

Oral Narrative and Interactional Institutional Identities in a University Second Language Classroom

Récit oral et identités interactionnelles institutionnelles en une classe de langue seconde en université

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Abstract

An analysis of University Italian L2 education is significant, for understanding both the Italian institution's cultural transmission and the international students' cultural appropriation. In this communicative process, *identity* is negotiated and constructed by many interactional strategies, among which narratives can be found. Hence, I will answer to the questions whether within the University, an institutional narrative which exemplifies the institutional interactional identities can be found and how it would be featured. The analysis will make explicit the actors' identity perceptions that the narrative embodies. Otherwise stated, I will describe how actors' identities are shaped by interactions through which the participants collectively construct a counter-structure institutional narrative.

Keywords: second language, institution, interaction, narrative, identity

Résumé

Une analyse de la didactique en italien L2 à l'Université est importante, pour comprendre aussi bien la transmission culturelle de l'institution italienne que l'appropriation culturelle des étudiants internationaux. Dans ce processus de communication, l'identité est négociée et construite à travers de nombreuses stratégies interactionnelles, dont les récits peuvent être trouvés. Par conséquent, nous posons la question suivante : à l'Université, un récit institutionnel qui illustre la identités institutionnelle interactionnelle peut-il être trouvé, et comment peut-il être caractérisé. L'analyse rendra explicite les perceptions des identités des acteurs que le récit incarne. En d'autres termes, nous décrirons comment les identités des acteurs sont façonnées par des interactions à travers lesquelles les participants construisent collectivement un récit « contre-structurel » institutionnel.

Mots-clés : langue seconde, institution, interaction, narration, identité

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1. Aim of the study

Universities are paramount to the education and, through the interaction, to the identity construction of the future professional-managerial class. An analysis of University Italian L2 education is significant, for understanding both the Italian institution's cultural transmission and the international students' cultural appropriation. In this communicative process, *identity* is negotiated and constructed by a variety of interactional strategies, among which narratives can be found (Ciliberti, 2007, p. 74).

The debate on “narrative-in-interaction” has recently received much attention, for its description, I refer back to Georgakopoulou, 2007, and for the general issues, to Schiffrin, et al., 2001 and to De Fina & Schiffrin, 2006.

In this study, I will describe how actors' identities are shaped by interactions through which the participants collectively construct a counter-structure institutional narrative.

1.1 Research questions and methodology

Institutional social interactions can shape learners' identities during their L2 courses (for the discussion on the role of institutions in social interactions, see North, 1990, p. 3ff; Nee and Ingram, 1998, p. 19; on the social role of interaction, see Gumperz, 2001, p. 17ff; on the identity interactional construction, see Ciliberti, 2007; on institution and identity, see Chevallier, 1994, pp. 239-251; on identity construction in L2 didactics, see Zarate et al., 2008).

L2 here is the foreign language taught in the Country where the target language is spoken, i.e. Italian in Italy, French in France etc., for this reason, it is good to keep in mind that the L2 class groups are heterogeneous for nationalities, languages and cultures.

Hence, the following questions stem:

1 – Within the University, can an institutional narrative be found which exemplifies the institutional interactional identities? How would the institutional narrative be featured?

2 –Which identity perception would the narrative unveil?

Here I present the results of the discourse analysis of an institutional narrative. The applied research method is direct observation and an open-ended interview. The corpus collects field notes, video-recorded lessons, and the interview with an expert, who is the teacher. Data are thus visual, audio and written. Therefore non-linguistic features are also considered. The data were collected in July 2010 in an Italian L2 course which was part of the Summer School organized by a Language Centre of a large Italian University.

The criterion used to select linguistic data is fundamentally based on semantic consistency with the topic of the narrative: Air conditioning.

2. An institutional counter-structure *narrative-in-interaction*

The peculiarity of this narration is in its structure and tellers. It features sequences of here and now interactions, is often embedded in online conversations, and is basically used for argumentation. There are several storytellers: students, the teacher, the researcher and the security officer. The detailed narration is not finalized to the telling of one's experience (as in conventional narrative

analysis), but rather to the solution of the problem presented. The story often shifts from content to the participants' relationship, at times helpfully constructing the relationship between the teacher and the class, at times suggesting the external institutional position of the teacher. Ergo, the institution plays the role of the counterpart.

