CONSTRUCTING GENDER IDENTITIES THROUGH NARRATIVES

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Rezumat
Lucrarea îşi propune o analiză a unor naraţiuni extrase din interacţiuni verbale neprovocate/spontane (naturally-occurring conversations), cadrul teoretic fiind cel oferit de sociolingvistica interacţională. Analiza exemplelor demonstrează că identităţile de gen nu sînt un construct fix, ci se poate vorbi de o (re-) interpretare de la o cultură la alta, de la un individ la altul, de la o situaţie de comunicare la alta. Deseori aceste naraţiuni sînt folosite de interlocutori pentru a construi şi consolida un anume tip de identitate de gen atît în cazul naratorului cît şi a celorlalţi protagonişti. Exemplele analizate evidenţiază modalităţile în care identitate de gen este construită şi faptul că în procesul de construire a identităţii de gen oamenii pot, în unele împrejurări, consolida normele existente în societate, iar cu alte ocazii aceste norme pot fi contestate. În aceste exemple locutorul construieşte identităţi de gen conservatoare atît pentru sine cît şi pentru nora şi nepoata sa. Deşi ne putem aştepta ca în alte împrejurări identităţile lor de gen să nu mai fie construite în conformitate cu normele conservatoare patriarhale ale societăţii româneşti, de data aceasta locutorul ia rolurile tradiţionale de mamă, fiică, soţie în serios şi doreşte ca intelocutoarea sa să aprecieze felul în care ea şi celelalte femei din familie respectă normele impuse de societate în această privinţă.

Research has shown that narrative language is instrumental in the construction and display of self and identity[1]. Thus it has been suggested that narrative structure enables the storyteller to gain an understanding of the self as a whole, with features of stability and continuity over time (Schiffrin 1996). Bruner argues (1987:15) that we eventually "become the autobiographical narratives by which we tell about our lives". As Schiffrin (1996: 169) has pointed out, the reason why narrative has this self-transforming function is that "narrative language provides a process of subjectivization: it reveals our presuppositions (our implicit meanings), permits multiple perspectives (different prisms through which we can view the world), and allows subjectification", in other

[1] The role of narratives in the construction and display of who we are has been the focus of scholarly attention in fields ranging from developmental psychology, social psychology and clinical psychology, to literary theory, sociology and sociolinguistics. For a review of studies covering such fields, see Schiffrin (1996).

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words it allows reality to be filtered "through the consciousness of protagonists in the story" (Bruner 1987: 25).

It is also well established that stories are resources not just for the development and presentation of self as a psychological entity, but also as a self that exists within a cultural matrix of meanings, beliefs and normative practices (Bruner 1990); our identities of social beings emerge as we construct our own individual experiences as a way to position ourselves in relation to social and cultural expectations (Chafe 1994). The form of our stories, their content and our story-telling behaviour are indices of both our personal selves and our social and cultural identities[2].

Although the study of narratives provides a rich site in which to locate the analysis of various identities, in what follows I will focus on two extracts that illustrate how a conventional gender identity can be constructed through a narrative describing mundane family events such as a birthday party and managing household activities. The extracts 1 and 2 are taken from an encounter with the beautician. Elsewhere (Hornoiu 2004) they have been analysed as news-updates, one of the types of small talk that conversationalists make use of to establish and maintain a relationship based on solidarity and co-operation.

Extract 1
(C)

1 Client: şi felicia ce face? a fost ziua ei duminică
2 SP: felicia da pe 23 a împlinit şi ea patruzeci şi trei de ani si restu-
3 lucrează da' ea lunea şi joia îşi ia liber că lucrează mai tîrziu
4 cum lucram io pe vremuri şi se chinuie cu ceara
5 că ba le-o dă o firma mai bună alta mai puțin bună
6 clientele care mai întîrzie care
7 (3)
8 vin la timp [...]
9 SP: cosmin a terminat toate zece examenele şi a luat numai nouă şi zece
10 ce n-a facut în anu' unu şi doi

[2] Research has shown that both the style and substance of stories are sensitive to such parameters as ethnicity, social class, gender and region. Other scholars linked story-telling style and substance to social roles at both interactional and institutional levels showing how story-telling facilitates, among other things, socialization into family roles (Heath 1983, Ochs and Schieffelin 1989).

