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## Reported Speech and Identity in Brazilian Accounts of Discrimination

# Reported Speech and Identity in Brazilian Accounts of Discrimination

Mercia Santana Flannery

## 1 Race and Racism in Brazil

The topic of racism in Brazil has attracted the attention of scholars representative of several fields and nationalities. There are studies discussing race and racism in Brazil in the disciplines of anthropology (Sheriff 2001) and sociology (Telles 2003). According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), Brazilians can be classified into five groups: White, Black, Yellow, Indigenous, and *pardo*, or *mestizo*. As a result, Brazil is considered a country with a white majority in this institute's surveys<sup>1</sup>, a fact that is contested by most Brazilians and by scholars exploring the topic.

Contrary to the official report, Telles (2003:15) shows that Brazil has almost three times as many Blacks as the United States. In Brazil, as the author shows, even those classified as whites are of African descent. Crucially, if American society is defined by segregation, Brazilian society is better defined by miscegenation. However, if this leads to the presupposition that racial relations in Brazil are characterized by freedom from discrimination, there are several anecdotal instances to prove otherwise.

Rodrigues (1995) discusses a survey conducted with different Brazilians in which they were asked to self-define their skin color. The result was 135 different color designations, ranging from 'pinkish' to 'green' (33). As various authors have indicated, in Brazil what defines one's ethnicity is not race per se, but rather, skin color (Telles, 2003). Besides, the stigma associated with the color black, due primarily to the long years of slavery in Brazil, results in attempts to conceal one's African ancestry. There is also a widespread view in Brazil that miscegenation would efface the traces of African influence and that it would ultimately become a country of a white, or lighter skinned, majority. Unlike the United States, in Brazil "one drop of African blood" does not make one black. Rather, in Brazil people are classified by the color of their skin, independently of their kindred.

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<sup>1</sup>According to IBGE's most recent survey, in 2000 the 170 million Brazilians were characterized as follows: 53.7% (91 million) white; 6.2% (10 million) black; 0.4% yellow (761 thousand); 38.4% (65 million) *parda* and 0.4% (734 thousand) indigenous.

Not surprisingly, several discourses on race circulate in Brazil. For instance, there is the theory of *branqueamento* (whitening). As some studies have demonstrated (Sheriff 2001), in Brazil there is a prevailing unwritten theme of ‘cleaning’ the younger generations from the color black through marriage between dark and lighter skinned individuals. Examples confirming how common this view is abound and can be extracted both from anecdotal episodes and from the TV or literature.

Sheriff (2001) conducted ethnographic research in shantytowns in Rio de Janeiro, collecting several narratives in which the ideology of *branqueamento* surfaces. Some of Sheriff’s informants revealed how the concern with “lightening the family” had impacted their courtships and marriages (135).

Another prevailing discourse on race in Brazil suggests the existence of a relative harmony among the races unnoticed anywhere else. The Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre has often been pointed to as responsible for popularizing this thought (Sheriff 2001, Telles 2003). In his book “The Masters and the Slaves” (1933:80), Freyre put forward the idea that blacks and whites are more integrated in Brazil due to the Portuguese colonization. Having themselves been under Muslim domination from the eighth to eleventh centuries, the Portuguese were more likely to intermingle with dark skinned peoples in Brazil, the native South American Indians and the slaves brought predominantly from West Africa. The corollary of the three races weaving, according to Freyre, was a *mestizo* society unconcerned with the different nuances of skin color and their significance, or at least more prone to continuously integrate. The reason for discrimination in Brazil, Freyre suggests, was in larger part due to class difference, rather than to skin color.

However, Brazil is a society seriously, albeit subtly, marked by racial differences. Telles (2003:17), for instance, discusses how “exclusion” has become the defining word of racism in Brazil. Although *mestizaje* and not segregation have been associated with the racial configuration of the country, blacks are also the poorest and least educated.

## 2 Reported Speech

One effective way of conveying another’s thoughts or actions, and to construct views of one’s epistemic and agentive selves, is to report her words in a given moment. This is effective not only because of the conveyed words per se, but especially because reporting what others said in a previous moment contributes to create involvement between teller and audience. The crucial effect of reported speech is not on the relation between teller and the character whose speech she is reporting within the story-world, but rather on

the relationship between the ones to whom such speech is being directed. This is not to say, though, that aspects of the presumed relationship between teller and the characters figuring in the story are not transparent through direct speech.

