Identity Construction of Brazilian Senior Citizens[1]

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1. Introduction

It is by now well established that narratives are a fruitful source for investigating how identities are displayed and negotiated in social practices. In this paper, I focus on identity construction by senior citizens. Scholars have investigated this topic from different angles such as linguistic strategies (Coupland, 1993), memory (Baldwin, 2008), inclusion, citizenship, etc. However, my specific focus here will be on how the construction of the identity is displayed through a whole life span.

Data come from an ethnographic project carried out with 10 Brazilian illiterate senior citizens, aging from 65 to 83 years old, who live by and off a landfill in the outskirts of the capital city, Brasília - Brazil. The corpus was built from January 2014 - July 2015, during this time, Portuguese literacy classes were offered by me.

The detailed socio-interactional approach analysis, complemented through ethnographic work, enabled me to analyze how these senior citizens positioned themselves and others as they narrate their stories of life and hardship, focusing on how their self past, self present and self future are deployed in the narratives. The analysis is based on the study of different levels of positioning (see Bamberg, 1997; Deppermann, 2015; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Bamberg, De Fina & Schriffrin, 2011; De Fina, 2013). Through close analysis of the narratives, I show how the senior citizens

display and negotiate their identity in the past as hardworking, rejected; in the present, as victims, excluded. In the future, as ashamed, embarrassed and excluded.

This research is integrated to the Latin American Network of Critical Discourse Analysis on Poverty – REDLAD, through the Brazilian Study Group of Discourse, Poverty and Identity[2]. It is part of my PhD project entitled "Discursive representations and identity construction of senior citizens: from life stories to literacy events".

In order to organize the topics presented in this paper, I will begin with a brief overview of key concepts, such as narrative and identity. Next, I will discuss the interactional positioning theory. Then, I will present the analysis of the three main categories: self past, self present and the self future. For each category there will be a narrative excerpt to illustrate it. Finally, I will make some final comments based on the analysis.

2. Narrative and Identity

Advances in research on narratives gave way to an interactional approach, which conceives narratives as talk-in-interaction and as a social practice (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008). In short, it conceives texts as the realization of socio-historically situated social events inserted in a context of culture, which dialectically exert influence on each other. Furthermore, it examines the ways in which the discursive situated phenomenon interconnects to broader social processes, such as discrimination, racism, social exclusion, to name a few.

In this perspective, the narrative is seen as a locus where representations are constructed. The narrator, while building the story world, presents him/herself and presents others and uses categories to define his/her identity as well as that of others. In addition, narrative studies seek to show that what defines people as members of a group is not only based on the content of their stories, but on the way they use the socially established resources to tell them. In this light, narratives provide world models, in which the actions and reactions are related to the identity and, therefore, represent and build social relationships (De Fina, Schiffrin, Bamberg, 2006).

Identity (traditionally associated with the self) is believed to be constituted in and through interaction, needless to say, linked to a social context. In this perspective, language occupies a central role in most social practices in which human beings are engaged. So, identity is seen as a process, not a unit, it does not belong to individuals, but emerges in interactions within concrete practice and is achieved through the discursive work (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1970; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). Recently, there has been a growing movement to study identity by bringing the interaction process to the center of attention and "emphasizes the social nature of identity, its plurality and interdependence in different levels of contextualization" (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012, p. 156).

In line with these thoughts, Anthony Giddens, and Zygmunt Bauman argue that a post-modern life is characterized by uncertainty, physical and social mobility, especially marked by disaggregation. Man has lost the credibility and sense of belonging to the traditional social structures and has become more aware of the lack of continuity, as well as sense of permanence both personal and in the environment that one lives in (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). This post-modern scenario has been used as the basis for studies on narrative and identity, especially the study of interactional positioning, as described below.

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[2] This group is led by Professor Dr. Denize Elena Garcia da Silva (CNPq/DGP) since 2006. REDLAD-Brazil is part of a broader international project: Latin American Network of Discourse Analysis on Poverty, which currently is composed by six countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela.

3. Interactional Approach to Positioning

In the last two decades, the interactional approach to positioning has established itself as a concept to elucidate how identities emerge and are negotiated in narratives. The interactional positioning theories address facets of identity, particularly, the way it is revealed in and through discourse (Bamberg & Georgakapalou, 2008). In this sense, the aim is not to find identity aspects in abstract structures, hidden in a discursive practice. Rather, the interactional positionings are linked to concrete social practices and allow analysts to empirically deal with the way in which people express their identities in situated practices.

