Membership Categorization in Africant Migrant Writers' Autobiographies

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Presented at NEMLA 2017 Session "Literature of Migration: Migrant Writers in Italy"
On March 24, 2017

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to share part of the results of a larger research on Italian literature of migration by presenting a different analytical approach to this cultural phenomenon in Italy. The study avails of ethnomethodology approaches regarding construction of identity and the concept of membership categorization, where the last term indicates classifications or social types that can be used to describe people. It offers concrete example of application of the membership categorization analysis on the autobiographies written by three migrant writers from Africa: *In fuga dale tenebre* by Jean-Paul Pougala, *Il mio viaggio della speranza dal Senegal all'Italia in cerca di fortuna* by Bay Mademba and *Ama il tuo sogno. Vita e rivolta nella terra dell'oro rosso* by Yvan Sagnet.

The identified categories have been analyzed taking into consideration the particular context and the discursive strategies employed, such as: negotiation of meaning, code-switching etc. Special attention is paid to membership categorizations which are presented as relevant within the narration by the authors themselves, and result as conflict-generating in certain contexts. In particular, the categories such as: 'nero', 'africano' and 'straniero' belonging to different membership categorization devises, respectively 'skin color', 'geographical area of origin' and 'citizenship", as well as terms referring to the 'nationality' of the authors, have been shown to have interchangeable usage, but also to have variable and sometimes contrasting connotations even within the same text. Ultimately, the results of the analysis show the context-dependent nature of the membership categorizations, which in turn means that a person cannot be defined in one word only, but that the identity is a matter of social construction in the course of interaction.

This paper is part of larger interdisciplinary research whose main objective was to study the construction of the category 'migrant' in the Italian literature of migration. Undoubtedly, the first recognition to this particular literary phenomenon in Italy has been offered by Armando Gnisci since the late '90s who observes this literary production in Italy in a worldwide perspective, as a part of the so called "mutual decolonization" and linguistic and literary hybridization of writings of various geographical and cultural origin. He 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»[1] (Gnisci 2003: p.8). Fulvio Pezzarossa, instead, in occasion of the twentieth anniversary from the first publications, discussed the proper use of the term "literature" and accordingly to some other scholars proposed writings, hoping that this term would embrace better the variety of forms and the idea of practices that carry the distinguishing feature of "migration". The discussion about the proper designation is not the most relevant, but it brings along further issues which are interrelated: its development, the genres and sub-genres it could be divided in, its reception, as well as other sociological and cultural factors. An important database of migrant writers in Italian entitled BASILI, founded by Armando Gnisci and Franca Sinopoli from the University of Rome, identified 481 migrant authors representing 93 different nations[2].

The attention of the literary critics and scholars has been following the development from the different points of view: thematic, linguistic, procedural, editorial etc. The sociolinguistic analyses have been conducted as well. Fulvio Pezzarossa admits that "in the restricted circle of researchers who until shortly ago wanted to compete with this issue had to draw mainly on alternative resources to those of strictly literary extraction". It was this sociolinguistic approach that arose our interest to go deeper in the ways how these procedures are embodied in the construction of identity of the narrator.

For this purpose the research has been focused on autobiographies written by migrant writers. Here, it should be pointed out that autobiographism has been accompanaying the migrant writings since the first publications in a greater or smaller manner. But to make a clear distinction which works to include, we refered to the notion of "autobiography" offered by Lejeune, where the criteria of autobiography is set by the coincidence of the author-narrator and the protagonist marked by the proper name. It doesn't mean that there isn't place

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1 I translate.
2 http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/basili2001/

for fiction, as Lejeune mentionss several example in the history of literature where this technique has been "abused". *It only acts as a "contract" between the author and the reader and helps to make the narration more truthful*. The application to the concept of Lejeune helps to establish a criterion of selection of texts, especially with regard to the autobiographical pact in the way that we can prevent that certain allusions typical of the fictional texts may result misleading. The tendency of migrant writers to turn directly to their own experience as a mean of communication with the "others" since the beginning of the phenomenon, it is a fact now established by all those who deal with this matter. Various references are used in order to define the relationship between the writer-narrator-protagonist and the experience narrated: scrittura e pratica autobiografica, (autobiographical writing) autobiografismo, impianto autobiografico (autobiographical imprint), cifra autobiografica (autobiographical code) (cf.. Comberiati, Moll, Nicu etc.) to alternative terminological suggestions, but always contiguous, such as the memoir or the "testiomonio"(cf.. Pezzarossa). Interestingly, the examination of some reviews that go more into specific in the argument of autobiographism shows that this aspect acts as a reducing factor with respect to the literary value of the works. It could be confirmed by examining all the studies where the phase of literary maturation of this production is almost identified the abandonment and removal of the autobiographical drive and orientation towards different generes and especially toward greater fictional intervention. *It feels as if reflecting on various possible motivations the critic trying to "justify" the autobiographical imprint even in advanced stages of development of this type of literature.* Some renowned scholars such as Comberiati, explains the presence of the autobiographical imprunt as a search for identity viewed as a core of this poetic, while Nicu revalues it, interpretating it as mean of the writers to overcome the trauma in the psychoanalytic sense namely as the satisfaction of a desire unfulfilled or a defense. Nicu notes another possible urge to write, caused by the trauma of the "re-ordering of one's life, its chaos," that is, to put together the various parts of the disintegrated self and reprocess the trauma and perhaps even the sense of guilt towards their loved ones at home. This last point, however, is found questionable in respect of this paper, since "I" is not intended as a compact unit or not of different parts, but as an ongoing process within the text highlights through the membership categorization.

