

## Student identity – A membership categorization analysis approach

Gabriela CHEFNEUX<sup>1</sup>

*The paper uses as its theoretical framework the Membership Categorization Analysis, a way of understanding how interlocutors interpret and give meaning to reality. The concepts underlying the analysis are members, categories, categorization devices, and categorization methods. The data drawn upon are seven interviews recorded with students from the Faculty of Letters at Transilvania University of Braşov. The paper investigates the values the respondents associate with being a student by resorting to categories, categorization devices (considered as expressing moral principles and attitudes), and categorization methods.*

Keywords: *Membership Categorization Analysis, categories, categorization device, categorization method*

### 1. Introduction

The paper investigates the values and standards related to being a student, by using the Membership Category Analysis. It is divided into two parts – the theoretical one, which presents the concepts used, and the practical one, which describes the data collection, analysis and interpretation, followed by conclusions.

#### 1.1. Theoretical frame

The first part of the paper introduces the Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA), its principles, and the way in which categorization is made. MCA, the method advanced by Harvey Sacks, studies the way in which interlocutors understand and negotiate social reality by considering how the speakers perceive and yield meaning to categories and the members included in them (Silverman 1998, 14).

---

<sup>1</sup> Transilvania University of Braşov, [gabriela.chefneux@unitbv.ro](mailto:gabriela.chefneux@unitbv.ro)

The three fundamental concepts involved are members, activities, and categorization devices.

### *1.1.1. Members*

Sacks (1984, 218) defines members as “classifications or social types that may be used to describe persons” while Hester and Eglin (1997, 5) consider them “the occupants of categories who are designated in the talk”. Initially, categories included only people, but later they have been extended to abstract and concrete objects.

The members in a category share similar characteristics (such as activities, beliefs, features, etc.). However, the classification work is context-dependent, as the categories can be established, clarified or negotiated during the interaction. Sacks (1984) states that categories are not “storehouses of decontextualized meaning” as they become meaningful only in particular contexts; similarly, Hester and Eglin (1997, 18) emphasize that the context “clarifies and organizes old or new membership categories”.

### *1.1.2. Activities*

Activities have been defined as action words “formulated implicitly or explicitly as conventionally accompanying some category” (Jayussi 1984, 37) or as words linking “subjects and objects” (Lepper 2000, 192). According to Sacks, it was activities that defined members in a category but later researchers have included “cultural predicates” (Hester and Eglin 1997) such as duties, responsibilities, obligations, rights, habits, beliefs, properties, knowledge, competencies, emotions or feelings.

Activities, duties, etc. have been analyzed according to different criteria: existing before the interaction or generated during it, central or peripheral and appropriate or not with respect to the respective category.

Thus, according to the first criterion, activities can be category-bound or category-generated. The former ones are usually taken for granted by the interlocutors and assumed as natural; they are “expectably and properly done by persons who are incumbent of particular categories” (Hester and Eglin 1997, 3). The latter ones are negotiated in talk, being built jointly by the interlocutors to “establish a particular category” (Lepper 2000, 193).

In terms of their centrality, Jayussi classifies activities as category-constitutive (essential for a member to have in order to be entered under that category), preferential (occurring during a conversation), category-tied (not

essential for members to have) or category-exclusive (not acceptable for a member). The centrality of these activities is subject to negotiation between the interlocutors, expressing the interactants' belief of who is a genuine member of that particular category. The characteristics of activities can also be interpreted in terms of intensity, being ranked "by reference to some standard for the occasion" (Jayussi 1984, 166) while in terms of propriety, activities can be good or bad (Cuff 1993).

Jayussi emphasizes that all classification work involves the speakers' ethical evaluation: "what permeates all these classification of activities/beliefs/feelings, etc., is the judgment that they include, as they are generally assessed in terms of a normal or a moral standard" (Jayussi 1984, 166).

### *1.1.3. Categorization device*

This is the criterion according to which interlocutors enter members under a particular category; it is the "organizing principle" which includes "a collection plus the rules of application" (Lepper 2000, 15). Examples of categorization devices are gender, age, profession, nationality, etc.

### *1.1.4. Ways of doing categorization work*

Interlocutors do categorization work in a variety of ways, some of which being: explanation, justification, information, demonstration, judgment, accounting, description, the speaker's direct, personal knowledge, "first or third person statement" about a member (Jayussi 1984, 73). The speakers may leave the hearers to infer the conclusions of what they say, or may make direct reference to category-bound activities, obligations, rights, skills, etc.

