

## **STORIES AND RACISM**

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### **INTRODUCTION: RACISM AND DISCOURSE**

IN THIS CHAPTER I examine the role of storytelling in the reproduction of racism. This analysis of everyday stories about ethnic or racial minorities is part of a long-term research project about the discursive reproduction of racism in white, European(ized) societies. My earlier work in this field focused on everyday conversations (van Dijk, 1984, 1987a), textbooks (van Dijk, 1987b), and news in the press (van Dijk, 1991). My present research pays special attention to the role of various (other) types of elite discourse, for example, in politics, corporations, and scholarship (van Dijk, 1993).

The research project is essentially multidisciplinary. It relates properties of text and talk with underlying social cognitions of language users as social group members, and it relates both discourse and cognitions with their context, that is, with their societal, political, and cultural conditions and consequences.

### **THE SYSTEM OF RACISM**

The ultimate aim of this complex theoretical framework is to acquire more detailed insight into the fundamental problem of white racism. Before we start our analysis of the role of stories in the reproduction of racism, therefore, we need a few (meta-)theoretical tools (for details, see, e.g., Barker, 1981; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Essed, 1991; Katz & Taylor, 1988; Miles, 1989; Omi & Winant, 1986; Solomos, 1989; Wellman, 1977).

My general approach to racism combines various elements of this earlier research with a discourse analytical study of social cognitions about ethnic minorities as an important element in processes of reproduction.

Crucial in this approach is a conception of racism as a form of group dominance. Ethnic dominance is understood as power abuse by white (European) groups, that is, as self-interested control over and as a limitation of access to socially valued resources (residence, citizenship, housing, jobs, wealth, education, respect, etc.). Such dominance may be defined and described at the macro level of groups and institutions, where it contributes to social inequality, as well as the micro level of everyday (inter)actions, where it manifests itself as “everyday racism” (Essed, 1991). At both levels, such relations of dominance also involve socio-cognitive dimensions, namely, as ethnic ideologies and attitudes shared by a group, at the macro level, and specific ethnic beliefs of social group members, at the micro level. Obviously, these two levels (macro and micro) and dimensions (social action/structures and social cognitions) are multiply interrelated. Thus, storytelling about ethnic affairs is, as such, a form of (discursive) interaction presupposing knowledge and beliefs of storytellers about ethnic affairs, but at the same time these storytellers implement, enact, legitimate, or challenge group knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies and thereby contribute to the reproduction of ethnic prejudices, which in turn underlie discrimination and hence indirectly condition ethnic inequality.

## **STRUCTURES OF DISCOURSE**

Discourse may similarly be analyzed according to this theoretical square of two levels and two dimensions. Discourse analysis usually focuses on local, micro level text, talk, or communicative interaction, including both the actual discursive practices of speaking or writing, as well their observable results (“texts”), on the one hand, and the underlying cognitions of speakers and hearers, including the meanings or interpretations of such discourse, on the other hand (see the contributions in van Dijk, 1985b).

However, at a more global level of analysis, we may also distinguish structural “orders of discourse,” that is, complex, societal, political, or cultural *systems* of text and talk. These systems include, for instance, the recurrent or preferred topical or thematic structures, lexical inventories, conventional text schemata, or stylistic and rhetorical strategies of groups, organizations, or whole cultures. Also these higher level, societal orders of discursive practices are in turn complemented by a high level of socially

shared social cognitions, such as the norms, values, and ideologies of these social formations. It is also in this macro level sense that we speak of “racist discourse.”

We see that the systems of discourse and racism can be analyzed according to the same general principles. This also allows us to effectively study racism from a discourse analytical perspective. Thus, both at the macro and at the micro level, racist discourse is of course a special case of discourse in general. Conversely, discursively enacted racism is a special case of other forms of racism.

## STORIES

If racism is reproduced through discourse and communication we may expect this also to be the case for stories and storytelling—in informal everyday conversation, in institutional storytelling, in the narratives of novels and movies, as well as in the special “stories” communicated by the mass media in the form of news reports.

To understand the specific ways stories contribute to the reproduction of racism, we briefly need to explain what stories are. That is, why and how are stories about an event different from a police report, a sociological analysis, or even a news report about the “same” event? And, how are stories different from argumentations, scholarly discourse, parliamentary debates, textbooks, or advertisements?

## NARRATIVE THEORY

Ignoring the details of a long tradition of narrative analysis, from Aristotelian poetics to structuralist or psychological studies of narrative structures and to conversational analysis of spontaneous storytelling, we may briefly summarize the relevant properties of stories as follows (for details, see, e.g., Chafe, 1980; Communications, 1966; Ehlich, 1980; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Mandler, 1984; Polanyi, 1985; Quasthoff, 1980; van Dijk, 1980):

- a. Stories are primarily about (past) *human actions and cognitions*, although also descriptions of other events, objects, places, or circumstances may be part of stories, for example, as conditions or consequences to human action.
- b. Stories are usually about events and actions that are (made) *interesting* for the audience. This “pragmatic” interestingness is usually obtained by the

account of events or actions that are unexpected, deviant, extra-ordinary, or unpredictable, given the knowledge and beliefs of the audience.

