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► **To cite this version:**

Véronique Traverso. Fragments of life before: A form of storytelling in psychosocial support sessions for refugee women. *Langage et Société*, 2021, 73 (2), pp.83-113. hal-03903266

**HAL Id: hal-03903266**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03903266>**

Submitted on 19 Dec 2022

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# Fragments of life before: A form of storytelling in psychosocial support sessions for refugee women

Véronique Traverso

Institut français du Proche-Orient (French Institute of the Near East)/ICAR Lab - Interactions, Corpus, Apprentissages, Représentations  
veronique.traverso@ens-lyon.fr

To open this article about storytelling in homage to Charles Goodwin, I will compare two quotes in which he sets out some defining elements. The first is taken from his 1984 article, “Notes on Story Structure and the Organization of Participation.” It comes at the end of the first analysis of the “wallpaper” story, which is told during a conversation between four friends, where the narrator, in the presence of her husband, describes a faux pas he made during their first visit to their friend Karen’s new apartment:

A multi-utterance turn [. . .], the body of the story, is preceded by specific moves by both the teller and the recipient: a preface offering to tell the story [. . .] and a request to hear the offered story [. . .]. At the conclusion of the story proper the participants engage in further talk relevant to it [. . .]. The body of the story contains a number of distinct sections. It begins with relevant background information [. . .] and then [. . .] with [. . .] moves to what will turn out to be the climax of the story [. . .]. The story thus contains not only preface, background, and climax sections but also what may be called a parenthesis, a section of background information embedded (disjunctively) within the climax.

(C. Goodwin 1984, 226)

In this quote, stories are described in terms of overall structure as having a preface, a “body” within which there are distinct elements, background, parenthesis, and climax.

The second quote is from the 2015 article, “Narrative as Talk-in-Interaction.” It appears at the conclusion of an analysis in which Goodwin shows how, through the organization of their verbal and bodily behaviors, the participants demonstrate their understanding that a story is emerging:

[a narrative is] a field of action built collaboratively by structurally different actors using a variety of semiotic resources within face-to-face interaction.

(C. Goodwin 2015, 204)

The space of reflection and discovery that is opened up by these two definitions frames much of Goodwin's work. At least three perspectives are discernible: an essentially classic form of narrative analysis that identifies the components of the story (background information, parenthesis, climax); an interactional description of storytelling as a multi-unit turn, initiated by a preface which allows the introduction to be negotiated and followed by a resumption of turn-taking; and also a praxeological and holistic conception of storytelling as an activity that incorporates the entire interactional scene (rather than just the narrator), the bodies of the participants (rather than just their words), their knowledge that is shared, transmitted, taken up, and transformed, as well as, more broadly, the positions and the construction of identities that the story gives rise to and that structure the social scene.

In the first part of this article, I set out what I view as Goodwin’s major contributions to interactional approaches to storytelling (namely multimodality, participation, and social organization). Using this framework, I then examine a form of story that recurs during psychosocial support sessions for Syrian refugee women in Beirut, which I call “stories of before.” In these accounts, the narrators describe aspects of their life in Syria, most often in comparison with their current life in Lebanon. I

endeavor to characterize these narratives and to examine them in light of the way in which, at different levels, they transform the situation in which they are produced. The question that really interests me is: what results from these transformations, in the interaction as well as in the wider context in which they take place? Through a multimodal analysis inspired by Goodwin, I thus seek to understand what women are doing when they produce these stories of before.

## 1. Storytelling as a “field of action”

As the above quotes indicate, Goodwin develops a resolutely interactional vision of narratives<sup>1</sup> (Sacks 1974, 1978, 1992; Jefferson 1978, 1988). This view presents storytelling as a collective activity, which the participants set in motion and then pause in the course of their exchange. The collective dimension of a story is particularly evident in its introduction as well as in the various contributions of the co-participants.<sup>2</sup> To introduce a narrative into the interaction requires that the storyteller obtain from the interlocutors the possibility of producing a long turn (a turn made up of several turns units), which temporarily suspends turn-taking, hence the use of a “preface.”<sup>3</sup> The production of the narrative within the interaction is supported by the recipients through their receipt tokens but also by their evaluations which, as well as showing their alignment with the activity, allow them to express their affiliation (Stivers 2008; Mandelbaum 2013).<sup>4</sup> Another form of contribution from the recipients is the production of a “second story,” which they also use to show their understanding of what the speaker has narrated. Sacks describes the tasks of the recipient of a story in these terms:

Recipient of a story has as one business to display his understanding of it [. . .], and/or to affiliate to it by showing its particular relevance to him. “Oh God love ‘im” is one form such affiliation takes. Another form involves recipient telling a second story, in which recipient figures as teller had figured.

(Sacks 1978, 261)

These characteristics, briefly summarized here, form the basis of the approach to narrative from which Goodwin proposes changes of perspective, new contributions, and additions. Goodwin’s motivation does not seem to have been the search for characteristics that are specific to narratives, distinct from other interactional activities. Within his work, the story appears rather to be an activity whose in-depth study leads to deeper reflection on the nature and forms of recipientship, and on participation and its various modes. Rather than constituting a complete reconfiguration of long-standing perceptions of the narrative, the striking feature of Goodwin’s studies on narratives is the way in which he enriches our understanding of the interlocutive scene, bringing into clear focus phenomena that had previously remained invisible or at least had not been described in any detail. Moreover, the stories he studies, of which a few examples appear later in this article (see 1.1 and 1.2), are, in many respects, canonical narratives, in the sense that they present the classic characteristics: displacement toward another time; succession of events starting from an initial situation and manifested in a series of narrative propositions; sequence of events in time underlying an emplotment; and the fall.<sup>5</sup> They are therefore quite unlike the less unified and less well-formed

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<sup>1</sup> The formulation of this perspective fundamentally revisited the approach of narratological studies to narratives, based on a search for its characteristic features (sequence of narrative propositions, timetable, spatiotemporal markers, emplotment) and its questions such as, for example, that of the “minimal narrative.” For a discussion of these structural features of narratives, as well as its interactional features (preface, tellability, evaluation), see Filliettaz and Revaz (2006), and Traverso (forthcoming). Mandelbaum (2013) provides a synthesis of interactional descriptions of storytelling.

