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Globalization, transnational identities, and conflict talk: The superdiversity and complexity of the Latino identity

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze the functionality of conflict talk (Grimshaw, 1990; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014) as an ideologically loaded, indirect index of identity construction (Kiesling, 2013). It focuses on the construction of the Latino identity: a transnational (de Fina & Perrino, 2013), top-down identity, that was created in the 1970s by the Nixon administration.

The data for this study comprise the comments posted on a CNN discussion forum in response to Soledad O'Brien's question "What did you think about Latino in America?" A cursory look at the corpus indicated that many Latino participants felt insulted arguing CNN – with its focus on illegal Latinos – had presented the community in a bad light. Thus, transnational identities and the internet, crucially related to globalization, come together in this study.

Results show that conflict talk plays a major role in the construction of intragroup dissociation both thematically and at the microlevel. Furthermore, the fact that complex selective dissociation (Garcia-Bedolla, 2003), rather than simpler dis/affiliation processes routinely associated with the construction of social identities (van Dijk 1998) is more at play in the corpus seems to confirm the need for complexity in the study of culture and identity (Blommaert, 2013a).

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1. Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to analyze the functionality of conflict talk (Grimshaw, 1990; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014). Conflict is here seen as an ideologically loaded, indirect index of identity (Kiesling, 2013) involved in the construction of the superdiversity and complexity (Blommaert, 2013a) of a transnational identity, namely Latinos in the context of the US (De Fina, 2013). More specifically, the analysis will focus on processes of intragroup disaffiliation.

Vertovec (2007: 1025) argued that globalization has resulted in a *diversification of diversity*. Hence, it is not enough to see diversity in terms of ethnicity, since variables such as "different migration statuses and their concomitant entitlements and restrictions of rights, divergent labour market experiences, discreet gender and age profiles, patterns of spatial distribution, and mixed local area responses by service providers" play a role in how people of the same ethnic group live and acquire experience. To further this line of research, this paper seeks to study of the role that mobility and complexity play in the construction of late modern identities and more specifically the coexistence of conviviality and conflict within superdiverse populations (De Fina et al., 2017: viii).

Thus, focusing on the functionality of conflict talk, this paper analyzes comments posted on a CNN discussion forum in response to the question "What did you think about Latino in America?" posed by former anchor Soledad O'Brien. O'Brien

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hosted a two-part documentary series titled “Latino in America” which, focusing on several individuals sharing the last name Garcia, aimed at presenting a comprehensive picture of the Latino experience in the US. A cursory look at the corpus indicated that many participants in the discussion, self-identifying as Latinos, felt uneasy about the documentary as they believed it had presented the Latino community in a bad light, by accentuating negative attributes and not dwelling on the positive ones. More specifically, the analysis seeks to unveil the micro processes involved in intragroup disaffiliation whereby participants selectively dissociate from those representations of internal others¹ who, in their view, perpetuate the stereotypes associated with the group. The interconnections between on/off line universes are of capital importance to the understanding of what a superdiverse society entails (Blommaert and Varis, 2013: 144).

The paper is structured as follows. The background section (Section 2) is divided into three sub-sections. Section 2.1 argues that conflict talk is a more inclusive term than impoliteness and allows impoliteness scholars to look at phenomena which are conflictual, but not necessarily aggressive in nature or aimed at causing offense. Section 2.2 looks at the relationship between globalization and identity, with especial attention to the Latino identity, a transnational identity. The Latino identity can be described as a superdiverse identity in the sense of Vertovec (2007) and Blommaert (2013a) and thus needs to be understood in the context of globalization. For its part, Section 2.3 explores the connections between conflict and identity construction processes and ends by posing the research questions that guide the analysis. Section 3 describes the methodological approach taken. Section 4 presents the qualitative and quantitative results obtained in the two-part analysis, whereas Section 5 discusses and interprets these findings. The paper concludes with Section 6 where the research questions are answered and additional discussion and some suggestions for future research are provided.

2. Background

2.1. Issues of nomenclature: why conflict talk rather than impoliteness?

Impoliteness research is a relatively recent development in the field of politeness. It started in the late 90s with Culpeper's (1996) and Kienpointner's (1997) positioning papers and came to fruition in the mid-2000s (Locher and Bousfield, 2008). Sifianou (2010: 119), for instance, commented that 2008 could be dubbed “The Year of Impoliteness”. However, terms such as rudeness or impoliteness have been proven difficult to define (Culpeper, 2008, 2011; Terkourafi, 2008). Furthermore, much of impoliteness research has drawn from interaction displayed as confrontation, such as “conflict-based televisual entertainment” (Lorenzo-Dus, 2008: 83) or characteristically confrontational genres of media discourse, (see, among others, Culpeper, 2005; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2009, 2010a, b; Lorenzo-Dus, 2009; Bayraktaroğlu and Sifianou, 2012; Perelmutter, 2013) such as reality TV, which is by definition scripted, storyboarded, and highly edited. For its part, research offering new participant frameworks for analyzing impoliteness in multi-party interaction has substantially drawn on scripted, fictional discourse (Dynel, 2012; Kádár and Haugh, 2013). One interesting exception is recent work by Kádár (2017) in which the author looks at four case studies of naturally occurring interaction that reveal the interface between im/politeness and ritual.

The kind of data impoliteness research has traditionally been based on has, as it were, oversimplified the task of locating instances of impoliteness, which are not necessarily so clear cut and evident in real interaction. Far from it, impoliteness occurrences are subtle and often require an in-depth knowledge of participants and relationships to be properly understood (Dobs and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013). Therefore, although expanding the scope of impoliteness research to encompass unelicited, naturally occurring interaction presents challenges related to both data collection and analysis, it can also lead to new insights into the everyday, often more understated, manifestations of impoliteness. As Blommaert (2013b: 620) argues, we will continue learning about how people live and behave even if “data are not spectacular instances of acute conflict”.

One of the hurdles in the development of the field has been issues of nomenclature and the disparity between first and second order uses of the labels that describe the phenomena under study (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2010; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2012). Sometimes, as in the case of politeness, often associated with mitigation and indirectness, labels can be restrictive and limiting. I believe that conflict talk is a more comprehensive term to refer to the gamut of problematical forms of interaction: from disagreement (Sifianou, 2012) to hate speech (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Sifianou, 2017). Along the same way that politeness is much more than just mitigation of threat, impoliteness can be seen as one of many ways in which conflict talk can be interpreted. Rather than just focusing on aggression and threat to face, it would be worth investigating how conflict talk can be used other than to cause offense.

Conflict² is an inherent part of human communication. Any verbal action can be potentially conflictive, what makes it so is the reaction it gets (Hutchby, 2001). That's why conflict needs to be understood in situated terms, since as Grimshaw argues “conflict is in the eye of the beholder” (1990: 283). Conflict involves some measure of different positionings and is not inherently negative, as it can be used to build communal life (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2009; Pagliai, 2010). Furthermore, conflict may not always be resolved as conflicting positions are attached to particular identities that would cease to exist if the conflictive situation ended (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014). In this paper, I am more interested in what conflict does than on what conflict is. For Example, as recent research has shown (see Section 2.3 below), conflict is intimately linked to identity construction.

¹ The term internal others, or national strangers who cannot abide by “our” norms or embody the ideal national character because of their cultural collective difference (Tileagă, 2005), is used here in a slightly different way to refer to in-group members from which selective dissociation is carried out.

² For a recent discussion on definitions of conflict and aggression, please see Janicki (2017).

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