shifts to a securer personal perspective (line 172: *ik solle doch zeker*, 'but I surely was supposed to'). This correction and shift in viewpoint illustrates that he is reluctant to associate himself with the *we*-form. The referent of the *we*-form in this specific context is the group of low-rank soldiers, but a link to the entire group of *SS Leibstandarte*-soldiers is easily made and the association to this group would of course entail many implications. So by correcting himself (line 172) or by not finishing sentences (line 173), he is able to switch pronouns, which have been demonstrated to be good indications of identity construction (e.g. Ochs 1993, De Fina 2003). He mostly changes back to a personal footing and therefore he refrains from constructing a consistent group identity – even when it is only referring to a group of bottom-rank soldiers. As Meinhof and Galasinski state, such pronoun shifts "are indicative of ideas, feelings, attitudes and experiences which the informants wish to embrace, as against others from which they want to distance themselves" (2000: 339) and this interviewee clearly wishes to distance himself from any type of group identity that is related to the *SS Leibstandarte*.

Then, the interviewee starts his description of tasks which is introduced and concluded by the boosting affirmative particle *ja* (lines 172 and 175). The tasks are formulated by means of lists that are interactionally used to prove the speaker's assertions by providing further details and thus serve to reinforce the speaker's claims (Tannen 1989) and construct a factual account (Edwards and Potter 1992). Especially three-part listings – such as this one – are common, since they imply covering the whole ground (Potter et al 1991, Jefferson 1990). Lists are often characterized by parallelism (cf. Johnstone 1983) and such parallel formulations can sometimes result in repetitions as in: *ginge pipi doen of kaka doen* ('went to do pee or to do shit'). As in English, this formulation in Dutch is quite long-winded since there are many shorter options: for example avoiding repetition of the verb *doen* ('to do') or using the one word-verbs that describe these scatological actions. Instead, the extensive choice of words of the interviewee acts as a delaying

device, which gives the speaker more time to plan ahead what he is going to say next (Sanchez-Ayala 2003: 338) in such a face threatening context.

The list is interrupted by two things: first of all, the interviewee starts a sentence that is broken off (*Uit straf als wij, als wij euh*; ‘As punishment when we, when we erm’). Although it is quickly repaired, “the replacement cannot excise all traces of the word that was initially said or starting to be said” (Schegloff 1979: 263) and thus we still see that the interviewee was going to explain when and for what reasons he had to execute such degrading tasks. On the one hand, the reasons for the break-off can be found in the possibility that the interviewee did not want to elaborate on the mistakes he made that deserved punishment, on the other hand one might argue that the interviewee avoids any further explanation because that would clearly reveal that he is avoiding the question since he is only talking about occasional punishments instead of his daily routine. Stressing this might prompt the interviewer to repeat her initial face threatening question. The second thing that interrupts the list of tasks is laughter. In this fragment, laughter can be considered as “a nonverbal, vocal communication of personal views” (O’Connell and Kowal 2004: 465) that can be used in interviews as “a deliberate and sophisticated rhetorical device” (O’Connell and Kowal 2005: 293). We argue that the interviewee is not using laughter because of the humorous character of peeling potatoes, nor is there any sign of speech play or verbal art as is the case with jokes (Sherzer 1985: 219), but that he deliberately inserts laughter to enhance the credibility of the airy tone he adopted in this light-hearted answer to such a serious question. It is thus part of the face saving positioning as a bottom-end ignorant soldier who stayed far away from the historical facts of the Second World War.

Then the contrastive conjunction *maar* (‘but’) in line 175 clearly marks a change in tone and a shift in subject: the interviewee comes back to the taboo subject that was introduced in the interviewer’s question. He repeats his claim of ignorance and continues with another broken-off sentence in line 176 (*En en mijne compagnie of batallion eh*; ‘And and my company or battalion erm’). Although incomplete, this sentence reveals the intended content based on its immediate context: the interviewee first claims that he had not had any political classes, after which he continues to state that his battalion had not had these either. By adding two words in Dutch (*ook niet*, ‘either’), the sentence would have been finished. But exactly as he shifted pronouns away from the collective *we*- form in lines 171-172, he avoids speaking for his entire battalion in this section as well. So instead of completing the sentence, he repeats for the third time that he was not aware of what was going on, further supporting his claim by two short (*eerlijk ja*, ‘honestly ja’) and two long boosters, which are the two final sentences of the extract. These do not contribute to the content, but merely serve to “modify the illocutionary force or strength of the assertion, thus reflecting the extent of the speaker’s confidence in making it” (Holmes 1984b: 48). The laugh that concludes the fragment provides a break from the seriousness of the interviewee’s statements, again contributing to the seemingly breezy tone of the answer.