<sup>2</sup> On this point precisely, conversational descriptions of the story depart from the propositions of Labov and Waletzki (1967), which were formed on the basis of stories produced by interviewees whom the interviewer asks to recount an experience where their life was in danger. In that format, unlike in conversations, for example, the narrators do not have to negotiate the introduction of a story, since from the outset they are, as Goodwin says, in the position “of having the rights to an extended floor” (2015: 198). On the Labovian approach, see in particular Bres (2001).

<sup>3</sup> As defined by Sacks: “It is an utterance that asks for the right to produce extended talk, and says that the talk will be interesting, as well as doing other things” (1992: 226); see also Jefferson (1978).

<sup>4</sup> See C. Goodwin (1986), C. Goodwin and M.H. Goodwin (1987) on “receipt tokens” and “assessments” and on the closure value of evaluations.

<sup>5</sup> These characteristics have been widely discussed and research on narrative in social interactions agrees that many of the narratives only imperfectly meet these criteria.

narratives that are very common in conversations and that are now grouped under the label of “small stories”:

an umbrella term that captures a gamut of underrepresented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, and shared (known) events, but it also captures allusions to (previous) tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell.

(Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008, 381)<sup>6</sup>

This label was introduced to distinguish small stories from canonical narratives, which De Fina and Tseng describe with reference to the Labovian model:

According to William Labov, [. . .] stories are recapitulations of past events, with a structure involving complications and resolutions, told by a narrator in order to make a point. These canonical narratives recount chronologically ordered events in the past, have well-defined beginnings/middles/ends, and usually revolve around significant incidents.

(De Fina and Tseng 2017, 381)

Incomplete and imperfectly formed, small stories actually represent a large part of ordinary, everyday narratives, and their study has progressed in parallel with the development of interactional research (e.g., Jefferson 1988; Traverso 1994).

While Goodwin’s proposals for the analysis of narratives do not engage with the discussion on what is or is not a narrative, they nonetheless constitute a major contribution to the study of this interactional activity, by means of advances in the areas of semiotic resources, the stratification of participants, and the construction of socio-interactional organization.

### **1.1. Semiotic resources**

Goodwin’s notions of “situated activity systems” (C. Goodwin 1997) and “interactive fields” (C. Goodwin 2015) show that elements at play in an interaction include not only linguistic, discursive, and prosodic dimensions, as well as bodies and their organization in relation to each other, and objects and spatial organization, but also interactional phenomena and practices, and particularly sequential organization as well as various forms of specific and recognizable actions (such as reparations or expressions of disagreement). One example of such systems, where various semiotic resources are interlinked, is in fact the story of the wallpaper, to which Goodwin returns many times over the years (1984, 2007, 2015, 2018).

#### Extract 1

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<sup>6</sup> Georgakopoulou explains the blatant opposition seen in this label to that of the “big story” (referring to life stories, biographical stories); its introduction was linked to the need to reveal research bias and to counteract the dominant models of narrative (Georgakopoulou 2015, 256). See also Georgakopoulou (2006).

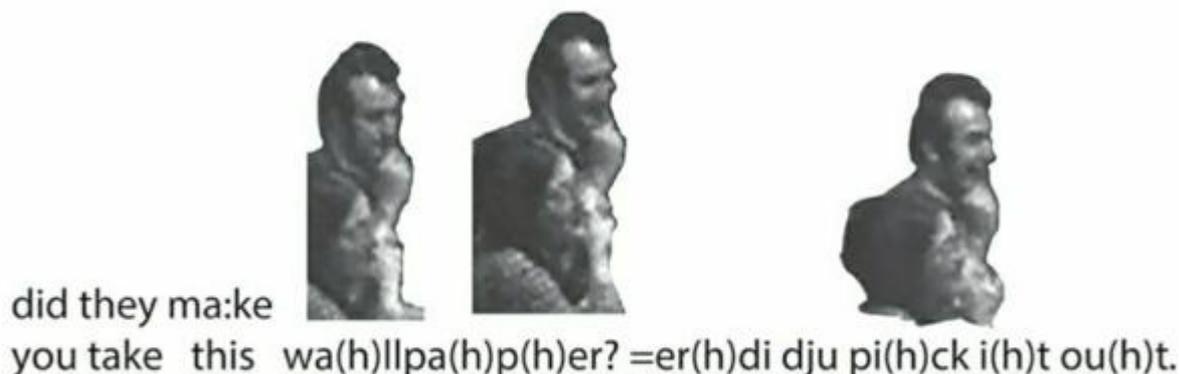
[G:26:5:55] (Simplified Version)

1 (4.0)  
2 Ann: Well- ((throat clear)) (0.4) We coulda used a  
3 liddle, marijuana. tih get through the weekend.  
4 Beth: What happened.  
5 Ann: Karen has this new hou:se. en it's got  
6 all this like- (0.2) ssilvery:: g-go:ld  
7 wa:llpaper, 'hh (h)en D(h)o(h)n sa(h)ys,  
8 y'know this's th'firs'time we've seen this  
9 house.=Fifty five thousn dollars in Cherry  
10 Hill.=Right?  
11 (0.4)  
12 Beth: Uh hu:h?  
13 Ann: Do(h)n said. (0.3) dih-did they ma:ke you take  
14 this [wa(h)llpa(h)p(h)er? er(h)di [dju pi(h)ck]  
15 Beth: hh! Ahh huh huh  
16 Ann: =[[i(h)t ou(h)t.  
17 Beth: =[[huh huh huh ,huh

Taken from C. Goodwin (1984), pages 225–226

In this extract, Goodwin shows how Don, the narrator's husband, who is present as she recounts the faux pas he made, actively participates in the narrative, albeit silently, in the way he visibly organizes his body, the direction of his gaze, his facial expressions, and his laughter. We see this in particular in line 14, the climax of the story, where the narrator inserts syllables of laughter inside the syllables of her words. Simultaneously, but in a different modality, Don produces mimicked laughter, which follows Ann's vocal laughter syllable by syllable. Goodwin describes precisely how Don's facial expression is amplified during "wa(h)llpa(h)p(h)er" (extract 2), resulting in laughter produced simultaneously by two separate bodies (Goodwin 2018, 132).

