

British Association for Applied Linguistics



B.A.A.L. / C.U.P. SEMINAR 2001

Linguistic ethnography in the UK

University of Leicester 28-29 March 2001

Seminar report

In wet weather but pleasant surroundings at the University of Leicester, thirty researchers, including seven PhD students, spent two intensive days discussing 'linguistic ethnography'. The **aims** of the seminar were:

- to bring together UK-based researchers conducting linguistic ethnography (LE) here and abroad in order to explore a range of past and current work and to identify key theoretical and methodological issues
- to explore the extent to which linguistic ethnography in the UK resembles or differs from LE elsewhere
- to explore the possibility of establishing an LE forum in the UK

In terms of **organisation**, the seminar consisted of:

- five 40-60 minute sessions in which different research groupings addressed the theoretical and methodological antecedents to their work, the ways they understood the phrase 'linguistic ethnography', and the disciplinary connections they made elsewhere. The pre-circulation of papers meant that formal presentations could be limited to 10 minutes, and the topics covered were: the new literacy studies (Kate

Pahl, Uta Papen, David Barton, Karin Tusting); institutional discourse (Srikant Sarangi, Celia Roberts); urban heteroglossia (Ben Rampton, Roxy Harris); multilingualism (Marilyn Martin-Jones, Jo Arthur, Angela Creese); classrooms and community (Eve Gregory, Anne Williams, Janet Maybin)

- a brief historical overview of British traditions of ethnography (Brian Street)
- a session on the use of fieldnotes (Karin Tusting) and transcripts (Celia Roberts) in linguistic ethnography
- a session discussion the comments and reflections on the meeting offered participants from outside the UK: Jim Collins (SUNY), Monica Heller (OISE), Jan Blommaert (Gent) and Stef Slembrouck (Gent).
- a ‘business’ meeting to discuss next steps

Since the meeting was only intended to *start* a debate on theoretical and methodological issues in linguistic ethnography, our only firm conclusion is that the debate certainly looks viable, both in terms of issues to address and people to address them. There was animated discussion on a number of relatively well-established methodological topics - reflexivity, ethnography as method vs ethnography as epistemology, power relations in research; the relations between local and large-scale process, between history and the moment, and between ethnography and action research - and Heath and Street (literacies), Goffman and Gumperz (situated interaction), Vygotsky and Bruner (activity theory), plus Hymes and Bakhtin, were all significant reference points. But a number of newer or more local issues also emerged: the dynamics of solitary vs team research; training for linguistic ethnography in the UK; contact/creolisation vs genealogical/family tree models of the development of LE in ethnography in Britain. There was a general feeling that the work discussed at this seminar did differ from a good deal of linguistic anthropology in the US, both in its institutional base and in being principally driven by ‘real world’ rather than intra-disciplinary issues, though

there was no consensus that 'linguistic ethnography' was actually the best term to describe what was being done here. Among other things, 'linguistic ethnography' sidelines research on literacies - arguably the best-established strand in the UK - and the 'ethnography of communication' may well prove to be the best descriptor.

As for **outcomes**, we agreed, though, in our discussion of 'next steps' that we should:

- approach BAAL about the possibility of setting up a more permanent forum for linguistic ethnography. High quality research requires methodologically well-tuned dialogue and critique, but at present, LE researchers are often relatively isolated. Judging from the number of people asking about this seminar (c 50 enquiries), there is also quite a high level of interest.
- apply to have a colloquium on 'Rethinking the Ethnography of Communication' at the 2001 BAAL Annual Meeting in Reading, as well as an open meeting to widen and develop the discussion of organisational possibilities for the future
- investigate the possibility of another seminar during 2002, possibly in Aberystwyth
- keep in touch with other activities and associations in or close to linguistic ethnography - for example, the Journal of Ethnography (represented at the seminar by Helen Wood), and the plans for a group on the linguistic anthropology of education in the USA (reported by Jim Collins).
- set up a email list, both for the seminar participants and others expressing an interest in linguistic ethnography
- in the first instance, use the email list to circulate (a) the one page summaries provided by seminar participants, (b) the manifesto of the Journal of Ethnography, (c) the reflective commentaries provided by the participants from abroad, (d) news of forthcoming meetings, (e) reports like this. Some of this material could also be posted on the BAAL website, and in due course, we should set up a webpage.

We are very grateful to both BAAL and Cambridge University Press for their financial and infra-structural support for the seminar, and if you would like to join the mailing list, please contact Karin Tusting at karin_tusting@onetel.net.uk, or join online at

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ling_ethnog/

Seminar organisers: David Barton (Lancaster University), Angela Creese (University of Leicester), Janet Maybin (Open University), Ben Rampton (King's College London), Karin Tusting (Lancaster University)

6th May 2001

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