Positioning is a discursive practice "whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and intersubjectively' coherent participants in jointly produced story lines" (Davies & Harré 1990, p. 48). Thus, in conversation, people position themselves in relation to one another, in doing so they "produce" one another (and themselves) situationally as social beings. Bamberg (1997) has refined the theory of positioning and suggests it be divided into three levels.

Level 1 – How are the characters positioned in relation to one another within the events? (Antagonists x Protagonists, etc.)

Level 2 – How does the speaker position him or herself to the audience? (what is the narrator doing with the story? Justifying himself/herself, trying to convince the audience of something?)

Level 3 – How does situated talk articulate with wider sociocultural practices? (De Fina, 2013).

So far I have presented the theoretical framework. I shall, now, proceed with the analysis.

4. Identity Construction Analysis

The analysis will be divided into three parts. First, I will show how identity is displayed in the past self, specifically when the participant talks about the adversity to go to school. Second, I will illustrate how identity is presented in the self present, particularly, when the participant faces some problems related to health issues. Third, I will demonstrate how identities are revealed in the self future, when the participant talks about her dreams.

1. Self past

Self past encapsulates experiences of life from childhood to the present time. The data is comprised of many stories about the participants' past experiences. The participants were asked if they had attended school in childhood. As a result, subcategories were created based on the content of the stories. Adversity to go to school was one of several subcategories that were identified in the data. Below, I will discuss one example of it to illustrate how identities are displayed in the narrative.

What stood out initially from the data was the fact that the participants (my students) talked about the adversity encountered in attending school in childhood. The reason for not being able to go to school was closely linked to work. This fact presented by the narrative reveals aspects of the sociocultural context, in the rural areas of the Middle East region of Brazil, in the 1930's and1940's. This historical period was recognized as the country's industrialization process, which, in turn, deeply transformed the urban and the rural areas. The transformation brought about innovative agricultural systems and technologies, greatly affecting the livelihoods of peasants who were forced to migrate to urban centers in search of work and better living conditions.

In the excerpt (1), we have a fragment of the story of Mrs. Silva (S), an optimistic, compassionate and perky lady, who lives in a very modest home by the landfill. She

earns a pension worth about two hundred dollars. She takes care and provides for her foster granddaughter, and two great-grandsons. At her age, she still collects items from the landfill, washes and repairs them and, cheerfully donates around the shantytown.

After sitting down in a quiet place, outside the classroom, I explained to her the procedures of the interview and asked her permission to record (line 1). In response to my inquiry, she says she has nothing to hide (line 4). Here, she positions herself as being sincere and honest, thus revealing aspects of her identity. Moreover, the researcher (A) asks where she was born and repeats the name of her hometown, as offering emotional support and asks if she had the opportunity to go to school as a child (line 8-9).

(1) 1   (A) – Right... Will you allow me to record this interview?
     2   (S) – Yes... for me its all right.
     3   (A) – Okay. great.
     4   (S) – Have nothing to hide, right? It's not a lie.
     5   (A) – The interview isn't very long. Where were you born?
     6   (S) – I was born in a place called Suja Pé, Barra do Corda.
     7   (A) – Barra [do...
     8   (S) –   [do Corda, Maranhão. Great! Did you have an opportunity to
     9   go school?
    10   (S) – No. I had, I tried to start school at about five years old, but my father
    11   ... I was raised by my loving gramma. Uh, I was rejected by him.
    12   Neither of them wanted me, so my gramma took care of me since I
    13   was six months old. Then, when I was five years old, my father took
    14   me out of her home and put me to work in the farm. Then, I did not
    15   have a chance to study. Never, ever, ever, ever. My grandma wished,
    16   but had no power. My father was rude, mean. God forgive me... Hope
    17   he is in a good place. I loved him despite all his malevolence [smiles].
    18   So, I never had time to study. I study a lot by removing weed, pulling
    19   out weeds, digging holes in the fields, yeah, my hands are all scarred...
    20   [showing hands], from pulling out the weeds, they were to be pulled
    21   out, not to be cut off.
                          (Interview - April 9th, 2014 – Mrs. Silva, 79 years old)

The narrative only begins in line 10, where she responds the interviewer's question. It is important to highlight how the narrator triggers the interest of the interlocutor with topicalization: but then my father ... (line 10), followed by a pause. Note, here, the use of the adversative discourse marker (Schiffrin, 1987) "but", which announces the construction of the father's identity to be built throughout the story. The father is portrayed as the cause for her not going to school.

