Imagined communities and identities: A spaciotemporal discourse analysis of one woman's literacy journey ☆

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the narratives of Marla, a 25-year old bilingual and biliterate transnational Latina mother. Data for this study came from an overarching ethnographic narrative inquiry study that investigated how five women tutors in a neighborhood literacy initiative constructed, enacted, and expressed their literacy identities. Marla's narratives illuminated a spatial and temporal framework that warranted a closer, more nuanced look at how she positioned herself in time and space. The authors inquired into what Marla's narratives suggested about her constructions of literacy and identity. Specifically, we focus on Marla's use of deictics, which illuminated a sophisticated storying of self that she used to position herself as a global citizen, a good student, and a mature family woman. Findings highlight how Marla restoried herself, constructing a new "now" self that she actualized in the present as she imagined a new future for her and her family.

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> "*We define who we are by where we have been and where we are going*"
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> — Wenger (1998, p. 149)

1. Introduction

This study investigates the narratives of Marla, a 25-year old bilingual and biliterate transnational Latina mother. Data for this study were taken from an ethnographic narrative inquiry that investigated how five women tutors in a neighborhood literacy initiative, the Women's Literacy Network (WLN), constructed, enacted, and expressed their literacy identities (Bacon, 2014). In the WLN, women with GEDs (General Education Development), a high school equivalency exam, tutored women who were working toward their GEDs. Heidi and Marla met when Heidi engaged new tutors in 20 hours of literacy workshops. Marla later agreed to participate in Heidi's narrative inquiry which led to a three-year relationship that stretched the boundaries of "self studying another" (Tedlock, 2011, p. 336).

Marla's narratives led us to interpret a spatial and temporal framework that warranted a closer, more nuanced look at her discourses. Thus, we inquired into what Marla's narratives suggest about her constructions of literacy and identity and her positioning of self in time and space. Specifically, we examined Marla's use of deictics, i.e. spatial, temporal, and personal (Wortham & Reyes, 2015) to illuminate the framework through which she constructed her literacy identity and narrated her stories.

In this article, we describe how Marla chronicled her literacy journey through a series of stories that were relationally linked in time and space to portray an emerging self which she imagined and actualized in the present. Wortham and Rhodes (2015) contend that narratives are embedded in particular contexts and cannot be understood without acknowledging the chain of events that constitute individuals' social characteristics, identities, and group memberships. Marla's perspective offers unique insights into her socially constructed worlds and situated identities. We look back in time to Marla's remembered self, as she constructed a new "Now Self" (Bruner, 1994). We witness Marla's experiences and transformations, and we interpret her interpretations of her world (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), traveling with her as she re-imagines her future (cf. Norton, 2013).

We began our investigation of Marla's narratives by considering the ways in which her discourses indexed her positioning over time and facilitated her construction of self as a literate being. Discourses, which constitute more than language and talk, situate the ways individuals create and enact their social worlds, illuminating

pathways of being and becoming (Fairclough, 2015; Gee, 2015). We take up van Dijk's (2009) view of discourses and related actions as mindful encounters shared within a realm of sociocultural experience. We perceive them as imbued with meaning and interpreted rather than observed.

Our analysis of Marla's narratives identified an accumulation of indexical signs that formed a chain of linked pathways over the context of her narrated events (cf. Wortham & Reyes, 2015). Canagarajah (2018) refers to indexicality as a spacio-temporal process whereby "meanings sediment over time to develop grammatical status and norms" (p. 35). Indexical signs or verbal cues, including deictics, signal the objects or referents to which they point (Wortham, 2004; Wortham & Reyes, 2015). This patterning of signs across successive events contextualized Marla's positioning as a global citizen, a good student, and a mature family woman who desired a better life for her and her family. Hence, the layering of experience, both tangible and intangible, mediated Marla's subjectivities, enabling the cultivation of a dynamic hybrid identity (De Fina, 2016). Within this framework, we theorize Marla's constructions of self as a discursive product of her social history.

Marla's narratives and discursive constructions of identity illustrate how narrative can "evoke the story-worlds in which interactions are re-lived" (De Fina & King, 2011, p. 166). Retelling Marla's narratives complicates stories of Latinas, who are often portrayed as intellectually inferior (Isasi-Diaz, 2011). As one of the most marginalized groups in the U.S., Latinas tend to be treated as a problem with little regard for the cultural practices that confront mainstream, majoritarian views (Villenas, 2005; Villenas, Godinez, Delgado Bernal, & Elenes, 2006). Ideological constructions that valorize standardized language practices further position Spanish-dominant Latinas as "linguistically deviant" (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p. 150). Gutiérrez and Orellana (2006) remind us that researchers are also complicit by describing English speakers in essentializing ways. They caution that normative representations can reify deficit framing and lead to flawed interpretations without regard to the unique challenges faced by individuals and communities.