- c. This also implies that stories are usually told to *entertain* the audience, for example, by influencing their esthetic, ethnical, or emotional reactions. However, as we shall see below for stories about minorities, stories may also have broader social, political, or cultural functions or play a role in an argumentative schema.
- d. Stories are abstractly organized by a canonical *textual schema* or superstructure consisting of a hierarchically organized set of conventional categories, such as Summary, Orientation, Complication, Resolution, Evaluation, and Coda or Conclusion (Labov, 1972; Labov & Waletzky, 1967). In concrete stories some of these categories may remain implicit. Also their ordering may deviate from the formal schematic order, whereas some categories (such as Evaluations) may occur discontinuously, that is, its installments may appear throughout the story.
- e. Stories may be told from different *perspectives* or points of view, may feature the storyteller as a participant or not, and may be realistic or fictitious.
- f. Conversational stories are further organized by general properties of *conversational interaction*, such as turn taking, sequences, strategies of negotiation and impression formation, and so on. Unlike many other forms of dialogue, however, storytelling usually involves the storyteller taking the floor for a relatively long time. And unlike most written stories, such everyday conversational stories are often jointly produced by several storytellers, and interruptions by the audience may become part of the narrative communicative events (e.g., by asking questions, providing comments).

## STORIES AND MENTAL MODELS

Cognitively speaking, stories are expressions of so-called (episodic) models, or situation models (van Dijk, 1985a; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). A model is a mental representation of an episode, that is, of an event or action taking place in a specific social situation. People are continuously engaged in building new (personal, subjective, ad hoc) models or in updating old models of episodes they witness, participate in, or read or hear about (Morrow, Greenspan, & Bower, 1989). Models play a role both during discourse production and in discourse comprehension. When we read the newspaper, we build new models about completely new events (such as about the “riots” in Los Angeles) or update models about episodes we have read about before (e.g., the war in the Gulf).

Models are much richer than the texts that are based on them, which in principle only need to feature the information that is relevant to express

and communicate. Models embody what we usually call the *interpretation* of an event but also feature personal opinions about such an event. They are organized by an abstract schema, featuring such categories as Setting, Participants, and Actions, categories we also encounter in the semantic structures of stories expressing such models.

Whereas most everyday models are mundane and hence hardly qualify as a basis for storytelling, those models that are somehow “extra-ordinary” are typically used for storytelling. Of course, descriptions of everyday, mundane events (typically so in the Orientation category: “I was simply doing my daily ... when suddenly . . .”) may be a strategic way to set off the narrative interestingness of less common events. Finally, there is a special type of mental model—that which represents the communicative situation (and hence the storyteller, the audience, etc.) itself. This *context model* will of course monitor what of the event model the storyteller will eventually express (e.g., because of the assumed expectations or interests of the audience).

## **SOCIOCULTURAL FUNCTIONS**

Finally, beyond the textual and cognitive properties of stories we find the many social and cultural aspects of storytelling. Stories are not merely to entertain the listeners, they may also have persuasive functions, and more generally, they may contribute to the reproduction of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, ideologies, norms, or values of a group or of society as a whole. Similarly, stories may be used to criticize, attack, or ridicule people. They may be one of the ways to inform people or to “tell the code” of institutions (Kelly, 1985; Mumby, 1987). Finally, stories about minorities generally function as complaints by majority group members or as expressions of negative experiences or prejudices about minorities. In sum, stories are a major discourse genre for the reproduction of culture and society. Unfortunately, for the same reasons, stories are also essential in the maintenance and legitimation of dominant power and ideologies—and hence in the reproduction of racism.

## **STORIES ABOUT MINORITIES**

In everyday conversations about minorities, stories play an important role. They are routinely told to express and communicate personal experiences

with minority group members, often of the storytellers themselves but also of family members, friends, or acquaintances. Such stories usually have an argumentative or persuasive “point” rather than an entertaining function. Whereas large parts of conversations about minorities are generalizations about ethnic minority groups or ethnic relations, personal stories provide concrete information, which is used as supporting “evidence” for a more general, argumentative conclusion. The weight of this evidence is epistemological (Danto, 1985; Dipardo, 1990). It suggests that the events told about are a reliable source of knowledge, because they represent a lived, personal experience. At the same time, it is suggested that the (negative) conclusion is not ethnically biased but supported by the facts.