Following, some complicating actions make up the story, starting with the passive voice structure "I was raised by my grandmother" (line 11). Here, the narrator positions herself as a victim, that is, as one who had been abandoned. The intention underlying such positioning might not only be geared towards positive evaluation from the interlocutor (Goodwin, 1986), but also as a way of expressing grief, abandonment and rejection in childhood. Narrating personal stories could be regarded as a way of sorting out pain.

Studies on personal narratives performance have suggested some benefits. By telling a story, one is able to make sense, or better yet, give a new meaning to their experience and improve self-perception of what has passed. The process can potentially contribute to the empowerment of the one who narrates the story (Montalbano-Phelps, 2004), as he/she has the opportunity to "review" phases of life and deal with past situations that are still turbulent in the mind.

It is worth noting (line 11-12) how Mrs. Silva reveals a sense of family detachment by the way she addresses her father: "I was rejected by him" and adds "neither of them wanted me" (line 12), referring to both father and mother. Again, the narrator indexicalizes her father's identity, as someone who abandons and rejects a baby in a vulnerable phase of life. This position of antagonist is also assigned to the mother.

In contrast, the narrator positions the grandmother as her ally in the story, represented as someone who cared for her. The epithet attributed to grandmother "loving grandma" (line 11) indexicalizes the emotional bond and the affection Mrs. Silva felt for her. At the age of five years old, she was taken away from her grandmother's home and was forced to work (line 14). The father is morally positioned as the villain of the story. As result of abandonment and early childhood work, the narrator states the impossibility of studying (line 15): "Then, I did not have a chance to study. Never, ever, ever, ever". Here at the end of the narrative frame she assumes the blame for not going to school.

It became evident, through the analyses, that students often justified the reasons for not going to school. To me, it has to do with that the audience (the researcher, who is also the teacher, represents the voice of education), the reason why they felt compelled to justify. Had the same story been told to someone else, like a friend, the justification might not have taken place.

A new story seems to emerge when Mrs. Silva states that her grandmother wanted her to go to school, but had no power (line 16). However, she just adds new details to the story. She explicitly reveals her father's identity (lines 16-17): "My father was rude, mean". Then, in line 17-18, she positions herself morally as somebody forgiving, as she switches to present tense, materialized in an internal evaluation: "my God forgive me, hope he is in a good place" as an inner speech verbalization (Tannen, 1989).

There are several ways to deal with adversity. Irony seems to be an alternative. A hint of irony can be seen in the fragment (line 19-20): "I study a lot removing weed, digging holes in the fields, yeah, my hands are all scarred... [showing hands]". The detailed imagery conveyed may be of great importance to the narrator, by which she provides an internal evaluation, as to invite the interviewer to draw conclusions (Tannen, 1989). As it can be noted, there is a display of identity marked by suffering and resistance.

What we witness here is a demonstration given by a lady who, despite the hardship she went through, reflects upon the past, going through countless experiences in life, and yet able to forgive the past and move on with her life. The story reveals a stage where the past is still painful, the future appears to be ephemeral and uncertain, and the present is the only thing you cling to. Next, I will show one example of narrative to illustrate the manifestation of the self in the present.

2. Self present

In this section, I present a specific kind of narratives that emerged from ethnographic work: habitual narratives. Habitual narratives refer to the way things are. They "can refer to the present, past and future, and are generally used to describe symptoms" (Riessman, 1999, p. 18). This type of narratives was employed by the senior citizens to describe the problems they face on a daily basis.

When the senior citizens narrated about everyday life, some thematic categories stood out such as domestic violence, discrimination and health-related issues. Conversations concerning health issues were quite recurrent in class. The excerpt (2)

illustrates the difficulty faced by Mrs. Silva to access the results of medical exams[3]. The local health department had no Internet connection from November 2014 to March 2015.