Tannen (1989) calls reported speech “constructed dialogue” as she discusses the properties of this linguistic strategy that are somewhat similar to the strategies used in fictional writing. According to the author, one possible explanation as to why speakers use constructed dialogue in spontaneous conversations is that it contributes to the creation of involvement. For Tannen, reported speech makes the characters and the events being described in our stories come alive, “as in play” (103). In turn, this aspect of the construction and use of dialogue in conversation contributes to captivate the attention of our audiences, promoting their involvement with our stories. Tannen also shows that most of what we attribute to other speakers through reported speech may actually never have been uttered.

Hamilton (1998) analyzed the use of reported speech in narratives of bone marrow transplant survivors in an online discussion list. This study examined how the subscribers to this list made use of different forms of reported speech to describe their exchanges with doctors and how the switch between direct and indirect forms contributes to portray the tellers as assertive figures when interacting with their doctors. As Hamilton states, “[t]he construction of directly reported speech in which the narrator shows not only *what was said*, but *how it was said*, is a very powerful tool in constructing the identity of the figure in the audience’s mind” (63).

Allowing the audience to see what a character said, and how, in a previous moment, contributes to detach the narrator from it. As Hamilton suggests, in her data such strategy works to let the doctors “incriminate themselves” (63). Likewise, in narratives of discrimination direct reported speech has a similar ‘incriminatory’ function. Showing what and how something was said leaves no doubt that one was in fact treated with discrimination. It also contributes to create specific positions within the narratives showing, for instance, that the situation was out of the control of the teller/victim. Ultimately, it contributes to create the positions of victim and perpetrator of discrimination in these stories.

Clark and Gerrig (1990) also stress the significance of reported speech as it empowers the tellers to “demonstrate” rather than “describe” the events of a story. As the authors show, reported speech makes the accounts more vivid than it would be if the storytellers merely stated the essence of what was said by another in a previous context.

When we report the words of others we make an active choice. As Clark

and Gerrig show, we also decide to report specific words, considering the unlikelihood of reporting everything that was said by someone in a previous moment and in *exactly* the same words. When we use reported speech, we filter, so to speak, that which makes more sense to be conveyed given the point of our stories and, ultimately, the argument that we are making. In addition, what we convey as the words of others may involve only what was most significant to us. For this reason, the very act of including the words of others in current discourse is evaluative.

There are several aspects of the composition of the characters figuring in our stories that are evoked through reported speech. For instance, tellers can choose to reproduce a line of someone's speech in a previous moment while attempting to also convey the tone of voice or the pitch that was imposed by the supposed author of that line. These elements are also significant in producing meaning, providing clues to interpret how one relates to what was said or how she wanted it to be interpreted by her audience. Reported speech, then, gives the teller the ability to convey one's attitude rather than only her mere words.

### 3 Data and Methodology

The dataset for this study was collected from individuals living in a Northeastern Brazilian city, in the state of Pernambuco. The collection started with individuals known to me in a city 40 minutes away from the state's capital, Recife. The narratives were collected through a version of sociolinguistic interviews (Labov 1972). The duration of the interviews ranged between twenty and sixty minutes.

I conducted fourteen interviews, with sixteen individuals. I started every interview by asking the subjects to talk about themselves, about their daily experiences at work or at school, and what they do for a living. Later on during our interaction, I asked my informants if they believed that in Brazil everybody has access to the same kinds of opportunities, independently of their economic, educational or ethnic backgrounds. The narratives of discrimination collected stemmed mainly from my informants' answers to this question. The majority of the individuals interviewed provided accounts of discrimination while contesting the idea that Brazil is a country free of racial prejudice.

The data collection revealed two main ways of describing discrimination: 1—there were cases of overt discrimination. In these cases, prejudice was conveyed through the use of negative referring terms, or insults, that designate the narrators' skin color; and 2—there were cases of subtle, covert discrimination. In these later cases, the actions of the offenders

were interpreted as being prejudicial even in the absence of denigrating verbal referents. In the second case, speakers present evidence of discrimination by regarding what happened to them as typical forms of discrimination in their communities.

Here, I analyze the use of reported speech in stories of discrimination, observing how it contributes to the construction of the tellers' identity. I also analyze the attribution of speech lines to the characters that were discriminated against and to the ones who discriminated. In addition, I analyze the function that reported speech has within such stories and the kinds of acts that are described through reported speech. To do so, I look separately into the occurrence of reported speech 1) in narratives of overt discrimination and 2) in narratives of covert discrimination.

