

BAAL SIG Report

UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum Seminar

Methodological Issues in Linguistic Ethnography

Open University 4th March, 2006

This seminar was one of a regular series organised by the UKLEF, to provide a forum for finely-tuned discussion and debate among researchers who draw on both linguistics and ethnography. It was part of our ongoing focus on methodological issues (explored also in the BAAL 2005 colloquium 'Linguistic Ethnography and the Social Sciences', and in the forthcoming colloquium 'Ethnographic challenges and opportunities in language research' at the Sociolinguistics Symposium in Limerick, July 2006).

The seminar was planned to address the following questions:

- How can textual and contextual analysis be combined?
- How can we develop a language of description to capture the dynamic aspects of communication?
- How can narrative be used, both as method and representation, within ethnographic research?
- Ethnographer or linguist? Are these and/or other identities/roles compatible in the research process?

Abstracts for nine presentations were received, and seven were selected which the organisers believed would provide a coherent programme for the day. The number of participants was limited to thirty and unfortunately, as a result, some applicants had to be turned away. As is the usual practice in UKLEF seminars, all presentations were plenary and a substantial amount of time was allocated for discussion. We had presentations from Keith Richards, Moira Inghilleri, Kate Pahl, Khadeegha Albouezi, Ellen Van Praet and a joint presentation from Alexandra Georgakopoulou and Mike Baynham. In the final session, Brian Street drew together and responded to themes which had emerged during the day. One presenter, Alexandra Jaffe, was unable to attend and provided a paper to feed into the discussion.

Keith Richards used data from two different sites to explore how, in both cases, contextual information (from field notes in one case and from a chance encounter in another), threw a new light on the analysis of talk in interaction. Information about a teacher's relationship with a student, and about antipathy between colleagues at a scientific research unit, directed his attention to particular features in the transcribed talk which might otherwise have passed unnoticed. While, as Richards pointed out, we can never know all the background history to people's interactions, his paper raised intriguing questions about the adequacy of data, the implications of researcher alignments in the field and the limitations of textual analysis for capturing the complexity of social relationship.

In the second paper of the day, Moira Inghilleri approached the question of contextual analysis from a more sociological perspective, drawing on the work of Bourdieu. Focussing on her research into the role of interpreters within the British asylum system, she explained how she was combining ethnographic observation of relevant sites and interviews with key participants within the asylum organisational structure, with a more macro-level analysis of the institutional constraints which shape the particular communicative competencies that interpreters bring to their work. She used Bourdieu's notions of field and habitus to analyse how interpreters, though not unreflexively, are caught up in larger configurations of power and control.

Questions about building robust analytic connections between micro and macro levels were also addressed, from an anthropological perspective, by Alexandra Jaffe in the paper she sent to the seminar. Drawing on her research on Corsican bilingual schools, she addresses the relationship between ethnographic research practices and sound standards of evidence for analytic claims, particularly in relation to questions of time, breadth, intensity and systematicity. Focussing on the code-switching between French and Corsican in a French literacy lesson for 5 and 6 year-olds, Jaffe analyses the different sources of ethnographic evidence she uses to argue that the teacher's language choice is a form of stance-taking which simultaneously positions her vis-a-vis the two languages of the classroom and positions these languages vis-a-vis each other.

Kate Pahl and Khadeegha Albouezi, in two linked papers, took up the themes of translation and interpretation introduced by Moira Inghilleri, revisiting them from a different perspective in relation to researcher identity. Using their separate ethnographic research projects focussing on life history work in multilingual homes, they provided contrasting accounts of

‘outsiderness’ and ‘insiderness’ and discussed the ethical and methodological dilemmas which these experiences had raised for them. Kate Pahl explained how her analysis of the ‘intimate text’ of a Turkish woman’s written life history had brought up particular issues about positionality and reflexivity in fieldwork, the role of friendship as a research method, and the impact of the relationship between the researcher and the researched on both the translation process, and on the translated text. Khadeegha Albouezi, drawing on doctoral research on multilingual women’s social literacy practices in a Yemeni community in South Yorkshire, explored and questioned the ways in which she enjoyed certain elements of ‘insiderness’ in her fieldwork, including a common language, which facilitated access, rapport, and trust. However, she was also an ‘outsider within’, in contexts of unequal power stemming from the interaction of hierarchies of race, class, gender, and language. Albouezi found that her dual identities as translator/interpreter and researcher highlighted tensions in representing the ‘other’, and that her own position was constantly shifting, between insider and outsider, the periphery and the centre.

Linking with the themes of insider/outsider in ethnographic research, Ellen Van Praet argued that the dialogue between researcher and informants should be the central epistemological focus in linguistic ethnography. In the context of an ethnographic study of weekly meetings in a British embassy, she suggested that the question ‘How do we develop a language of description to capture the dynamic aspects of communication?’ is misplaced, since it suggests a modernist conception of culture ‘out there’, available for documentation. A postmodernist understanding of the object of anthropological study as a dynamic encounter between divergent intersubjectivities would suggest that our main concern as linguistic ethnographers should be a dialectic moving forwards in understanding through a continuous dialogue between the interpreter and the interpreted. She used data to illustrate her own dialectic development of understanding about the meaning and significance of the concept ‘native speaker’ for the people she was studying.

Shifting to questions about the role of narrative in linguistic ethnographic research, Mike Baynham and Alexandra Georgakopoulou brought together their experience of researching ‘big stories’ (life histories and autobiography) elicited in interviews and ‘small stories’ from conversational exchange, to explore the possibilities of theoretical and methodological cross-fertilisation between these two areas. They explained how they were looking for ways of moving beyond Labovian generically-based narrative analysis to develop a more distributed and dynamic account of how narrative constructs identity, agency and social

space/positioning in both transitory and more enduring ways. Using narratives of migration from interview data and examples of informal talk between teenagers in class, they discussed how one might analyse transitory fleeting small stories in both conversations and interviews, and larger stories over time which blended in with other kinds of talk.

There was a considerable amount of lively discussion following each of the papers, and chairing was both exciting and demanding (speaking from my own experience in one session : other sessions were chaired by Theresa Lillis and Julia Gillen). I think the quality of the discussion emerged out of the strong focus on practical research and examples of data throughout the day, together with the visiting and revisiting, from different perspectives and in different research contexts, of a set of central methodological issues. These issues included tensions between textual and contextual analysis, insider and outsider identities, issues of translation and representation and the dynamic nature of social process vs the relative fixity of analytic description. In the final session, Brian Street drew out some of these tensions in a provocative delineation of terms indicating a more processual analytic frame (such as micro, dynamic, insider, emic, dialogic, local, proximity, practices), setting these in contrast to terms emanating from a more 'fixed' analytic framework (macro, detached, authorised, etc, outsider, distant, monologic, global, texts).

Overall, the day raised as many questions as answers, providing the opportunity for sharing work and exchanging ideas in the context of finely tuned discussion and debate. The seminar feeds into the ongoing discussion of theory and methodology in linguistic ethnography, which will be revisited and taken forwards in future events and publications.

Papers from the seminar are now posted on the UKLEF website, www.ling-ethnog.org.uk .

Janet Maybin, seminar organiser