

## Linguistic Ethnography and the Analysis of Data

(see accompanying handout)

I've been asked to introduce linguistic ethnography as a multi-method approach to discourse and social interaction, and I think there are two ways I could do this. Either I could treat the word 'development' historically, and give an overview of the different traditions of research that linguistic ethnographers draw on. Or alternatively, I could interpret the word 'develop' as 'produce', and then illustrate a multi-method analysis of discourse and social interaction with the analysis of a single piece of data.

Well I'm going to take the second option, mainly because it fits with today's focus on data, but also because there's an overview of approaches and traditions in the paper we pre-circulated, entitled 'Neo-Hymesian linguistic ethnography in the UK'. Of course, I'll be very happy indeed to engage with any questions that that paper raises in the discussion after my presentation, but for the next 25 minutes,

- I'll begin with a sketch of the tenets, analytic resources and empirical horizons in linguistic ethnography.
- Then I'll try to illustrate this in an analysis of social class in interaction, and
- after that, I'll conclude with some remarks about linguistic ethnography's relevance to the contemporary era, and some ideas about how you could fit it into your own research.

So first:

### **1. Linguistic ethnography: Tenets, horizons, frameworks and goals**

Linguistic ethnography is something of an umbrella term,<sup>1</sup> but whatever the differences between sub-traditions, linguistic ethnography holds that

- i) the contexts for communication should be investigated rather than assumed. Meaning takes shape within specific social relations, interactional histories and institutional regimes, produced and construed by agents with expectations and repertoires that have to be grasped ethnographically; and
- ii) analysis of the internal organisation of verbal (and other kinds of semiotic) data is essential to understanding its significance and position in the world. Meaning is far more than just the 'expression of ideas', and biography, identifications, stance and nuance are extensively signalled in the linguistic and textual fine-grain.

You can describe those two sets of claims as **basic methodological tenets** in linguistic ethnography, and the **empirical horizons** they open up are very broad. Yes, you're looking at communication, but you treat this as the temporal unfolding of social process, orienting to at least three general focus points. One of these is **individual persons**:

- their physical bodies, senses & perceptions
- their cultural and semiotic repertoires, and the resources they've at their disposal
- their capacities, habitual practices & dispositions
- their likes & dislikes, desires, fears, commitments, and personalities
- their social status and category memberships

**Situated encounters** are another point of focus, and here you can look at

- the events, genres and types of activity in which individuals interact together
- the physical arrangement of the participants and the material setting
- actions, sequences of actions and the use of semiotic materials (signs, language, texts, media)
- the inferencing, the interpretations and the efforts that participants make to understand or influence each other

- origins, outcomes and wider links: how signs, actions & encounters fit with interactional & institutional processes over longer & broader stretches of time and space

And then third, you try to reckon with **institutions, networks & communities of practice**, which can vary in their durability and scale from e.g. playground peer-groups to clubs to schools, mass media and government policy. Here there's an interest in

- how institutions shape, sustain and get reproduced through texts, objects, media, genres and practices etc, as well as in how
- how institutions control, manage, produce and distribute persons, resources, discourses, representations, ideologies, spaces etc

Putting all these together, the assumption is of course that persons, encounters and institutions are profoundly inter-linked - the repertoires of individuals get used and developed in encounters, encounters enact institutions, institutions produce and regulate persons and their repertoires through the regimentation of encounters, etc etc, all with varying degrees of friction and slippage.

Now to get some purchase on these empirical processes, there are at least four major sets of **analytic resources** that you can draw on in linguistic ethnography:

- a) first, there's *linguistics & discourse analysis*, which provide a view of the expressive affordances of the linguistic resources that participants draw on
- b) second, in *Goffman* and *conversation analysis*, there are frameworks and procedures for investigating situated encounters, and these can help us to see
  - the ongoing, sequential construction of 'local architectures of intersubjectivity'
  - the rituals and moral accountabilities permeating the use of semiotic forms and strategies
  - the shifting spatio-temporal distribution of attention and involvement in situations of physical co-presence
- c) third, there's *ethnography* which, for example, provides
  - a sense of the stability, status and resonance that forms, strategies and materials have in different social networks beyond the encounter-on-hand, as well as
  - an idea of how and where an encounter fits into longer and broader biographies, institutions and histories.
- d) fourth, there's an vital place for *other public and academic discourses* which provide the purpose and relevance for analysis, as well as a broader picture of the environment where the study's sited.

