

Linguistic Ethnography and the Analysis of Data

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Sections:

1. Linguistic ethnography: Tenets, horizons, frameworks and goals
2. Social class in interaction
3. Contexts for linguistic ethnography

1. Linguistic ethnography: Tenets, horizons, frameworks & goals

1.1 TENETS: Linguistic ethnography holds

- that 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
- that 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.

1.2 EMPIRICAL HORIZONS: Linguistic ethnography offers descriptive and analytic procedures for investigating communication within the temporal unfolding of social process, as this affects persons, situated encounters, institutions, networks and communities of practice. Attending to these (profoundly intertwined) empirical foci, LE uses case-study methodology to engage with issues, formulations and claims made more generally/ elsewhere in social science and public discourse.

How LE addresses these three empirical foci analytically:

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 positions, status and category memberships

Situated encounters:

- the events, genres and types of activity in which individuals interact together
- the material setting and physical arrangement of the participants
- actions, sequences of actions and the use of semiotic materials (signs, language, texts, media)
- inferencing, interpretation and the efforts of participants 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

Institutions, networks & communities of practice, varying in durability and scale from e.g. playground peer-groups to clubs to schools, mass media and government policy.

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

The assumption is that persons, encounters and institutions are profoundly inter-linked, and a great deal of research is concerned with the nature and dynamics of these linkages – with varying degrees of friction and slippage, repertoires get used and developed in encounters, encounters enact institutions, and institutions produce and regulate persons and their repertoires through the regimentation of encounters.

Engagement with other academic & public discourses

The empirical descriptions produced LE respond to a wide range of different debates/literatures, but there are a number of 'big thinkers' that LE research tends to align with: Bakhtin, Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens, Williams.

Box 1: An example of research investigating the links between persons, encounters and institutions

The links between persons, encounters and institutions are very clearly illustrated in the work of John Gumperz, Celia Roberts and others on ethnicity in job interviews (Gumperz, Jupp and Roberts 1979; Roberts, Davies and Jupp 1992; Roberts and Sarangi 1999). The starting point in this work was a very widespread social process – race discrimination and disadvantage in the workplace – and the first move was to identify events in institutional life that played a key role in the allocation of opportunities and resources. Interviews presented themselves as a prime site for institutional ‘gatekeeping’ like this, and so Gumperz et al then undertook detailed analysis of interviews as situated encounters. Here they uncovered the way that participants had different expectations about the interview genre, and how they drew different kinds of inference from the use of particular linguistic signs. Gumperz et al were able to relate these patterned differences back to the participants’ ethnically different social networks, and in the end, they were able to argue that hitherto unnoticed ethnic differences in the communicative repertoires and practices of individuals were having a negative effect on the outcome of these interviews. Overall, participants in these interviews might start out with a fair degree of initial good will, but the interaction was influenced by ethnically-based differences in communicative style that no-one was aware of, and this fed into the wider patterns of race discrimination.

1.3 FRAMEWORKS & RESOURCES

- *Linguistics & discourse analysis* give a provisional view of the communicative affordances (‘meaning potential’) of the linguistic resources that participants draw on in communication
- *Conversation analysis* and *Goffman* provide procedures and frameworks for investigating interactional encounters. More specifically, they help us to see:
 - the ongoing, sequential construction of ‘local architectures of intersubjectivity’
 - the moral accountabilities & the ritual investment governing the use of forms, strategies & materials
 - the shifting spatio-temporal distribution of attention and involvement in situations of physical co-presence
- *Ethnography* provides
 - a sense of the stability, status and resonance that linguistic forms, rhetorical strategies and semiotic materials have in different social networks beyond the encounter-on-hand
 - a sense of the cultural & personal perspectives/experiences that participants bring to interactions, and take from them
 - a sense of the cultural and personal perspectives/experiences that participants bring and take from interactions
- *Other public and academic discourses* provide purpose and relevance for the analysis, allowing us to answer the ‘so what?’ question (cf ‘case study’ methodology generally, and Hymes’ motto for ethnography: “two feet on the ground & one eye on the horizon”)

1.4 GOALS

- to show regard for the uniqueness, deficiency, & exuberance of the communicative moment, and acceptance that there’s no complete or definitive interpretation of the meaning of an utterance or exchange (either for the analyst or the participants)
- to produce accounts of how participants handle specific forms, strategies, materials or genres, venturing an interpretation of how this use feeds and limits the communication overall, and connects with local social life more generally. These accounts need to be:
 - sufficiently plausible to stand up (a) to critical scrutiny from other analysts (once they’re properly tuned to the ethnographic particulars), as well perhaps as (b) to the participants’ own sense of what could have been going on
 - consistent with data on practices deemed broadly similar (sometimes leading to a degree of prediction)
 - careful, coherent, explicit, accurate, sceptical, cumulatively comparative, original etc

2. Social class in interaction

2.1 **FIELD SITE:** The extract below comes from radio-microphone recordings of 2 male and 2 female 13 & 14 years at an inner London comprehensive school in 1997. Approximately half the students at ‘Central High’ received free school meals, and in 1999, when my informants took their 16+ GCSE exams at the end of compulsory schooling, <20% of the students got 5 or more GCSE A*-C results. Nearly a third of the students were registered as having special educational needs, there were high levels of geographical mobility, and almost a third belonged to refugee and asylum seeking families.