Reported speech was used in every narrative in association with the actions in which discrimination is conveyed. In narratives of overt discrimination, the tellers used reported speech to convey the insult and the acts that lead to them. In these stories, reported speech plays a significant role because it leaves no doubt that one was treated with prejudice. In narratives of covert discrimination, reported speech was equally significant although there is no utterance of an insult towards the black character. However, the teller concludes that s/he was discriminated against, in part, based on the verbal interaction that they had with another person. Reported speech allows the teller to construct the scene more vividly and, therefore, to make it clear for the audience why the tellers felt, or thought, that they were treated with prejudice.

In sum, in the narratives of the data, reported speech is used to describe both 1) attitude and 2) action. In the first cases, reported speech can be introduced without verbs of saying, and in the latter, it is usually introduced with verbs of saying. I look next at the uses of reported speech in narratives of overt and covert discrimination and how they convey attitude or action, creating the identities of both victim and perpetrator.

#### **4 Reported Speech in Narratives of Overt Discrimination**

In narratives of overt discrimination, reported speech plays an important role because in such stories discrimination is presented through an insulting utterance. Usually, the tellers of these experiences directly report the insulting utterance.

The excerpt below is one example of overt discrimination from a story told by a high school teacher in her late 40's who I call Julia. The episode happens when Julia asks one of her students to fetch an object from the school administrative assistant. However, the student returns empty-handed,

and tells Julia that the administrative assistant refused to send what was asked for while calling Julia a “little black woman” (s-t).

(1)

- a. Julia: A problem happened that left me very intrigued.
- b. I have a student who is black.
- c. Mércia: Right.
- d. Julia: She is black and: [she] is really poor.
- e. She goes through a lot [of needs.]
- f. Mércia: Right.
- g. Julia: She seemed to be a real friend of mine.
- h. And on the other day I asked her that she went to get an
- i. object with the secretary.
- j. The secretary is a girl [who is] really white.
- k. Mércia: Right.
- l. Julia: Mary.
- m. Mércia: Right.
- n. Julia: Really white. She is really white.
- o. Because there are people who have light skin and are not
- p. white and she is really white.
- q. So she went to ask this object there at the administration and
- came back saying the following
- r. “teacher, Mary said”- No. I said “where is the object that I told
- you to get?
- s. Then she said the following “Mary said “tell that little
- t. black woman ((louder)) that I don’t have anything to send.””

In Julia’s story, discrimination occurs when her student, supposedly reporting what someone else said, conveys prejudice towards her. As in other stories, discrimination in such narratives is overtly conveyed through an insult. Notice that Julia’s own words requesting that the student go to the administration office to pick up an object are indirectly reported (h-i). However, the climax of Julia’s story, the moment when her student insults her, is conveyed through reported speech (s-t). Julia also demonstrates a concern with specific information and details of her exchange with the student that resulted in discrimination. For instance, Julia starts reporting her student’s words, but stops and self-corrects, re-phrasing what she had said, “No. I said” (r), so as to convey the exact words and sequence of utterances in their exchange. Demonstrating exactly which words were uttered immediately prior to the insulting statement allows Julia to represent the



situation as discriminatory, as it shows that there was apparently no direct relation between Julia's question and the student's insulting statement.

In addition, providing details of the context in which the insult was uttered is a display of involvement of the speaker with what is being said (Tannen 1989:141). It also contributes to establish Julia's credibility, supplying evidence of her commitment to truthful information.

More pointedly to my analysis, the use of constructed dialogue in this excerpt contributes to depicting the relationship between insulted and insulting parties, namely, Julia and her student. For instance, Julia's description of what she said to the student is a demonstration of her higher position relative to her student even though Julia describes the student as a "friend" (g). This shows that although they were "friends," her student was not in the position to refer to her as she did, ultimately insulting Julia. Note that a part of Julia's lines is a directive to her student. When the student returns empty-handed, Julia in an authoritative tone asks about the object in question "where is the object that I told you to get?" (r).

Interestingly, in this example, the effectiveness of reported speech as a linguistic strategy to demonstrate others' voices is exemplified in the layers of speech being conveyed. The complicating action of Julia's story presented in this excerpt, through constructed dialogue, consists not only of what the student said, but of what she claimed another individual, the administrative assistant, said about Julia. These layers of others' voices are relevant to understanding both local and global aspects of discrimination contained in the story. First, in line with Julia's point, the act of discrimination against a black by an equal is "intriguing". However, that the student used the figure of a white person to transmit a racial insult is also meaningful, because it expresses the rationale of prejudice and discrimination in their societies. In the terms of Bruner (1990), it reflects an aspect of their "folk psychology," according to which discrimination against blacks can be expected from whites.