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11 Client: da
12 SP: şi şi-a facut mărţişoare să le dea cadou colo colo şi el
13 să nu mai dea bani pe ele
14 Client: şi george?
15 SP: george nu se simte bine cu sănătatea a facut tratament şi fizioterapică
16 a făcut şi reflexo
17 în londra a făcut crize şi a trebuit să-şi facă **[**injecţie cu voltaren
18 Client: **[**m::::
19 SP: şi acum mai are nişte cîteva şedinţe de fizioterapie (cu) pauză de zece zile
20 şi să continue mai continuă cîteva
21 (2)
22 pe douăş'patru martie tre' să plece
23 Client: e acasă el
24 SP: e acasă de o lună şi ceva
25 Client: nu se plictiseşte acasă
26 SP: e nu:: mai face şi el
27 Client: da: v-ajută
28 SP: pe felicia ei acolo-n casă fac menaju' că pînă vine felicia seara
29 ce s-o mai aştepţi pe felicia să pregătească masa să:
30 mai uşurează pe căn- cătălina că ea se pricepe la gătit
31 şi cosmin face piaţa
32 Client: cătălina găteşte da?
33 SP: cătălina găte::şte
34 (2)
35 ce nu ştie mai face felicia mai complicat joia şi lunea
36 în rest cartofi la cuptor cartofi prăjiţi ouă ochiuri grătar
37 Client: e şi astea dacă vii şi le găseşti gata făcute contează
38 SP: e:: da' ea nu poate la opt şi jumătate să aştepte toţi nemîncaţii
39 să vină felicia să pregătească

Extract 2
(C)

1 SP: era mîndră că de ziua ei i-a luat cosmin o pereche de cercei de argint mari aşa
2 Client: a::::h
3 SP: cînd i-am văzut la (.) ureche zic io nu port aşa şi era numai cu argint

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4 da' verigheta lor este combinație de aur cu aur alb
5 Client: mhm ce frumoasă
6 SP: şi merge şi la argint şi la aur da şi avea o groază de brățări pe mînă
7 'cerceii ăia mari mi-a luat cosmin de ziua mea'
8 că pe nouă februarie a fost ziua lu' cătălina pe cinşpe a lu' cosmin şi acum pe
9 douăştrei a lu' felicia da şi:::
10 (4)
11 îi luase a venit c-o seară înainte naşa de cununie a lor şi i-a adus o bluză
12 foarte frumoasă cu fir prin ea aşa
13 (4) au facut la clubu' unde lucrează cosmin au serbat amîndoi pe:::: sîmbătă
14 pe paişpe
15 Client: de velăntain
16 SP: da au făcut platouri reci
17 le-am făcut io un tort de fructe le-am dat

The beautician engages in extended stories about her husband's health, or her son and daughter-in-law's happy marriage, about her grandson's academic success or her granddaughter's cooking talent. Through these stories she constructs a particular gendered identity for both herself and the protagonists. The gender identity constructed here is to a certain extent a conservative one: an identity conforming to the beliefs existing in a patriarchal society[3], beliefs about the way women and men should behave. This mirrors Andrei's point (1978: 219) that there is overwhelming societal pressure to accept particular gender roles[4]:

[3] Recent research on gender has shown that post-communist Romanian society, although characterised by gender-related egalitarianism at the level of official ideology, is marked by traditional patriarchal attitudes and practices in the private sphere and by patriarchal authority in terms of the state-citizen relationships (Pasti 2003). Moreover, recent public opinion polls and increasing tendencies towards left-wing conservatism show that a paternalist state is still favoured in contemporary Romanian society (Miroiu 2004).