Some other fragments however clearly illustrate that he is not as ignorant as he claims to be. For instance in example 8, when they are discussing the selection criteria of the elite

SS-soldiers, he quickly rounds off the incomplete list of features the interviewer provides of the ‘Aryan race’:

(8)

57	IR	<i>En groot en blond?</i>
58	IE	<i>En groot und blond, blauwogig als het ging ja. Maar alle send ook nich blauwogig</i>
59		<i>geweest. Maar de euh (.)</i>
60	IR	<i>Maar wel groot en blond.</i>
61	IE	<i>Groot euh</i>
57	IR	And tall and blond?
58	IE	And tall und blond, blue-eyed if possible yes. But not everyone was blue-eyed.
59		But the erm (.)
60	IR	But tall and blond all right.
61	IE	Tall erm

Just a couple of turns before, in example 6, the interviewee claimed not to have known and still not know anything of politics, but in this example we see proof of the contrary. Being asked about the features an *SS Leibstandarte*-soldier should have, the interviewee immediately adds *blauwogig* (‘blue-eyed’) to the list the interviewer provides. He instantly mitigates this self-introduced feature, claiming that not all soldiers were blue-eyed. In line 59, we see that this addition in line 58 leaves the interviewee quite confused and then the interviewer picks up the thread again. She does this by a statement that is bold on record through the addition of the Dutch adverb *wel*, expressing stress and contrast to the interviewee’s prior mitigated answer. In line 61, the interviewee then answers by selecting the most innocent feature, namely tallness, which may be regarded as typical of all soldiers. In lines 61-65 he elaborates on this feature by giving details of the soldiers’ heights and by telling a humorous story of a tall soldier and his tiny wife. Again, through the use of humor, he manages to move away the topic from the face threatening discussion of Aryan features.

Furthermore, when being asked directly about the anti-Jewish policy (line 157), the interviewee’s answer clearly demonstrates that he was aware of certain military campaigns against the Jews, thus contradicting his identity construction of the ignorant soldier.

(9)

157	IR	<i>Hebbe jullie in ’t leger ooit iets gemerkt van die anti-Joodse politiek?</i>
158	IE	<i>Ik, wij hebbe ok die die boekenverbranding zo te zeggen sollen wij, soll ook in</i>
159		<i>Berlijn gebeurd zijn. Ik heb er niks van gezien. Wij hebbe, paar dage later hebbe</i>
→ 160		<i>we davon gehoord. Nu motte mal voorstelle: wij send de elite van Hitler geweest en</i>
161		<i>en wij wiste niks davon ja. Nu het is werkelijk gebeurd ja mar ik, ik heb het, ik heb</i>
→ 162		<i>er nooit nich gewete. Eh, doch diezelfde week nich ja.</i>
157	IR	Have you ever noticed anything of the anti-Jewish politics in the army?
158	IE	I, we have also that that book burning so to speak <i>sollen</i> we, <i>soll</i> also have

159 happened in Berlin. I haven't seen anything of it. We have, a few days later we
 → 160 heard of that. Now you have to imagine: we were the elite of Hitler and
 161 and we didn't know anything of that *ja*. Now it really happened *ja* but I, I have it, I
 → 162 have never ever known of it. Erm, at least not during the same week, *ja*.

