The potential contribution of Linguistic Ethnography to Vygotskian studies of talk and learning in education.

While Ben has been talking about possible problematic tendencies for linguistic ethnographers who have come from teaching, I want to look at the possibilities for dialogue <u>between</u> linguistic ethnography and the rather more well established Vygotskian approaches to studying talk and learning in school. In particular, I want to argue that linguistic ethnography has something valuable to offer to the Vygotskian explanatory framework.

Vygotsky's placing of 'the word' at the centre of the dialectical process between inner consciousness and the outer social world suggests that processes of mental learning mediated through language are also processes of enculturation into, and action upon, a particular socio-cultural context. In other words, there seem to be (at least) three intertwined processes:

a. children's acquisition of language

b. their use of it as a tool to think, to get things done, to pursue relationships, to negotiate identity,

c. children's socialisation into a particular cultural setting

However, while this close connection between language development, socialisation and culture has been examined in studies of young children- I'm thinking here for instance of the work of Elinor Ochs and Bambi Scheffelin- Vygotskian concepts have been used within educational research in schools in a rather different way. I shall suggest that while Vygotskian research in language and education has given us important insights into the intricate interactive processes of constructing knowledge that go on within <u>particular kinds</u> of dialogues between teachers and students, it has been limited by a rather undertheorised conception of context. Also, although neo-Vygotskian researchers often refer to their approach as 'socio-cultural', from the point of view of linguistic ethnography, they do not seem to address the sociocultural nature of language and literacy events and practices in the classroom.

I should say at this point that I want to open up questions rather than present a tightly argued position. Vygotskian ideas have been enormously fruitful in a wide range of research on children, language and learning. I shall focus here on lines of development that have been particularly influential in British education, around Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978) and the neo-Vygotskian concept of scaffolding.

For educationalists, Vygotsky's argument that conceptual development happens first at the social level, through interaction and dialogue with others, before being internalised to feed into individual development, has reclaimed from Piaget-influenced education, the explicit

guiding role of the teacher, through talk. With cognitive development redefined as a dialogue rather than a process of individual discovery and growth, the nature of teachers' dialogues with students have taken on a special significance. Using Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, ie the difference between what a child can achieve on his or her own, and what the same child can achieve when supported by a teacher or more able other, researchers have looked at how teachers can support students through dialogue to extend through their zones of proximal development eg teachers' use of particular kinds of questions to direct students' attention, their rephrasing of student responses to shift them into educational discourses. An important concept in relation to this is the notion of scaffolding, defined by Bruner as 'a way of reducing the degrees of freedom in carrying out some task so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring' (Bruner quoted in Mercer 1995 p73). Scaffolding is seen by Bruner as a kind of temporary 'vicarious consciousness' provided by the adult for the child.

Wood (1998) and colleagues suggest that scaffolding should, first, reduce uncertainty in a task and, second, be contingent on the response of the child so, gradually, the teacher's support can be reduced and finally withdrawn. Mercer (2000) suggests that teachers and learners use talk and joint activity to create a shared communicative space- an 'intermental development zone', on the contextual foundation of 'their common knowledge and aims'.

'In this intermental zone, which is reconstituted constantly as the dialogue continues, the teacher and learner negotiate their way through the activity in which they are involved. If the quality of the zone is successfully maintained, the teacher can enable the learner to become able to operate just beyond their established capabilities, and to consolidate this experience as new ability and understanding. If the dialogue fails to keep minds mutually attuned, the IDZ collapses and the scaffolded learning grinds to a halt' (p141).

Mercer has also applied the idea that dialogue can create an intermental zone to studies of children working together without a teacher and argues that particular ways of using talk, which children can be taught- what he calls 'exploratory talk' as opposed to disputational or cumulative talk, produce better kinds of social thinking which enable children to accomplish tasks together and achieve greater understanding.

Wood, Mercer and other neo-Vygotskian researchers have established dialogue, between teachers and students and between students themselves, as an important site for learning. The concepts of the zone of proximal development and scaffolding have produced a powerful lens for focussing on particular kinds of teaching and learning dialogues.

