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Reflections from overseas guests

Comments and reflections from three of our overseas visitors, [Jan Blommaert](#), [Monica Heller](#) and [Stef Slembrouck](#).

[Jan Blommaert](#), Ghent University

Following the discussions during the seminar, I decided to turn to what, in my view, constitutes the most attractive and valuable aspect of ethnography. Before doing that, I should underscore that my main influences in ethnography are Dell Hymes and Johannes Fabian. The former is better known in linguistic circles than the latter; yet, both have a lot to say on ethnography, and turning to them may be of use whenever ethnography is the topic of discussion. Both Hymes and Fabian see ethnography as a particular way of constructing knowledge. In other words, they emphasize the epistemological aspects of ethnography. Hymes has done this on a variety of counts, and most accessible in this respect are the writings in which he discusses interdisciplinarity (e.g. Hymes 1971). Epistemological aspects of ethnography define most of Fabian's oeuvre (see esp. Fabian 1979, 1983) (for a discussion see Blommaert 1997). In discussing the epistemological dimensions of ethnography, two main features are often mentioned.

Materialism: Ethnography looks for real actors in real events, using real communicative codes with real effects in real lifeworlds. An ethnographic approach to language is an approach that starts from concrete, non-idealist and non-a priori phenomena. The knowledge constructed in ethnography is knowledge about society, in a practical sense.

Dialogue: Ethnography constructs knowledge through dialogue, often again in a very practical and mundane sense. Fabian stresses the fact that ethnography is communication, i.e. ordinary communication between two subjects. This communication is a Bakhtinian dialogue, and it accounts for the interpretive nature of ethnographic knowledge.

Both features locate ethnographic epistemology squarely in the realm of everyday interpretive procedures. Ethnographic knowledge is constructed by means of everyday, mundane interpretive resources and mechanisms. Hence the frequency of 'inexplicable', intuitive and autobiographical status of much of what ethnographers 'know' about their subjects. Method is very often 'added' afterwards, and the interpretation of field data is in practice often the (re)construction of meanings in data by means of post-hoc structuring, categorizing and clarification.

For both Hymes and Fabian, as for me, therefore, ethnography is far more than a set of techniques or methods for fieldwork and description. It cannot be reduced to ways of treating 'data' either, for 'data' in ethnography have a different status than in many other disciplines. Data are chunks of reality that have a (autobiographical) history of being known and interpreted. They are situated ('coeval' in Fabian's 1983 terms) and interpretive. In contrast to practices in other branches of discourse analysis (e.g. conversation analysis), data are often not 'shared' in ethnography because of this autobiographical-epistemic dimension.

This 'deeper' dimension allows ethnography to be inserted in all kinds of theoretical endeavors, to the extent of course that such endeavors allow for situatedness, dynamics and interpretive approaches. Thus, there is no reason why ethnography cannot be inserted e.g. in a Marxist theoretical framework, nor in a Weberian one, nor in a Bourdieuan or Giddensian one. One will find ethnography wherever issues

of human consciousness are dealt with, often in micro-macro constellations. This accounts for the fact that ethnography has also been picked up by micro-historians such as Carlo Ginzburg and Emmanuel le Roy-Ladurie.

This also provides ethnography with a critical potential. There is an acute awareness of facts being situated realities in a non-neutral world full of power, authority and evaluations. The ethnographer is required (especially since Fabian 1983 and Clifford & Marcus) to formulate his/her own positions vis-à-vis the 'facts', and he/she cannot claim to be an un-gendered, un-aged, un-classed etc; producer of knowledge. In ethnography, one often takes sides: one knows people, not facts. Involvement is a rule, not an exception nor a luxury.

References:

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[Monica Heller](#), University of Toronto

Three themes come to mind: objectives, voice and space/time. "Objectives" really has to do with why one would want to do ethnography in the first place. This has an ontological dimension: while I have seen attempts at positivist ethnography

(descriptions of what is happening), engaging in such attempts seems often to lead to conversions to interpretivist positions. It is probably worth trying to figure out why that is the case; as others pointed out, the activity itself forces a recognition of the embodied and hence subjective nature of knowledge, and therefore of knowledge production. We have nothing to hide us from this awful truth, that is, that we are actually daring to try to produce knowledge, in the form of an account of activities or processes about which we either know little, or for which current accounts seem inadequate in some way (probably because they leave some essential things unexplained). This knowledge is not just about description, it is also crucially about explanation.