This paper relies on MCA in order to identify the activities associated with the category of student, the categorization device and the categorization method used by the respondents, the aim of the analysis being to determine which are the moral values related to being a student.

## **2. Data analysis**

The second part of the paper presents the respondents, the data collection, the instrument, and the interpretation of results.

## 2.1. Data collection

The analyzed data are part of an interview that was conducted in January 2024 with seven students from the Faculty of Letters from Transilvania University of Braşov.


They were all 3<sup>rd</sup> year students in the Language and Literature program, ranking in the former quarter of their class and studying English as a major or minor subject combined with Romanian, German, or Chinese. There were six female students and one male student, all aged around 21.

After being informed of the purpose of the interview (to discuss their student experience) and guaranteed confidentiality, they all agreed to participate in the research.

The aim of the interview was twofold: to see how students perceived their university experience and how this had changed them in professional and personal areas and secondly, to identify the features and qualities they consider relevant for a student. The interview was a structured one, with some clarification or probing questions asked when deemed necessary. It consisted of nine questions and was conducted with the seven respondents over a period of two days. The time spent with each interviewee varied in length from 25 to 38 minutes.

The interviewees were asked in which language they wanted to have the interview, which was designed in English; three opted for English and four for Romanian. The answers were translated if given in Romanian and the transcribing convention used was the edited type.

## 2.1. Interview analysis

In the context of this interview, the category is that of 'student'; the respondents' answers are analyzed in order to see which are the activities/actions/responsibilities/ rights/skills, etc. considered relevant for a student, and what categorization  vice and method each respondent uses. The interviewees describe the features a genuine member in the student category should have, assessing these features in both moral and normative ways, thus indicating the values they uphold in terms of their professional life. The question analyzed in this paper was the fourth in the interview and was phrased as follows:

*What similarities and differences do you perceive in terms of:*

- *yourself and the peers in your group,*
- *your group and other programs in the Faculty of Letters at Transilvania University,*
- *your group and students in similar programs at other universities.*

The seven respondents were all students in the Language and Literature programs (referred to as their own group in the interview); sometimes they had classes with students from other programs (Applied Modern Languages) (referred to as other programs in the Faculty of Letters); the third part of the question was asked to see what the respondents thought the similarities and differences were between their own program and similar ones attended by friends or acquaintances at other universities.

Three of the seven respondents did not answer this part as they did not know anybody studying at a different university.

Below I present the analysis of the seven interviews.

### 2.2.1. S1

According to S1, all the students in her group have an artistic nature:

(1) *Suntem toți asemănători. Toți avem o fire artistică.*

‘We are all similar. We all have an artistic nature.’

S1 uses a feature, “artistic nature”, as the categorization device, while the method used is ascribing this feature considered relevant, as indicated by the repetition of the personal pronoun “we” which is emphasized by the use of the quantifier “all”.

When comparing the students in her group with the students in other programs in the same Faculty, S1 uses the same categorization device, a feature, which is this time “literary”, which she relates to the students’ future profession:

(2) *Grupa de română secundar sunt literari. Mai serioși – au mult de citit, arată deja ca viitori profesori. Cei de la engleză principal sunt mai relaxați.*

‘the Romanian minors group are literary. More serious – they have a lot to read, they already look like future teachers. English majors are more relaxed.’

S1 describes her colleagues in other programs as “literary” and “more serious”, because these students have more to read. The characterization method is assigning a relevant feature and justifying it. S1 does not know students in other universities, so she does not answer the last part of the question.

### 2.2.2. S2

S2 describes his group colleagues as follows:

- (3) We have a similar mindset, a bit nerdy, the program gave us this nerdiness, we share common interests, our first interactions were mostly Oriental culture...

For example, I come from social studies in high school I see people who come from mathematics and I find it interesting how we can gravitate towards the same interests in the end.

The categorization device is behavior – “nerdiness” (S2 repeats the word twice “we are a bit nerdy”, “this nerdiness”) and interest in Oriental culture, shared by all the students in S2’s group, even though they come from various types of high schools (humanities, science, etc.). The categorization method is describing and referring to personal knowledge.

In order to present similarities and difference between the students in his own group and other programs in the Faculty, S2 uses behavior as the categorization device. He is highly interested in foreign cultures and in speaking foreign languages and these interests bring him close to other students in the department who study foreign languages too.