2.1 Air conditioning: The plot

The problem is set right before the beginning of the first video recording, a student asks the researcher, who is an observer in the classroom, to exchange seats, because she needs cooler air. She justifies her request saying that the air conditioning system does not work properly. The teacher says she has reported the problem to the administrative officer (during the security officer's holiday), but the air conditioning is still not working. After about an hour lesson, during the break when the classroom is empty, the video camera accidentally records the security officer entering to check the temperature in the classroom.

In the following lessons, the teacher repeatedly refers to air conditioning and summer heat, incorporating the subject as context for examples in her teaching units.

The epilogue is in the video interview with the teacher towards the end of the research period: the researcher tells the teacher that the air conditioning was not repaired because the security officer was on holiday.

2.2 Interactional features of the institutional narrative

Institutional narrative can be described according to location, forms and media of the narrative, and its interactional features, such as storytelling rights, tellability, (Linde in Schiffrin, Tannen, 2001, pp. 518-536) and embeddedness (Georgakopoulou, 2007, pp. 58-59). For the purpose of this paper I will focus on the interactional level of analysis.

In the following example, we can see how the narrative at issue is *embedded* into another narrative which has the explicit function of introducing the subject of the lesson.

Example no. 1

[6.30]

(1) I.: Yesterday yesterday afternoon you went to visit the Cineteca.. right?

[7.00]

(9) I.: eh two hours, wasn't it hot? Was it hot?

(10) S1: no no

(11) S3: no

(12) S2: no outside it was, though...

(13) I.: inside? There was the air (*she*

(14) I.: *rotates her hands at her head height to indicate air*) (2) conditioning. That's Ok

(15) S2: inside there was the air, yes yes no problem

(16) S2: aahhahah hhh

- (17) S4: (*she turns smiling to her classmate on her right*)
 (18) S3, S5: ahhah
 (19) I.: no problem wehhhhahaha well you were well, Ok.

After the problem setting, at 6.30 minute recording, the teacher warms up the class for the lesson and elicits a narration (line 1), the teacher (I) returns back to the topic of temperature in line (9) “It wasn't too hot? Was it hot?”, S1 is reassuring, “no no”, as well as S3 and S2. S2, though, manages to add a longer turn in line (12) “no, outside it was, but...”. The teacher, therefore, turns to him completing the sentence with a question in line (13-14) “Inside? There was the air (about 2.00 second pause) conditioning”: this teacher's turn, especially emphasized by the gesture during the pause (*lines 13-14*), infers a working air conditioning system; emphasis is also given by intonation and by the slow pace between “air” and “conditioning”, a white space which increases expectations and signals inference.

The process at work here, the conversational inference, is the sharing of information regarding collective knowledge (a functioning air conditioning system) which exemplifies what the interactants have in common. This process of interpretation (Gumperz, 1992, p. 306) by which participants in an exchange retrieve relevant background knowledge and assess others' communicative intentions, is also the illocutionary force of what is conveyed.

Hypothetically, to share the same knowledge allows the participants to perceive a similar identity, however partial and limited to this special context. S2's sentence (line15-16) “yes yes no problems (laugh)” signals both the inferred reference to the air condition narrative and its evaluation. There are participants' approvals: S4 signals her participation to the inferences by smiling and looking her class mate, the overlapping laugh that follows (line 16 and 18-19) indicates the general comprehension of the communicative exchange. A feeling of affiliation to the same group and knowledge are shared by all the class, teacher included.

Example no. 2

- (1) R.: It has been cleared up then the reason for the story of the air conditioning, you
 (2) R.: know? Because Maria was on holidays when it was reported, and it was reported it
 (3) R.: was reported not to her who was the one that. She wasn't here but it was reported to
 (4) T.: eh.. when s/he passed by and (*incomprehensible*)
 (5) R.: Sergio who has already send the
 (6) R.: technician here once, she says, but (0:02) but not
 (7) T.: eh you see?
 (8) R.: So (0:08) then I ehhh would like...