In order to qualify as “narratable,” however, events must satisfy a number of conditions. We have seen above that such events should somehow be “interesting,” preferably both for the storyteller and the audience. Specifically, stories about minorities should tell about events that are remarkable as examples of intergroup encounters. In a predominantly white society, any encounter with a member of a minority group might in principle be qualified as remarkable in its own right simply because of the uncommon nature of such encounters. Indeed, the very appearance of a black person in a wholly white European village may be sufficient reason to tell others about “having seen” such a person. In racially or ethnically mixed cities such encounters are increasingly common and hence less interesting for storytelling. In that case, it is no longer only the very group membership of the “other” story participants but the nature of the acts and events that increasingly become relevant as conditions of narratability.

What acts or events of ethnic situations are specifically remarkable? An obvious first answer to this question is that all those properties or activities of minority group members are remarkable that are interpreted as nontrivially different from those of own group members. That is, storytellers implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—compare ethnic situations to situations and events in which only white people are involved. This comparison is essential, because those events that might not be narratable in all-white situations may well become worth telling when one of the participants is not white, if only because such “solo” situations are less common or more remarkable on purely cognitive grounds (Taylor, 1981).

However, exceptionality is not a sufficient condition of narratability. That is, typically, stories about minorities usually have an overall *negative* evaluation. Positively remarkable events involving minority groups are much less used as occasions for storytelling by prejudiced white people. Cognitively speaking, this may mean that such events are not interpreted

and stored as positive events in the first place, or if they are, they may be not or less easily retrievable. This is of course specifically the case if the communicative function of the story is to support a negative conclusion about minorities. Models of positive encounters may in that case be less accessible or more readily discounted as “irrelevant” for the point to be made.

If stories about minorities are primarily told to support a more general negative conclusion, we should conversely expect them to be instantiations of ethnic or racial stereotypes and prejudices. For instance, if blacks are believed to be more criminal than whites, we may expect stories that back up such a general racist opinion. Compared to other stories about crimes, such stories thus have two independent but related conditions of narratability: For most ordinary citizens crimes of minority group members are not only forms of deviant behavior or instantiations of uncommon events but specifically interesting because they are examples of a specific category of “minority crime.” Crime news and newsworthiness in the white media are also premised on this condition: Stories about crimes by minority group members tend to be paid specific attention, both by the journalists and by the readers (van Dijk, 1991).

Note though that the very participation of minority group members is not enough. That is, both in news reports and in everyday stories, they are much less told about when they are victims of crime, especially when these crimes are committed by white group members. Hence, agency and responsibility are crucial in supporting negative conclusions about minority groups, because only such stories are instantiations of white group prejudice. Whites, and especially prejudiced whites, will seldom tell stories in which blacks are the victim of discrimination or racist attacks. Crucial, then, is the further condition that the negative activity should be interpreted as a real or potential *threat* to white people, if not to the white group as a whole. In other words, stories about minorities are often stories about *whites* as (*self-defined*) victims of acts of minority group members or of ethnic relations in general.

The class of events that may be qualified by these conditions—negatively interpreted acts of which blacks are seen as responsible agents and of which whites are considered as (innocent) victims—is potentially very large. Crime and violence are primary topics in this case, simply because the element of intergroup threat is most concrete and consequential in this case: The very safety of white group members is compromised.

However, threats and danger may also be economic, political, social, and cultural. Hence, we may also expect stories that support general prejudices about economic competition (“They take away our jobs, houses . . . ,”

etc.), political power (“They will take over in this city”), social privileges (“They are all on welfare,” “They live off our pocket,” etc.), and cultural threats (“They don’t speak our language,” “They have a different religion,” “They have a different mentality,” etc.).

In all these cases, there is a gradual transition from remarkable but acceptable differences through unacceptable deviance to immediate threats to the white group. The more the stories are group-threatening, the more prototypical they are as “minority stories” and hence the more persuasive they are in making the negative argumentative point. This may mean that there is a general narrative strategy to move from perceptions of difference to evaluations of negative deviance and threat.

Thus, when blacks are seen to be dressing in a remarkable (e.g., “flashy”) way, or to be driving conspicuous cars (a point made in several stories recorded), this would as such hardly qualify as sufficient grounds for storytelling. Rather, it is the interpretation and explanation attached to such an observation that may become the point of the story—that such extravagant behavior is inconsistent with the stereotype that minorities are poor and that (therefore) such ostentatious behavior should probably be explained at least as a provocation, if not as the consequence of deviance or crime, such as abusing of welfare regulations or dealing in drugs.

Not only socioeconomic or cultural differences or threats may be involved here but also (at present often hidden or even repressed) feelings of white superiority: The minority group members are in a subordinate position and should act accordingly; if not, they are “out of place.” In other words, a threat may also be interpreted as a threat to our superordinate position or our privileges, for instance, when blacks claim equal rights or effective measures (e.g., affirmative action) that may bring these about. Even slightly preferential treatment in specific situations will immediately be rejected as “reverse discrimination,” that is, as an infraction of white group rights. Again, many stories, especially in situations of changing and more developed intergroup relations (for instance in the USA), will focus on this form of “threat.”