- (4) English majors I could easily link with them, we have in common that we know English. They enjoy speaking English in common conversation which is something that allows us to relate more easily. I cannot relate to Romanian studies. Whenever they talk about Romanian studies, I feel a bit alien, outsider, I don’t take a keen interest in this part of literature.

The categorization method is explaining, as S2 speaks about what he has in common with students studying foreign language and what the differences are between himself and students studying Romanian language and literature. He contrasts these two categories by using affirmative sentences for the former and negative ones for the latter: “could easily link with them” versus “I cannot relate to Romanian studies”, while the lexis selected reflects the intensity of his feelings: “could easily link”, “enjoy” versus “I feel a bit alien, outsider”.

To compare the students in his own department with students at other universities, S2 uses as the categorization device knowledge acquired for the future profession. He believes that his own university provides a more complex approach to the study of Chinese, as the focus is both on language and on literature, while in other universities the focus is more on language. S2 also thinks that his own program offers students more career options, as he and his colleagues are given the possibility of exploring future job opportunities:

- (5) At X university the focus is on different parts of the language whereas we focus on both culture and language. This friend of mine says they don't talk about other topics other than language itself.

The categorization method is third person statements and use of personal knowledge: "this friend of mine".

S2 values learning and interest in foreign cultures and language and appreciates the wider range of choices for future professions offered by his own Faculty.

### 2.2.3. S3

The third respondent describes the students in her own group in terms of their determination to pursue their goal. S3 considers that there are students who follow the aim they had when they become students, namely that of studying their favorite topics (language and literature) and becoming good professionals, and others that abandon this purpose.

- (6) *Toți am venit cu un scop asemănător, să învățăm, să aprofundăm, să ne dezvoltăm pe partea de literatură și gramatică. Asta studiem de fapt. Diferențele, și astea le-am observat din primul an și acum sunt foarte evidente, ar fi dorința pe care o am în continuare de a lucra într-un domeniu ce ține de facultatea aceasta și faptul că nu m-am pierdut. Am aceleași dorințe, îmi doresc același lucru de la mine, îmi doresc tot mai mult. Unii se pierd așa pe drum.*

'We all came with a similar purpose – to learn, to go deeper, to develop in terms of literature and grammar. This is what we are actually studying. The differences, and I noticed them from the first year and now they are very obvious, would be the desire I still have to work in an area that is related to this program and the fact that I haven't lost myself. I have the same desires, I want the same thing from myself, I want it more and more. Some just lose their way.'

S3 uses consistency in achieving one's purpose as the categorization device and appeal to moral facts as the categorization method – students should pursue their chosen path and should not lose it. In order to express this idea, S3 resorts to contrast ("the differences would be") and intensification ("this is what we are actually studying", "some just lose their way", "I want it more and more").

S3 uses the same categorization device, consistency in achieving one's purpose, when commenting on similarities and differences between her own group and other similar programs at the Faculty:

- (7) *Celelalte specializări toți avem același scop. Diferențele se văd când ne referim la materii, la specializări.*  
 'The other programs we all have the same purpose. The differences become obvious when we talk about subjects, about specializations.'

The differences are related to the subjects studied while the similarities are described in terms of attitude towards studying. The categorization method is describing using her own knowledge: "we can see the differences".

For other programs at other universities, S3 uses as the categorization device the amount of work involved, which can be interpreted as indicating commitment to the students' initial aim. S3 believes that she and her colleagues study more topics in more depth and attend more extra-curricular activities:

- (8) *Din ce am vorbit cu prietenii mei care au făcut alte specializări – portugheză – am observat diferențe la materii, destul de mari – noi avem mai multe materii și mai multe seminare de mai multe ori, ei au de obicei la două săptămâni, noi la o săptămână, cel puțin aici noi învățăm mult mai multe în sensul că mai multe capitole, mai multe subiecte, mai multe opere.*  
 'From what I discussed with my friends who attend other programs – Portuguese, I noticed differences in subjects, quite big - we have more subjects and more seminars, they usually have one every second week, we have one every week. At least here we learn more, meaning more chapters, more topics, more literary works.'

The categorization method is describing and justifying; linguistically, S3 resorts to degrees of comparison: the differences are "quite big" "more subjects", "more seminars", "more times", "we learn more", etc.