When the interviewer asks about anti-Jewish politics, she does this in a face saving way: she does not probe for any anti-Jewish actions the interviewee might have undertaken, but she immediately puts him in the position of a spectator, somebody who may have *noticed* (line 157) something. Still, the question remains face threatening because of the taboo subject that is being referred to. The interviewee starts answering in a very confused and almost incomprehensible way: in line 158-159 we see reformulations (*sollen wij, soll ook in Berlijn gebeurd zijn*, '*sollen* we, *soll* also have happened in Berlin'), repetitions (*die die*, 'that that'), hedges (*zo te zeggen*, 'so to speak') and shifts from a personal (*ik*, 'I') over to a collective (*wij*, 'we') and to an impersonal (*soll gebeurd zijn*, '*soll* have happened') perspective that is further supported by the use of *soll* that can be translated as 'was supposed to', thus creating even more distance between the interviewee and the historical facts. His answer focuses on the burning of books and his initial topic introduction on line 158 is mitigated by the weakener *zo te zeggen* ('so to speak' / 'as it were'). This historical fact occurred on the 10th of May 1933 in Berlin, when books that contained anti-Nazi ideas were burned. Although the book burning focused on Jewish authors as well, the event was more exemplary for censorship than for strictly anti-Jewish politics, of which many 'more typical' and more sinister examples could be given (e.g. Kristallnacht). By selecting this topic instead, the interviewee again chooses the face saving option by discussing an event that occurred quite often in the course of history, from the arson in the library of Alexandria in 392 till the burning of the Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and even JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* in much more recent times (Wikipedia 2006c). This alternative topic selection actually implies an almost negative answer, contributing as such to the identity construction of the ignorant soldier.

However, a couple of interesting things happen in the interviewee's continuation. In line 159, he finds his words again and starts to discuss the issue further by immediately denying that he was a witness to this event, but that he and his fellow-soldiers heard about it only afterwards. The first indication of this claim is already present in line 158, through the use of *soll*. In lines 160-161, he inserts a reversed disclaimer (see above) again, which is made relevant because his former membership of the category of *SS Leibstandarte*-soldiers ('Hitler's elite') implies a certain degree of knowledge of such facts. His introductory words to this disclaimer (*Nu motte mal voorstelle*, 'Now you have to imagine') function as a gambit that semantically frames this topic as a "surprising aspect" (Keller 1979: 223-224). This gambit confirms the interviewee's "category entitlement" (Potter 1996): just as we expect somebody who is a member of the category of doctor to have knowledge of a specific domain, the interviewee obviously feels that it is expected of a member of the category of *SS Leibstandarte*-soldiers to be aware of all Nazi activity. Since he is claiming the contrary, he frames this claim as an unexpected statement, contrary to what is generally believed on the basis of the interviewee's *SS Leibstandarte*-category membership. The contrastively and very explicitly formulated

disclaimer, boosted by the affirmative particle *ja* shows the importance the interviewee attaches to denying the *SS Leibstandarte*'s access to information. In line 161 he confirms that he knows the facts to be true, a statement which seems quite redundant and out of place since he just told the interviewer that he heard about the burning of books. He continues to state that he had never known about it, which contradicts his previous statements (lines 159-160). He immediately corrects himself in line 162 so that his statements are consistent with one another again. This apparent inconsistency supports the thesis that in lines 160-162, the interviewee is not discussing the relatively face saving topic of the burning of the books anymore, but instead that he is focusing on something that he talks about by means of vague reference words (*het* and *er*, both translated as 'it'): one could argue that he is referring to the Holocaust without explicitly mentioning this subject that is extremely face threatening. That would explain the strange confirmation in line 161: when talking about the Holocaust, it is quite logical that the interviewee wishes to state that he knew it *really happened*, in order to distance himself from people with negationist views. In the next sentence, he echoes in almost exactly the same words what he and quite a number of other Germans claimed about the Holocaust after the war: '*Wir haben es nicht gewusst*'. Finally, he realizes the inconsistency with these statements and the story about the book burning that he hesitates and then corrects himself, shifting the topic back to the relatively safe subject he started his discussion with. In all, we see that the interviewee denies knowledge three times with increasing scope: *I haven't seen* (line 159), *we didn't know anything* (line 161), *I have never known* (line 162). He mitigates this denial two times by limiting its temporal scope to a couple of days, which strongly contradicts the statement in line 161-162.

Again, as in the other examples we discussed in this section, we see that the identity of an ignorant soldier is constructed and that it is contrasted with the implications of the interviewee's membership of the *SS Leibstandarte*-category.

5. Conclusions

"Narratives are versions of reality" (Ochs and Capps 1996: 21) and they "bring[s] multiple, partial selves to life" (Ochs and Capps 1996: 37). When looking at the version of reality that is created in this interview, we see that the selves that are brought to life are constructed in close relation with face needs. Taking the face threatening topic of the interview into consideration, this almost goes without saying and thus we expected to find many instances of face management and sometimes contrasting identity constructions in this interview.