Note finally that conditions of narratability for minority stories seem to be internally inconsistent. If it is the case that difference, deviance, or threat are seen as prototypical properties of minority groups, then stories that support such general beliefs should hardly provide new, interesting, or unexpected information for the storyteller or the (white) audience. Indeed, the acts of minority group members in such a case would be predictable and hence less narratable. If this is the case, we may conclude that although such discourses are less narratable as stories, they may well be acceptable

as premises in a different kind of discourse genre—that is, in argumentation, as we have seen above. They are, indeed, less to entertain than to complain, accuse, and argue. At the same time, because of the official norm of tolerance and the “risk” that the audience may be actively antiracist, the storyteller can not always be sure that the general prejudice is shared, so that the present story may be intended not so much to make a well-known claim but to support a controversial position (see also McGee & Nelson, 1985).

### **AN EXAMPLE: THE CAB ACCIDENT**

Let us examine one example of such a story in some detail. The story is told by a 28-year-old male maintenance worker from San Diego, originally from Ohio, living in a mixed, lower-middle-class neighborhood. The interviewer was a 19-year-old male student, and the initial topic of the semi-directed interview was the neighborhood of the interviewee.

In order to be able to place the story against the background of other statements by the interviewee, let us first give a few brief quotes that illustrate his opinions regarding ethnic minorities and ethnic relations in his neighborhood, in San Diego, and in the USA generally. When asked whether he likes his neighborhood, he spontaneously brings up ethnic minority groups in his first conversational turn, as is the case for many other people we interviewed. We can conclude from this prominence in conversation a prominence of ethnic relations in the models the speaker has of his neighborhood. After having been away for a year, the speaker noticed the following:

1. We've got a lot more Mexicans coming up here, a lot more blacks and before it wasn't half as bad as this was, the place has really changed in about a year. (LG4, 7-9)

Note that change in ethnic composition is perceived as a change for the worse when there are less white people in the neighborhood. This observation is hardly unique. Also in most of the interviews we recorded in inner-city neighborhoods of Amsterdam, “negative change” was one of the most prominent initial topics of the speakers: The increasing presence of minority groups is interpreted as a sufficient condition for seeing the neighborhood as becoming run down or as otherwise less attractive for whites. Indeed, in order to qualify as remarkable and hence as subject for stories, minorities do not even have to do anything: Their mere presence

may be sufficient to qualify as a general “complication” in the “life story” of white people.

When prompted to be more specific, the interviewee hedges a bit (not exactly this area, “but down where we used to live, on . . .”) but eventually mentions the garbage lying around everywhere (“Just like Tijuana”) and tells about the experiences of others, his wife in the first place (“she was afraid to walk down these streets”). The comparison with the Mexican city at the other side of the border is sufficient for locals as a negative characterization.

Once the deterioration of the neighborhood is attributed to the arrival of Mexicans and blacks, the speaker volunteers other things he doesn’t like about “them”:

2. Especially when it happens on welfare and they’re getting government and they’re just, you know, it gets to be a waste. (LG4, 33-35)

The conclusion from such arguments is straightforward: “They should have a lot tougher ways of getting into the United States.” Or at least, if people are coming to this country, they should not get any government money for a number of years, because “they” are coming only because it is so easy to get welfare. When asked about the blacks, who after all did not come to this country because of welfare, he remains within the same topic: They want easy help, and everybody is cheating on welfare, “especially the blacks.”

Such general statements, however, may be heard as racist, so when asked about whether he has black colleagues, the interviewee backs down a little with the well-known Apparent Concession Move:

3. You got bad blacks, you got bad whites, you see, I don’t get along with a lot of some of these white people, and I don’t get along with some of these black people. So it’s just, you know. (106-108)

Such comparisons are a persuasive tactical move in the overall strategy of positive self-presentation: If not only blacks but also whites may be seen as “bad,” then the statement cannot, at face value, be seen as expressing a negative attitude about blacks. That such statements are a form of apparent concession may be concluded from the fact that the rest of the interview will focus on examples of bad behavior by the others—and not by white people. Thus, he immediately goes on to relate that his wife was harassed by some Mexicans, and that although she was rescued by a young girl friend, this girl also was a gang member and pulled a knife to chase away the Mexican men.

Illegal immigration, he further admits, is also stimulated by the companies that hire undocumented aliens, so he proposes more active policing of employers and concludes that the government is not serious in wanting to stop illegal immigration as long as so many companies depend on cheap “slave labor.”