The main methodological instrument for the research involved the concept of socially constructed identity and membership categorisation 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»

As we see, from the 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. 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 highly specific personal identity in the course of ordinary activities»[3] (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 etc

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»: consistency rule, economy rule, (Economy rule: a single membership category is adequate to describe a member of some population. Consistency rule: if a category from some collection is used to describe a first member of some population, then that category or some other category from the same collection may be used to categorize further members of the population.

Caniglia, remember that the novelty in Sacks's proposal is not to the concept of the categories as such, which is known from the times of the ancient Greek philosophers to the most recent sociologists. Instead, the originality of Sacks is represented by the same ethnomethodological perspective from which starts, as well as from 'objective to study in the empirical methods, the skills and untold resources through which a sense order to the social actions is being assigned. What is ordered and methodical, precise Caniglia introduction on the analysis of Sacks, is the choice of categories acting as operation. Key points: Each category store the same information. A further feature of the categories that identifies Sacks is the expected representativity of members.

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3 I translate.

The relevance of the membership categorization in the Italian migrant literature is evident right from the titles of the most famous novels, such as: come *Io, venditore di elefanti, Chiamatemi Ali, Immigrato, Noi italiani neri, Staniera, Princesa, Il mio nome è regina, Memorie di una principessa etope* (Nasibù, 2005)*, ecc. Almost all the titles represent a membership categorization, which could be easily understood as a need of the migrant writers to categorize himself and elude the usual categories conferred by others. Following the principles of Sacks, therefore, to construct a scheme that shows the tendenncy not only in terms of type of categories, but procedural tendency, highlighted in the "method", ie the way in which the authors 'play' with the "machinery" presented by Sacks

Furthermore, it is revealed as essential to identify not only which categories are selected by the authors to categorize themselves and with which methods in the sense of technical and linguistic and discursive procedures used for that purpose, but also how they show the relevance of that specific category. Initially it was built a sort of 'dictionary' of the categories used in texts, identifying at the same time also the relevant category-related features: the activities, the membership-categorization device, all other categories used to categorize other persons mentioned, the perspective of categorization (if it was the narrator to categorize himself or other persons mentioned in the context and what), as well as any particularities (of the type of shift categorization too from one to another and so on.) As a result, the one used in this research could be described as primarily "corpus-driven" compared to the "corpus-based" (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001), as were the data analysis together to provide the analysis parameters.

The next steps in the research undertaken included selection in the bases of the common traits and particularities related to the membership categorization out of the identified autobiographies. At the end, the autobiographies of three migrant writers (out of 9), all of them from Africa: *In fuga dale tenebre* by Jean-Paul Pougala, *Il mio viaggio della speranza dal Senegal all'Italia in cerca di fortuna* by Bay Mademba and *Ama il tuo sogno. Vita e rivoltanella terra dell'oro rosso* by Yvan Sagnet have been taken into consideration. The methodic use of the categories has been observed, which means the way that they are being constructed throughout the narration, and afterwards, they were classified.

Self- ed other- attribuited categorizationss

First of all, it was found that basically the categorizations can be self- or others- attributed. The others- attributed categories are present through the voices of the other characters that the author chooses to insert in the text, which means he considers them relevant.

> Fra le persone che ho conosciuto, c'è la signora Laura che mi è rimasta molto nel cuore. Io, quando vendo, non fermo mai le persone anziane, ma quella volta fu lei che mi avvicinò e come se mi conoscesse da sempre, mi chiese un favore […] Era contenta, e siccome ogni tantto le sfuggiva una parola in francese, le ho chiesto *"Parlais vous francais?" "Oui"* mi ha risposto ed poi ha aggiunto: "Io sono stata in Francia tanti anni, so come sono i senegalesi, voi siete bravi e simpatici. (Mademba, 2006: 34).

> Among the people I met, there is Mrs. Laura I have left a lot in the heart. I, when I sell, never stopped the elderly, but this time it was she who came up to me and as if I had always known, he asked me a favor [...] She was glad, and since every now and then slipped a word in French, the I asked "Parlais vous francais?" "Oui," he said and then added: "I have been in France for many years, I know how they are Senegalese, you are good and nice.

