Identity in Narrative

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Volume 3
Identity in Narrative: A study of immigrant discourse
by Anna De Fina

Identity in Narrative

A Study of Immigrant Discourse

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To Inder, Emiliano and Silvio Jit

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Acknowledgments

*La vida no es la que uno
vivió, sino la que uno
recuerda y cómo la recuerda
para contarla*

[*Life is not the one you live,
but the one you remember
as you remember it
when you tell it*]

Gabriel García Márquez

Introduction

The writing of this book was motivated by my involvement in three areas of interest both in academic and personal life. The first one relates to the ways and means through which language, and in particular narrative, displays its power to voice experiences, to bring about shared understandings of life events, to shape and transform individual and collective realities. The second one relates to migration as a social phenomenon and as a personal experience. I have migrated more than once during my adult life and, although I am conscious of the profound differences in motivations, economic backgrounds, origins, adaptation routes, among those who carry out a journey that takes them away from their countries to settle somewhere else, I am also convinced that there are many commonalities, many patterns of behavior and experience that are shared by all of them. Those commonalities constitute a firm basis for understanding and solidarity, and an occasion for reflection. Finally, the writing of this book was also spurred by a deep interest in Mexico, since the many years I spent in that country stimulated in me a great admiration for the richness and complexity of the Mexican people and of Mexican cultural traditions.

The book is based on interviews and ethnographic observation carried out between September 1996 and June 1997 with 14 Mexican economic immigrants living in Langley Park, Maryland, who were mostly undocumented at the time. The work responds to two primary objectives: investigating the constitution, representation and negotiation of identities among Mexican economic migrants to the United States, and showing in what ways narrative discourse constitutes a privileged locus for the study of identities. The focus of the analysis is on the connections between the local expression of identities in narrative discourse and the social processes that surround migration.

There are two preliminary questions that I would like to discuss in the following pages. The first one is: why study immigrants? The second one is: What are the advantages of small-scale discourse analytic studies as opposed to quantitatively based investigations, in order to gain an understanding of migration and the processes of self definition and redefinition that immigrants live?

Let us start with the first question: The importance of studying immigrants and immigration hardly needs stressing given the social relevance of the phenomenon. A great number of new immigrants enter the U.S. every year and of these immigrants, many are undocumented Mexicans (Dillon 1997). The presence of Mexican undocumented workers in the U.S., already estimated between 1.8 and 3.6 millions in the seventies,[1] has currently reached, according to the national press, a number between 3 and 4 million of individuals.[2] Quantifications of the immigration flux vary, but figures are high enough to give an idea of the relevance of a phenomenon, largely unknown, but also unmistakably part of American everyday life. Mexican immigrants, especially undocumented ones, become more numerous every year and as the divide between the wealth of the U.S. and the poverty of its neighbors increases, so does the number of those who are pushed across the border by the dream of a better life.

However, immigration is not only important because of its numerical significance. It is also important because of its economic, social, and psychological impact. The constant debate over this topic in the mass media, in the political arena, in academic circles, and at dinner tables, is a symptom of the centrality of the role of immigration and immigrants in the political and social landscape of the country. On the other hand, the continuous attempts, particularly in the South Western states, to limit and regulate the rights of immigrant workers[3] show how deeply divided politicians and common citizens are on the extent to which recent immigrants can be considered a true part of society. In fact, the constant increase in the number of Hispanic immigrants in particular and their recent attainment of the status of largest and fastest growing minority in the U.S.,[4] has raised and continues to raise great anxiety among mainstream Americans since often these immigrants are seen as taking over the country and imposing their own life style, language, and customs. In many cases being Hispanic is equated with poor performance at school, drug abuse, poverty and violence. Images and stereotypes abound, but information on immigrants is scarce and although a wealth of literature on social and political aspects of immigration exist, very little is known about who immigrants are, what they think and what they feel, why they come to the U.S., how they see themselves. This is particularly true of undocumented Mexican immigrants who are active and present in innumerable work sites across the country and who lend their workforce for low skilled jobs in areas such as construction and painting, landscaping, catering and food serving, agriculture and house cleaning in a large number of American cities and rural areas. Their language, food, music are gaining increasing popularity, but their voice is rarely heard. Although visible in the work place, they lead their life in anonymity and isolation. Thus another

reason to study immigrant realities, particularly immigrant identities, is the need to provide insights into aspects of a phenomenon that is amply debated but largely under-analyzed.