Extract 2



C. Goodwin (2018), page 132

These very detailed analyses of the resources deployed by participants considerably broaden our understanding of forms of contribution to the narrative, by taking into account not only the speech of the speakers but also their bodies. They also invite us to revisit the question of participation, and in particular to reconsider the enunciative instances of speaker(s) and recipient(s) engaged in narrative activity.

## 1.2. Multiple participants and the stratification of voices

Another of Goodwin's significant contributions to the study of narratives is his discussion, within his own research framework, of proposals emerging from other traditions, and the fact that he merges various dimensions, notably the sequential dimension and the enunciative dimension. His reflection on this area is based on an elaboration of Goffman's (1981) proposals concerning the deconstruction of participants, as well as on a "corporealized" rereading of the polyphony of Valentin Nikolaïevich Voloshinov (*Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*). In several articles (for example Goodwin 2007, 2015), he discusses the limitations of these two views and puts forward his own vision, which

is a temporalized (rather than static) vision, with a high degree of specificity (rather than being global or generic), multimodal (rather than logocentric), and which integrates “into the same world”<sup>7</sup> all participants in an interactional situation.

In his 2007 article on the wallpaper story (C. Goodwin 2007), Goodwin shows that, in a Goffmanian interpretation, Ann's speech encompasses a wide series of roles (author, animator, etc.) while the other participants are frozen in a fixed and unchanging status (recipient, official participant, whether addressed or unaddressed, etc.). In contrast, Goodwin's own analysis shows, on the one hand, that Don, who is both the character animated by, and recipient of, Ann's story, is indeed also a coproducer of the story, and on the other hand, that the modes of participation deployed by the “recipients” in the production of the story, as well as the resources they use, change as the story unfolds over time. The description of these resources and of the complexity of the contributions of the various participants is extended even further in Goodwin's analysis of the speech of his father Chil, who was aphasic as a result of a stroke and in linguistic terms had available only the three words “yes,” “no,” and “and,” as well as a number of lexically empty syllables of various prosodies (C. Goodwin, M.H. Goodwin, and Olsher 2002). His analysis of Chil's account of an earthquake (C. Goodwin 2004, 2013) during a family gathering highlights not only how Chil manages to have a “second story” told (Sacks 1992), but also how, through his facial expressions and his own body, he co-narrates the story that Helen verbally produces. At a certain point in the story (concerning a painting that almost falls on a baby because of a tremor), Chil expresses his disagreement with Helen:

### Extract 3

50	Helen:	En the picture over the be- uh the crib fell on ( )	
51	Linda:		Ohmy: goodness.
52	Chil:		No:.



53		(0.7)	
54	Linda:	Fell?	
55		(0.5)	
56	Chil:	No:.	
57	Scott:	started to fall?	
58		(0.2)	
59	Chil:	Yes:.	
60	Scott:	En you stopped it?	
61	Chil:	No:.	
62	Scott:	or you- moved it-	



### Goodwin (2004), page 164

When Helen claims the painting had fallen (l. 50), Chil disagrees (“no:” l. 52), raising his hand above his head, before looking at Helen and then Linda (who has just formulated an evaluation, l. 51). The action produced by Chil at this position in the sequence, where an explanation of the disagreement would be expected, functions as a reference to an alternative version of the event, leading the other participants to try to identify it (“started to fall?” l. 57), and ultimately resulting in a collective production of the version of the story desired by Chil. With his analyses of Chil's stories, Goodwin moves further away from his starting points (Goffman and Voloshinov), highlighting a deep interconnection between speaking roles and forms of participation. He describes a “distributed speaker” for each one of us who, like Chil, is able to “co-operatively incorporate in our own actions

<sup>7</sup> Taken from Charles Goodwin's review of Goffman's *Footing*: “In *Footing*, instead of collaborating together to build talk, speakers and hearers inhabit separate worlds” (2007, 28).

resources provided by others” (C. Goodwin 2018, 103).

### **1.3. The construction of socio-interactional organization through narrative activity**

The last aspect that should be noted here about Goodwin’s studies of narratives is the way in which they reflect and contribute to the construction of social organization. He develops his thoughts on the subject with Marjorie Goodwin, based on the latter’s work on disagreements among young African Americans.

Together, they examined, for example, how a specific type of storytelling builds a specific social organization among the group of girls, by putting participants into positions that push them into acting in a certain way. For example, if Bea tells Julia publicly that Terry made negative comments about Julia, this reported story will put Julia in the position of the “offended party,” which will lead her to want to accuse Terry and hold her to account. These “instigating stories” (M.H. Goodwin 1982) set up protagonists and events in a way that is strongly related to the positions that they push the girls in the group to take and the social actions that they push them to carry out. Accordingly, they construct and transform social organizations and the identities of participants.<sup>8</sup> This idea of transformation is of major importance in Goodwin’s later works. He sees this process at work on different levels, for example when, in a successive turn, participants take up and transform the elements and parts of a previous turn (the “substrates,” C. Goodwin 2018); in the fact that a story transforms in situ (i.e., at the time of its production) the socio-interactional organization in place; as well as in the return transformation that the in situ interaction will have on the participants’ actions and on themselves:

The process of participating in the interactive field created by a narrative—performing transformative operations on it that display understanding and build appropriate, consequential subsequent action—simultaneously transforms those who perform such operations.

(C. Goodwin 2015, 216)

Once again, in these examples the emphasis is not on the narrative as a series of propositions, nor on the reality, truth, or accuracy of the facts that have been related, but on its effect on the situation in which it is produced, for, with, and between those present.

## **2. Contrasting, escaping, and redefining the context by storytelling in a collective**

As part of the REMILAS-Liban project<sup>9</sup> and as an extension of a series of studies on the construction of identity positions in gatherings (Traverso 2003, 2014, 2017), the aim of the following study is to describe what appears to be a particular type of story in the very specific context of psychosocial support sessions for vulnerable refugee women. As well as analyzing these stories, I will seek to show how their production transforms the actual context. My objective is to shed light on what these transformations lead to, not only in the here and now of the interaction (through the sequences they give rise to), but above all in the broader context of the session in which they take place and the social organization that psychosocial support sessions reflect.

