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Discussant's comments
on SS16 Colloquium organised by the UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum:
Ethnographic challenges and opportunities in language research
July 2006

1) Reflections on individual papers
2) General comments

1) Reflections on individual papers
Papers under discussion:
- 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?*

I think we can say we've been listening to very fascinating papers, which taken together touch on a wide variety of important issues in the field of linguistic ethnography and beyond that. If I grossly summarize:
o Alexandra's paper shows how small stories are situated *doings*/ways of experiencing/understanding (rather than mere *beings*, a kind of identity report), and how ethnography can be used as a contextualizing/context-enriching device that allows us to retrieve processes of entextualization and the dialogicality of practices (across time and space).
o Theresa's paper discusses a problem that in a way concerns us all, viz. the hegemonic status of English as the international language of science, and tries to develop a methodology that gets a grip on how local literacy practices and text histories relate to macro-level social practices.
o Francesca's paper asks questions about restricted access, and searches for a method (a specific kind of conversation, viz. 'heightened experiential understanding') that allows the ethnographer to make the most of whatever access s/he does have, to gain maximal insight into processes that are kept out of sight.
o Frances in her paper presents what might be called an ethnographic and linguistically goal-oriented survey study that challenges the hegemony of positivist approaches in social research on communication, identifies the oversimplifications that derive therefrom (as if communication would be a question of telementation, a transaction of fixed meanings in a fixed code), and asks how this research can inform local police practice.
o Celia, finally, jumps into the gap between micro and macro and breaks a lance for a linguistic ethnographic practice that takes seriously its accountability to the wider data-set and tries to comply with the holistic promise in all ethnographic research - and clearly she shares the same concern as Frances with the practical relevance of linguistic ethnographic work.
   While all papers seem to take as self-evident the opportunities afforded by an ethnographic perspective, or its combination with forms of linguistics, some of the papers under discussion are

clearly ethnographic in nature, while others are more linguistically grafted. There are, in other words, differences in what role ethnography is allowed to play in these linguistic ethnographies, and they range from being used as a contextualizing tool to being an imperative in data constitution, analysis and presentation. This not only illustrates the diversity of studies hiding behind the term 'linguistic ethnography, but it also confronts us with the tension between linguistics and ethnography, and the "tying ethnography down-opening linguistics up" dynamic that's mentioned in UK Linguistic Ethnography discussion paper (Rampton et al. 2004). As Frances indicates, studying one aspect of a whole situation might be seen as incompatible with any kind of 'real' ethnography, whereas linguists might ask how, precisely, 'affective conversation' in Franscesca's paper works, or what evidence can be provided for the experiential understanding that results from this.

If I was to play certain papers off against each other, I think that Celia's emphasis on different kinds of data and the micro-macro relation jars somewhat with Alexandra's focus on contextualized small stories, while the latter's analysis of visible micro-interactional detail differs with the less tangible information transfer Francesca puts forward or is trying to develop methodologically. Francesca's focus on small scale communities throws up questions of access which are relevant for Theresa's and Frances's larger data sets, though in the larger data sets, cases of difficult (or no) access might pale into insignificance next to the amount of data where access was relatively unproblematic. Theresa's and Frances's paper both deal with texts, but perhaps differ in the change agenda that Frances subscribes to – could a broadly comparable agenda be developed in Theresa's research context?

2. General comments

All this in itself already provides food for discussion and interesting comparison, but since everyone here thinks that an ethnographic perspective is useful, necessary and enriching, it might be worth (re)familiarizing ourselves with some of the long-standing problems in ethnography mentioned e.g. by Hammersley (1992), and considering how far we take these issues on board. How far do we address the problem of representation, or the question of realism, or the ethnographer's own identity as a social being? Equally, how far do our linguistic ethnographies match up to the minimal characteristics of ethnography (cf. Agar 1980), and if they don't, can our 'imperfect' ethnographic products still be reconciled theoretically with the importance we attribute to treating linguistic behaviour as social behaviour, and to seeing our objects (linguistic acts) inextricably related to the ideas and interpretations with which we approach them? After all, 'tying ethnography down' might simply amount to knowing less about the social and contextual dynamics that guide the production of linguistic objects. So how far, in sum, can linguistic ethnographers hold ethnographic aspirations if they don't adequately reckon with the problems ethnography brings, and the minimal conditions it puts forward?