A focus on immigrants and their identity can also help defeat overgeneralization and stereotyping and show the complexity of immigrant realities and experiences. Stereotypes are in fact often the result of a lack of knowledge about immigrants. Anthropologist Rosaldo (1993) stresses the relationship between stereotyping and ignorance and argues for the importance of listening to what people say about themselves. Proposing an analysis of Chicano narratives, he underlines that this kind of research is a response to our ignorance of members' self-perceptions and our inability to answer questions about them. The same can be said about undocumented immigrants and many other minority groups that are often ignored or largely misunderstood.

The second question proposed at the beginning of this introduction was: Why should we rely on small scale qualitative studies such as the one proposed here in order to gain a deeper understanding of immigration and of the processes of self definition and redefinition that accompany it? I argue that a qualitative perspective, particularly one based on discourse and narrative, is much more insightful than quantitative methodologies because it helps bring to the surface and understand aspects of the representation of the self that are not apparent through statistics, questionnaires or sample interviews.

Qualitative studies on Mexican immigrants are scarce not only in the field of discourse studies, but also in other research areas. Although sociological and economic aspects of Mexican immigration have constituted and continue to constitute the focus of many sociological, economic, social psychological, anthropological studies (see Cornelius & Marcelli 2001; Durand 1991; Gaxiola 1991; Heer 1990; Wayne, Chavez, & Castro 1982; Bustamante 1979; Wayne 1978a, 1978b; Gamio 1969a, 1969b) questions related to self and other-perception, and self and other-representation, are relatively neglected.[5] But immigration as a process crucially involves a continuous definition and redefinition of one's identity and of one's membership into larger communities. Life stories analysts and social psychologists see it as one of the landmark events in the life of individuals and groups. Thus, it is hardly possible to come to terms with immigrant realities without understanding these "subjective" processes. In an investigation of socio-psychological responses to migration among Mexican immigrants, de la Mora (1983), argued that although many studies on the topic suggest that the factors influencing the outcome of the process are both subjective and objective, most mainstream analyses have exclusively focused on objective conditions such as unemployment, inequality in income distribution,

patterns of population growth, educational levels, work-force qualifications, and so on. This emphasis has resulted in a lack of understanding of the impact of subjective factors related to migration on the life of individuals and groups.

The importance of developing knowledge on the self-perception and identity formation among immigrants has been recognized by anthropologists studying new immigrant populations (see for example Chavez 1992, 1994; Rosaldo 1993). They argue that such knowledge may for example, lead to a better understanding of the factors that help immigrants integrate or that, alternatively, prompt their isolation within the host society. A comprehensive study on Mexican immigrants in Southern California (Wayne, Chavez, & Castro 1982) suggested, for example, that the integration of first generation Mexican immigrants into American society is minimal, as they tend to see themselves as outsiders to that society even after many years of residence in the U.S. More recent qualitatively based analyses challenge this kind of accepted wisdom and suggest in contrast that generalizations on the way new immigrants adjust to life in the U.S. are ill founded, since too little is known about their lives and the repertoire of identities that they might be developing. Lamphere (1992), for example, in the introduction to a collection of papers about the interrelationships between newcomers (including Mexicans) and established residents in U.S. cities, argues that stereotypical images about the way immigrants relate to other ethnic groups are inadequate to describe new urban realities. Similarly, in a study based on interviews about community membership among undocumented Mexican immigrants in the San Diego area, Chavez (1992) challenges the assumption that the strong links with their country of origin hinders Mexican immigrants' development of a new sense of community in the U.S. since:

> …while many Mexicans retain ties with their home families and communities, this does not necessarily undermine their experience in their new communities, experiences that may isolate them from the larger society or lead to change, sometimes well thought of and other times unconscious, in their orientation from sojourners to settlers. (p. 56)

In this process, immigrants may be developing "multiple senses of community membership."

