

## ETHNOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN LANGUAGE RESEARCH

Colloquium  
coordinated by  
UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum

Conveners:  
Dr Vally Lytra (King's) & Prof Ben Rampton (King's)

List of contributors and papers:

- Alexandra Georgakopoulou (King's College London): *In search of context in language research: The ethnographic advantage*
- Theresa Lillis (Open University): *Researching academic literacy as a social practice: Developing a text-oriented ethnography*
- Francesca Bargiela (Nottingham Trent University): *Liminal ethnography in the attempt to study segregated organisations*
- Frances Rock (University of Cardiff): *Looking the other way: linguistic ethnography and forensic linguistics*
- Celia Roberts (King's College London): *Dealing with large audio/video data sets ethnographically: Beyond pick'n'mix?*
- Discussant: Dr Jürgen Jaspers (University of Antwerp)

### 1. Colloquium topic, background, contributors and proposed titles

#### ETHNOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN LANGUAGE RESEARCH

Since moving out of its original base in anthropology and coming 'home' to the study of western societies, ethnography has taken a number of different forms, and has been variously viewed as a set of empirical methods, as a type of field experience, as a style of writing and analysis, and as an epistemological perspective. So what does ethnography mean right now to linguists and discourse analysts, and what are its problems and possibilities?

In this colloquium, language and discourse researchers address this question by

- a) describing the theoretical, methodological and/or empirical elements in their own research that they consider to be ethnographic
- b) discussing the manner and extent to which this ethnographic element has or hasn't been able to reach parts that other methods couldn't.

And in the background, of course, there is a larger question. Exactly what does and doesn't count as ethnography in language research? More generally the diversification of ethnography has generated a range of disputes about the boundaries that do or don't distinguish it from situated intuition, action research, cultural analysis, and simply qualitative work (Hammersley 1992; Bloome & Green 1997; Willis & Trondman 2000). How do these issues appear from the vantage point of language and discourse analysis?

**References:** Bloome, D & Green, J 1996 'Ethnography & Ethnographers of and in Education: A situated perspective' in J. Flood, et al. (eds.) *A Handbook for Literacy Educators* New York: Macmillan; Hammersley, M. 1992. *What's Wrong with Ethnography?* London: Routledge; Linguistic Ethnography Forum Coordinating Committee 2005. *UK Linguistic Ethnography: A Discussion Paper*. At <http://www.ling-ethnog.org.uk>; Willis, P. & M. Trondman 2000. Manifesto. *Ethnography* 1/1

The presenters, their titles and abstracts are as follows:

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**Alexandra Georgakopoulou (King's College London)**

*In search of context in language research: The ethnographic advantage*

As most socially minded linguistic work attempts to relate aspects of language to social and cultural context, it is necessary to ask the question of what exactly ethnography, or put more modestly, an “ethnographic perspective” on language data adds to this enterprise; how it can reach parts that other methods can't. I will locate the advantage afforded by ethnography in contextual studies of language in the realms of *context-enrichment* and *context-reflexivity*. I will specifically argue that ethnography as a context-enriching tool allows the analyst to tap into processes of recontextualization and dialogicality that are by and large not made visible or audible in language data. Context-reflexivity on the other hand can be specified as critical awareness of various kinds of both context indeterminacy and ideological biases that underpin qualitative research to language.

I will substantiate the above claims with reference to a study of a group of female adolescents in a small town in Greece which I embarked on a few years ago. Many of my analytical findings would have been very different – if there at all- without ethnography mediating the contextualization processes. Certainly ethnography as a complex mode of inquiry, partly autobiographical partly epistemic, challenged a strictly interactionist approach to the data at the same time as bringing home the “irreducibility of experience” in any attempt for total event accounting.

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**Theresa Lillis (Open University)**

*Researching academic literacy as a social practice: Developing a text-oriented ethnography*

In this paper I discuss the methodology adopted for a 4 year (on going) study of the academic writing and publishing practices of some 46 scholars from central and southern Europe who work in psychology and education (Lillis and Curry 2006). The aim of the study is to understand the significance of publishing in English for scholars and the obstacles and opportunities they encounter, and to examine which texts are successful or unsuccessful in being accepted for publication—and why. The four national sites involved in the study--Hungary, Slovakia, Spain and Portugal—form part of the ‘Expanding Circle’ of English language users (Kachru, 2001), in which English is used as a foreign language and increasingly as an instrumental language in education, commerce, and other areas.

The specific research methods used in this study are as follows: semi-structured literacy history interviews with scholars, group discussions, email discussions, observations of scholars’ working activity, interviews with key local insiders such as librarians and translators, the collection of institutional and historical documentary data. The core data sources are drafts of scholars’ texts and text-focused discussions around such texts; to date we have collected some 520 texts and conducted 155 interviews with scholars. We have used the term ‘text oriented ethnography’ to describe the overall methodological approach in this study as a way of signalling our approach to data collection, analysis and representation. Although labour intensive as a methodology (and problematic given the constraints under which we carry out research), this model of data collection and analysis offers a way of exploring text production in context, and specifically, of exploring the relationship between *literacy practices* construed as observable units of behaviour at the interactional level and *literacy as a social practice* at a macro, theoretical level.