(2) 1 (S)   ... In the old days, we used to receive a piece of paper to do blood
    2 (A)   tests. Then, we used to do the blood test and take it to the hospital,
    3 (S)   today... only through Internet...
    4 (A)   – How does it work? [researcher]
    5 (S)   – We go there, they put it on the Internet, then if it is
    6   working... but I see that it isn't. Then, they say "come tomorrow"
    7   then we keep going back, going back, going back, and it ends up...
    8   nothing. You never receive, you never receive, and you never
    9   know what it was. [referring to the result of the exams]
            (Interview - April 9th, 2014 – Mrs. Silva, 79 years old)

It is interesting to note how the temporal markers: in the old days and today were used to establish the basis of the argument. The narrator compares how exam procedures were in the old days with the how it is done today. After the comparison, I asked her about the procedure to access the exam results. She explained (line 5-9): "we go there, they put it on the Internet, if it is working ... but I see it isn't. ... Then, they say "come tomorrow". The narrator chooses the pronoun "they" to represent the health department staff, positioning them as distant. The action in the conditional mode: "if it is working" denotes the improbability of being operating in a satisfactory manner, which is followed by, "but I see it isn't" (line 6). The choice of present tense corroborates the problem as being constant. In line 6, she uses direct speech, imperative mood: "Come tomorrow". This sentence has been spoken several times in class. It made me wonder whether this is a standard response to the poor elderly who visit the medical center. The repetition of the verbal index "keep going back" reiterates further the indifference with regard to the senior citizens, naturalizing exclusionary social practices.

It is striking the positioning of Mrs. Silva who positions herself as victim of a process of modernization. Unable to read as well as unable to access the Internet, she feels totally excluded. There is a widespread belief that everyone has access to the Internet in Brazil, that is to say the least, totally untrue. In order to make suitable public policies, policy makers must take into account the diversity and the complexity of the population, and above all, its specificities and local needs.

Next, I will provide an example of narrative, in which the participant talks about her future.

3. Self future

The self future refers to plans and dreams not yet fulfilled by the participants. In retrospect, looking through the research notes, hardly ever there were discussions in the classroom about the future, unless motivated by a question, as it was the case here: Why do you want to learn to read? In addition, future talk seldom comes up naturally in everyday speech. Taking into account the analysis of the whole data as well as the ethnographic work, it is possible to suggest that the senior citizens under investigation here talk more about the past and present than about the future. The future engenders hopes, dreams, plans, but unfortunately in the old age "tomorrow" seems oblique, vague and slippery.

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[3] It is important to mention that 75% of the Brazilian population receives free medical care from the government. The participants of this research are very poor and depend solely on the government for medical assistance.

Mrs. James (J) is a lady who never had a chance to study. Now, at the age of 65, she is finally having an opportunity to do it. The feeling of embarrassment for not knowing how to read can be identified in Mrs. James' narrative. Before the point at which transcription starts in the next excerpt, the participant was talking about some classes she attended at the farm where she lived as a child. Though she took some classes, they were not enough to enable her to read and write. Then she was asked about the reason for wanting to learn to read and write (line 1).

(3) 1   (A) – Why do you want to learn to read?
     2   (J)   – Me? I want to learn to read for me to read the Bible. Learn to read
     3   things, like when you see something passing by, you know. Take the
     4   right bus. Because I know, like, a little, well, very litle, don't I? When
     5   I go to the bus station, I already know some, right? Taguatinga, Guará
     6   [neighborhood names] But, even so, it is very difficult... I want to
     7   learn for me to know more, right? for shopping, for math operations,
     8   right? To understand the names of things when you go shopping
     9   (A) – Difficult, isn't it?
   10   (J)   – Very hard.
                     (Interview - September 24th, 2014 – Mrs. James, 65 years old)

In addition to her desire to learn to read to study the scriptures of the Bible, Mrs. James would like to be able to catch the right bus by being able to read its route signs and so on. Moreover, she feels that reading will help buy things in a store, understand labels and even do basic math. It will help her become more independent as she points out in line 11. Thus, she will have no need to ask other people to assist her. Through the arguments, Mrs. James positions herself as ashamed and embarrassed.

Finally, I believe that literacy events can contribute effectively to social inclusion practices through the acquisition of reading skills as well as the increase in reading competence levels. In addition, by learning to read and write the senior citizens, like Mrs. James, can strengthen their identities and fight for their rights.

5. Conclusion

As we could see from the data analysis, Mrs. Silva displayed and negotiated her identity in the past as hardworking and rejected, as she was forced to work to help feed the family. She used different linguistic strategies to present herself and others, such as evaluation devices, direct speech, verbalization of inner speech. In the present, Mrs. Silva positioned herself as victim and excluded, as she cannot read or access the Internet in order to obtain medical exam results. She uses time markers to contrast how things were done in past as opposed to now. As for the future, Mrs. James positions herself as ashamed, embarrassed for not being able to read.

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