In sum, qualitative studies of immigrant communities are important both to assess and evaluate the ways immigrants fit into the host society, and to provide knowledge about communities that are often the object of stereotyping and misjudgment. In this book I argue for the importance of the analysis of identity among Mexican immigrants, but I also show how such analysis

inevitably leads to its expression in discourse. I also argue that narrative discourse is particularly illuminating of ways in which immigrants represent the migration process and themselves in it. Thus, my objective is not only to describe aspects of the identity of Mexican immigrants, but also to advocate for a discourse-based approach to identity. Language is central to the expression of identity because it is not a reflection of our apprehension of reality; it is not a "conduit" (Reddy 1979) for thought, but rather a constitutive aspect of our experience of the world. We cannot understand and share experience if we do not express it linguistically. The way we express our experiences is as part of those experiences as the material and psychological processes that prompted our telling of them. Storytelling, as other discourse activities, is seen here as situated discursive practice (Fairclough 1989) in the sense that it both obeys and creates social rules, understandings, and roles. It obeys social rules that dictate how narratives should be constructed, by whom and to whom they should be told,[6] what is tellable, and how.[7] Furthermore, storytelling, like other discursive practices, rests on socially shared meanings, conceptions and ideologies (van Dijk 1998), establishing a constant dialogue (Bakhtin 1981) with them, but also generating new meanings and new behaviors. Among the central functions of storytelling is, as I will argue, that of presenting and representing identity. In this framework narrating is a way of talking about the self, but also a way of practicing certain types of identity in specific interactional contexts.

The recognition of the structuring power of discourse and of discourse organization is, therefore, at the heart of the enterprise of studying identity through discourse analysis. The choice of narratives as the focus of analysis and the centrality of narrative in the expression and negotiation of identity will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter 1. Here I just want to note that the focus on the micro-analysis of naturally occurring talk and the emphasis on the local mechanisms through which identity is expressed and negotiated in narrative, derive from the conviction, shared by many interactional sociolinguists, that it is mainly through the analysis of data in painstaking detail and the consideration of the contextualization cues that speakers use to convey specific meanings (Gumperz 1982, 1992) that it is possible to generate hypotheses on how members of a community represent and negotiate their belonging to social categories.[8] According to interactional sociolinguists and other interactionally oriented scholars, in order to understand how language contextualizes social realities, it is important to combine a close focus on the details of texts "with a broader conception of meaning" (Basso 1992:268). Detailed discourse analysis is like a magnifying glass in that it illuminates the way linguistic items and strategies employed by individuals are part of a repertory of resources shared

by communities. It is through the study of situated discourse instances that cultural and social meanings become apparent to the analyst.[9]

But why study narratives in particular? Narrative is one of the privileged forms used by humans to elaborate experience. This is why narratives have been widely studied as windows into the analysis of human communities and individuals in fields as diverse as anthropology (Lévi Strauss 1963), ethnography and folklore (Hymes 1981; Bauman 1986; Rosaldo 1986), social history (Griffin 1993), psychology (Rosenwald & Ochberg 1992; Bruner 1990; Polkinghorne 1988; Mishler 1986); sociology (Somers & Gibson 1994). One reason for this popularity is their methodological richness. Narratives have been used as data in many fields of the social sciences and narrative analysis has constituted the methodological tool of a revolution in qualitative research that has become generally identified as the 'narrative turn'. This generalized interest greatly owes to the characteristics of narratives as texts. Narratives are highly spontaneous and at the same time highly organized texts both in the way they are structured, and in the way they are inserted in conversation (Labov & Waletzky 1967/1997; Labov 1972; Jefferson 1978); for this reason they can be recognized and analyzed as a specific and highly constrained discourse genre. Furthermore, they are a discourse genre that invites and promotes involvement and participation. Labov's appreciation of the highly spontaneous character of narratives led him to use them as a central tool for his study of the vernacular language, since he thought that when people narrate their experience, they get involved and become less self conscious of the way they speak. After him, researchers have begun to use narratives as an alternative to more traditional methods of elicitation such as questionnaires and formal interviews. In the present study the spontaneity and involvement that the telling of narratives created within the interview context were an invaluable aid. I was interested in how immigrants make sense of their immigration experience and I asked them questions on how they felt, what they thought about it, how migration had changed them. But a direct reconstruction and reflection on the personal experience of immigration is difficult to elicit. I anticipated that immigrants would have difficulties of various kinds in talking about, or reflecting on their experiences explicitly, while I thought that they would more easily tell stories, whether asked to do so or not. This turned out to be true, since stories and other kinds of narratives emerged throughout the interviews as spontaneous answers to questions, as illustrations of argumentative points, and as recollections of past experience. Narratives were then a central tool for me as a researcher in that they allowed me to study important aspects of the identity construction in this