Since he claims to hear a “lot of stories in this town,” the interviewer prompts him to tell one. He then starts to tell the story that we propose to examine in more detail. Before the factual story comes up, however, he first makes a more general statement about illegal cab drivers:

4. ( ... ) like half the cab drivers here are illegal aliens. I know half the cab drivers are illegal up here. It makes pretty good money doing that. It makes 50 dollars bringing them up from the border, bucks a person. (184-187)

This brief reference to illegal aliens is consistent with the more general topic of illegal work in the area. After other personal information about his job and his family, he is invited by the interviewer to talk about the different cultures in the city. It is within this general argument that the actual cab driver’s story comes up (*italics* express special emphasis):

5. **M:** Yeah, that’s one of the things I don’t like. It’s just, I don’t know. Before, when people came into the United States, when I read *my* history, you know, they wanted to *adapt* to the American way of life, you know, maybe keep some of their own ways, you know, just hang on to their children, but they wanted to adapt, they wanted to learn English, they wanted to get a job, they wanted to do this. And now, they come over here and it’s acting like, WOW!, you know, you know the state gives them everything, on the ballots they’ve got their own languages so they can vote in different languages. I wouldn’t be surprised if they put up street signs in Spanish and (???) and stuff like that. I just think it’s really stupid. It really is.

**I:** You think they shouldn’t have to spend the money?

**M:** No, because, you know, it’s uhh, I mean I was driv I drove a cab a couple of years ago, you were talking about stories, and this poor, I was driving alongside this old guy, he was in the left hand lane, I was driving alongside. All of a sudden he was coming in my lane, and I reeled it over, went up on the side of the curb, he scraped the whole side of my cab. And he could . . . so we got over and we pulled up at the gas station, and he got out, he could not speak a word of English. His daughters—he had his granddaughters with him, they were about 10 or 11—he can’t speak a word of English, so they made a phone call, so that his son’s coming down; they’ll get it all straightened out, and this guy was just standing there, he wouldn’t even talk to me, you

know, he was just standing there on, and his daughter kept saying that it was my fault that I didn't know how to drive and stuff, and I'm you know, this guy couldn't even speak a word of English. What is he doing driving a car? What happens if he kills someone in the street, ran him over or something? Could you imagine him on the phone trying to get assistance or something like that! So they come over there and uhm he tried to tell the police it was my fault, that he had wanted to turn coming into my lane, that he had put his lights on and I didn't give him access to come into my lane. I was, you know, he was halfway, you know, back up the hill, you know, I come into my lane, I mean he was way ahead of me when I turned, he was right alongside of me, you know, and the then he comes right into my lane, he's, you know, telling these people that it was my fault, and it turned out it wasn't my fault. I got it taken care of, but it was just the way he was, you know, he couldn't speak a word of English, and it was stupid, you know, at least, you know, how can you read a street sign if you can't speak English, you know, or even read it. It's just, it's just what I hate, you know. They should come here fine, but a lot came here because they knew they were getting a lot of money out of the deal, and they did. A lot of them did. (201-247)

In many ways this is a typical conversational story as well as a typical story about foreigners. That it is a story in the first place may be concluded from the fact that it is about interesting past events and actions, in which the storyteller was involved and that are out of the ordinary. Accidents and near-accidents, both in everyday stories as well as in news stories, are among the most prototypical examples of such eminently narratable events. The embedding in a conversation, the overall schematic organization as well as the local style further show that it is a story and not, for example, a police report of the same event. Finally, the speaker himself classifies and marks the beginning of his story as such: "You were talking about stories."

The overall narrative schema is as follows (note that narrative schema categories do not organize local structures directly but higher-level, macropropositions or topics, which we here provide as tentative approximations of those of the storyteller himself):

1. *Setting* (Time, Participants): I drove a cab a couple of years ago.
2. *Orientation*: I was driving alongside this old guy and his granddaughters.
3. *Complication I*: Suddenly he came into my lane and scraped the side of my cab.
4. *Complication II*: We pulled over, but he couldn't speak a word of English.

5. *Complication III*: They claimed that it had been my fault.
6. *Resolution I*: I got it taken care of.
7. *Evaluation I*: It was stupid.
8. *Evaluation II*: It is just what I hate.
9. *Coda/Conclusion I*: It is dangerous to drive a car when you don't speak the language.
10. *Coda/Conclusion II*: Most of them only come here for the easy money.

This overall story structure is rather straightforward; most canonical narrative categories appear in the story. The Setting is fairly brief and merely goes back to a situation in the past when the speaker was still a cab driver. Notice the conversational repair (“I was driv I drove a cab a couple of years ago”) in which the correction to a simple past refers to a general state (a profession), which is necessary to explain why the storyteller was driving a cab in the first place.

Then in the next sentence, the actual action description is expressed by a gerund (“I was driving”), thereby introducing the Orientation category, which usually describes a mundane, everyday activity (“I was just doing X, when . . .”). The Complication is duly introduced by “All of a sudden” and controls all the propositions in the conversation that describe the way the old man was changing lanes. This part is given in two installments, of which the second is even more detailed but functional as a form of face keeping for the storyteller: It should become obvious for the hearer that it was not the storyteller himself who was to blame for the accident.