S 3 uses the same categorization device to describe students, namely consistency in following one's purpose, reflected in their commitment to studying.

#### 2.2.4. S4

S4 talks about learning Chinese, which is her main interest at university.

- (9) I think we all experience the same process in learning Chinese, because we all came here without knowing any Chinese at all...The difference might be... in my group we have students that are greater, better than me and some that are some not that good at Chinese.

When speaking about her group colleagues, S4 uses as the categorization device knowledge of Chinese, as she talks about her colleagues whose level of knowing the language is higher or lower; the categorization method is describing.

In order to comment on other programs in the same Faculty, S4 resorts to difficulties as the categorization device: “different types of difficulties”:

- (10) Every program has its own difficulties and advantages. As I observed from Romanian English they have way more books to read. I think we’re not getting the same amounts (sic!) of books to read because we have the difficulties of learning Chinese. That’s how they match each other – the difficulties.

Different types of difficulties.

According to S4, the difficulties are balanced, some students have more to read, others have a difficult language to master, which involves a lot of effort. S4 resorts to explaining as a categorization method and she uses the verb “observe”, signaling that she relies on her own experience.

S4 has no former colleagues at other universities so she makes no comments in relation to programs at other universities.

S4 uses as the categorization device behavior - learning and the difficulties associated with it.

#### 2.2.5. S5

To describe the students in her group, S5 states:

- (11) They are friendly first of all and quite hardworking. If you want to learn a new language such as Chinese, which is quite difficult, you have to be hardworking in order to succeed.

The categorization device used is behavior, namely friendliness and hard work, which S5 expands by means of explaining. Her colleagues are sociable, pleasant and easy to spend time with while at school they are diligent.


S5 shares these features with her peers but she is different from them when it comes to learning; unlike her colleagues, she learns best when she enjoys the topic. For this part of the answer, S5 introduces a new categorization device, behavior, namely enjoyment of the subjects studied. The categorization method is first person avowal, reflected in the repeated use of first person pronouns: I, “for me”, “my colleagues”.

- (12) For me it depends on the amount of enjoyment I get out of the class. My colleagues have a better way of focusing in lesson even if they might not enjoy it that much.

S5 uses the same categorization device - enjoyment of the studied subjects - when talking about herself and the students in other programs at the same Faculty:

- (13) I think that most people who came here come because they are interested in this area of study and regardless of the subject they find some enjoyment.

The categorization method used is attribution: “I think that most people ... find some enjoyment”.

As far as students  at other universities are concerned, S5 states she had not kept in touch with former colleagues.

S5 uses different types of behavior as the categorization device: friendliness, hard work, and enjoyment of one’s studies.

#### 2.2.6. S6

S6 starts by talking about the difference between the two subgroups (Romanian English), which she identifies as being level of involvement, indicated by attendance.

- (14) *Noi suntem oile negre – noi parcă nu suntem atât conștiincioși. Ei vin în număr mult mai mare la cursuri și la seminare. Sunt domni profesori care au remarcat chestia asta că vin mai mulți de la A decât de la B.*  
 ‘We are the black sheep – it seems we are not that conscientious. They come in much higher number at courses and seminars... There are teachers who noticed this that there are more students from subgroup A than B’.

S6 uses professional involvement as the categorization device and personal knowledge and third person statements to do the categorization work.

When talking about the similarities between the two subgroups, S6 uses again professional interest as the categorization device and explaining and third person statements as the categorization method: the discussions during the seminars can go deeper, the level of understanding of reading for the seminar can differ:

- (15) *Practic primim cam aceeași informație. Mai sunt domni profesori care spun că la grupa nu știu care am dus discuția până nu știu unde pe când la noi poate a mers mai greu.*

‘Actually we receive the same information... There are teachers who say that with group X we took the discussion up to a certain point, while with us maybe it was more difficult.’

Professional responsibility is expressed as amount of work and task realization and S6 supports her statement by referring to her teacher’s words: “there are teachers who say”, “there are teachers who noticed”. The method for categorization is a combination of account, explanation, and third person declaration.

Comparing her own program with others at the same Faculty, S6 expresses her belief that her own program is more difficult and involves more work but offers professional rewards in terms of professional knowledge and training.

The categorization device is again amount of work reflected in number of subjects and exams and the categorization method is appeal to moral facts - difficulties have to be faced in order to become a good professional.