### **2.1. Life skills sessions**

“Life skills and awareness sessions” fall under the broad category of “mental health and psychosocial support”, which is described by humanitarian organizations as “any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being and/or prevent or treat mental disorder” (InterAgency Standing Committee IASC, 2007).<sup>10</sup> At Nina, the NGO where the sessions studied were recorded, women come to be trained in textile crafts. Their registration in this course also commits

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<sup>8</sup> Identities and positions are thus approached in a fundamentally interactional way, i.e., they are viewed as being set up in situ, in both sequential and relational terms (see, among others, Antaki and Widdicombe 1998; Greco, Mondada, and Renaud 2014).

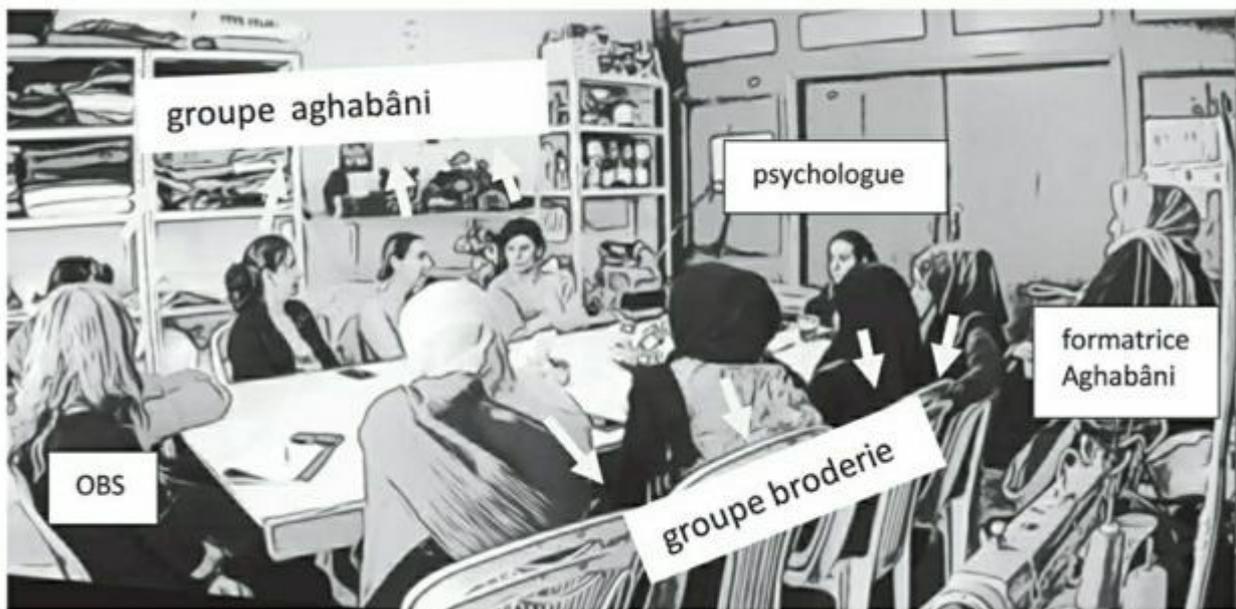
<sup>9</sup> Project funded by Ifpo-Beirut and Saint Joseph University (Beirut).

<sup>10</sup> See [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/emergencies/guidelines\\_iasc\\_mental\\_health\\_psychosocial\\_june\\_2007.pdf](http://www.who.int/mental_health/emergencies/guidelines_iasc_mental_health_psychosocial_june_2007.pdf)

them to taking a Life Skills session, where their presence is also monitored. A female psychologist or social worker facilitates these sessions.

The stories that I analyze are therefore produced within a framework that activates identity attributions:<sup>11</sup> the very fact that a session is devoted to women's rights, to stress, or to hygiene categorizes the participants as 1) being likely to suffer from issues related to these themes, and 2) not having knowledge about, or at least requiring further information on, these topics. In this article, I focus on a session devoted to hygiene that was attended by two groups of women being trained in two embroidery techniques (machine embroidery or *aghabâni*, and hand embroidery). The two embroidery trainers arrived during the session. The group is seated around a large table (one of the two trainers is out of the picture). The facilitator (a psychologist) is seated at the end of the table; the women participating in the session are seated by order of arrival and within their embroidery group. Accordingly, the *aghabâni* group are seated on one side of the table, to the right of the psychologist, and to her left is the hand embroidery group.

Image 1



Translation of captions from left to right: observer, the *aghabâni* group, embroidery group, psychologist, the *aghabâni* trainer

The two groups are differentiated not only by their chosen craft, but also by the fact that most of the participants in the *aghabâni* group are vulnerable Lebanese women, with the exception of one displaced Iraqi woman, while all the women in the hand embroidery group are Syrian.

## 2.2. Stories of before

The women's "stories of before" evoke the country left behind. These are stories from before the war (in Iraq or Syria), from before their exile. They do not relate specific facts or events that took place at a clearly defined time in the past; they concern the habits and routines of life in the country left behind. In recounting these stories, the women highlight the differences in the way of life and living conditions between Syria and Lebanon and point out what was better before, back there.

These stories stand out from the types of stories that are most frequently analyzed in the field of migration studies (see among others Pestre 2010; Jacquemet 2009; d'Halluin-Mabillot 2012; Maitilasso 2014; Chambon 2018; Saglio-Yatzimirski 2018; Traverso and Chambon, forthcoming). Indeed, these stories do not conform to the variations and repetitions of the "refugee story" as it must be produced for the organizations that process asylum requests or as it is prepared by the groups that help migrants with their application. Nor do these resemble the narratives solicited in interviews

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<sup>11</sup> Greco, Mondada and Renaud (2014); Traverso (2014, 2017); Marranconi and Kerbage (2017); Kerbage and Traverso (2020).

or focus groups,<sup>12</sup> another major category of narratives seen in the field of migration studies. Indeed, these stories of before are not solicited, they emerge; they bring something to the interaction that is unique to the narrators, rather than being their attempt to conform to expectations (of the researcher) or demands (of the protection officer). They take place in a setting where they are not specifically expected or requested, but where conditions nevertheless allow for their production. Formally, they are far from including all the characteristics of the canonical narrative discussed above. One of their defining linguistic markers consists of introductory statements comprising temporal and spatial markers that form a break with the here and now of the interaction (“when I was/we were in. . .,” “back then. . .”). They are most often very brief, and do not correspond to the category of the “*emplotment*,” which has a logical model (in the relationship between cause and effect) underpinned by temporal organization (i.e., ordered utterances). Rather, they are based on a model of contrast or opposition. One last important characteristic is that they take place in multi-participant situations, and that they are themselves collective, even though most of the time only one speaker verbally produces the story form. In this sense, they are truly a field of action (C. Goodwin 2015).