As was said in the introduction to the analysis however, the difference in explicitness of the two main identity constructions in the interview, namely that of the sportsman and of the ignorant soldier, is striking. Given the social context and the fact that a life story is not just situated in the past and repeated in the present, but rather situated in the past, mitigated over time and constructed in the present, this is not surprising. Presenting yourself as a young man with a strong interest in sports is presently considered to be a clearly apolitical stance, although this was rather different in the prewar years. Being a

sportsman was then an example of living up to the Nazi ideal of the young, healthy Aryan man. But since this political interpretation is not very well known anymore in our current society with its strong admiration for sports, this did not seem to interfere much with the present-day identity construction in the interviewee's story. Moreover, the sportsman-identity is also quite original in the sense that it is not an identity construction that can be expected of all former *SS Leibstandarte*-soldiers. Positioning yourself as an ignorant soldier though is much more historically charged since the '*wir haben es nicht gewusst*'-claim has been a reason for debate for many years. Taking this historical context into consideration, the identity construction of the ignorant soldier, which is at the same time a denial of knowledge and ideological involvement, is heavily influenced by the interviewee's experience of his post-war life and the undoubtedly numerous occasions he was personally, but also on a more general basis, confronted with the atrocious truth of the Nazi camps and the public reactions of his former fellow soldiers to these events. Thus the fact that the social positioning of the ignorant soldier has been frequently constructed by many other Germans before him, is undoubtedly a factor which may have led the interviewee's own ignorance-construction to be much more implicit and mitigated. This is quite explicitly revealed by the comparison with the straightforward way in which the interviewee positions himself as a sportsman, which is obviously much less charged by history and society, at least from a contemporary point of view. The two identity constructions are in a way complementary, because the identity of the sportsman provides a reason for joining the *SS Leibstandarte*, thus making the claim of ideological ignorance and political disinterest more credible. For example, the fact that the interviewee resists his categorization as a member of the group of soldiers by reformulating and shifting pronouns (cf e.g. 7) further supports this claim of ignorance since it avoids any implications the *SS Leibstandarte* categorization could entail. However, when comparing this strategy with the sportsman identity construction, we see that the latter is more convincing because it provides an alternative motive instead of just a denial of knowledge. It is exactly in this sense that the two identity constructions complement one another, since the interviewee's sportsman identity "provide[s] solutions to problems which someone may perceive in his or her account of self", thus at least partially "avoiding the implications which go with those characterizations" (McKinlay and Dunnett 1998: 36), in this case the implications of belonging to the category of *SS Leibstandarte* soldiers.

Furthermore, in these data we clearly see an example of the influence of time and its complex relationship with a life story as was discussed by Schiffrin (2002). After having lived in the mind of the storyteller for many years, the story has ripened into a multi-layered version of past events that were once experienced by the interviewee and that have matured over the years, being nurtured by events of the current times until the moment of storytelling. At that moment, especially considering the face threatening topic and the presence of a tape-recorder, the story presumably undergoes many other instant changes which almost turn it into a snapshot of the personal, and at the same time, historical events that are looked at from a very particular angle. We see these layers and influences reflected in a number of fragments: for example in the discussion of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and especially of the Book Burning, we not only see the shifts in time, linked to the knowledge that was available at the time and afterwards, but also the

influence of the knowledge and its social implications that were gained throughout the years. This results in complex, and sometimes contradictory versions of reality which are sometimes hastily corrected by the interviewee. Especially the extremeness of his story, which we see constructed in the content but also by means of the many Extreme Case Formulations that both convey generalizations and ‘absolute’ truths, makes it almost impossible for the interviewee to hold his position: he presents himself not only to be extremely apolitical and ignorant, but also to be obsessed by his love of sports. As the many examples and their contradictions demonstrated, this extremeness is part of the situated action to build a more or less ‘acceptable’ identity on this occasion. It is part of the personal – probably unconscious – choice the interviewee made, since, as Ochs and Capps point out: narratives “are embodiments of one or more points of view, rather than objective, omniscient accounts. While some narrators emphasize the truth of a narrated text, others grapple with the fragility of memory and the relativity of point of view” (1996: 21).