So where does linguistic ethnography come in?

a. Going back to Vygotsky, he makes it very clear that zones of proximal development have strong cultural/historical dimensions. They're a site of socialisation as well as conceptual

development. Vygotsky sees conceptual development as 'a function of the adolescent's *total social and cultural growth*' (Vygotsky op cit p108). I would suggest that in their focus on conceptual development in terms of curriculum goals and objectives, some neo-Vygotskian researchers employ a rather narrow concept of context. The idea of context as the shared knowledge and aims between teachers and students underpinning their intermental development zone doesn't fully address the complexity of this knowledge and the multilayered and contested nature of aims within the classroom as a cultural context with its own local institutional imperatives and affordances for particular kinds of learning, and its own sites of cultural struggle.

b. There's also a kind of cultural transparency about the notion of scaffolded dialogue which doesn't address the diversity of students' classroom experience and engagement with classroom activities and with the teacher, in relation to issues like class, gender, ethnicity and race. Early studies in the ethnography of comunication show how children's different 'ways of speaking' at home can lead to misunderstandings when they are expected to use talk for learning in certain ways in school, sometimes raising difficult dilemmas for their sense of personal identity and self-worth (Philips 1972, Michaels 1981, Heath 1983. Sola and Bennett 1986). Using scaffolding may disadvantage students unused to this kind of participative structure, over-control their responses and set up power relations establishing the teacher as sole arbiter of the truth (Reid 1998, quoted in Daniels 2001)

c. Scaffolded dialogues only account for a very small proportion of children's language experience in school. What about all the other kinds of language interactions going on in and around classrooms? Neo-Vygotskian research tends to focus analysis on specific stretches of dialogue between a teacher and specific students rather than recognising the full range of language and literacy practices going on in classrooms, of which scaffolded dialogue or exploratory talk is only one kind among others. Where researchers talk about the classroom as 'a discourse community' or 'community of practice', I would suggest that this is often an idealisation based on particular kinds of curriculum-focussed talk.

So I'm saying that in work on scaffolding in classrooms, there is a lack of recognition of it as a particular kind of sociocultural practice, a particular kind of speech event, within a particular kind of institutional context. There's an emphasis on the cognitive dimension of dialogue and not enough recognition of the social and emotional dimensions. Students engage differently and are differently positioned within schools and within teacher-student dialogues depending on their social and cultural life experience and sense of their own identities.

This lack of theorisation of the broader context is acknowledged in Harry Daniels' book reviewing Vygotskian educational research. He writes: 'a model of pedagogy which reduces analysis to teacher-pupil interaction alone results in a very partial view of processes of social formation in schooling' (2001p175). Daniels suggests adding on Activity Theory and

Bernstein to fill the gap. I want to argue that linguistic ethnography also has something valuable to offer, particularly to Vygotskian researchers who are interested in bringing together the knowledge and cultural resources of students' home communities with the academic purposes of teaching in school eg Louis Moll (1990, 2000) and those interested in harnessing resistant, subversive discourses in the classroom (Guttierez et al 2000). Most importantly, I think linguistic ethnography can offer important insights about the specific situated dialogues between people in classrooms which are, for Vygotsky, the key mediating communicative patterns which constitute tools for action, thinking and feeling.

Maybe at this point I should say what I think linguistic ethnography is- I think we're in the process of negotiating this through grounded practice. A working definition for me at the moment would be: Ethnographically grounded detailed analyses of communicative practices in specific contexts, which produce various kinds of insights about social life. Language use is seen as a social and cultural phenomenon which needs to be analysed both in its own detail and in relation to other social and cultural phenomena. Researchers draw on theory from anthropology, especially the ethnography of communication, and from sociolinguistics. There's also an interest in the macro-level social discourse theories of theorists like Bourdieu, Foucault, Volosinov.

So what can linguistic ethnography offer to Vygotskian studies of talk and learning in the classroom? I suggest that there are at least three kinds of contribution that it can make.

a. Linguistic ethnography provides a focus on insider perspectives, which can help us to understand the meanings of classroom interactions for the different participants involved and gain a clearer sense of the motivations and understandings of specific students in relation to educational and other activities in school. These emic perceptions are used as the basis for working up analytic categories which may be articulated by participants, or may be presupposed, having been identified through ethnographic research. There are many different possible layers of context for a particular teaching/learning interaction in school: the local classroom with its patterns of particular kinds of relationships and expectations between a specific teacher and specific students, relationships with are coloured by gender, class, ethnicity, other implicit connections or distances between the individuals involved. Students are inserted, and insert themselves, in different ways into the various institutionalised practices of schools, buying into curriculum knowledge and educational goals in different ways. This is thrown into particularly stark relief in multicultural classrooms, as was demonstrated in the ethnography of communication studies I referred to earlier. The cultural 'ways with words' which children have learned in their home community and use as psychological tools to make sense of the world may be problematic for teachers teaching schooled literacy practices in the classroom context.

