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Membership Categorization Analysis as a Tool in the Studies of "Migrant Literature"

Introduction

The idea for this paper comes from a larger interdisciplinary research project that studies the texts of Italian migrant literature from a sociolinguistic point of view. By Italian migrant literature we intend "literature written by authors who write in a national language other than that of their origin, even practicing self-translation in both directions"[1] (Gnisci, 2003, p. 8). The objective of the research is to study the linguistic elements that aid in the construction of identity and the categorization of the migrant person in these texts. Concretely, it aims to show how and through which linguistic elements in the texts the category "migrant", understood as a socially constructed reality, emerges, and in which sub-categories it can be divided. The concept of "membership categories" indicates "classifications or social types that can be used to describe people» (Hesler and Eglin, 1997, p. 3). Further objectives of the research, besides offering a new methodological approach to Italian migrant literature and to literature in general, include contributing to the de-marginalization of the literary and cultural phenomenon of migration in Italy and abroad.

The research method includes an analysis of the categories, by which we mean the study of the methodical use of membership categories and descriptions in the texts and in particular how this methodical use is a key resource for producing and attributing meaning. The references include works in the field of sociology, ethnomethod-

ology, sociolinguistics, literature and disciplines dealing with topics related to membership categorization. The paper offers a theoretical overview as well as concrete examples of membership categorization analysis applied to the autobiographical novel *Porto il velo, adoro i Queen,* written by Sumaya Abdel Qader.

Italian Migrant Literature

One of the greatest scholars of migrant literature in Italy, professor Armando Gnisci, used the term "Italian migrant literature" to indicate "literature written by authors who write in a national language other than that of their origin, even practicing self-translation in both directions"[2] (Gnisci, 2003, p. 8). The origins of this literature are inseparable from the phenomenon of immigration in Italy. It is important to note that the general tendency of the authors in terms of subject matter is to relate their own experiences, encounters and collisions with a new and different environment, sometimes even using a clearly allusive fiction. Italian migrant literature has had a unique development compared to the literatures of other languages where this kind of writing has been found to exist. In Anglophone and Francophone literature, the phenomena of "migrant writing", "black writing" and "*littérature beur*" are closely connected to the colonial experiences of Britain and France, and the human rights movement. This is why Italian migrant literature must be viewed from a unique perspective.

Literature related to the phenomenon of immigration in Italy had its beginnings in the last decades of the twentieth century. One of its early inspirations was the tragic story of the South American worker Jerry Essan Masslo, murdered by a criminal group in 1989 at Villa Literno in Campania, which inspired the story of the same name – *Villa Literno* – written in 1991 by a writer of French-Moroccan origin, Tahar Ben Jelloun. A year earlier, three important publications in Italy came to light: Mohamed Bouchane, a writer of Moroccan origin, published *Chiamatemi Ali*, Salah Methnani of Tunisian origin brought out *Immigrato*, and the Senegalese-born author Khouma Pap

wrote *Io, venditore di elefanti*. In 1992, Armando Gnisci wrote the essay *Il rovescio del gioco*, examining two works of this period: the above-mentioned *Immigrato* by Methnani and the short story collection *Dove lo Stato non c'è* by Ben Jelloun. These early experiences are followed by a plethora of literary testimonials that no longer recognize national boundaries. This is a testament to the idea that the Italian language has become the primary choice for hundreds of migrants from all over the world living in Italy. BASILI, an important database of migrant authors writing in Italian founded by Armando Gnisci and Franca Sinopoli from the University of Rome, identified 481 migrant authors representing 93 different nations.[3]

Nevertheless, the status of this particular literature in Italy is not yet well defined and its reception and related studies are, in general, restricted to non-profit organizations, people interested in "intercultural" issues, and a group of enthusiastic academics keen about the subject. Besides the above-mentioned database BASILI, other notable resources are web sites dedicated to the experiences of immigrants in Italy such as *Gioco degli specchi*[4], *El-ghibli*[5] and *Letterranza,*[6] where one can find a regularly updated list of titles regarding immigration published in Italy, including works of literary criticism. While these texts, especially those that serve as a guide to migrant literature (such as the essays by Armando Gnisci, Franca Sinopoli, Daniele Comberati, Daniela Finocchi, Silvia Camilotti and Roberto Derobertis), examine migrant literature from the point of view of literary criticism, the research presented in this paper offers a sociolinguistic and ethnomethodological approach, considering the texts not as products of a phenomenon, but as part of a process taking place during the production of the works themselves.