The teacher's request was not fulfilled because of a procedural failure: She asked the administrative officer (Sergio), not the security officer (Maria) (lines 2-3, 5). Explicitly the procedure was wrong, but implicitly, the person was. It was *the teacher* who reported to the wrong person. Consequently, the institution is not minorized (on *minorization*, see Gumperz, 1992, p. 302). We can reasonably argue, as did Linde (2001, p. 530), that “tenure [time in position of responsibility] within

an institution is very important to people's identities.”

The storyteller's identity draws attention to the *storytelling rights*. They are mainly related to status. The students do not apparently have storytelling rights, as they usually react to the teacher's input and usually do not select the topic. In the very beginning, though, a student starts the topic, acquiring storytelling rights because she was suffering. Apparently, the students have no right, unless their health is threatened. On the other hand, they do have the right to evaluate the story (as in Ex. 1, line 15). The teacher certainly has right to tell (she tells the officer, the researcher, the students), but her status is not high enough to attract the necessary attention, except from her students. The researcher also has rights, but more as a mediator than a storyteller (see the R.'s turns in Ex. 2). The difference in status of the researcher and of the informant teacher is highlighted by their institutional position: the former is a permanent member of the teaching staff, the latter is a free lancer. The security officer (Maria) asserts her right to tell only if she is asked.

In storytelling, *silence* has an important role, as it “expresses” the right to talk and to be informed, besides defining the speakable and the unspeakable. The teacher was not informed by the administrative officer (Sergio) about the result of her complaint. However, the matter was unofficially discussed, which ratified its status of a speakable topic.

Storytelling rights are closely related to *tellability*, which is a matter of social negotiation. Tellability is determined by the story, in this case the narration is “mostly used argumentatively”, so “the notions of effectiveness, appropriacy, and consequentially (...) the local business on hand.” become relevant (Geogakopoulou, 2007, p. 58). The air conditioning problem does not seem to have much tellability. The teacher does not receive direct feedback regarding the problem and, while not ignored, she is reassured with words more than with appropriate actions.

2.3 Paradigmatic and counter-structure narratives

Generally speaking, institutional narratives can be *paradigmatic* and/or *counter-structure*. Linde (2001, p. 525) defines *paradigmatic* institutional narratives as stories about life examples to be followed, to be emulated, they are models of real life success which can be accomplished by any member of the institution. The *counter-structure* narrative illustrates the actors' resistant tendencies in everyday institutional life, it uncovers interactional tensions and pockets of expectations of an interactional institutional change. Its structure is relatively loose, it lacks a systematic all-encompassing narrative, and there is silence. This narrative certainly falls into this second type. The narrative events are scattered over one week; they are told by different people, and the story is repeated many times in the same context (the classroom). Further, it is interactionally constructed: narrative events and their evaluations are negotiated both to infer what others are conveying and to monitor how the speaker's contributions are received (Gumperz, 2001, p. 217).

3. Conclusions: Perceived Outcomes of Interactional Institutional Identities

In this paper, the narration under analysis is not intended as an enclosed teller-listener paradigm. Rather it recalls Georgakopoulou's “narration-in-interaction” (2007), which should be described within the discourse analysis framework.

This institutional narrative is *counter-structure*, and outlines the participants' perception of their institutional identity. The *teacher's* repeated complaints suggest an inefficient institution, which does not solve important problems for both students and teachers. The *students'* representation is softened by the unsaid, they accept the fact that the institution cannot handle problems, but we have no clues about the reasons for this acceptance.

The *administration* justifies its behavior by evoking holidays, and the common knowledge on how inevitably in these periods institutional activities slow down, and things might not be performed properly, if not at all. But at the same time, the teacher's identity perception is suggested in her procedural mistake, positioning her as someone external to the structure.

The participants' institutional identities are reinforced through the narratives within interactions by a feeling of affiliation (teacher and class) which can help classroom interaction. On the other hand, the analysis indicates that the teacher's external position (free lance) somehow weakens her institutional identity and this is perhaps the reason of the unhappy ending of the narrative. It is therefore evident how institutional identity can be constructed and can be identified through the analysis of narrative in interactions in this specific university L2 classroom setting.

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