That brings me to voice. I think it is important to assume our own voices, and not to pretend that we can "give voice" to others. This is a particular problem in linguistic ethnography, because our data is in a very material way other people's voices. So somehow we have to deal with this, this providing an account, by listening to (and reading etc) others.

Perhaps what we have to offer has to do with ways of making linkages among activities, processes, events, objects, people in ways which are not readily accessible to other actors. We can discover ties across space and time which allow us to see social process happening. Indeed, this is where an ethnography which takes language seriously is particularly helpful, since social order is neither solely in the here and now, nor is it solely somewhere out there in some "macro" cyberspace. Rather, there are complex ways in which interactional processes (and orders) provide a view into local agency and creativity, while pointing to structuring constraints which lie not in the immediate interaction, but rather in ties among interactions (some kind of sociolinguistic intertextuality, if you like).

[Stef Slembrouck](#), Ghent University

The point which I would like to make has to do with "total events" (perhaps this is not the best term) and I would like to link this up with one or two observations about

changing societies, shifting research foci and changing economies of research funding (my vehicle will be a surrealist image. The example I am using is that of a child health care centre in the urban neighbourhood where I live in Ghent. Babies and parents visit the centre once a month during the first year of a child's life and three or four times during the second year. The health centre is run by the Flemish government. It is visited by more or less 85% of its target population. A visit to the centre characteristically involves a rather fixed round of sequenced activities - the child is first weighed and measured and these data are entered into a developmental graph, next there is the consultation with a "social nurse" (providing an opportunity to discuss various things - e.g. feeding routines, play, etc.) and, finally, parent(s) and child see the paediatrician (this is the more strictly medical consultation-part and also the point where eyesight and hearing will be tested, vaccines will be injected, etc.).

A first observation is that it is no longer possible to research this site within a singular framework of professional discourse practices in the context of health (as might have still been possible, say, 15 or 20 years ago). Of course, the activities in the centre do primarily revolve around socio-medical practices of physical examination, social surveillance and counselling (e.g. measurements feed into statistics and tables which, when processed on a national scale, produce long-term norms of individual physical development reflected in developmental graphs; part of the health centre's brief is to passively screen populations for child neglect and abuse; in addition to this, a visit to the centre counts as "free medical consultation" and it provides an opportunity to discuss any aspect of the parents' or the child's experiences).

However, each of these activities calls for - in the diction of this particular seminar - a "multi-clustered" approach (or should I say, intensive "cross-clustering"). For instance, literacy concerns will inevitably enter into the research project. Think, for instance, of the activity of choosing an appropriate infant formula in the context of bottle feeding when dealing a reflux problem; think also of what one could call a "regime of leafleting" in government information campaigns of the past decade and a half; etc. Issues to do with multilingualism, translation and interpreting are intrinsic to an analysis of professional discourse practice in this particular neighbourhood. In the post-war era, the area has moved from being a working class neighbourhood (textile industry, late 19th century, almost like a village in its own right) to becoming a

peripheral, less affluent town district with a mixed population - partly working class, partly second and third generation immigrants of mainly Turkish and Moroccan descent, partly less well-off professionals (housing is relatively cheap), partly a fleeting population of refugees, asylum seekers and *sans papiers*, etc. In the absence of professional interpreters, older siblings are often called upon to perform the role of a mediator but I would also want to stress the centre's voluntary commitment towards the health of "undocumented" babies and children in the area. In addition, there are also issues to do with class-based and ethnocentric versions of parenting. In short, this site calls for an integrated multi-dimensional approach to language practices which is, moreover, sensitive to the pace of shifting situational pressures upon and within the institution.