In the next excerpt, Milton, a civil servant in his mid-50's, uses reported speech to convey typical instances of discrimination. His hypothetical situations are provided in answer to my request for examples. Similar to Julia's story, in Milton's description reported speech conveys both the relationship between offended and offender, or their relative positioning, and it also supplies details of an exchange characterized as discriminatory.

However, unlike Julia, Milton does not tell a first person story, but rather creates a hypothetical situation in answer to my request for examples of situations involving prejudice and discrimination. Nonetheless, his examples are revealing because, in his attempt to generalize and only tell stories that typify discrimination, Milton particularizes them, by providing

details. In Milton's hypothetical story, reported speech is also used to convey the insult, the focus of his description, marking the relationship between the characters.

(2)

- a. Mércia: Uh-hm. So what are the like the most typical that some
- b.           one can be mistreated because of [skin] color?
- c. Milton: Let's say that you are you/ anything.
- d.           Let's say that you pass by someone and do not see her
- e.           and bump into her
- f.           Then "ah are you blind, you black!"
- g. Mércia: Uh-hm.
- h. Milton: Eh you can give change in the bus=
- i. Mércia: Uh-hm.
- j. Milton: =and people in the bus think that "give me my change"
- k.           "I won't [give it]! There is no change for you.
- l.           Go away, [you] black!
- m.           There is no change for you."
- n.           So there are several examples that are cited.

Milton describes two possible scenarios where blacks can be discriminated against. One situation involves a black individual involuntarily colliding with someone in a street and receiving an insult, "are you blind, you black!" (f). The line that Milton constructs to depict a typical case of discrimination is also the most important aspect of his description, containing the essence of an interaction that results in one being mistreated on the basis of his skin color. In this case, discrimination is also conveyed in *how* Milton utters the words attributed to a prejudiced passerby, as he uses a higher pitch to portray that voice. He also uses a marker to open the line attributed to the passerby, "ah" (f), which conveys irritation and impatience.

In the second hypothetical situation that Milton describes, constructed dialogue also plays a crucial role in defining it as discriminatory. In this second case, though, Milton uses reported speech to describe the sequence of actions involving bus passenger and bus employee. With this example, Milton illustrates how an argument can end in an insult directed at the black individual. He opens one of the lines with "the people in the bus think that" (j), which is a very atypical form to introduce speech. This way, the line that Milton uses conveys not only a verbal action, the insult, but also an attitude and, therefore, helps to position the characters in relation to each other. For example, although the black passenger requests his due change, the bus

employee's response conveys disrespect for the passenger, as the request is dismissed and the passenger is sent off after being insulted, "go away you black" (1). Thus, Milton exemplifies the existence of prejudice with a vivid description of a typical situation and uses constructed dialogue to depict only the discriminatory action.

Next, I discuss the use of constructed dialogue in one story of covert discrimination.

## 5 Reported Speech in Narratives of Covert Discrimination

In narratives of covert discrimination, a racial insult is not the focal point of the discriminatory action, but rather the actions that were accomplished through a longer sequence of speech. Specifically, although constructed dialogue is not used to convey an insult in such narratives, it expresses the overall attitude of one character towards the other, usually manifested through the denial of a request, and consequently it becomes the basis for the interpretation of the speaker as to what was thought to be discriminatory. Thus, although constructed dialogue is not the vehicle for the conveyance of an insult, as in narratives of overt discrimination, it is still the basis of the speaker's interpretation and argument that she was discriminated against.

This function of constructed dialogue in stories of covert discrimination is illustrated in the story told by Edna, a university student in her early twenties. Edna tells me of how she was discriminated against while attempting to buy a computer at a store. According to Edna, the man who spoke to her, the manager of the store, denied her request for information because he concluded that she could not afford to buy the computer. Edna's story indirectly constructs an argument that the man relied on her appearance, as she suggests that he draws conclusions on her ability to pay for the computer. Edna's evaluation of the events is conveyed through the reporting of her exchange with the manager, through constructed dialogue.

(3)

- a. Edna: Then I asked him what was the value of the computer.
- b.       Then he told me,
- c.       [he] looked at me
- d.       and said "we don't sell computer[s]."
- e.       Then I looked like this ((lit. I reflected on it)) and insisted
- f.       "but I want to know the price of THAT computer."
- g.       Then I pointed to the computer.
- h.       Then he came to me and said "that computer is broken.

- i. So there is no point in you buying it
- j. because you'll have to fix it and it will be very expensive."
- k. Then I imagined that if it was broken why was it for sale.