The second installment of the Complication category features another unexpected and self-threatening event: The cab driver is being accused in a situation where he perceives himself as being the victim of reckless driving. The Resolution of that strand of the story is briefly summarized by the speaker as “I got it taken care of” (He doesn't tell how, or by whom), and then followed by a well-known Evaluation example: “It was stupid.”

Now, this would be one of those classical everyday accident stories were it not for a specific additional complication: The other driver didn't speak “a word of English.” As part of a normal “car accident” story, it might have been a minor additional problem, for example, as a secondary complication in the resolution of the incident. This is however not the case. The very fact that the storyteller several times repeats “and he couldn't even speak a word of English,” suggests that this complication is far from minor for the storyteller.

Indeed, the point (Polanyi, 1979) of the story is not so much the car accident at all but the fact that the other driver didn't speak English. That is, in this particular interview, which is largely about minorities and ethnic relations in southern California, and following a question and response that deals with cultural differences and the alleged reluctance of present immigrants to learn English, the story's point should be related to the implications of this statement, as is indeed the case: The storyteller's Evaluation and Conclusion categories describe in detail what the possible consequences are of lacking knowledge of English when driving a car ("What happens if. . .").

In fact, what we witness here is what may be called a *second-order* story. That is, there is a story about a car accident, but "on top of" (or "below") that story there is another story about the disastrous consequences of being unable to read or speak English in traffic (and hence in U.S. society). It is this second-order story that is the real "foreigner story," prompted by the conversational context (they are no longer required to learn the language, etc.), and leading to its own Conclusion, which is to support the thesis of the speaker in this section of the interview.

Of course, the narrative persuasiveness of the second-order story may well be carried by the strength of the Complication category of the first story. A car accident is usually such a tragic event, and a sufficiently "strong" first-order narrative, to make the second-order "foreigner story" compelling. However, in this case, there is a hitch: The cab driver only got some scratches on his car, so the first order story may well be tellable, but it is not very compelling since nothing serious happened. The storyteller implicitly knows the weakness of his first-order (car-accident) story, and therefore emphasizes the possible consequences of the present Complication ("What if he kills someone . . ."). This is a well-known narrative strategy to enhance the dramatic nature of complications (e.g., "I could have been dead . . .").

An alternative way of analyzing the main Complication of this story ("He couldn't even speak a word of English") is to treat the car accident itself as the Orientation. Since it was a minor accident, which took place several years ago, there is in fact little reason to tell the story in the first place; indeed, if it were not for the presence of a foreigner, it probably would fail as a first-order story. However, as an Orientation it does fine: "Some years ago when I had a car accident, it turned out that . . ." Having minor car accidents is a rather mundane fact of automotive life and may therefore be used as an introducing Orientation. Indeed, the real Compli-

cation (““The other guy didn’t speak English”) changes the possible outcomes of such an everyday event as a minor car accident.

Notice finally that this story has only one Resolution category—the sentence “I got it taken care of.” However, this solution merely refers to the problem of what the storyteller sees as a false accusation. What is *not* resolved is the major Complication of the story: the fact that the old man didn’t “speak a word of English.” This lack of a Resolution category in stories about minorities is rather typical. In 144 Dutch stories we analyzed, about 50% did not have any Resolution category (van Dijk, 1984). We explained this lack of Resolution as an expression of the lack of a solution in the underlying model: The complicating event is interpreted as an unresolved predicament, which makes the whole story take the form of a complaint-story. Had the storyteller been able to solve the problem, in this case for instance by talking to the old man in another language, then the “point” of the complaint-story would have been lost: The problem would not have been serious. Stories about minorities, therefore, are accounts of events that put minorities in a negative perspective. The lack of a Resolution emphasizes the (negative) Complication category, and thereby the problematic nature of the presence of immigrants in the country.

Although less relevant as a story per se, the first-order car accident story is nevertheless narratively needed to carry the other story, because the fact that somebody unexpectedly didn’t speak English on a particular occasion is hardly sufficient as a story Complication either. Its dramatic nature only becomes prominent when placed in a situation where the inability to speak the language may have fatal consequences, for instance, when somebody needs to call for help after a serious car accident.

We have seen that at several levels this complex story is told in order to support the overall conclusion that it is necessary for immigrants to learn the language. This statement both occasions and concludes the story, and is part of a more complex argumentation, given in the beginning of the example, where the speaker makes a difference between old and new immigrants. This comparison is itself introduced by an evaluative statement in response to the interviewer’s question about cross-cultural conflicts:

6. Yeah, that’s one of the things I don’t like.

This evaluation must itself be supported by a more general evaluative principle or norm. This norm is set by the correct, past behavior of immigrants: They adapted. Both in California and in the Netherlands, it is the norm of adaptation that is most frequently associated with immigrants

in everyday conversations. One of these norms, also in California, is that the immigrants should learn the language of their new country. Following a well-known “the good old times” move, the speaker concedes that the “old” immigrants really took initiatives and went out to get a job, thereby further emphasizing the bad character of present immigrants. This statement specifies his more general, earlier opinion that immigrants are being pampered by state handouts and no longer do their best, an argumentative move that is characteristic of contemporary “no-nonsense” attitudes and policies toward minorities. The language question is then further detailed by giving the example of bilingual ballots and street signs.