I would like to capture the latter through the metaphor of a kettle with five whistles (coming from the country of René Magritte I think I can get away with such a surrealist image). There were 5 clusters in this seminar, so my kettle has 5 whistles (of course, other sites and other occasioned discussions may well call for a four-whistled kettle or a six-whistled kettle). First one must remember that the kettle is always under pressure (in the same way as, drawing on a related metaphor, there will always be someone in the institutional site who is close to letting off steam). Thus, one will always hear at least one of the whistles, but sometimes more than one at the same time, and every now and then the build-up of steam in one whistle is bound to deafen the others (of course, this doesn't mean they stopped playing). One month it is the short-term influx of Kosovarean refugees which exhausts the centre's resources, the next month it is the government's new leafleting policy which requires implementation, a few weeks later it is the re-structuring of participation frameworks which is uppermost in the centre's "collective mind" (a recent, contested change is that nurses are no longer allowed to attend the medical consultation part). The whistles here are like frames of reference: they transform air pressure into meaningful sound, a particular voice. In the image discussed here, each of the 5 whistles plays a different tune. I don't think there is a case to be made for making them play the same tune or enforcing harmony - it is better to allow each whistle its own pitch, strength and loudness. Sometimes one can detect a harmony, at other moments there is mainly tension and dissonance. Note that whistles can also "go

over the top" (this happens when some of the air escapes at the sides and produces pure hiss - "noise" which the framework is not well-equipped to handle). And sometimes a whistle simply pops off - as pressure from the field turns out to be more than the framework can possibly manage in its present form.

I could go on developing this metaphor in various directions, and no doubt, there will be a point where I hit its limitations. Let me instead try and take some of this to the level of ethnographic epistemology. So far, my point of departure has been the troubled site, not the "clusters" and the mainstay of my argument has been to draw attention to multiple and shifting foci of investigation and how these relate to a chain of institutional experiences. Having selected a site and a "people", how can one decide beforehand that this will be a literacy project? About professional discourse practices? Urban heteroglossia? Multilingualism? Practices of translation and interpretation? Especially if one comes to research with a sense of wanting to deal with social problems, of researching contested, problematic or uncomfortable aspects of life in the workplace in a way which is also sensitive to the dynamics of the institution and the preoccupations of those directly involved in it, any definitive thematic assignment will always be premature and bound to be overtaken by subsequent events. Images of a lonely, heroic(?) researcher who cares deeply about (but does not always cope equally well with) the "symphony" produced by the institution's specific kettle are not far off now. The experience can have pretty damaging effects: losing one's sense of coherence as well as developing an acute awareness that one is continually playing catch-up.

In partial response to this, let us not forget: team research and inter-disciplinarity make sense. Please let us also not forget: inter-disciplinarity is increasingly imposed upon us, that is, if one wants to secure any funding at all. Also: although it is generally a good idea to have a pretty clear idea about what exactly one wants to do before one applies for funding, the imperatives of research will shape themselves over time. Ideally, such a realisation should be matched by a funding model which acknowledges the coherence of the site and its dynamics. Can one appeal to a concept of "ethnography" to advance such a logic? An ethnography begins when one walks through the institution's door in the hope of finding a will to construct an

common agenda. Or, perhaps it began much earlier. Is there another epistemology which is equally sensitive to the dynamics of events shaping research and research shaping events? Is there another social-scientific epistemology which recognises the fascinating but very mundane mixture of distanced observation and sympathetic involvement? Is there another epistemology with such a strong tradition in thematising the balancing act between the need to come to a situation as well-equipped as possible with "foreshadowed problems" (Malinowski 1922) but nevertheless insisting on scrutinising carefully one's own biases and interpretative inclinations (Hymes 1980). Looking at work over the past two decades, one must also add (as lying within the scope of this particular epistemology): a thematisation of the fundamental "hopes", a few moments of "glory" and a lot of "frustration" which come with an agenda of intervention and social change. Is there another epistemology which is equally sensitive towards the researcher's shifting positionings in a network of relationships within the institutional site?

I won't conclude by saying: it is good to be an ethnographer. Instead I'd prefer to say: seeing oneself as an ethnographer can bring coherence to the research experience (dimensions of ethnography and ethnography) as well as bring about epistemological continuity between the academy and the researched site (with potential for transformation and critical leverage in both).

References:

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