Implicit categorizations

Another important classification regarded the implication of the category, it means that very often the category is implied by the mention of category-related features, or so called category-bound activity:

> Forse, come avrebbe previsto Montesquieu, il ruolo più adatto a me, perché proveniente dall'Africa, sarebbe stato quello di pulire i cessi degli atleti in qualche villaggio olimpico a Pragelato, a Sestriere o Bardonecchia, non certo di usare il cervello per trarre qualche vantaggio economico dai giochi. (Pougala, 2007: 218).

> Perhaps, as Montesquieu would have expected, the most suitable role for me, because it came from Africa, would be to clean the toilets of athletes in some Olympic Village in Pragelato, Sestriere and Bardonecchia, certainly not to use the brain to draw some economic benefit from the games.

Here, in this example, the others-attributed category –"toilet cleaner" is implicitely evoked by the category-bound activity "cleaning the water closet". The category isn't mentioned at all but the refusal of the author to categorize himself with this category is even reinforced by

the contrast with other category-bound activities, and the consequent categories he preferes to be identied with, such as: enterpreneur, or sponsor.

Another sub-type of categories not explicetly mentioned are those that we have defined such as: presumed categorizations, most of them other-attributed by means of the category-bound activity, but considered by the author as non approriate.

> Cerco sempre di far ridere chi avvicino, perché con una persona che tu non conosci, se ci vuoi parlare senza dar sospetto, bisogna farla ridere, dire qualcosa per cui pensi: "Quello che viene da me è una persona simpatica". E così cadono le paure che magari io lo voglia rubare o raggirare (Mademba, 2006: 35).

> I always try to make people laugh who approach, because with a person you do not know if we want to talk without arousing suspicion, you have to make her laugh, to say something to think: "What comes to me is a nice person." So drop the fears that maybe I want to steal or swindle. (Mademba, 2006: 35).

False categorizations

While narrating their migrant experiences, the authors often find themselves in difficult and complicated situations and they are forced to use different categories where they feel don't belong in order to avoid risk or danger, or to achieve certain goal. Here we see the improper use of the category "asylum-seeker" by Mademba, in function to his "passport" to Greece.

> Al secondo tentativo di varcare la frontiera, io ho detto di venire dalla Mauritania e i miei compagni dalla Somalia. Con questo strattagemma volevamo evitare di essere rimpatriati, poiché chi proviene dai paesi in guerra può dichiararsi 'profugo politico'. (Mademba, 2006)

> On the second attempt to cross the border, I said to come from Mauritania and my companions from Somalia. With this tactic we wanted to avoid being repatriated, since those coming from countries at war may be declared 'political refugee'

Categorizations by denial

The authors turn to this type of categorization by negation of other categories belonging to the same "collection".

> Sulle prime c'era grande diffidenza nei miei confronti. Né sudanese, né tunisino, unico camerunese in tutta Boncuri, risultavo tanto per cambiare agli occhi di tutti un po' straniero. (Sagnet, 2012: 76)

> At first there was great suspicion in me. One Cameroonian in entire Boncuri nor Sudan, nor Tunisian I ended being in the eyes of all a bit of a stranger. (Sagnet, 2012: 76)

In this excerpt the category "camerunese" is preceded by negation of other categories of the same collection, here "nationality", or "age" in this excerpt.

> Ma per i miei figli che cosa potevo fare? Il testamento lo fanno i vecchi, io avevo solo quarantadue anni. Quale tipo di testamento poteva lasciare un uomo della mia età? (Pougala, 2007: 229)

> But for my children what I could do? The will is normally done by the old I was only forty-two. What kind of a will could leave a man of my age? (Pougala, 2007: 229)

Here, the category "young" is implocit, but is evoked through the negation of the opposite category. The categorial resources are the following "I miei figli" , "I vecchi", "uomo della mia età" and the previously stated "'io avevo solo quarantadue anni'" belong to the same collection based on "relationship". Applying the economy and consistency rule we assume that the category that remains after the negation of the other categories from the device "stages of life", that the relevant category here is "giovane".

The categories obtained by applying the methods shown above were inserted into a grid and classified according to those types. Even though, the membership categorisation analysis is susbstantially qualitative type of research, here it worked also in deducing some relevant quantitative results, i.e. which categories have been used most by the authors and were considered as the most relevant. To do so, we calculated the data extracted from the three autobiographies using the Word Smith software.

Concluding remark

The category 'migrant' is attributed to the writers of the texts in question, it is indisputable from the fact that their literature is classified as 'literature of migration', and as a result, criticism is often read of 'migrant writers'. However, by examining the texts and then 'categories in action', ie, situated in a specific context, it turned out that in the narratives of

their lives, there are many other categories that they themselves choose relevant to categorize themselves, and it is this is the empirical aspect that prevails in this research.