By its multiple identity constructions and by its differing way this is done, this interview illustrates how identity is strongly linked to life stories and how face management plays an essential role in this process of constructing and mitigating social positionings. But other elements such as its complex situation in time, the influence of social and historical facts, personal post-war experiences and the current setting of the interview also play a crucial role in the way identities are built and negotiated in the story. The combination of all these elements leads to a complex, almost impenetrable network of influences on the identity constructions of the narrator. Some recurrent linguistic strategies may be discerned, such as the way the interviewee usually answers face threatening questions by evading the topic and then inserting it again as a side sequence in his story. Furthermore, some clear threads run through the story, namely the identity construction of the sportsman and that of the ignorant soldier, and some clear influences can be discerned, such as the historical facts which turn the interview into a face threatening act and the widely repeated character of the ignorance-claim, but there will always be aspects, such as untold experiences of the narrator, his personal interpretation of the goal of the interview or the way he has dealt with his own contribution to the Second World War, that remain beneath the surface. Analyzing this life story thus on the one hand leads to insight in the way the interviewee deals with the face threats and manages his identity constructions, but on the other hand, one has to realize that not all aspects and influences can be fully integrated and understood. A whole life may be just too large to be fully captured in its complexity.

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Appendix: transcription symbols used in the examples

Symbol	Explanation
(.)	Short pause
[...]	Own addition
→	Signal of a significant line
A: word=	There is no discernible pause between the

B: =word	turns of the two speakers
A: word [word B: [word	Overlapping talk

Based on Antaki (2006)

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¹ The SS was an organization which consisted of a political and a military wing. The *SS Leibstandarte* was part of the military wing and was initially founded to be Hitler's elite guard unit, but it was also sent to the front later on.

² The *Arbeitsdienst* was one of Hitler's initiatives to fight unemployment. It was not part of the army, but it was closely linked to the Nazi-regime.

³ The *Sanitätskompanie* was the medical component of the army.

⁴ The *Regierung* is the government.

⁵ Since the interviewee's language is interspersed with German or semi-German words, the translation is not always complete in English. To stick as close as possible to the original, we chose not to translate some of the German words. So on the one hand, the translation sometimes contains rather odd sentences, but on the other hand we also tried to obtain a reasonable level of readability.

⁶ The transcription generally follows standard punctuation, but some transcription symbols are inserted when these are relevant for the analysis. A list of the meaning of these symbols is provided in the appendix.

⁷ *Sollen* is a verb of which the modal meaning depends strongly on the context. In this sentence, *soll* can be translated as 'was supposed to be'.

⁸ The *Wehrmacht* was the name of the armed forces of Nazi-Germany from 1935 to 1945. During World War II, the *Wehrmacht* consisted of the army, the navy and the air force (Wikipedia 2006a).

⁹ 'Is being *ingegliedert*' can be translated as 'is being incorporated in'.

¹⁰ In April 1924 Hitler was tried for high treason and sentenced to five years imprisonment in Landsberg Prison. During his staying he dictated *Mein Kampf* to his deputy Rudolf Hess (Wikipedia 2006b).

¹¹ *Ja* is a modal particle that has an affirmative meaning, but it cannot be translated directly by means of 'yes', since it is used differently in German than in English.

¹² *Trotz* can be translated as 'although' or 'in spite of'. The interviewee clearly uses this word in its German sense as a conjunction, which is marked in his intonation by the small pause before he pronounces this word. One could argue that the interviewee uses this word in its Dutch sense of the adjective *trots* ('proud'), but this is not the case for two reasons: (1) the pause provides proof for the start of a subordinate clause and (2) the interviewee hardly ever uses this word because he consistently uses the dialect variant *fier* to express feelings of pride.

¹³ *Dom verkope* is a Dutch alteration of the German expression: *jemanden für dumm verkaufen* which means that people are considered to be stupid (in this case by the politicians).

¹⁴ *Soll* is the German for ‘supposed to’ or ‘should/ought’. In this case, one could translate this sentence as: ‘If it were so, I would say it’.

¹⁵ This is a rather loose translation, but it captures the gist of the interviewee’s words. In the transcription, we left the original German *solle doch*, since it is as foreign in Dutch as it is in English.