When you pull all of this together in the empirical analysis of recordings of interaction, you aim for an account that

- respects the uniqueness, deficiency and exuberance of the communicative moment, but that also
- describes how participants handle specific forms, strategies and materials, and that
- tries to understand how this feeds off and into local social life more generally.

There is no complete or definitive interpretation either for analysts or participants, but you want an end-product that is mindful of the scholarly virtues of care, coherence, accuracy, accountability, scepticism and cumulative comparison, that is sufficiently plausible to stand up to the scrutiny from other analysts, that is open to reformulation in terms that participants can engage with, and that speaks to wider social or intellectual concerns.

Well okay, that's a rather programmatic sketch of methodology, but what kind of account does all this actually generate? To give you an idea, I'm now going to turn to some research I did looking at what **social class** meant for a group of 13 and 14 year olds in a multiethnic comprehensive school in inner London.

## 2. Social class in interaction

I didn't set out in this research to look at social class *per se*, but I was interested in what was happening when these youngsters put on exaggerated posh and Cockney accents. I had an intuition that class relations and identities would be relevant, and I got quite a lot of initial encouragement for the idea of linking class and social interaction from readings of Thompson, Williams, Bourdieu, Skeggs and Reay. Still, the main job of analysis started with the transcription of sections of speech from my radio-microphone recordings of spontaneous interaction, and here's an example, taken from the start of a Science lesson.

In the episode, Hanif's been away from his table looking around for a book he needs for the writing work they've been set, but now he's arrived back, bringing a copy with him, and the hyper-Cockney pronunciation of 'Galaxies' in line 11 provides the starting-point for what I'm going to say:

Extract 1

Hanif (wearing the radio-mic), Arun (14, male, Malaysian descent), Simon (14, male, Anglo-descent) are sharing the same table in science.

1 Hanif: ((whistles six notes))  
2 what you doing Arun  
3 (.)  
4 what you doin Arn  
5 (.)  
6 (>shup<) leave it Dimbo  
7 (2)  
8 look what you ma-  
9 look what you made me do  
10 (4)  
11 "Stars and Galaxies"  
[stā:z n gæləksēī::z]  
12 (1)  
13 ((quietly reciting page numbers:))  
14 one three seven  
15 (3)  
16 ((fast and loud to the teacher:))  
17 >SIR can I go check if there's any  
18 Essential Sciences left<

In lines 2-4, Hanif asks Arun what he's doing, and after that in line 6, he tries to ward off some kind of territorial incursion. Exactly who's trying what isn't clear from the tape, but Hanif follows it with a reproach in lines 8 and 9. There's no audible apology or retort, the matter drops and Hanif then turns to his worksheet, reading the title aloud and ending the word Galaxies with an exaggerated Cockney diphthong.

To begin with, it's linguistic phonetics that helps to pin down the pronunciation, differentiating 'galaxies' from Hanif's normal accent and lining it up with broad London. The next step is to try to understand what's going on interactionally in line 11, and it's here that Goffman's useful. Hanif seems to be talking to himself when he reads the 'Stars and Galaxies' worksheet title, dedicating himself to the solitary task ahead. But as Goffman says, we're still very alert to the people around us when we talk to ourselves in public, and so in Hanif's self-talk, we're entitled to see an orientation to the over-hearers nearby. In fact, in reading out the worksheet title, Hanif's also consolidating a shift of footing, displaying his upcoming involvement in the curriculum task, disengaging from the business with his friends. If we add into this the ethnographic observation that broad Cockney was quite often associated with informal sociability, we can move to an initial interpretation of what's going

on here – Hanif may be starting up on schoolwork, but in rounding off the title with hyper-Cockney, he’s toning down the signs of his school commitment, showing that that he’s not a nerd, that he’s still in tune.