These earlier evaluative statements are echoed at the end of the story by the narrative conclusion of the second-order story—“It is just what I hate”—which nicely fits the story into the argumentative schema of the conversation. The storyteller does so at two argumentative levels: First, he wraps up the complaints about the alleged lack of language ability; and second, he immediately goes on to place that conclusion within the higher-level conclusion relative to the unacceptable motivations of present-day immigrants. This explicit embedding shows again that “minority stories” are primarily not to entertain but to persuade the audience of an argumentative point that—for prejudiced storytellers—nearly always implies a negative characterization of “them” and a victim role for “us.”

## **OTHER MINORITY STORIES**

Compared to the interviews collected in the Netherlands, those recorded in California have relatively few stories. Most speakers talk about their neighborhood and city, and the relations with minorities, in rather general terms, as is also the case for most interviewees in the Netherlands who live in white neighborhoods: They have few personal experiences with minorities in the first place.

At the same time, storytelling seems to be conditioned by a mixed class and education factor: Middle-class interviewees tend to speak in a more general, descriptive or argumentative mode and less in a narrative mode. Apart from the possible lack of personal experiences, this class or education difference suggests that the issue of “ethnic relations” is defined by middle-class speakers primarily as a social issue, for which argumentative discourse is most appropriate. For lower-class speakers this is also the case, but their arguments may be less persuasive if they lack detailed general knowledge about ethnic affairs. Instead they tell personal stories

to support their general point. This may explain why most Californian speakers, most of whom were rather well-educated, middle-class citizens, tell fewer stories.

Against this background, a few comments are in order about some of the other stories told in California.

### **The Mugging**

A 30-year-old male electrician is telling about the relations with his white and black friends. He relates that there were sometimes minor conflicts, such as mutual name calling (“You know, like ... like if they be talkin’ about Honkies ‘n’ stuff”). Asked about a particular situation he tells, very briefly:

7. YEAH, I got mugged one time! At a city park ... by a bunch of black kids and one of ‘em was ... supposedly my friend. I was with him, this black kid, and ... he joined in with them ... they just beat the shit out of me ... you know( ... ). They beat the hell out of me, too, they they were real aggressive . . . not happy. ( ... ) ‘Cause it was, you know, it was what he was supposed to do, He didn’t want have then reject HIM, I guess ( ... ). Ya know, I hated him for it after that. I never talked to him again. (JK 1, 4-5)

The story has the usual narrative categories, including a final Conclusion/Coda. Again, it is especially the Complication that is focused on. The first-order Complication, repeated in the next turn of the dialogical story, is that some black kids beat him up, whereas the second-order Complication is about an act of betrayal: The black kid he thought to be his friend joined the other blacks. His explanation of this betrayal shows that this is the real point of the story: Even when they say they are your friends, you can’t really trust them, because they will stick together. Note that also this story has no Resolution, neither of the first-order story (the mugging) nor of the second-order story (the betrayal by his friend). Interestingly, the Conclusion/Coda only pertains to the first-order events: He never talked to that particular black guy again. He does not conclude, at the second-order level, that he never had any black friends anymore.

### **Affirmative Action**

The second story is told by a 60-year-old elementary school teacher. Asked about affirmative action, she replies that employment should be

competitive, and the best people hired. She then tells the story about a friend of hers:

8. Yes, well I do know that happened in W., in the school system, because a friend of mine would have gotten a position but they decided to give it to a minority. And she had been my principal and she had had some kind of position in the school system in W. and she was just a gem. Now I don't know anything about the other person, but this was my friend and I felt real bad when she didn't get it because, you know, I always just expected her to go to the top. But now the other person could have had qualifications exactly like hers. And she never felt badly about it, never complained. (LD1 A, 5)

Again we find the usual narrative categories and a focus on what is seen as one of the problematic aspects of ethnic relations—that white people are sometimes denied a job because a black person gets it. Note that in this case there is some kind of Resolution to the problem described in the Complication category (“but they decided to give it to a minority”): Her friend accepted the fact that she didn't get the job.

Interestingly, the presence of a Resolution category in stories about minorities is often associated with a less negative attitude toward minorities. This also appears in the statement that maybe the minority applicant was just as good, thereby legitimating that this applicant could be chosen just as well as her friend. For her, the events were merely a personal disappointment (“this was my friend”) and not an example of a more general issue, for example, of unfair competition.