In this contribution, I will discuss and illustrate one key unit of data collection and analysis that we are using to explore text production, ‘text history’, to do as follows:

- In general terms, to discuss the ways in which our approach relates to ‘linguistic ethnography’
- To consider how different specific methods method contribute to the building of a ‘text history’
- To explore the value of this methodological approach for researchers interested in or committed to notions of language and literacy as a social practice.

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**Francesca Bargiela (Nottingham Trent University)**

*Liminal ethnography in the attempt to study segregated organisations*

A monastery could be defined as a segregated organisation that seeks to value and develop each and every member within a highly structured and rule-bound spatio-temporal frame. This programme is achieved over the members' lifetime and through the practice of daily routines governed by the rhythm of a tradition emanating from the interpretation of an ancient set of principles known as the Rule of Benedict.

The study of a monastic community poses ontological and methodological challenges even to the qualitative researcher with previous experience in other organisational environments. In this paper, I would like to engage with the methodological and ethical challenges that a first encounter with the monastery as a segregated organisation raises. The approach that I have found useful for my liminal ethnography is the engagement in 'conversation' with each participant from the community. Here 'conversation' is understood as a relational, existential and ongoing commitment to situated understanding, which includes the possibility of mis-understanding and the risk of confusion and uncertainty about oneself and the Other.

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**Frances Rock (University of Cardiff)**

*Looking the other way: linguistic ethnography and forensic linguistics*

During the last 30 years it has become increasingly possible for researchers to question the work of the police. This questioning has typically focussed on practical matters, on what police officers do. The questioning often has a change agenda, seeking to alter police behaviour. Much of this work has been concerned with developing and examining the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984) and an associated Code of Practice which aim to regulate police procedure. These research foci on police work, practical questions, change and the implementation of legislation have provoked predominantly quantitative research. Such approaches as experimental psychology have dominated the investigation of police work and the place of language in that work. Yet the work of the police officer is perhaps not reducible to the countable. Officers' work is embedded in particular times and places, in national and local legislative frameworks and in national and international debates about ethics, justice and equality. Officers' work is also influential, shaping the lives of communities and individuals in both predictable and unpredictable ways.

This paper presents one perspective on gaining access to the world of the police officer as it is lived in the police custody suite and to the place of language in that world. The project it describes was initially intended as an examination of particular texts which are routinely used by police officers. Ultimately, it became apparent that there was a need to see these texts within locally experienced patterns of social life. The paper discusses how, and to what extent, ethnography became a part of the practice, method and theory of this research. In doing so, it examines how ethnography operated around and alongside other research practices, methods and theoretical stances and how ethnography provided a novel way to see the texts under examination.

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**Celia Roberts (King's College London):**

*Dealing with large audio/video data sets ethnographically: Beyond pick'n'mix?*

Ethnographers enjoin us to deal with data holistically. The unit of analysis may vary in size but, whatever its size, it needs to be treated as a whole. However, talking a holistic stance is problematic when the sociolinguists' interests coincide with the applied linguists responsibility to be practically relevant. The combination of the two can produce ethnographically thin analysis and interpretation. Sociolinguists' fine-grained analysis of audio/video recorded data privileges the recorded event over the conditions which produced it and over other less easily recordable events (Hak 1999). The consequent 'aesthetic of smallness and slowness' (Sacks) fixes the analyst to the micro. And where these micro-processes are connected to wider structures and concepts, an unexplored gap between micro and macro remains.

By contrast, practically relevant research has to persuade professionals in other fields that there is a large enough data base for outcomes to be convincing and relevant. Here the analyst is, ironically, often up against demands to look more holistically at institutionally defined categories such as classrooms, interviews or consultations. But there is a spurious holism since the wider conditions of their

production, participant understandings and theoretical underpinnings are marginalized. So, the impulse towards the micro, on the one hand and towards 'valid' data sets on the other produces an extensive but ethnographically thin audio-visual data base of, say, 30 – 50 hours.

Drawing on several data sets of institutional life in medical settings and job interviews, I will suggest ways of working with these sets more ethnographically:

- 1) Resisting conventional CA (and DA approaches) where ethnographic information is used in the early stages or remains relatively unintegrated in the interpretive stages.
- 2) Treating the recordings/transcriptions as ethnographic material e.g. working both on individual recordings as unique and working thematically across recordings; e.g. using time as a factor, comparing interviews with the same interviewer over one morning
- 3) Selecting 'core' data from the rest and being explicit about this process.

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**Jürgen Jaspers (University of Antwerp) – *Discussant***

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