### 2.3. Setting up a collective story: “We had a big house”

The Life Skills session devoted to hygiene begins with a round table during which each woman in turn gives her point of view on what this concept covers and its importance (Traverso and Kerbage 2020). Maha, chosen to speak first, describes the difficulties she has in keeping her children clean. At the end of her turn, when she is about to hand on to her neighbor on her right (image 1 below), another participant (seated opposite her), Maïssa, takes the turn. The extract reproduced below begins at the end of Maha’s turn at talk, when Maïssa and then the psychologist produce a few turns, confirming the end of this first turn at talk and formulating their agreement (Maïssa, l. 4) as well as proposing a generalizing statement (the psychologist, l. 5, 7, 9):

#### Extract 4<sup>13</sup>

All interactions take place in Arabic. The original language, in the form of a phonetic transcription, is reproduced only when this is necessary to indicate more precisely the sequentiality of the turn or multimodality.<sup>14</sup>

4	MAI	hm::: that’s true
5	PYR	all children are [like that
6	MAH	[yes
7	PYR	if if they play if they don’t get dirty huh [(.)&
8	MAH	[yes that’s true
9	PYR	&it’s as if they if they hadn’t been playing
10	MAH	°mmhm°

<sup>12</sup> On this point, Maitilasso relates the following anecdote: “Do you want me to tell you my story? I can do that, I have already done it many times’, Thierno explains to me with a smile [. . .] when I tell him about my research and my desire to talk with him about his migratory journey. Thierno’s life story is presented as a product, the expression of a literary performance that can be reproduced whenever desired; a product for which there is a strong demand from journalists, ethnographers, and human rights activists” (Maitilasso 2014, 1). My own experience at the NGO Nina also reflects this state of affairs: while the participants (both trainers and beneficiaries) were disconcerted that I did not ask them to tell me about their life but to let me record the training and Life Skills sessions, when I finally conducted interviews (on their experience of training in textile crafts), they found themselves on familiar ground, and I understood how familiar and even pleasing this format was to them.

<sup>13</sup> I thank Sophie Harfouche and Maha Barakat for the transcription of the corpora. My warm gratitude also goes to all those involved in NGO Nina, who welcomed me among them for a year and allowed me to make recordings.

<sup>14</sup> Transcription formatting uses normal font for transcription, lighter font for translations, and bold grey for multimodal notations. The conventions used follow ICOR: [http://icar.cnrs.fr/projets/corinte/documents/2013\\_Conv\\_ICOR\\_250313.pdf](http://icar.cnrs.fr/projets/corinte/documents/2013_Conv_ICOR_250313.pdf). The transcription from Arabic follows ARAPI convention: <https://ifpo.hypotheses.org/933>. In translation, the sign {} surrounds adaptations aimed at facilitating understanding (additions or translation by pragmatic equivalents, for example for discursive markers). Conventions used for the notation of gestures available on the CORVIS website: <http://icar.cnrs.fr/projets/corvis/>.

mah nods  
 11 (2.5)  
 12 # MAI \*especially #1 here +the #2 space {I mean} there isn't  
 mah \*gestures toward her neighbor on her right  
 mai +G->MAH, raises her hands facing one  
 another to describe the space=>  
 13 MAI isn't isn't [::  
 14 MAH [yes that's true  
 15 (0.3)



Image 1 - Maha gestures toward her neighbor on the right to indicate it is her turn to speak



Image 2 - Maissa describes the living spaces

16 MAI +{I mean} the ap- +the organization  
 mai +G>PSY +G>MAH  
 17 the organization of the apartments +here  
 +R>PSY



dwellings in Lebanon—while the term “enclosed” or “small” is not pronounced, it is embodied by the compartmentalized and defined space conveyed by the speaker’s two outstretched hands (image 3a, 3b), contrasting with the wide and circular gesture describing the large houses in Iraq (l. 8 below, images 4a, b, c, d, e):

**Extract 5** (detailed transcript of extract 4)

16 MAI jaʕni eʃʃe- niðām  
 +{I mean} the ap- +the organization  
 mai +G>PYR +G>MAH  
 17# niðām eʃʃiqāq #3 +hōn (.)  
 the organization of the apartments here (.)  
 mai +G>PYR



Image 3a - The organization of apartments + here



Image 3b - Maïssa defines a space between her two outstretched hands

18# miʃ niðām +el#4 bjūt lekbire  
 it's not like the organization of big houses  
 mai +opens her hands in a  
 circular gesture



Image 4a



Image 4b



Image 4c



Image 4d



Image 4e - Maïssa, hands relaxed, makes a wide circular gesture

19# +mitlə ma kə#5nna naħna  
 as we were  
 +gestures toward L with L hand



Image 5 - Left hand gesturing to the left “as we were”

20# MAI bi lʕirāq u mumkin \*bi su#6rja [kamān  
 in I+raq and maybe in Syria too  
 mai +G>MAH, gestures toward MAH, R hand  
 mah \*nods

21# MAH [ʔē kamān  
 yes als\*o+  
 mah -> \*  
 mai +G>PYR



Image 6 - Right hand gesturing toward Maha “in Syria too”

This part of Maïssa’s turn establishes a possible common point (a shared attribute) between the speaker (an Iraqi) and the Syrian participants (“and perhaps in Syria too”). This proposal elicits the agreement of Maha (who nods regularly) as well as that of several of the (Syrian) women, seated opposite Maïssa, who also nod.