[4] This view is also echoed by Weedon (1987:3) who argues that "As children we learn what girls and boys should be and, later, women and men. These subject positions – ways of being an individual – and the values inherent in them may not all be compatible and we will learn that we can choose between them. As women we have a range of possibilities. In theory almost every walk of life is open to us, but all the possibilities which we share with men involve

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'Noi nu ne creştem copiii cum vrem, ci aşa cum ne impune obiceiul, tradiția, opinia publică, societatea cu structura ei dintr-un moment dat'

The question that arises is what do such stories aim to accomplish? At one level they are intended to bring the interlocutor up-to-date on what the narrator and significant others have been doing. At another level they are components in a complex answer to the client's enquiry. At yet another level during these stories, the service provider constructs conservative or normative gender identities for herself, her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter. According to the Gender Barometer 2000, in contemporary Romanian society the proportion of women who have internalized and accepted patriarchy is roughly similar to that of men[5]**.** She represents her daughter-in-law as a 'good' mother and 'loving' wife who is concerned for her family's comfort and well-being and therefore works long hours to supplement her family income[6], but at the same time she manages to take two days off to look after her family's needs. Consider the most obvious relevant sections of the narratives:

Extract 3
(C)

- (felicia) lucrează da' ea lunea şi joia îşi ia liber că lucrează mai tîrziu cum lucram io pe vremuri şi se chinuie cu ceara că ba le-o dă o firma mai bună alta mai puțin bună
- (o ajuta) pe felicia acolo-n casă fac menaju' că pînă vine felicia seara ce s-o mai astepți pe felicia să pregătească masa

accepting, negotiating or rejecting what is constantly being offered to us as our primary role – that of wife and mother".

[5] Romanian mass-media do not portray a less patriarchal society. Television shows with and about women are confined to aspects of the private sphere whereas shows with and about people (i.e. men) focus on aspects of the public sphere and issues of general interest. Commercials endlessly perpetuate the image of the woman who brings up her children and does all the cleaning and cooking to keep her man around the house or the woman who beautifies herself to win over the man for whom she will wash, clean and cook to keep him around the house. The Romanian woman as promoted by mass-media is the victim of poverty and violence or the super-woman top model (Roventa-Frumusani 2005), the so-called 'Barbie doll'.

[6] More often than not, female professionals depend on their husbands' incomes since their own incomes are inadequate (Pasti 2003).

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- (ce e mai complicat) face Felicia joia şi lunea
- e:: da' ea nu poate la opt şi jumătate să aştepte toţi nemîncaţii să vina felicia să pregătească
- era mîndră că de ziua ei i-a luat cosmin o pereche de cercei de argint mari aşa

While the message is easily inferred from the first four utterances, it is not quite so obvious form the last. In fact, this utterance indicates that Cosmin's love for his mother is a reflection of the latter's good qualities. The beautician also constructs her own gender identity as a good understanding mother(-in-law) and grandmother:

Extract 4
(C)

- pînă vine felicia seara ce s-o mai aştepţi pe felicia să pregătească masa
- le-am făcut io un tort de fructe le-am dat

Similarly, the service provider constructs for her granddaughter a gender identity that conforms to the rather conservative norms of Romanian society. The granddaughter is portrayed as being perfectly able to look after her father and brother and run the household showing that in the traditional Romanian family, which is characterised by a spirit of partnership only to limited extent[7], the performance of the housewife role in adulthood is prefaced by a long period of apprenticeship. This is most obvious in the following three utterances:

Extract 5
(C)

- Cătălina se pricepe la gătit
- cătălina găteşte (….) cartofi la cuptor cartofi prăjiţi ouă ochiuri grătar
- ea nu poate la opt şi jumătate să aştepte toţi nemîncaţii să vină felicia să pregătească

[7] In contemporary Romanian society 80% of household chores and the raising of children is left up to the wife whereas only in 5% of Romanian families household chores are jointly completed by both partners (Barometrul de gen, 2000).

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These extracts describe a state of affairs frequently encountered in Romanian society: girls are socialized into appropriate 'feminine' behaviour which presupposes, among other things, taking care of the male members of their families[8]. In the socialization of boys, freedom of choice and independence are valued twice as much as in the case of girls who are orientated towards obedience and hard work[9].