Theoretical Background

Useful methodological instruments for this kind of research approach involve the concept of socially constructed identity and membership categorization analysis. These methods are mainly used in

the field of sociology and are then transferred and used for sociolinguistic studies, as for example, in ethnomethodology. The term "ethnomethodology" refers to a "sociological school that studies resources, practices and procedures of common sense through which members of a culture produce and recognize objects, events, and courses of action in a mutually intelligible way"[7] (Fele, 2002, p. 9). In this regard, it is important to clarify the two basic concepts that are in the focus of the research and take their cue from ethnomethodology studies. The term "identity" is being used in the way it is employed in ethnomethodology. The ethnomethodological approach to the concept of identity is considerably different from popular interpretations of "identity" like the "distinguishing character or personality of an individual".[8] In this case, the components that define the identity characteristics are stable and fixed. In contrast, for ethnomethodologists identity is seen as

> the result of a constant work, i.e., actions and discourses that appear to be relevant to the interlocutors in relation to processes of identification and are subject to verification, analysis, approval, resistance, change […] People build identity and resist it in referential, creative and unpredictable ways regarding the context[9] (Klein and Paoletti, 2002, p. 32).

As we can see, from an ethnomethodological point of view identity is a process that is being built through the daily interactions of the individual and is closely linked to the context in which this process is carried out. Even the theorist Garfinkel, considered one of the founders of ethnomethodology, examines the idea of social construction of identity.

Yet another key concept is that of "membership categories". By membership categories we mean: "classifications or social types that can be used to describe people" (Hester and Eglin, 1997, p. 3). Ethnomethodology places membership categories in the centre of the identification processes; their use during the process of identification is very diverse and creative. They serve as a background "through which

members develop a highly specific personal identity in the course of ordinary activities"[10] (Klein and Paoletti, 2002, p. 179). The basis for membership categorization analysis can be found in the work of Harvey Sacks (1935 – 1975), who examined the way in which categorizations rely on social categories, e.g., policeman, mother, deviant:

> My attention shall be exclusively limited to those categories in the language in terms of which persons may be classified. For example, the categories: "male", "teacher", "first baseman", "professional", "Negro", etc., are the sort I shall be dealing with. Frequently such "membership" categories are organized, by persons of the society using them, into what I shall call "collections of membership categories", categories that members of society feel "go together" (Sacks, 1966, p. 15-16).

Sacks also paid attention to how these and associated social categories might be organized into collections, known as "membership categorization devices". The central elements in the use of social categories, according to Sacks, are membership categorization devices and a set of "rules of application":

> any collection of membership categories, containing at least a member, so as to provide, by the use of some rules of application, for the pairing of at least a population member and a categorization device member. A device is then a collection plus rules of application. An instance of a categorization device is the one called "sex": Its collection is the two categories (male, female). It is important to observe that a collection consists of categories that "go together" (*Ibid.*,1972, p. 332).

Ethnomethodologists working on the analysis of conversation demonstrate through concrete examples the use of categorizations that goes mostly unnoticed in our daily interaction. Literature, being a communicative act, can be understood as a form of such interaction. What marks migrant literature in particular is the fact that "mem-

bers"[11] use a means of communication from a language other than their mother tongue to express experiences related to specific social conditions such as being a "migrant". The purpose of the research presented in this paper is to demonstrate the use of communicative strategies and membership categories by the authors during the identification process through written expression.