In fact, dwelling on this a bit longer, there’s a case for saying that when Hanif uses Cockney to read aloud from a school text, he’s contradicting what you’d normally expect. Normally, people’s pronunciation gets posher when they read aloud or when they turn to school business, but Hanif’s doing the opposite, and this becomes more pronounced if we follow the activity unfolding over several minutes. Shortly after the Extract, Hanif’s exclamations suggest that he’s really quite interested in the subject matter - ‘wow’, ‘oh my god’ - but at the same time, he continues weaving exaggerated accents into the task. We get a quasi-Jamaican version of ‘Stars & Galaxies’ a little later on, and then after a period of attentive silent reading, he begins to turn the worksheet into quiz questions for the other boys on his table. Indeed, at one stage of this quiz, he uses a hyper-Cockney version of “okay” to get Simon & Arun to attend to the question coming up, and at moments like these, the exaggerated Cockney seems to go further than just toning down the signs of Hanif’s own educational commitment. At moments like this, it looks as though he’s trying to make the classwork more interesting and accessible for his friends, and there’s a case for saying that Hanif’s *vernacularising* school knowledge, bringing the science worksheet to life with non-standard accents and a popular TV genre.

So far, then, I’ve focused on an encounter, and I’ve drawn on linguistics and Goffmanian interaction analysis. We’ve had the vowel sound (*galaxies*); the interactional dynamics of the utterance in line 11 – self-talk designed to be overheard; and the **genre** mixing in the development of subsequent activity – the curriculum worksheet getting turned into a quiz. Now at this point, it’s vital to *broaden* the focus beyond this particular episode in at least two ways. On the one hand, we need to situate this episode in longer ethnographic observation of Hanif, his friends and classmates, and on the other, we need to bring in other episodes where posh and Cockney get stylized.

Unfortunately, there’s time only for the briefest summary, but taking ethnographic familiarity with Hanif first, yes, the challenge in Extract 1 to traditional equations of book learning with poshness fits a much more general pattern – Hanif often combined a commitment to learning with flagrant disregard for the decorums that learning is traditionally surrounded by. In their participation in class discussions, for example, he and his mates were often uncontrollably *over-exuberant*. However, in case we’re too tempted to read him as a radical,<sup>2</sup> it’s also worth noting that Hanif’s teachers were often very receptive to his transgressive enthusiasms, and he was widely recognized as a star pupil. So there’s actually quite a good reason for seeing his unconventional vernacularisation of schoolwork in Extract 1 as the product of his position at the top of the hierarchy in Class 9A, supported by the dominant local order rather than opposed to it, and indeed we could go on from here to locate the school itself in a much longer history of struggle over multi-ethnic comprehensive education.

Looking sideways to other instances of exaggerated posh-&-Cockney, the first thing to note is that this kind of stylization was actually rather common, occurring about once every 45 minutes in my 37 hours of data. About half of these performances responded to processes of stratification and division associated with schooling – as in Extract 1, both posh and Cockney were quite often stylized in the transitions between work and play, and ultra-posh was also used when kids felt patronized by teachers. But in addition, away from the demarcations and ranking involved in schooling, hyper-Cockney and posh were quite extensively used in humour and mockery among kids themselves. In fact, pulling together the connotations evidenced in about 20 episodes, Cockney seemed to be associated with vigour, passion and bodily laxity, while posh got linked to physical weakness, social distance, constraint and sexual inhibition.

All in all, I looked at about 50 episodes, and it certainly took a lot of time to analyse each of them. For much of this time, I worked to the aesthetic of ‘slowness’ and ‘smallness’ that Silverman associates with conversation analysis, squeezing out the kind of interactional detail illustrated in Extract 1. But I was also very interested in how these episodes figured within both biographical and institutional process, and so in the end, like a lot of linguistic ethnography, my account also covers both individuals and institutions, even though it’s situated interaction that holds the central place.

But so what? Okay, the account might look quite convincing – might seem quite satisfying aesthetically as piece of layered ethnographic description – but is that It? Well obviously not, and this is one of the moments where wider public and academic discourses become relevant. Overall, there’s material here for case-study engagement with a number of debates about social class, but maybe the most obvious link is to claims about class and identity transformation in late modernity.

Looking across my dataset as a whole, pulling together all of the themes and images evoked in these situated stylisations of posh and Cockney, you can make out the over-arching imprint of a set of high-low, mind-body, reason-&-emotion binaries that reach back to the emergence of bourgeois society in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. When you consider that this wasn’t a traditional white working class school – when you remember that pupils came from all over London, that about a third were from refugee and asylum seeking families, that less than a quarter in Hanif’s class were white, and that Hanif spoke to his parents mostly in Sylheti – in short, when you consider the globalised, multi-ethnic late-modern environment, then these kids’ insistent reproduction of a very traditional class imagery contradicts the view that class is losing its salience particularly among contemporary urban youth. Maybe more profoundly, if we bring the imagery these kids had at their fingertips together with the asymmetrical situations in which they spontaneously stylized posh and Cockney, then I think we’ve got a graphic empirical picture of what Williams calls ‘class hegemony’, the “saturation of the whole process of living... [by] the... dominance and subordination of particular classes”. What the analysis shows, in short, is that even though they didn’t talk explicitly about it, these kids’ everyday practical consciousness was deeply impregnated with the sensibilities we traditionally associate with social class.