At least one rather different feminine identity gets voiced throughout these news-updates. It is the identity of several mutual female acquaintances who identify themselves more readily with the role of a modern woman with a full-time job, a woman who is very careful about her physical appearance and who regularly undergo beautifying treatments[10].

Extract 6
(C)

1 Client: da camelia ce bine arată nu ?
2 SP: da camelia arată foarte bine
3 'să ştiţi că chiar nu m-am dus decît de vreo două ori'
4 la o colegă a ei care a făcut cosmetică
5 da' nevoită că mă duceam acolo la coafor şi dacă nu mai puteam să vin
6 de cînd lucrez la bancă termin tot la şapte opt seară
7 ştiam că sîmbăta dumneavoastră nu lucraţi
8 şi cînd mi-am adus aminte
9 cînd a mai vrut ea să mai vină din nou auzise că sînt bolnavă şi nu mai lucrez
10 Client: şi auraş?
11 SP: auraş acuma nu mai vrea să piardă
12 că toate fetele au lăudat-o ca arată foarte bine

[8] Cf. E. Stanciulescu , *Sociologia educatiei familiale: familie si educatie in societatea romaneasca. O istorie critica a interventionismului utopic*, Iasi: Editura Polirom, vol. II, 1998
[9] See *Barometrul de gen (2000)*

[10] This type of woman, promoted mainly by mass-media, is referred to in gender studies as 'the Barbie doll' (Miroiu 2004): an independent career woman with sex appeal and access to beautifying techniques.

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Through her narratives the beautician also constructs her son's and grandson's gender identities. In some contexts she portrays them as assuming a predominantly conservative and normative male identity when she presents her grandson as knowledgeable, competent and successful:

Extract 7
(C)

- cosmin a terminat toate zece examenele şi a luat numai nouă şi zece ce n-a făcut în anu' unu şi doi

In other contexts men are portrayed as behaving in ways more usually framed as 'feminine' (helping with the housework or doing the shopping) deviating thus from a traditional masculine identity[11].

Extract 8
(C)

- ei acolo-n casă fac menaju' mai uşurează pe cătălina
- cosmin face piața

These extracts show how gender identity is constantly being constructing and people may reinforce existing societal norms at one point, but challenge and contest them at others. In extracts 1 and 2, on this particular occasion the service provider constructs a predominantly conservative identity not only for herself but also for her daughter-in-law and granddaughter. Although we may safely assume that in other respects their gendered identities may not conform to the rather conservative norms of Romanian society, on this occasion she takes the traditional roles of 'good mother', 'good daughter' and 'good wife' very seriously, and likes others to recognise and appreciate the

[11] Ordinarily, in terms of housework duties, men's work is related private property and its external tokens: the house and the car become symbols of social status. Since property ownership confers power, this close association between men and symbols of property represent the materialization of relationships based on power (Miroiu 2004).

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extent to which she and other female members of her family meet society's prescriptions in these two areas.

Conclusions

The analysis of narratives has shown that social identity is locally situated: who we are is, at least in part, dependent on who we are with and where we are, both in interactional and discourse worlds. This view of identity differs to a certain extent from the view of identity assumed by some variationist sociolinguistic analyses. Sociolinguistic studies of variation often assume that identities remain constant despite contextual changes, that they are somehow fixed attributes that are permanent properties of speakers. Thus a speaker will be coded, for instance, white, middle-class, middle-aged, English woman and she will maintain this constellation of features irrespective of the activity or interaction in which she is engaged. As the analysis of these extracts has hopefully demonstrated, identity is far from being categorical or fixed. We may act more or less middle-class, more or less female depending on what we are doing and with whom. Sometimes we may choose to conform to the traditional female identity imposed by a patriarchal society, whereas at other times we may choose to display more liberal identities that deviate from those norms. Transforming experiences into stories and narrating them become a way of showing our interlocutors the salience of particular aspects of our identities.

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