Example of Membership Categorization Analysis

The purpose of this part of the research was to record and classify the ways in which the authors identified themselves and others in the text. As previously stated, we use the term "membership categories" to indicate classifications that ordinary people use to identify, describe or refer to someone, be it a place, an action or an object, in the course of a conversation or a written text. These categories will be analyzed in relation to how they attribute meaning to an action, a situation, an image or a text. An initial examination of a selection of texts written by authors belonging to the migrant community has allowed us to identify linguistic elements – titles, adjectives, nouns, expressions and idioms – in the texts that migrant writers use when they talk about themselves in their works. We have selected our corpus based on a study of works published on the aforementioned websites as well as a study of works available in the libraries and bookstores in the city of Perugia, where this research takes place. Our corpus includes the following works: *Divorzio all'Islamica a viale Marconi* and *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio*, written by the Algerian writer Amara Lakhous, *Amiche per la pelle* written by Indian female writer Laila Wadia, and, *Porto il velo, adoro i Queen* by Sumaya Abdel Qader.

We turned our attention to works that are more closely related to the personal experiences of the authors, and to everyday circumstances, i.e. where the autobiographical reference is transparent. As pointed out above, the development of this literary category in Italy in the previous two decades led to the creation of a variety of expressions that are hard

to classify under a specific genre or form. That is why we avoided the use of the term "autobiographical" in its general meaning: the biography of a person narrated by himself or herself. Instead, it is necessary to mention that the research is focused on the works where the "autobiographical pact", as Philippe Lejeune (1975) puts it, is more or less evident. The term refers to literary works where the overlapping of the figures of the protagonist in the story, the author, and the narrator is marked within the text or through external resources, such as the book cover, title-page, review, etc.

Sumaya Abdel Qader's novel, *Porto il velo, adoro i Queen*, represents this kind of work. It is the story of a young girl born of Jordanian parents, raised and educated in Italy. Using simple and fresh language, she depicts everyday situations of contemporary Italy where, as the subtitle says, "nuove italiane crescono"[12]. The main character represents this new generation of Italian girls. Her distinctive trait is the headscarf, an expression of her religious beliefs and at the same time the reason she is often discriminated against. While presenting the events she does not follow a diachronic line, but instead divides them into topics such as: "Made in Italy", "New generation", "*Uomini e donne*"[13], "To veil or not to veil?", etc. The narrations are not always set in Italy, as she often retells her experiences in the East, meaning Jordan, where she sees her roots, and in the "other world", i.e. the USA.

We can identify terms and expressions that are proper membership category devices from the way she describes the people she encounters and how she is being described by others. The major challenge in terms of analysis is to discover the points where categories match and in what points they might contradict, as well as what that might say about this "body of knowledge" from whence the categories derive. For example, when referring to her sense of belonging outside of what is being categorized as "Italian", we can see her using the following expressions: "*noialtri ibridi*"[14] (Abdel Qader, 2008, p. 13, 16, 17), "*roba nuova*"[15], and "*noi nati qui*"[16], (*Ibid.*, p. 16). They are expressions of the attempt of the protagonist to find an adequate sub-category for both of the categories she feels she belongs to: the Italian and the non-Italian.

Each of the expressions is composed of at least two terms and contains the acceptation of "unusual", "strange" and "mixed". To accentuate the negative feeling that comes out of this attitude, she uses pejorative terms such as "*bastardina*"[17] (*Ibid.*, p. 20), used ironically when she reflects upon her refusal to choose only one of the cultures she feels she belongs to and to reconcile the differences of the two by being unique. Another term she uses is "*razza inferiore*"[18] (*Ibid.*, p. 31) when she describes the way she feels treated when she finds herself in the police station waiting for her permit of stay. In reference to the bureaucratic problems and the lack of official recognition of her Italian status from being born in Italy, she places herself in the category of "foreigners". The same recognition of "Italianity" is regained once she finds herself in her parents' country of origin, where they use the opposite device to categorize her. The parents categorize her as "Italian" or even in a wider sense a "Western type" when her behaviour or physical appearance does not correspond to the local customs, such as the way to serve coffee, wearing nail polish or even being thin. These examples show the relevance of perspective in defining a membership category, so that when identifying a membership category we should take into consideration the person categorizing and the person or group of people being categorized.

Sacks introduces another important concept regarding membership categorization analysis, defined as a "category-bound activity". He elaborates:

> By the term I intend to notice that many activities are taken by members to be done by some particular or several particular categories of members where the categories are categories from membership categorization devices. Let me notice then, as is obvious to you, that "cry" is bound to "baby", i.e. to the category "baby" which is a member of the collection from the "stage of life" device (Sacks, 1972, p. 335).

