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**A singular contribution to the research of oral  
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## **A singular contribution to the research of oral narratives throughout an amazing reflection on slavery in the United States**

Jonathan Clifton, Dorien Van De Mieroop. 2016. *Master Narratives, Identities, and the Stories of Former Slaves*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Using critical discourse analysis and conversational analysis, Jonathan Clifton and Dorien Van de Mieroop analyze the period of slavery in America through the lens of former slaves' memories. The research takes as its pivotal point of interest the way in which identities are interactionally constructed and negotiated on a turn-by-turn basis. From a data-oriented analytical perspective, they provide a complex picture of the system of slavery in America, adopting the methodology of conversational analysis and pointing out the locally oriented nature of identity.

The empirical basis of the study consists of audio recordings of former slaves archived in the American Folklife Centre, which are available at the website *Voices from the days of slavery*. Even though the corpus is sorted under this heading, a larger proportion of the interviews is not specifically related to the days of slavery (p. 26), because those interviews were recorded in the 1930s and 1940s. As consequence, much of the speeches relate to the postbellum period.

The book is organized in nine chapters: The first is an introduction defining relevant concepts. Chapters two and three are historically oriented, providing a brief overview of slavery and the historical context of the data. Chapters four, five, six and seven constitute the core of the text, due to the way in which the authors describe the process of constructing different identities in the role of interviews. Chapter eight deals with truth and falsehood in master narratives, taking into account the specific case of Charlie Smith. Finally, in chapter nine, the authors conclude their research, making a brief review of most frequent master narratives and counter-narratives concerning slavery.

Chapter one provides an introduction in which identity and narrative are defined. The authors believe that narratives are the negotiation of identities. In this sense, narratives are a privileged locus of identity construction, which allow us to test our identity categories. Master narratives are pre-existent sociocultural forms of interpretation – also called dominant discourses. Counter-narratives are the challenge of these dominant discourses. Such

perspective highlights the dynamic nature of narratives, at the local interactional level and at the social contextual level (p. 2).

Identity is considered to be in a constant process of change, existing between people, rather than within people. It is not a product, but a process that is “continually shaped and reshaped through interactions with others and their involvement in social and cultural activities” (Wetherell and Maybin, 1996, p. 220). Concerning interactional analysis, the authors draw insights from Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), in which the world is understood in terms of membership categorization devices (MCDs) such as Family. These categories have predicates associated with them. The book emphasizes the nature of these categories, highlighting that they are not prediscursive entities which can be presupposed on the basis of individuals demographic features such as gender or professional roles. Narratives are retrospectively constructed. Due to this fact, the narrator not only tells different stories about the self at different times, but also at the same point in life facing a different audience.

In chapter two, the authors provide a historical background on the slave narratives. As explained in the beginning of the section, they have not written a historical chapter, but rather a historical discursive retrospection. In doing so, they do not reconstruct the historical truth of what happened. Instead, Jonathan Clifton and Dorien Van De Mieroop investigate the ways in which the narratives are organized through the interactive and interpretive practices of interviewers and interviewees, who construct a socially-situated version of what happened and how this version is affected by master narratives (p. 2).

In the third chapter, they discuss the importance of the imagined audience to the narrator when telling the story. However, it is taken for granted that narratives are a form of identity work that varies according to the target audience. The excerpts selected to demonstrate this identity construction have the same theme of law and order. All of them refer to the postbellum period. The interviewees demonstrate an identity similar to contemporary racist ideologies, constructing identities of the oppressed by using an ideology that denigrates them.

In the fourth chapter, “slave-as-animal” identities emerge from narratives, comparing slaves to cattle and dogs. The interviewees do not denounce the way they were treated by the system of slavery. Instead, they reinforce the master narrative of the slave as a property, in most cases totally dependent on the whites.

In the fifth chapter, the authors deal with identities in the sameness-difference dimension, elucidating the white supremacy master narrative as an *oeuvre civilisatrice*. They investigate “how narrators negotiate their membership in particular groups, often by setting up comparisons between the in-groups and various out-groups” (p. 95). This chapter demonstrates that there may be many different ways in which a speaker can orient his speech to slightly different versions of “baseline” master narratives of white supremacy.

Chapter six points out counter- and master narratives of race, obedience and religion. Jonathan Clifton and Dorien Van De Mieroop discuss narratives that acquiesced to some version of master narratives of African American inferiority. They have searched the corpus for narratives which contain resistance to oppression. Nevertheless, these fragments are rare, considering the context of the interviews, in which white scholars and former slaves were put together to record an interview in a segregated society.

In chapter seven, the authors present the master narratives and memories of violence. In this section, they analyze how remembering and forgetting what they have been through are achieved in talk in the slaves narratives. In doing so, they explore how these processes relate to different master narratives of the storytelling time. The chapter zooms in on one of the master narratives of slavery as a benevolent system which was current in America at the time of the interviews. Their interactional approach to the construction of remembering and forgetting represents a relatively new method to understand narratives.

Chapter eight points out the specific case of Charlie Smith, in which truth and falsehood in master narratives are highlighted. The authors focus on the notion of story ownership, and consider how Charlie Smith claims ownership of a traditional tale. In order to do this, they discuss how Smith uses a pseudo-personal narrative to take ownership of a folktale of capture, transportation, and sale (p. 95). In their opinion, what is important to the research is the symbolic truth of the narrative rather than its historical accuracy.

In the last chapter, they summarize the analysis of each master narrative presented in the book and make general observations about master narratives: they are neither monolithic nor fixed; there is not one version of these master narratives; they may change over time; what is a master narrative and what is a counter-narrative may also evolve over time; master narratives are collaboratively negotiated; they interact with counter-narratives, and those contradicting positions to potentially contradicting master narratives may co-exist within and across time and space.

This research, which goes beyond linguistics, offers the reader an amazing opportunity to discover the recent history of America, bringing vivacity through the voices of the interviewees, who may represent not only former slaves in America, but also in other countries. Considering linguistic studies, the authors present a wide range of literature which may aid students in understanding concepts and methodology. Finally, it can be strongly recommended to those interested in narratives and identity, mainly because it contributes to the development of the linguistic research using oral data.

### **References**

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