group, and for the immigrants as interviewees because they allowed them to talk more freely about their experiences.

Another important aspect of narratives as resources for studying groups and communities is their ability to serve as locuses for the *keying* of experience. Goffman uses this term to refer to "all strips of depicted personal experience made available for participation to an audience" (1974: 53). In storytelling many linguistic devices, such as tense, reported speech or pronoun switching, allow narrators to replay their experiences for an audience as if these were taking place before their eyes. In that sense, although narratives might occur as a response to a question by the interviewer or they might be directly elicited, they still largely respond to the expressive needs of the narrator and therefore are more likely to reveal her/his point of view on events and experiences than other kinds of talk. Furthermore, narratives are in many cases negotiated, thus their significance is established interactively by the participants in a speech event. Therefore, they allow for different participants in an interaction to express their evaluation of events (Goodwin 1986). This aspect of storytelling was important to my study since the telling of narratives constituted an occasion for the discussion of the meaning of personal experience to members of the community. Participants in interviews expressed collective values and beliefs either through evaluation of narratives told by others, or through co-construction of narratives with others. Thus, while answers to questions were most of the time individual, narratives invited more participation and negotiation of meaning from participants.

As I have argued, discourse, and narrative in particular, represent the point of intersection between the expression of individual feelings and representations and the reflection upon and construction of societal processes, ideologies and roles. The latter become alive in the arena of talk in a unique way. By analyzing narratives we analyze not only individual stories and experiences, but also collective social representations and ideologies.

Overview of the volume

The internal organization of the book mirrors my ideas, detailed in Chapter 1, about the relationships between narrative discourse and identity. Except for Chapter 2, in which I give background information on Mexican undocumented immigrants and on the group of immigrant workers interviewed for this study and I discuss some methodological choices, the rest of the book is centered on the analysis and discussion of different aspects of the presentation and negoti-

ation of identity in narrative discourse. I argue that identity is not necessarily expressed at one and the same level since it can be displayed or given off, but it can also be openly negotiated. The degree of openness may vary, in the sense that choices as to self-presentation can be more or less explicit depending on the general interactional function of the narrative itself and the storytelling context. Identities emerge in my analysis through the establishment of connections between linguistic choices, interactional worlds and story worlds. My proposal is that in order to study identity, we need to look at these different aspects and at its different ways of emergence in discourse.

I focus on the analysis of two basic aspects of the construction and expression of identity: the projection of the self into specific social roles, and the expression of membership into groups and communities. The first aspect, the projection of social roles, is analyzed through the consideration of ways of presenting the self in relation to others, and of ways of presenting the self in relation to social experiences. I look at the role of the self with respect to others as expressed in social orientation, while I analyze the role of the self with respect to social experiences as agency. The linguistic phenomena and strategies on which I focus are pronominal choices and voicing. Both pronominal choices and voicing operate at a level where identity is displayed more than openly discussed. Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to this level of contextualization/expression of identity. In Chapter 3, I analyze pronominal choice and other linguistic strategies that index social and cultural meanings related to broad conceptions of the persona. In Chapter 4, I focus on voicing. The analysis is centered on the use of constructed dialogue to report events and actions in the particular story worlds connected with the border crossing. The focus is on the narrators' presentation of his/her role as figure in the story world in that the narrators' choices in terms of reporting forms, types of acts reported, and attribution of those acts to story characters, is seen as signaling different degrees of agency and participation in the narrated action.