Following this introduction, Maïssa begins a story of life before (extract 6) by speaking, no longer as a voice supporting Maha’s turn, but in the name of an “us” which shares a common experience. She indicates this by the use of the pronoun “us” (“us, our houses, they were uh;,” “*naḥna buyūtna kānet ø:::*”), in a construction with the disjunctive pronoun “*naḥna*” (us/we) at the beginning of her turn, which reinforces the opposition between the houses of Iraq (and possibly of Syria) and those of Lebanon. The speaker continues, with her gaze directed toward the psychologist, describing what the houses were like “over there”:

## Extract 6

- 22 MAI [+us our houses they were uh::+ (0.5)  
mai +raises her hands facing one another +
- 23 +{I mean} horizontal constructions +  
mai +hands in vertical position, then horizontal, with R hand sweeping  
over L hand
- 24 +not vertical  
mai +hands facing one another, upwards mvt
- (0.4)
- 25 PYR yes
- 26 MAI +{I mean} one house next to another +and there was  
mai +R hand gesture indicates successive positions +gesture of separation
- 27 a fence (0.5) +and you had a big house and +you  
mai + 2 hands gesturing in front +rep.
- 28 # had a garden and +you had a garage (.) {so} #8  
mai +rep.
- 29 # +the child was more #9 \*¶[comfortable playing  
mai +rep.
- 30 MAH [°yes°  
mah \*H->PYR, nods  
sam ¶H->PYR, nods



Image 8 - Maha and Samar look at Maïssa



Image 9 - Maha and Samar look at psychologist

- 31 PYR hm hm
- 32 (0.2)
- 33 # MAI not like here +{where::} #10  
mai +presses her hands together and shoulders forward
- 34 # MAI (.) he is im- im-  
35 imprisoned in the house  
36 +{it's:}#11:

mai +G>opposite

mah G>PYR

sam G>PYR

37 PYR yes



Image 10



Image 11 - Maha and Samar look at Maïssa



Image 12 - Maha and Samar have turned their heads toward the psychologist, while Maïssa looks in their direction

After a description of the houses in Iraq, lines 22–28, Maïssa explains, in line 29, the link with the children of whom Maha spoke. Finally, in line 33, she describes a contrast with what is happening “here” (“not like here,” “*mif mitəl hūn*”), where the child “is imprisoned in the house” (“*maḥbūs bi*

*lbēt*). The description of places and space is accompanied by numerous gestures which reinforce the contrasts between large spaces (with their various components, cf. baton gestures l. 27–28) and spaces which enclose (retraction of the arms and shoulders, l. 33, images 10, 11).

The construction of interlocution by means of the gaze is also interesting. On the first occasion, at line 30, two members of the group (Maha and Samar) use their bodies to express their affiliation with Maïssa's words (they nod their heads), and they reinforce the structuring of the current story: at the statement "so the child was more comfortable playing," which appears to be a kind of conclusion to what precedes, and a possible end of Maïssa's turn (or is at least a marked articulation), they turn to the psychologist, demonstrating that they are waiting for her reaction. The same configuration occurs again at line 36, at the end of Maïssa's turn, which is left open by the speaker as she herself looks toward the women opposite them, while Maha and Samar turn toward the psychologist, again expressing their expectation of a reaction. At line 37, the psychologist produces a simple receipt token, indicating that she will not resume the turn, which allows Maïssa to go on.

The essentially silent contributions (except for the very quiet "yes" spoken by Maha, l. 30) and gestural or postural contributions of Maha and Samar also embody the socio-interactive organization set up by Maïssa: these two participants act as active parts of the "we." The affiliation between the participants, which creates a form of collective speaker that represents the voices of those who have left their country, is expressed again at the end of Maïssa's turn:

### Extract 7

- 38 MAI lamma kænna bi lʕiraq/ ʕēr ʃi::\:  
when° we were in IRAQ/ it was DIFFERENT/
- 39 ?enno:: hajdi ləʒnejne u baʕrif  
this is the garden and I know
- 40 ?ænno \*ʕam jalʕabu \*u hək  
\*that they are playing \*{and all that}
- mah \*nods \*nods
- 41 PYR ?ē  
yes
- 42 (0.5)
- 43 MAI bass hūn ?enno::: (. ) bʕūfha ʕaʕb ?enno lwalad  
but here (. ) I find it difficult that the child  
jiʕlaʕ ma btaʕrfi wēn rājeħ (0.4) u::: (0.3)
- 44 goes out you don't know where he is going (0.4) and::: (0.3)
- 45 bi hal ʕaʒʔa uʕawāriʕ u:: (0.9)  
in this busy place and these streets and:: (0.9)
- 46 KTĪR ʕAʕB jaʕni  
it's very difficult {in fact}
- 47 \*[(0.5) u kamān tetərki lwa- lwaled  
\*[(0.5) and also that you leave the- the child
- mah \*inclines her head to one side

48 MAH [hm

48 MAI be lbēt kill ennhār kamān \*(0.5) [\*ʂaʂb  
in the house all day also \*(0.5) \*it's difficult  
mai \*shakes her head and shoulders  
mai \*head mvt up and down 2 times

49 MAH [kamān ø: +ħabes  
it is also uh: an imprisonment  
mai +G->MAH

50 MAH ħurijje  
of freedom

51 (0.5)

52 MAI +ʔē::\ [ (.) ʂaʂb  
yes it's difficult  
mai +inclines her head

53 MAH [ʔē  
yes  
mah G->PYR  
mai G->upward

54 (0.8)

I will not present a detailed analysis of this extract, but will highlight two aspects.

On the one hand, we see that Maïssa again constructs this last part of her contribution on the basis of a contrast (“when we were in Iraq . . .,” l. 38, “but here,” l. 43), highlighting the difficulties in Beirut and the tranquility of Iraq.