The question of <u>representation</u>, and the issue of realism, asks how far ethnographic accounts can legitimately claim to represent (or reproduce) an independent social reality. As Hammersley indicates, "empirical phenomena are descriptively inexhaustible: we can provide multiple true descriptions of any scene" (1992: 24), and when we accept that ethnographers are subject to the same forces and constraints attributed to the objects of ethnographic research, then inevitably, our descriptions are not a reproduction of reality, but a specific, assumption-laden representation of it. So in a sense, ethnographic descriptions are little different from the descriptions and explanations that we all employ in everyday life. This needn't, of course, lead to extreme relativism where all descriptions are equal value. In the first place, even though we have to accept the fact that our representations of sociolinguistic phenomena are selective and necessarily reliant on cultural assumptions, we can address the question of why one description is provided rather than another, and explicate and justify the relevances that have shaped the data constitution and analysis. And second, as others have also indicated, ethnographies differ from laypersons' descriptions in their

systematicity, the explicitness and coherence of the models that are employed, the rigour of the data-constitution and analysis, and the amount of evidence provided. Ethnographers typically base their work on a wide range of data, and indeed, according to Agar (1980), a search for patterns across different kinds of data is one of the minimal characteristics of an ethnography (see Auer 1995 for an example). So how far can we base comprehensive ethnographic claims on just one type of data (such as audio-visual material), and mightn't other types of information throw a different light on what's visible/audible in the recordings (cf. Hymes 1996)?

Alexandra comments on how <u>researcher-researched relationships</u> are at the forefront of ethnographic problematic, and Frances cites Venkatesh who notes that ethnographers can be perceived as 'potentially intrusive state agents', making it clear that we-as-researchers, and our academic work, are in fact indexical. Franscesca elaborates on the boundaries and difficulties produced by the ethnographer's own social identities, as well as on the effects this has on data constitution, and she shows that to a certain extent, we're actually all liminal ethnographers, struggling to account for different kinds of restricted access.

More than this, the researcher-researched relationship has a socio-historical relevance. Ethnography (and linguistics) emerged out of a Herderian interest in local folklore which worked by traditionalizing what it described and opposing it to the modernity that it was said to precede (Bauman & Briggs 2003). Ethnography as an academic discipline is strongly implicated in the construction of modernity, and has itself served the existing status-quo, operating as a location where hegemonic meanings and perspectives are reproduced (cf. Cameron et al. 1992). It is no coincidence that ethnography prototypically involves white middle class scholars researching 'traditional', mostly non-white people or problematic, non-modern groups. In other words, we have to be wary of what is traditionally found problematic in our society (Silverman 1994), or as McDermott holds, "we must protect ourselves … against accepting our culture's own definition of its problem", "we must work against our culture in order to study it". (McDermott 1987: 364)

In addition, there's a shared realization in ethnography that our own indexicality should lead to explicit self-reflexivity and the work of 'provincializing' ourselves, situating ourselves in a social context, indicating how we are tied to specific social sites and groups, what our interests are. As Agar says, we need to ask ourselves and each other first 'who are you to do this?', and then 'how does that effect your data constitution and representation?', 'how do you document that?', and 'how do we integrate this in our methodology?' (Agar 1980: 91ff.)

If we situate ourselves, and contextualize our relationship and interactions with the people we study, we might start to approach what Fabian (1995) suggests – moving from a position that takes knowledge as representation to one that takes knowledge as praxis, documenting our own learning process as a situated dialectic in which "understanding and experience are in constant interaction, are mutually constitutive" (Lave & Wenger, 1991:51-52).

Another difficulty, pointed out in the UKLEF discussion paper and elsewhere, is that ethnographic descriptions are static renderings of processes in which it is often hard to take the contingencies and fragmentation of everyday life into account. This is something that Francesca also points out when she says that 'organizing never ceases', that organizations are only temporary reifications (p.6), and the same can be said of all the groups we study, whose groupness is never fixed but always somewhere in between formation and disintegration. Related to this, Marvin Harris has argued that there are no unchallenged authorities, and that groups are always sites of a struggle between dominant and subordinate actors constructing hegemony. In sum, there's a danger of homogenization in cultural description (cf. Harris 1974), and in our descriptions of the routine result of this local struggle, we need to make room for dissent and deviation, as well, perhaps, as for hidden practices that are blocked from sight by what's most conspicuous.

So if I'm to formulate a few questions that might launch us into a discussion, I'd draw attention to some contradictory pairs of concepts faced by ethnographers, and thus potentially by linguistic ethnographers as well:

1. Objective observation vs subjective learning/empathizing: to what extent do and should we explicate our relevances/purposes? What forms can this take, and how do we integrate why we do what we do into our methodology? How do we describe our own learning process and knowledge construction?
2. Friend vs stranger (domination/subordination), and the interaction between researcher & researched: There's often talk about this, but how do we foreground this concretely? How do we take into account that we're always to some extent liminal ethnographers, 'outsiders looking in'?
3. Breadth vs depth of data, and the issue of different kinds of data: If we sacrifice breadth for depth and an aesthetic of slowness, how do we compensate or justify this loss of a wider perspective? Do we need to?

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