The second level of analysis of identity deals more, even though not exclusively, with the explicit construction of self in relation to the member's community or to external groups. Basic to membership construction is self and other categorization, which is studied through identification strategies. When self and other categorization is at stake, identity is more often negotiated than displayed and in order to analyze it we need to resort to implicit and explicit references to belief systems and ideologies. This level of analysis is taken up in Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 discusses the categorization of self and others. Crucial to such categorization are narrative strategies used to introduce characters in stories. I argue that the analysis of story orientations reveals that

immigrants use ethnicity as a central identification category for self and others in their stories and that ethnic identification reflects and constitutes different levels of context, from the local negotiation of positions about self and others and the creation of participation frameworks in particular interactions, to the articulation of values and beliefs shared in the community and the contextualization of cultural and social norms. Chapter 6 focuses more closely on the narrators' articulation of social representations and beliefs through storytelling, by looking at the application of the ethnic category "Hispanic" to self and others in different story worlds. This chapter focuses on the comparison of the construction and definition of identity in different story worlds, showing how self and other representations are based on schematic relationships between actions and identities that are often encoded in stories. However, I also discuss how even the same categories for self and other description may acquire different senses depending on the story world depicted and/or on the interactional world,[10] and how narrators may display conflicting stances towards apparently uncontroversial definitions of the self.

Both dimensions of identity are studied interactionally in the sense that the analysis does not look at story world organization as such, but at the connections that speakers establish between their narratives and the discourse in which they are inserted. However, interactional construction and negotiation is not taken as exhausting the contextual nature of narrative. The dialogue established by narrators cannot be exclusively reduced to the exchange with audiences, since participants are also engaged in dialogue with mainstream discourses about immigrants and immigration. In that sense again, the analysis of narratives needs to take into account how local contexts interact with wider contexts such as ideologies, belief systems, and the intertextual dimension.

To conclude, this book proposes an analysis of the narrative construction of identity by undocumented Mexican immigrants, but also an approach to the study of identity through narrative. The focus of the analysis is not on the projection of individual selves, but on the dimension of group identity and therefore particular attention is devoted to the processes and strategies of identity construction that seem to be common among members of the group interviewed, and on the nexus between the local expression of identity by particular narrators and the more global processes of collective representation that frame and interact with such local expressions.

Identity in narrative
A discourse approach

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss narrative, identity and their relationships. I attempt to show why narrative is central to the study of identity and which properties of narrative as a genre make it particularly apt to become the locus of expression, construction and enactment of identity, but also a privileged genre for its analysis. In the first section, I present my definition of narrative and review some theoretical models that are basic to understand both narrative structure and function. In the following section, I examine some theoretical approaches to identity and to its analysis in narrative discourse. I then present my own approach to the analysis of identity in narrative. I discuss different levels and modes of expression of identity in narrative, review linguistic and textual phenomena that relate to these different levels, and discuss the methodological tools and analytical levels that I used to analyze identity as a collective phenomenon. In the last section, I go back to the theoretical question of the relationship between identity, discourse and context and explain how my approach to narrative identity is informed by a view of discourse as social practice.

1. Narrative genre and types of narratives

The first question that I want to address is the definition of narrative as a genre and the kinds of narratives that form the object of my analysis. Among the criteria proposed to distinguish narrative from non-narrative texts, one dimension is, in my view, essential to the characterization of a text as narrative. Such dimension is temporal ordering, or sequentiality. Essentially, narratives are texts that recount events in a sequential order. Even when sequentiality is conceived in terms of casual connections, there is a temporal aspect to it since events that generate other events are presented as preceding them temporally.