At line 49, overlapping with Maïssa’s final evaluation, Maha in turn utters an evaluation, thus confirming the closure of the story. This addition is particularly interesting to observe in the light of the processes of resumption, transformation, and recycling of resources that were present in the interaction. It first reproduces Maïssa’s syntactic construction of her previous turn (Maïssa: “kamān (0.5) ʂaʂb” “it’s difficult,” l. 48; Maha: “kamān ø: ħabes ħurijje” “it is also uh:: an imprisonment of freedom,” l. 49). It also resumes the same type of construction as in the initiation of Maïssa’s turn (l. 12, extract 5), “xaʂtan” “especially” and “kamān” “also” (adverbial expansions) and the same modality i.e., completion of a turn. Finally, the speaker recycles and transforms the lexical root of imprisonment (*ħbs*) (used as a noun in “ħabes ħurijje” “imprisonment of freedom,” l. 49; then as a past participle in “maħbūs bi lbēt” “imprisoned in the house,” employed by Maïssa l. 35, extract 6).

Maha’s turn at talk leads to a brief affiliative exchange between her and Maïssa, achieving closure of the story: at line 49, Maïssa, who was looking at the psychologist, turns to Maha, then, at line 51, she makes a confirmation (with a “yes” and a nod of her head), before once again uttering her own evaluation, thus integrating Maïssa’s contribution into her own speech, while Maha also makes her own ratification (line 52). Both then mark the end of the exchange by looking away from each other, Maha turning to the psychologist, while Maïssa looks up.

In summary, we can interpret the speech from line 22 as emanating—through Maïssa’s voice—from a collective speaker, who tells a story of life before, accompanied, supported, and completed by the contributions (verbal, vocal, or gestural) of the other participants. This story plays out many

processes of resumption, transformation, and echo on the verbal level, as well as the “corporalization” of socio-interactive positions. The story moves the discussion toward common considerations that are shared with the other refugee women in the group, concerning their past life, a life that was more affluent (cf. the list of possessions, lines 27–28) than life in the here and now. This indicates the presence of identity traits that go beyond those of “women requiring Life Skills sessions or women in need of support from groups providing aid to refugees.”

## 2.4. Telling a story to differentiate yourself: Aleppo laurel oil soap

The second story, which I will examine very briefly, sets up quite different socio-interlocutive constructions within the group. The *aghabâni* trainer, Monira, joined the session during the round table. Once each of the participants has expressed herself, the psychologist invites her to speak, and she discusses the curative properties of hot water, which leads her to introduce a story from before:

### Extrait 8

14 MON {in fact} we used to go to the public hammams (.)  
 15 the water [(0.6) there was uh how do they say it  
 16 PYR [hm  
 17 MON the house of fire  
 18 (0.3)  
 19 PYR hm  
 20 MON the house of fire had like a long platform  
 21 (0.4)  
 22 as hot {as} fire  
 23 (0.5)  
 24 MON huh (0.2) uh:: when they sit on it  
 25 [the body can stand it  
 26 GLO [like a #sauna# [Ωlike a #sauna# Ωback home]  
 glo ΩG>Obs ΩG>MON=>  
 27 MON [yes (.) like a #sauna# ]  
 28 like a sauna (0.5) and so [xx the water (.) the old people  
 29 GLO [sweat running  
 30 MON poured water (.) hot hot water\  
 31 (0.7) [11 lines on hot water omitted]  
 32 MON {I mean} and:: they Δonly used Δthe sa-  
 mon Δraises a finger=> ΔG>group=>  
 chin level  
 33 MON (0.5) ghâr soap [Aleppo soap I don't know if]  
 34 MAH [\*yes ghâr ]  
 mah \*nods  
 35 MON anyone knows it [Δhere they call it local soap  
 mon Δraises her finger higher  
 36 wom. [yes  
 37 MON (0.4) Δthey brought me some but it didn't look like  
 mon Δhands together=>  
 38 MON ghâr soap Δ (0.5) from Aleppo that uh (0.4)  
 mon Δarms lowered

39 {I mean} uh pre- prevents allergies  
 40 (1.2)  
 41 PYR hm

Monira develops her story by gazing at the psychologist, while the latter produces continuers (l. 16, 19). At line 26, in an intervention which momentarily interrupts the face-to-face conversation between Monira and the psychologist, Gloria compares the hammam to the sauna, which can also be interpreted as a marker of the contrast between a modern Western reality (the sauna “back home”) and a different oriental and traditional reality, of which Monira speaks.<sup>15</sup>

In the rest of the story, Monira mentions the handcrafted soap (*ṣabun ḡār*) that is emblematic of her city, Aleppo. In lines 32–33, she draws attention to it during her turn at talk through a series of processes: gesturing, with a raised finger; glancing, directed at the whole group; self-repair, incorporating a relatively long pause before pronouncing the name. Then, at lines 33–35, with the phrase “I don't know if anyone knows it,” she suggests that the reality she is describing is possibly unknown to other participants, including the Syrian women in the group. She thus constructs the group in a very different way to Maïssa's action in the previous story. Here, not only does she imply that the other participants might not know what she is talking about, but when on the contrary the latter claim to know Aleppo soap (l. 36, most of the women in the group nod vigorously, wherever they are sitting around the table and whether or not they are refugees), she goes on to draw attention to the fact that Aleppo soap is very different (and much more hygienic) than local Lebanese soap. In her speech, Monira thus operates lines of distinction that are more complex than what Maïssa did in her story, and which cannot be summed up by the contrast of “here”/“there.” On the other hand, rather like Maïssa, she mentions the differences between Aleppo laurel soap and Lebanese handcrafted soap (l. 35–38), emphasizing that the latter does not have the sanitizing qualities of *ghâr* soap and putting forward a contrast (marked in particular by the opposition of “I” versus “they”).

## 2.5. The reception of the stories

Monira's story, like that of Maïssa, is a story that places value on customs from before and that evokes what was better in the country left behind compared to the reality of here. In these two stories, the negative side of the comparison is simply denoted by “here” (*hūn*), and, rather than “we” or “I,” only “they” is spoken. Lebanon, Beirut, and the Lebanese are not explicitly mentioned. In these stories, it is neither the protagonists (see for example the vague use of the pronoun “they” in Monira's account), nor the precise facts that matter, but the fleeting evocation of another time and the emphasis on differences in ways of behaving and living, accompanied by an underlying value judgment which allows us to glimpse the difficulties of living as a refugee.

I have focused on the introduction and reception of the stories among the people who are connected to them (having produced the turn that led to the story, or having engaged in it by means of continuers, marks of verbal or gestural agreement, or evaluations, or by collaborating in their closure).

