Reported Speech and Identity in Brazilian Accounts of Discrimination

Narratives are a well known locus for the analysis of issues pertaining to language and identity. As Schiffrin (2002) states narratives provide a "sociolinguistic self-portrait" of their tellers, and thus, allow us to investigate aspects of how tellers perceive themselves and how they convey this perception through language. Interestingly, although much has been said about narratives, on the one hand and about racism on the other, there has been no linguistic study of discriminatory narratives in Brazilian Portuguese. Thus, this narrative genre and one of its main linguistic characteristics are the analytical focus of this paper.

Specifically, this paper examines the use of reported speech, or "constructed dialogue" (Tannen, 1989), as a strategy to position the characters of the narratives either as victi victim ms or perpetrators of discrimination. Some of the questions th at it seeks to answer are: Do the storytellers portray themselves as 1) individuals who 'fought back' when faced with discriminatory actions, or 2), as individuals who were subject to negative situations upon which they had no control, e.g., as helpless victims? Does the use of reported speech vary according to the kinds of discrimination being described e.g., overt vs. covert discrimination?

The data for this study are comprised of discriminatory narratives collected from sociolinguistic interviews (Labov, 1972) with individuals from varied backgrounds, including police officers, garbage collectors, teachers, and soccer players. Two crucial kinds of narratives are identified in the data: 1) those describing events of overt discrimination, in which an insult is directed at the teller; and 2) those describing events of covert discrimination, in which the tellers conclude that they were discriminated based on their interpretation of other characters' actions. Similar to what Essed (1988) reports, we find that tellers frequently compare the kinds of acts being described in their stories to typical acts of discrimination in their communities. Thus, the kinds of illocutionary acts performed through reported speech and the contrast between the use of direct and indirect forms enable the teller to create specific roles and identities within the different kinds of discriminatory narratives of the data (Hamilton, 1998).

This paper adds to our understanding of racial issues by providing an analysis of how tellers of discriminatory narratives use reported speech to position themselves vis-à-vis other characters in the story-world, thus creating the identities of victim and perpetrator of discrimination. In addition, this paper makes a contribution to the study of oral narratives in Brazilian Po B rtuguese, examining a genre not yet investigated.