Edna's exchange with the manager is the basis for her expressed belief that she was treated with discrimination. In essence, Edna interprets the denial of her request as discriminatory because the sequence of actions that she describes does not achieve the typical result for exchanges between client and salesperson in a service encounter. Specifically, in the realm of possible or expected exchanges between client and salesperson, it is commonsensical that a request will be made, an answer will be supplied and the involved parties will depart with the client buying, or not buying, the item at stake. The point of Edna's story or what causes her to believe that she was being discriminated against, is that her request for information about a product, a computer, is not satisfied. Rather, the manager dismisses her inquiry about the price, stating that the store does not sell computers.

An exchange between client and salesperson is predictable in many aspects. Although variations are possible for different cultures, a typical exchange between client and salesperson is likely to involve: greeting, reply to greeting, inquiry, reply to inquiry, agreement to buy/statement not to buy, thanks/greeting, reply to greeting. Edna's story is reportable, or "exceptional" (Bruner 1990: 47) because it breaks with our expectations as to what would follow her inquiry on the price of a computer that she saw at the store. The manager's reply, which Edna depicts through constructed dialogue, "we don't sell computer[s]" (d), departs from an expected reply by denying the correctness of Edna's assumption that the store sells computers. The manager's words also break with Edna's expectation, which she expresses through her next line again in constructed dialogue, "but I want to know the price of THAT computer" (f). Edna attempts to redirect the course of her exchange with the manager by calling his attention to what justified her inquiry, an exposed computer, apparently for sale, in the store. Through constructed dialogue again Edna depicts the manager's second attempt to dismiss her request for information, this time by undermining the validity of it. Edna describes the manager's dismissal also through constructed dialogue, "that computer is broken" (h), showing that although he answered her question, he did not provide the information that she was seeking.

Note that the manager's comment is considered discriminatory not only because of its questionable veracity but also because of what it communicates about the judgment that he makes of Edna. By saying that "the computer is broken" (h) and "so there is no point in you buying it because you'll have to fix it and it will be very expensive" (i-j) he is

portrayed as having made at least two assumptions about Edna. First, he is assuming that she does not want to buy a broken computer, which may or may not be the case; and second, he is assuming that Edna does not have the means to afford fixing it.

In addition, for Edna the discriminatory action of the manager consists in giving her information that she believes not to be true. This is conveyed as Edna reflects in the manager's reply "Then I imagined that if it was broken why was it for sale" (k), leaving unasked and unanswered the question of why one would expose an object in a store if it is not for sale.

## 6 Conclusion

As we saw in the previous sections, in narratives of overt discrimination, reported speech has the central role of supplying the line that characterizes the story as an event of discrimination. Reported speech in overt narratives of discrimination is the main linguistic strategy to convey the central idea in these stories, i.e., that their tellers were discriminated against. On the other hand, in narratives of covert discrimination the central action is interpreted as discriminatory by the teller not necessarily because of, or through, the verbal utterance of an insult. Rather, in such narratives the teller describes deriving a sense, a feeling or a thought that she was discriminated against by reflecting on her experience and by comparing it to what she knows to be typical cases of discrimination in her culture or community. In these experiences tellers also rely on "folk psychology" (Bruner 1990) to interpret the events that they describe as discriminatory.

Although in these stories constructed dialogue has a different role from the stories of overt discrimination, it also constitutes an important resource to convey the sense that one was discriminated against. This is so especially because of the overall role of reported speech in the data of conveying attitude. Rather than using abstract labels for the situation or even for the characters that appear in their stories, the speakers opt for *demonstrating* their attributes. This is accomplished through constructed dialogue.

Constructed dialogue allows the speakers to enact the qualities of the characters or even the situations that figure in their stories. Moreover, constructed dialogue is important in these stories because it highlights a basic feature of the community where the speakers are from, namely, that it is a socio-centric society. Individuals are, thus, always portrayed in their relation to others, in terms of how they acted towards others or of how they felt in relation to what was done by another individual.

Yet, the roles and representations of these forms of relating and feeling towards one another differ in narratives of overt and covert discrimination.

In the former, the discriminatory acts are performed linguistically, through an insult, and in the latter, an action is interpreted to be discriminatory based on the speaker's interpretation of it.

In sum, constructed dialogue helps to create the identities of victim and perpetrator of discrimination within the story world. It allows the tellers to portray one character as a helpless victim, 1) by giving the other character more power through what is said and how, and 2) by showing, as in Edna's story, that despite the black character's attempts to convince others of their honesty or ability to acquire an object, there is no argument that can restrain them from acting prejudicially. This, in turn, enhances the position of the other character as the offender because it shows that despite the facts to prove otherwise, they held to their views and suspicions of black individuals.

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