To conclude this presentation, I’d like to try to bring my account of linguistic ethnography closer to home, first of all locating it in the late modern epistemic environment that all of us inhabit, and second, by suggesting ways of accommodating it in different studies.

### **3. Contexts for linguistic ethnography**

There’s a general feeling nowadays that the world’s more fragmented, less coherent, less predictable than it used to be, and that social categories like class, gender and ethnicity are much harder to use now than they used to be – “What is the working class today?” asks Paul Gilroy, “What gender is it? What colour is it? How in the light of its obvious segmentation, is it to be unified?” And anti-essentialist critique has created lots of trouble for traditional notions of ethnicity and gender as well. Now this, it seems to me, is one point where the epistemological commitments in ethnography come into play – ethnography’s partly defined by its commitment to taking a long hard look at empirical processes that make no sense within established frameworks, and if right now we’re experiencing a period where traditional frameworks are actually looking a lot less well-established than they used to, then ethnography’s one option to turn to.

Turning from the ‘ethnography’ half of LE to the ‘linguistic’, there are also productive links to social constructionism and the view that everyday activity is actually rather consequential for the production of social reality. If the social world gets reproduced and created anew in

the plethora of specific activities that make up our routine lives (Berger and Luckman 1966; Giddens 1976, 1984), then it's not just ethnography that's useful for the purchase it gives us on the lived and the local. To see how realities get proposed, ratified, resisted and reworked, we need to look at communication, and to do a good job with this, it helps to have the tools of linguistic, semiotic, discourse and interaction analysis.

So does that mean that everyone should now go off and turn themselves into ethnographic linguists?

No it doesn't, and I'm not claiming that linguistic ethnography holds monopoly rights to the kinds of perspective I've described – participant observation in non-linguistic ethnography provides another route and so does first-hand experience in everyday life. Even so, if you're interested in the incessant and innumerable processes through which people reproduce, nuance or refuse established social relations and identities – or try to create some space for new ones - then for pinning it down and starting to separate the elements, linguistic ethnography can be rather useful. And more than that, I ought to admit to at least some personal uncertainty about the extent to which you can really do justice to the *constitutive* context sensitivity of social life just with a content analysis of interviews, or the statistical analysis of questionnaires.

Not that I think content and statistical analysis ought to be jettisoned – they're obviously an extremely important part of our efforts to understand the social world, and vital to any analysis of, for example, social class. But there are good reasons for varying the magnification with the lenses we use to look at social life, and if you're doing a PhD for example, maybe it really wouldn't take a major reorientation of the whole endeavour if you were to have just one chapter looking at the details. The thing about the methods we'll be doing this afternoon is that - unlike the situation with systemic functional grammar for example - you don't have to spend 6 months learning a whole elaborate system before you can start generating plausible and interesting interpretations. What really matters is the analytic mentality and the kinds of rhythms of analysis pioneered in conversation analysis. Indeed, when you begin to engage with the kinds of analysis we're talking about, you may discover you really don't need a thousand instances before you can start making credible claims, or that there's lots you can recover from an experiment you botched. And maybe at a more philosophical level, this kind of analysis helps ensure that wherever we're working on the scale from macro to micro, we've a clearer view of how things come together in the lived moment, both tempering and strengthening our generalizations with a sharper view of what's left out.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I think 'linguistic ethnography' is the most convenient term for describing the approach I'll outline when talking to an interdisciplinary audience (whose interest in sub-disciplinary specializations is likely to be relatively limited). But in talking to an audience of linguists, a more sub-disciplinary specification would be in order, and in my case, this would be 'interactional sociolinguistics' (see e.g. Rampton 2006:23-25).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, there were other occasions when Hanif's exaggerated Cockney looked politically regressive, as when, for example, it was perjoratively targeted, for example, towards non-conformist girls. Indeed, given his status as star students, there's a case for seeing his stylization in Extract 1 as a piece of Bourdieuan condescension (Bourdieu 1991:68ff).