Finally, when talking about similar programs at different universities, S5 states that she does not know enough to speak about it but mentions as a general aspect that she and her colleagues work harder than students at other universities.

Using the same categorization device (amount of work) and categorization method (explaining), S6 refers this time to the shortcomings of having more work to do as it reflects in the average grades for registering for the master’s degree programs.

- (16) *Știu că e și partea de licență la care nu dau examen, noi dăm. Știu că e doar susținerea lucrării și e o diferență care se vede. E un efort în plus și examenul de licență care se vede în media de admitere la masterat.*

‘I know that for the graduation they don’t take an exam, we do. They only have to defend their BA project and this is a difference that can be noticed. It is additional effort and the BA graduation exam is reflected in the admission grade for the master’s program.’

S6 uses amount of work and responsibility as main features in doing the categorization work while the method is direct experience and third person statements.

### 2.2.7. S7

According to S7, the third year students share the same passion for reading but are different in terms of interest towards the subjects they study:

- (17) *Pasiunea pentru citit probabil că și asta ne mai diferențiază dar care am rămas suntem destul de asemănători. În schimb, nu toți manifestăm același interes pentru toate materiile.*

‘The passion for reading, probably it also differentiates us but the ones who are in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year we are pretty similar. However, not all of us have the same interest in all the subjects’.

The categorization device used is behavior while the categorization method is demonstrated attribution.

In terms of similarities and differences between her own group and other programs in the same Faculty, S7 also uses again behavior - interest in study - as a categorization device while the category is realized via demonstrated attribution:

- (18) *Din ce am observat referitor la cursuri, prezența, când avem cu engleza principal majoritatea suntem din grupa noastră. Nu știu de ce. Probabil că nu au același interes.*

‘As far as I have noticed attendance at lectures when we have classes with English majors most of the students present are from our subgroup. I don’t know why. Probably they do not have the same interest.’

To talk about other programs at other universities, S7 uses amount of work as the categorization device; the categorization method is explanation by ground: S7 considers that she and her colleagues learn more, are given more information, have more work to do, which is reflected in the higher level of stress, as compared to students at other universities:

(19) *Din ce am auzit cred că noi avem mai multe informații decât cei din alte părți. Și nu-i văd atât de stresați cât ne văd pe noi de obicei. Nu par atât de stresați.*

‘From what I have heard I think we have more information than those at other universities. And I don’t see them as stressed as I usually see us. They don’t seem so stressed.’

In order to talk about the differences, S7 uses 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> personal pronouns (“we/us” vs. “they/them”) and degrees of comparison “more information”, “as stressed as”. S7 relies on behavior (amount of work reflected in stress level) as a categorization device while the categorization method is attribution or explanation.

### 3. Conclusions

The categorization method most frequently employed by the respondents is explaining, followed by attribution of behavior or feature, describing, personal knowledge, moral facts, and third person declarations; they mainly rely on their own observations and experience. Sometimes, the interviewees combine these methods, for example explaining, describing and third person declarations, and resort to several categorization methods when answering the three parts of the question.

The seven respondents mainly use as categorization device behavior, followed by knowledge and skills. They resort to the same categorization devices for all the three parts of the questions and these devices express their moral values and norms.

The interviewees refer to activities and behavior (studying, working hard, showing interest or enjoying what they learn), competencies (becoming a good specialist), attributes (friendliness), moral obligations (following one’s purpose). All of them are category–constitutive, central, and embedded and express the respondent’s moral values the interviewees deem essential for a student.

### References

- Cuff, Edward C. 1993. *Problems of Versions in Everyday Situations*. Washington D.C.: International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis. University Press of America.
- Hester, Stephen and Peter Eglin. 1997. “Membership Categorization Analysis: An

- Introduction.” In *Culture in Action Studies in Membership Categorization Analysis*, ed. by Stephen Hester and Peter Eglin, 1–23. Washington D.C.: International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis and University Press of America.
- Jayyusi, Lena. 1984. *Categorization and the Moral Order*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Lepper, Georgia. 2000. *Categories in Text and Talk. A Practical Introduction to Categorization Analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
- Sacks, Harvey. 1984. “Notes on Methodology”. In *Structures of Social Action* ed. by J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage, 21–27. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Silverman, David. 1998. *Harvey Sacks and Conversation Analysis (Key Contemporary Thinkers)*. Cambridge: Polity Press.