2.2 **EXTRACT ONE:** Hanif (aged 14, Bangladeshi-descent; wearing the radio-mic) 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. 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 ((pronouncing the final syllable of 'Galaxies' with an
 exaggerated Cockney accent:))
 "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<

2.3 STEPS IN THE ANALYSIS (which covers: utterance forms ⇔ interactional moves ⇔ episodes & genres ⇔ personal & institutional dispositions ⇔ pervasive cultural practices & imageries ⇔ relevance to wider debate)

- a) *Identifying 'galaxies' as an exaggerated Cockney syllable*, using my own ears, phonetic analysis and playback to participants
- b) *Construing line 11 (reading-the-title-aloud) as 'self-talk'* – superficially self-absorbed but sensitive to the people around and styled to be overheard in a gathering (Goffman 1981)
- c) *Putting (a) & (b) together?:* Emerging just at a moment when he's making the transition from peer sociability to work, Hanif's fleeting Cockneyfication looks like it's toning down the signs of his commitment to school
- d) *Noting an anomaly:* getting more Cockney for schoolwork & reading aloud?? – these are contexts that normally/conventionally favour posh. But is this (structural observation) relevant?
⇒
- e) *Following the development of the episode:* Hanif subsequently turns the worksheet into a quiz, further elaborating it with hyper-Cockney and quasi-Jamaican. It looks like school knowledge is being 'vernacularised', brought to life with non-standard accents and mixed with a popular TV genre. Is this symptomatic of something more general?
- f) *Ethnographic observation:* Hanif often combines commitment to learning with a lack of regard for the decorums with which learning is traditionally surrounded. He's top of the class, and his teachers are generally quite receptive to his (tolerably) transgressive enthusiasms.
- g) *Comparing other instances of exaggerated posh-&-Cockney stylization* (cf 50 episodes in 37 hrs of data): About half of these episodes registered processes of stratification and division associated with schooling (stylized posh and Cockney often occurred in transitions between work and sociability (like Extract 1), and pupils also used ultra-posh when they felt patronized by teachers). Aside from the demarcations and ranking involved in schooling, stylized posh & Cockney also featured in humour and mockery among kids themselves, playing on a set of associations which linked Cockney with vigour, passion and bodily laxity, and posh with physical weakness, social distance, constraint and sexual inhibition.
- h) *Linking to debates about social class and identity transformation in late modernity:* A decline of class awareness among late modern youth? This was
 - *A field setting where you wouldn't expect to find traditional class sensibilities:* a global city, a very multi-lingual school, with c. a third of the students from refugee and asylum-seeking families,
 - *my informants didn't have much to say about class as an explicit topic:* they were much more articulate about ethnicity, race, gender and sexuality, and
 - *class awareness is often said to be weakest among young people:* "The cultural changes discerned by postmodernists manifest themselves among young people rather than the older age groups. Young people are

especially responsive to media and fashion changes. They have often formed distinctive subcultures which signify their distance both from wider society and their own parents. For this reason, their awareness of class is often less developed... the decline of class awareness is likely to affect young people most fully” (Bradley 1996:77, drawing on Lash (1990), Willis et al (1990), Hollands (1990)).

But

- the imagery these kids had at their fingertips involved a set of high-low, mind-body, reason-&-emotion binaries (2.3.g) that reach back to the emergence of bourgeois society in the 18th and 19th centuries
- they shifted to ultra-posh-&-Cockney in routine moments of educational division and stratification.

⇒ this looks like the “saturation of the whole process of living... [by] the... dominance and subordination of particular classes” (Williams 1977:109). These kids may not have talked explicitly about it, but their everyday practical consciousness seemed deeply impregnated with the sensibilities we traditionally associate with social class (and this showed up in their ordinary, non-stylised accents as well (cf Bourdieu 1991:Part I)).

3. Contexts for linguistic ethnography

3.1 Linguistic ethnography in late modernity:

- The world’s more fragmented, less coherent and less predictable than we used to think - “What is the working class today? What gender is it? What colour is it? How in the light of its obvious segmentation, is it to be unified?” (Gilroy 1987:19; also e.g. Bauman 1992:65). But ethnography’s rather good at addressing empirical processes that established frameworks find hard to understand.
- Everyday activity is rather more consequential than we’d previously imagined (e.g. Berger & Luckman 1966; Giddens 1976, 1984). If the social world is produced in ordinary activity, and social realities get produced, ratified, resisted and reworked in everyday interaction, then the tools of linguistic, semiotic and discourse analysis can help us understand about a lot more than just communication (as it’s traditionally understood).

3.2 Linguistic ethnography, other social science research methods, and your own research

To find out more, see
UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum - www.ling-ethnog.org.uk
ESRC/RDI Programme *Ethnography Language & Communication* - www.rdi-elc.org.uk

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