



Essentialization strategies in the storytellings of young Luso-descendant women in France: Narrative calibration, voicing, and scale



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ABSTRACT

This article examines how young Franco-Portuguese storytelling participants use a particular set of strategies of narrative calibration and voicing to make essentializing claims in narrative discourse. Specifically, I analyze how storytelling participants shift between specific and generic deictics of verb tense and pronouns in ways that “jump scale” between reportively narrating single events and nomicly asserting general “timeless” types and principles. Participants exploit such shifts between specific and generic forms in ways that also transform and enhance the voicing and uptake of the generalizing claims made. Through use of such strategies, participants implicitly invoke generational, historical, and national time scales. I argue for an approach to scale that integrates earlier discussions of event, context(ualization) and interdiscursivity.

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1. Introduction

This article examines how storytelling participants produce and infer general “timeless,” essential social types, situations, and moral principles. I address how participants alternate between the singular and the generic (Lyons, 1977; Carlson and Pelletier, 1995) to tell stories that make particularly interactionally persuasive “points.” I focus on the voicing (Bakhtin, 1981), or more specifically, the complex transformations and laminations of speaker roles (Hill, 1995; Irvine, 1996; Koven, 2011a) through which storytelling participants move from narrating one-time events to then narrating and inviting alignment and affiliation (Stivers, 2008) with perduring social “truths” about normative gendered behavior. These claims concern whether young women of Portuguese descent raised in France should follow their Portuguese elders’ gender norms or those of their peers in urban France. When moving between specific and generic, participants shift from reportive to nomic calibration, often constructing and aligning with essentializing statements in the talk itself.¹ However, as we will see, these “timeless” principles in fact (re)produce particular contrasting moral positions connected to juxtaposed spatiotemporal frameworks or scales of generation, (non)modernity, and nation. In this way, it is in and through the voicing in the storytelling interaction that participants implicitly and explicitly evoke and project “essential truths,” that summon up and resonate

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¹ Issues of morality, praise, and blame are central in oral narrative (Labov, 2002; Hill, 1995; Miller et al., 1997; Ochs and Capps, 2001), where storytellers may narrate in ways that enhance alignment with particular moral positions, and invite disapproval of others. Participants may also use storytelling not so much to communicate pre-established, static moral positions, but to collaboratively sort through juxtaposing moral uncertainties within and across narrated and narrating events (Ochs and Capps, 2001).

across these multiple scales. After analyzing how participants use deictic shifts between specific and generic as calibrational and voicing strategies, I then ask about the relationships between contemporary uses of the notion of “scale” and older notions of “event” (tokens and types), “context(ualization),” and interdiscursivity.

2. Essentialization

Storytellers narrate in ways that invite recipients to align with discursively presented, contrasting sets of events, figures, and moral principles. Through particular combinations of narrative strategies, storytellers may implicitly and explicitly make general claims about the social world. Analysis of participants’ production of locally agreed upon, abstract truths adds to sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological discussions of essentialism, or more specifically, essentialization (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004; Irvine and Gal, 2000; Silverstein, 2003). Just as Bauman and Briggs shifted from criticizing those who might “decontextualize” discourse from its interactional surround, to examining “decontextualization” as itself a pervasive discursive practice (1990), I advocate a similar shift from critiquing essentialism to analyzing essentializing discourse practices. In this article, I treat essentialization as the discursively displayed presentation of images of social actors, situations, and principles as intrinsic and timeless. I explore how participants essentialize through discourse strategies that link specific tokens to general and timeless types.² Such essentializing moments may involve alternations between reportive and nomic calibration (Silverstein, 1993). When participants produce and align with nomic calibrated, essentializing speech, they may collaboratively produce and orient to higher order social orders or “scales,” e.g. the generational, the historical, and the national, in the storytelling interaction itself.

Without invoking the notion of nomic calibration, previous scholars have described similar essentializing phenomena. For example, anthropological authors may write in the “ethnographic present,” abstracting from the contingencies of specific fieldwork encounters to authoritatively construct their participants as timeless others (Fabian, 1983). Such strategies also occur in more mundane interactions. Mothers may make generic statements to their young children about male and female picture book characters so that male and female are reproduced as essential social kinds (Gelman et al., 2004). These strategies may play a role in the discursive (de-) essentialization of race/ethnicity, when Asian-American youths make and then respond to generalizing typifications about Asians as a pluralizable type (Reyes, 2004). Also addressing how conversationalists produce a particular type of racializing otherness, Pagliai (2009, 2011, 2012) discussed how conversationalists invite alignment from others in relation to “racializing statements”... “truth statements” (2009: 554) or “basic evidential truths” (2009: 562).

This article adds to these discussions by examining how young Franco-Portuguese storytelling participants produce essentializing claims through alternations of strategies of narrative calibration and voicing. In their storytelling interactions, participants complain to and seek affirmation from each other about the wrongness of their elder Portuguese kin’s moral principles relative to their own. I will analyze how storytellers perform a type of upward scale shift, by switching from narrating one-time events to asserting general types, situations, and principles, which co-present participants ratify. Through these switches, participants implicitly invoke mutually re-inforcing culturally chronotopic images of generation (young and old), vernacular history (modern and old fashioned), and nation (France and Portugal). By demonstrating how participants link specific tokens and general types, this article will also add nuance to discussions of the now ill-fated micro/macro dichotomy (Wortham, 2012). That is, through linking specific tokens and generic types, participants may evoke seemingly more “macro” or “higher-scaled” contexts of generation, modernity, and nation.

3. Essentialization and calibration

The notion of calibration designates how participants link a current, unfolding speech event (Es or the narrating event) to various spatiotemporal frames (Et or narrated events) Silverstein (1993) (see also Whorf, 1956; Jakobson, 1957). Silverstein describes three types of calibration, which participants may combine: reflexive, reportive, and nomic. In *reflexive calibration*, participants produce an emergent model that contextualizes the current interaction, as they construe and display to one another in real-time “what is going on”; in *reportive calibration*, participants link distinct “there-and-then” speech events with the current interaction, as often occurs in stories about a past event told in the present; in *nomic calibration*, participants may link a separate “timeless” realm (such as that invoked in ritual, proverbs, or pronouncements that assert general truths) with the current interaction.

Participants may combine the three types of calibration in the same communicative encounter. However, as I will be centrally discussing how participants use nomic calibration, I briefly review how this notion has been applied. Nomic calibration has been used to explain ritual’s performative capacity to invoke a sacred realm and make it phenomenally experienceable to social actors in the present (Silverstein, 1993, 2003, 2004). It has also been adopted to explain how diasporic or transnationally mobile social actors use various semiotic forms (ritual, narrative, etc.) to evoke and experience the “beyond” of a space-time of an imagined “homeland” or migration, from the perspective of a current time and place (Eisenlohr, 2006; Dick, 2010; Koven, 2013a). Utterances that declare some state of affairs to be timelessly or typically “true” may also involve

² The linguistic and philosophical literature uses the term generic and genericity (Carlson and Pelletier, 1995). I use “general” and “generalizing” to capture how participants produce generic speech in interaction.

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