But beyond these moments, the space that these stories open up in the general dynamic of the sessions is very quickly closed down in what follows on. Each arouses a reaction from one of the Lebanese women in the group. After Maïssa's story, one woman refutes the point that the story illustrated, arguing that viruses are also caught at home and that therefore “it doesn't make any difference if you deprive them of their freedom.” She refutes the accuracy of what has just been said and redirects the discussion toward the theme of hygiene in general.

After Monira's story, the same participant takes the floor to make fun of the old customs of the hammam—where “the grandmothers would boil you alive”—throwing doubt on them by pointing out that doctors today recommend, on the contrary, not to treat one's skin aggressively and to wash with mild products.

These interventions pick up on some aspect of the narrative as being inaccurate (e.g., “in Lebanon, children must be deprived of their freedom to keep them clean”). They reframe things, and in the course of the sessions these stories of before thus appear as moments, recurrent yet fleeting.

<sup>15</sup> On contrasting representations of the hammam in the Middle East as expressed during sessions, see Traverso (2014, 2017).

### 3. Conclusion

These stories of before are very far removed from being canonical stories or real chronicles of the life of before. They fall back on a past time, but are not organized in the form of a series of events: they evoke a time which does not progress; they use fragments to recall lost ways of living and doing. Through these stories, the women animate voices, both individual and collective, within the collective. Sometimes they argue and openly question the validity of what is said (Traverso 2019; Traverso and Kerbage 2020), but this is quite rare.

The question, ultimately, is that of the impact of these stories and the local transformations that they operate on the sessions, on their expectations and their principles, on the themes discussed or on the group. Initially, the analysis of the stories shows that, in the sequential unfurling of the interaction, they are followed by a return to the framework (in terms of subject or format) that was set up at the start. The stories are fleeting, and the space they open up is fragile. More generally, the year-long fieldwork carried out in this NGO did not reveal any significant change in life skills activities, apart from the alterations arising from new directives from funding bodies. However, these stories of before are recurrent and emerge session after session, on different occasions, to express through the motif of contrast the shortcomings and difficulties of life “here.” Their recurrence, and the responses they most often elicit from the Lebanese facilitators or participants, seem to point to two aspects, which I will now relate to the very activity of “psychosocial support for refugees and vulnerable people” and all that this implies in terms of constraint, attribution of image, and proposition/imposition of principles, which are often inapplicable in the conditions in which these people live. In interviews, the facilitators, young psychologists, sometimes still in training, or social workers, often express their unease and the difficulty of their task (Traverso 2019). They are well aware that participants attend sessions for very diverse reasons that have little to do with the session content, ranging from the opportunity to leave their homes, meet other people, have their children taken care of while they themselves are attending training, and so on. In practice, many of these women are just waiting for the session to end and sometimes chat with each other, some talk about the topics raised, some dispute what is being said, some tell stories. It is within this context that we must consider these stories of before. Drawing on the work of Charles Goodwin and taking into account the diverse resources, the bodies of the participants, and the establishment of embodied collective roles, my analysis has shown that these stories activate another collective within the group, which, through the story, develops a practice of resistance to the activity and what it is putting in place. This is played out over and over again, in a repetitive way, and provokes, in an equally recurrent way, repartee, reframing, even rebuttals (like “it doesn't make any difference if you deprive them of their freedom”). This repetition resembles a game: a kind of bickering that goes back and forth.

At the same time, the stories also represent narrative escapes, which briefly lead outside the current situation (the Life Skills session) or the more general situation (of being a displaced person). Through their production, the women collectively evoke, remember, and value their customs, as a way of laughing in the face of constraints and difficulties, but also as a way of briefly appropriating to themselves the time that is meant to be dedicated to a session promoting psychosocial well-being.

#### **Translated and edited by Cadenza Academic Translations**

Translator: Clare Horackova; Editor: Suzy Bott; Senior editor: Mark Mellor

#### Transcript conventions

The transcript conventions used in this paper are a simplified version of the ICOR conventions, whose complete version is available on the website: [http://icar.cnrs.fr/projets/corinte/documents/2013\\_Conv\\_ICOR\\_250313.pdf](http://icar.cnrs.fr/projets/corinte/documents/2013_Conv_ICOR_250313.pdf).

ABC	le pseudo the participant's pseudo is made of three capital letters.		
[]	beginning and end of overlaps	xxx	inaudible segment
par-	truncation	/ \	raising/falling intonation
:	lengthening	.h	inhalation

(.)	short pauses (untimed) (<0.2s)	(il va)	uncertain transcription
(2.2)	pauses in seconds	°well°	quiet voice or very quiet (°°well°°)
&	continuation of the turn by the same participant	SO	increased volume or other forms of insistence
=	latching	[...]	transcriber's cut
((rire))	double parenthesis: non transcribed phenomena	->	before an abbreviated name, points to the turns commented on in the analysis

Conventions for gestures are loosely based on those of Mondada, available on the website CORVIS <http://icar.univ-lyon2.fr/projets/corvis/>.

abc	abbreviated names in lowercase letters indicate that the line is devoted to the description of a gesture or movement
tourne la tête	descriptions of gestures are in grey
* *	indicates the beginning and end of a gesture or gaze that is described in the next line
>> ou -->	indicates that the gesture continues during the following lines until the next marker
G	gaze
H	head
R hand, L hand	right hand, left hand
*, Δ, Ω	is used to distinguish the participants in descriptions of gestures

The Arabic transcript adheres to ARAPI transcript conventions (<https://ifpo.hypotheses.org/9335>), of which it only uses the interactional tier and the translation tier. In the translation, {} indicates adaptations to facilitate understanding (words added or pragmatic equivalent, for example for discursive markers).

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**Abstract:**

In this article, I attempt to characterize brief narratives repeatedly produced within the framework of psychosocial support sessions with refugee and vulnerable women in Lebanon. I treat them as “fields of action,” demonstrating how, at different levels, they transform the situation in which they are produced, with a view to understanding what the women are doing with these “stories of before.”

**Keywords:** interactional resources, participation, refugee women, framework, transformation