We see that there are two different types of negative minority stories: those that are told merely as a personal experience of a negative event in an interethnic situation, on the one hand, and stories that in addition have a more general point, on the other hand. The latter type are more clearly group stories and tend to be told primarily to make a more general negative point in an argumentation schema about a minority group, as was the case in the cab-accident story told above.

The stories by the other interviewees are in line with the findings presented here. Thus, one other woman (unemployed, 42-year-old), who had just moved to San Diego and who had never lived in an inner city before, was surprised that her prejudices about crime and threats in the city were *not* confirmed: She had left a pair of tennis shoes and other things in the laundromat and came back hours later and still found them there. She concludes the story with the following Resolution, Evaluation, and Conclusion:

9. ( ... ) and there they were sitting, all neatly stacked in a nice little row waiting for me at about nine thirty at night. So, and this is called what you'd call a mixed neighborhood, you've got a little bit of every ... social and economic strata, I think, but I don't uhh I don't find any . . . excessive amount of of crime or any real serious feeling of being threatened, if we're out late at night coming home late at night, that sort of thing. (LG3,1)

As is the case in the Dutch interviews, spontaneous positive stories about minorities or race relations are also a rather reliable indicator of the lack of or less aggressive prejudices. Note though that this woman does know about what she is supposed to expect. The point of her story is precisely, as in most stories, that "normal expectations" are being thwarted. That is, she is aware of the socially shared belief among many white people that mixed neighborhoods, or rather, nonwhite people (at least in poor inner-city areas) tend to be threatening and to steal. At the same time, her story may be understood as an example of a counterstory, that is, as a story that is intended to challenge prevailing prejudices. Note that such counterstories presuppose a lack of (blatant) prejudices: In the analysis of stories by obviously prejudiced speakers, I found very few positive stories about minorities.

## CONCLUSION

Racism as a system of white group dominance is reproduced at several levels. In addition to acts of individual and institutional discrimination, this system is especially reproduced through discourse and communication. White people need to know about the opinions, attitudes, and ideologies of other group members and at the same time want to communicate and legitimate their own to others. Storytelling is one of the discourse genres that allows people to express their experiences and evaluations of concrete "ethnic" events.

My study of everyday conversations in the Netherlands and California has shown that such stories are usually told as functional elements in overall argumentative strategies of negative other-presentation. That is, in order to show that African Americans, Mexicans, Turks, Moroccans, or Surinamese have the negative properties that are represented in their attitudes, prejudiced white people need to support such a claim with "evidence." If not, negative statements about minorities or immigrants may be heard as racist. Negative stories, then, are presented as stating "the facts,"

because they report events that people have witnessed or participated in themselves.

The analysis of some examples from the Californian interviews has shown first that we may distinguish between first- and second-order storytelling. Interesting first-order Complications, such as a car accident, may become virtually irrelevant at the second-order, ethnic or racial level and merely a context (and pretext) for relating the allegedly problematic aspects of race relations, such as immigrants' inability to speak English. Further confirmation of the hypothesis was found in stories about minorities that tend to lack a Resolution category. There are two, related, explanations for this structural property of "minority stories," which they share with other "complaint stories": (a) an interactive, persuasive function, where the focus is fully on the (negative) Complication, that is, on the negative properties ascribed to minority actors, and less on what the storyteller "did about it"; and (b) a representation in mental models of ethnic events as essentially problematic, as a predicament for which there is no solution for the storyteller.

It was also shown that there is a systematic difference between stories told by prejudiced people and by those people who favor equality and actively oppose racism. The first stories are mostly negative and tell about events or experiences that confirm more general, negative attitudes. Such stories are as stereotypical as the attitudes that monitor the construction and retrieval of the mental models on which they are based. White people who have no or fewer problems with minorities spontaneously tend to tell more varied and more positive stories or will occasionally even tell negative stories about racist or intolerant whites. Whereas the prejudiced people will tend to repeatedly affirm that they are of course not racist, antiracist speakers don't feel the need to present themselves in this positive light. Their very stories and arguments themselves show what their position is.

Finally, it was stressed that storytelling is not merely an expression of personal experiences and opinions. On the contrary, the very difference and variations in storytelling between more or less prejudiced speakers already suggest that social cognitions are involved that are shared by different groups of people. Stories about minorities, thus, are not so much expressions of personal experiences. Rather, they are expressions of group experiences. In the same way as prejudices operate (among other things) by categorization, generalization, and de-individuation of minority group members, white speakers tell their stories as dominant group members. In the same way as their personal experiences with the "others" are interpreted as experiences of the white group, their stories, and hence the

models from which these derive, are heavily monitored by general beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies. Indeed, such “minority stories” are in a way similar to myths and folktales: anonymous stories of group experiences, expressing group concerns, and group beliefs. In our case, they are at the same time expressing and reproducing white group power, by persuasively making the point that “we” are better than “them,” or rather that “they” fail to meet the standards that are set by “our” values and norms.

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