The linguistic ethnographer can draw attention to the fuller significance of an interaction, an artefact, a piece of child's writing or drawing, in the context of their broader language and cultural experience beyond schooled practice and discourse. In any classroom, indeed, I would suggest, we could ask how far are teachers and students' minds ever mutually attuned? Isn't that tuning irrevocably shaped by social, emotional and cultural as well as cognitive factors? And how far can we analyse teachers and students' interactions in relation to assumed common aims? Lemke (2003)- what students do in the classroom is more to do with a longer term project of identity building rather than with learning bits of the curriculum, 'except insofar as it fits our particular agenda of 'being a good student' or 'not falling for that bullshit". Researching and attending to emic perspectives can help us to build up a richer explanation of meaning-making processes in talk, which takes account of the cultural and social dimensions of dialogues, the importance of the longer term identity work that's going on and the institutionalised nature of the knowledge being constructed.

b. In doing detailed analyses of language use in particular contexts, linguistic ethographers look for patterns emerging from across a wider range of systematically collected data. The analysis of any specific extract, then, takes account of the meaning for the participants of that particular language event, in the context of their broader language practices. At one level, a swift piece of scaffolding of a couple of students by a teacher as she moves around the room may be consolidated, or undermined, by subsequent talk with other children at the same table, whom they have asked for more help. A further important stage of learning occurs while the two friends attempt to work through the problem together, attending at the same time to other conversations around them which they may join in with from time to time. They may be drawing on out of school frameworks of knowledge and unschooled literacy practices in order to try and make sense of their work, and their negotiations of relationships with each other, and of their own identity position in relation to these school activities, will also be going on through the talk.

From a broader perspective, these language practices in schools will have different meanings and possibilities for students in relation to their language practices, and indeed their use of different languages, out of school. Linguistic ethnography research has shown how struggles over authority and legitimation in multilingual educational settings reveal how the faultlines and fractures in the wider society, often related to past colonial histories, are played out through educational processes in the classroom. For instance Marilyn Martin Jones and Mukul Saxena have looked at how bilingual teaching assistants in primary classrooms in Lancashire who speak both English and an Indian language are often marginalised by the monolingual English-speaking teachers who define and orchestrate classroom activity. Jo Arthur shows how code-switching by teachers in classrooms in Botswana reinforces the assymetric power relations between speakers of the 'legitimate' and other languages and may cut children off still further from the legitimate language and the prestigious knowledge it encodes. In a different language context, in Jaffna where multilingual code-switching is an established and rich communicative resource, Canagarajah argues that the tension between the Tamil-only ideology of the local community and the 'English-only' ideology of the

international ESL teaching community is managed by teachers and students through their frequent switching between the local Jaffna Tamil and Tamilised English.

c. In these ways, linguistic ethnography can begin to document the sociocultural dimensions of scaffolding and to map out the social, cultural and historical dimensions of students' zones of proximal development, and the implications of these for their engagement in school language and literacy practices. I would argue that linguistic ethnography can contribute to building up a theoretical framework which can connect detailed analyses of language use in particular contexts with a more macro-level sociology- discourse with Discourses, to use Gee's terminology. In relation to Hymes' original concepts referred to in the Jim Collins quote in Ben's paper, I think we have moved on from the idea of a 'speech community' to more constructivist notions of discourse. And we've moved on from the rather monolithic concepts of 'family', 'school' and 'work' to more of an emphasis on sites and practices, and the co-constitutive relations between them. I think the research I've just referred to in multilingual classrooms, do start to build up connections between micro and macro levels, using concepts such as 'legitimate language', and 'symbolic domination'. In Ben's own work, where he uses fine grained discourse analysis to look at London adolescents' stylization of vernacular London speech, he looks at how social class is both reproduced and problematised through this stylization. So he's using microanalysis to trace the emergence of the macro-social structure of class, via Volosinov's concepts of behavioural and established ideologies.

So, to summarise what I've been saying, Vygotskian theory suggests that dialogues between people in classrooms provide key mediating communicative patterns which constitute tools for action, thinking and feeling. Researchers using the concepts of ZPD and scaffolding have focussed on the cognitive aspects of these dialogues and, I would suggest, neglected their social and affective aspects, the sociocultural dimensions of classroom language and literacy events, and the wider cultural context which weaves together activity in classrooms. Linguistic ethnography can contribute to documenting and developing our understanding of these other dimensions and help to provide a richer account of children's language and learning in school.

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