By identifying membership categories emerging from a text, we also have to focus on the activities bound to the category. For instance, "wearing make-up" can be seen as a category-bound activity.

Sulinda, the protagonist of the novel, points out that before going to a police station she puts mascara on in order to make sure she appears as "*un'immigrata più occidentale*"[19] (Abdel Qader, 2008, p. 32). When she is seen as a "foreigner" on the Jordanian airplane, it is because she applauds the pilot, just as the Italians do. Furthermore, the sub-category "*persona integrata*"[20] (*Ibid.*, p. 38) of the "migrant" category is connected to the possession of Italian citizenship; her categorization as being "Italian" depends on "recognition by the State", even though in certain moments she tries to justify her categorization as a "*brava figlia dello Stato*"[21] (*Ibid.*, p, 28) and her belonging to the Italian category, stating that she has never received bad grades in school and has always paid her bills and bus tickets.

As far as the membership categorization devices are concerned, it is noteworthy that the main character is identified through a collection such as "origin" through the categories "immigrated", "born here" or "foreigner", and other collections such as "gender", "religious belief" etc. She is also identified through a combination of different collections. For instance, she uses the category "*donna musulmana*"[22] or "*noi musulmane*"[23] numerous times during the narration where we can see the combined use of the collection "gender" and the collection "religious belief". A more detailed categorization of this type can be noticed when she reflects upon the difficult condition for immigrants regarding employment in Italy listing all the categories that she belongs to: "*donna*"[24], "*immigrata*"[25], "*giovane*"[26], "*musulmane*"[27], and "*velate*"[28] (*Ibid.*, p. 72). By listing the mentioned categories she feels she belongs to, she gradually points out the restriction of employment opportunities.

Conclusion

The writings of migrant authors are a social denunciation of the discriminated and marginalized – an invitation for "others" to see the reality of Italy from a different perspective. The above-mentioned examples of analysis of the selected novel display the complexity of the membership categorization process. The author uses a combination of

terms in order to formulate the appropriate category, or even a combination of different categories of different collections, although only one category is enough to refer to a person. The future perspective of this research is to extend the corpus to include more authors and works and to offer a new methodological approach to Italian migrant literature and to literature in general, as well as to contribute to a positive recognition of the literary and cultural phenomenon of migration in Italy and abroad.

The migrant writings present a new viewpoint of contemporary Italy which comes along with an enriched Italian language, where we can find terms transcribed from various languages of the world into the Italian alphabet, thereby introducing new cultural concepts. Moreover, a deeper insight into these writings, such as the research presented here, provides an opportunity to explore new ways of defining and seeing ourselves and others, and raises our awareness about the expressions we use in our everyday communication.

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NOTES

[1] Our translation.

[2] Our translation.

[3] http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/basili2001/. Last Visit 7 September, 2013.

[4] http://www.ilgiocodeglispecchi.org/. Last Visit 7 September, 2013.

[5] http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/. Last Visit 20 February, 2014.

[6] http://www.letterranza.org/. Last Visit 20 February, 2014.

[7] Our translation.

[8] h t t p : / / w w w . m e r r i a m - w e b s t e r . c o m / d i c t i o n a r i d e n t i t y ? - show=0&t=1379325056. Last Visit 16 September, 2013.

[9] Our translation.

[10] Our translation.

[11] The term "member" is used here to describe those who share a common body of knowledge about the social world and common competences in using such knowledge.

[12] "new Italian girls are being raised". This and subsequent translations of passages from *Porto il velo, adoro i Queen* are ours.

[13] "Men and women".

[14] "we – the other hybrids".

[15] "the new stuff".

[16] "we, the ones born here".

[17] "little bastard", with reference to a female.

[18] "inferior race".

[19] "a more Western-type immigrant".

[20] "integrated person".

[21] "good daughter of the State".

[22] "muslim woman".

[23] "we muslims".

[24] "woman".

[25] "immigrated".
[26] "young".
[27] "muslims".
[28] "wearing a veil".