For this reason, we take up the call to render a strength-based, complicated, and more even representation of Latina immigrant mothers, like Marla, one that lives in the Neither/Nor, a space that symbolizes comings and goings rather than beginnings and endings (Guerra, 2014). Comings and goings signify a departure from binary thinking and notions of fixity. Marla's migrations, her locations, and her re-locations, shift attention from mapping places and movements in narrative discourse to disrupting the "discursive othering of immigrants and marginalized people" (De Fina, 2009, p. 111). In this way, symbolic social meanings become embodied in places and spaces to amplify Marla's knowledge, dignity, and resilience and to create a potent counter-story and imaginaries of possibility.

2. Theoretical framework: theorizing identity

Our framing for this study employs sociocultural and sociocultural linguistic approaches to theorize identity, self, time, and spatiality. These approaches coalesce to allow us to explain how Marla discursively produced and positioned herself as a global citizen, a good student, and a mature family woman. Through analysis of Marla's narratives, we explicate elements of self as related to subjectivity and positioning.

Identities, as McCarthey and Moje, 2002; McCarthey and Moje make clear (2002; see also Moje & Luke, 2009), are fluid, dynamic, and situated in relationships. Gee (2005) posits that any theory of language is a theory of practice where discourses are resources that can be employed in the context of practice. He stresses the connection between experience and meaning, stating that "talk, dialogue, and social action" with others shape our reality (Gee, 2008, p. 97).

Blommaert and Rampton (2012) further maintain that "meaning is multimodal, communicated in much more than language alone" (p. 14). As such, discourses integrate multiple modes and modalities of communicating and being; they are central to identity construction, as identities can be represented through narration, performed, or enacted through our interactions with others (Wortham, 2001).

While identity research has been an important concept in the social sciences, earlier research conceived of identity as anchored in the "dense relations between *identities as aspects of self* and *identities as social and cultural objects*" (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007, pp. 102–103). We argue, however, that conceptualizing identities as "aspects of self" or as "social and cultural objects" situates identity independent of action or agency. Sfard and Prusak (2005) assert that conceptualizing identity according to a set of adjectives or nouns that describe or point to a certain kind of person can serve as a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 15). Common words with subtle undertones such as illegal, illiterate, uneducated, or learning disabled commodify individuals and institutionalize identities (McDermott & Raley, 2009). Such categorization often limits or presupposes what individuals can expect to achieve or become (McDermott & Raley). We present this literature to (1) elucidate our analytic approach, (2) demonstrate how Marla employed discursive devices to situate her subjectivities over time, and (3) disrupt and challenge incomplete, monolithic cultural narratives. Lastly, drawing on De Fina (2009), we think our framing important for re-theorizing place as a discursive process in narrative identity construction.

2.1. A sociocultural approach to identity

In a sociocultural framework, thought and language are inseparable. Language is a personalized social process by which "reflection and elaboration of experience takes place" (John-Steiner & Souberman, 1978, p. 126). Citing Vygotsky, van der Veer (2007) explains that environments and humans are mutually constituted; they shape one another in "a spiral process of growth" (p. 23). Humans "attach meaning to different aspects of their environment," and because environments are to some degree socially constructed through mediation and dialog, they respond to changes in an individual's "actions, capacities, age, and so on" (p. 23).

Rather than view identities as social and cultural *objects*, Holland and Lachicotte (2007) establish identities as "social and cultural *products* [emphasis added] through which a person identifies the self-in-activity and learns, through the mediation of cultural resources, to manage or organize himself or herself in the name of an identity" (p. 114). This view of identities is consistent with Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) notion of a figured world, a socially and culturally constructed space where identities are enacted in the practice of activities meaningful to that particular world.

In a similar vein, Gee (2014) uses the term *typical stories* to describe everyday theories about the world in which people are socialized into specific discourses. Such theories are based on beliefs and values, using assumptions and simplified models of the world, which Gee likens to 'folk theories,' 'frames,' 'scripts,' 'cultural models,' 'Discourse models,' and 'figured worlds' (p. 89). He posits that whether a story is typical or not varies according to our social and cultural groups, what is stored in our heads and what is stored "out in the world. . .in other people's heads" (p. 90). Typical stories provide a rationale for grouping and classifying individuals and suggest how individuals come to be positioned by self and others.

Positioning, according to Wortham (2004), is "an event of identification, in which a recognizable category of identity gets explicitly or implicitly applied to an individual in an event that takes place across seconds, minutes, or hours" (p. 166). Acts of positioning are always self-authoring in that individuals are called into an