The idea of temporal ordering as a defining property of narrative is one of the tenets of literary narratology (Bal 1985; Genette 1980), a discipline that has had great influence on linguistic studies of narrative. Prince (1982: 4), for example describes narrative as "the representation of *at least two* real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other." The temporal dimension is viewed by many scholars as inextricably tied with narrative, both in the sense that time itself cannot be conceived outside its expression through narrative (Ricoeur 1984), and in the sense that it is through the weaving of events in time that narratives realize their meaning making and interpretive functions (Brockmeyer 2000). Linguists who have studied narrative also give prominence to time as a principle governing the organization of narrative. In his groundbreaking work, Labov (1972: 359) incorporated time in his definition of narrative as the recapitulation of past experience, and Ochs & Capps (2001: 2) recently characterized personal narrative as "a way of using language or another symbolic system to imbue life events with a temporal and logic order."

Aside from temporal ordering, which is usually accepted as basic to narrative, other criteria have been proposed as distinctive features for narrative, but these are not as universal, or as applicable to all kinds of narrative texts. In fact, most definitions of narrative either apply to specific narrative genres, but not to others, or describe prototypical cases only. The prototype of a narrative, both in literary and conversational domains, is the story. Stories can be described not only as narratives that have a sequential and temporal ordering, but also as texts that include some kind of rupture or disturbance in the normal course of events, some kind of unexpected action that provokes a reaction and/or an adjustment. Thus linguistic, literary and psychological models of stories recognize the existence of textual components representing a basic action structure and progression in these types of texts. Labov (1972) and Labov & Waletzki (1967/1997) conceived of typical stories as composed of a number of sections:

1. An abstract that summarizes what the story is about
2. An orientation that gives indications about the setting of the story and its protagonists
3. A complicating action that presents the main action of the story
4. An evaluation through which the narrator gives the point of the story
5. A result that represents the resolution to the complicating action
6. A coda that signals the closing of the story and bridges the gap with the present.

Ochs & Capps (2001: 173) argue that storylines are articulated in ways that present explanations of events and propose the following story components:

1. Setting
2. Unexpected event
3. Psychological/physiological responses
4. Object/state change
5. Unplanned action
6. Attempt

In their model, while settings lay the background for understanding unexpected events, the latter may set in motion a response, a change of state, a random action, or an attempt to deal with them.

In both these linguistic models the axis around which stories revolve is a complicating event. Research on psychological responses to stories confirms the prototypical character of stories that have the kind of structure outlined above. Brewer (1985: 170), who attempted to devise universal properties of stories, hypothesized that readers enjoy narratives if they produce "surprise and resolution, suspense and resolution, or curiosity and resolution." To support his hypothesis, he reports results of a study conducted with Lichtenstein (Brewer & Lichtenstein 1980) in which readers who were asked to rate narratives on the degree to which they were stories or non-stories, did not consider texts without an "initiating event" or an "outcome" to be stories. Thus the way we conceive of stories usually reflects a general expectation about their structure: stories may be told for many reasons including to enjoy, inform, argue, and express feelings, but they are expected to convey a sense of suspense or surprise and a closure of some kind.

This expectation is related to a further criterion used to distinguish stories from non-stories: tellability. According to Polanyi (1985), for example, stories are usually conceived as texts that evolve around events that are 'tellable', i.e. interesting, surprising, or unexpected in some way. Thus the idea of tellability is tied to the presence of a complicating action in the story and so examples of highly tellable stories both in everyday talk and in literature are those that present dramatic events, out of the ordinary occurrences, unexpected developments or resolutions. Finally, both Labov (1972) and Polanyi (1979 and 1985) mentioned the importance for prototypical stories to have a point, i.e. to convey the narrator's interpretation and point of view on characters, events, or state of affairs. Labov talked about evaluation as a main component of stories and a section destined to carry out the function of responding to a possible: "So what?" coming from a listener. Polanyi expressed a similar view when