

COMING TO LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY FROM A BACKGROUND IN TEACHING

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1. Introduction: My aims within the current state of play
2. Professional trajectories and academic tone
3. Three potentially limiting tendencies in the teaching => ethnography trajectory
4. Conclusion

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1. Introduction: My aims within the current state of play

I'd like to begin with quite a long extract from a 2003 article by Jim Collins that appeared in a recent book on the linguistic anthropology of education. Collins is based in the US but he's spent quite a lot of time in Europe, and in this extended quotation, he offers a sketch of the potential relevance of three different approaches to language in contemporary education, starting with (i) traditional Ethnography of Communication, turning (ii) to 90s linguistic anthropology, and then (iii) to critical discourse analysis:

“[i] ... writings on the **ethnography of communication** (Gumperz & Hymes 1986)... provided an orientation and inspiration for much qualitative research in education (eg Cook-Gumperz 1986; Heath 1983; Philips 1982), [but they] would need considerable retooling before being of much help in understanding the nature of identity and inequality in the so-called information society (Castells 1996)... Three quick points are pertinent here. First, core concepts of this tradition, such as ‘speech community’, look quite different in an era of transnational capital, global media, and postmodern identity dynamics (Rampton 1998). Second, many key social institutions, such as family, school, and work, which were taken as stable and predictable within the E of C tradition, have undergone radical change in the last 30 years (New London Group 1996; Heath 2000). Third, processes such as emergence were either absent from or underdeveloped in E of C concepts such as ‘communicative competence’ (a point made by Wortham [2003], as well as by Gumperz 1982).

[ii] Although recent work [in] **linguistic anthropolog[y]** (LA)] has moved beyond earlier frameworks, taking up questions such as nationalism, state-endorsed hegemonic culture, and, most generally, how “members’ language ideologies mediate between social structure and forms of talk” (Kroskrity 1998:12), little of this recent work has directly addressed questions of education or, for that matter, whether we live in a distinctly ‘late’ or ‘post’ modern era. More pointedly, although the concepts discussed [in this tradition] - indexicality, creativity, poetic structure, [entextualisation] and metadiscursive framing - contribute to a viable social-cum-linguistic constructivism, they do not, in and of themselves, provide a clear image of what society is like: how it is organised, what its primary institutions are, or whether it is changing or static. This involves two problems or shortcomings, which I can only list here. First, there is an agnosticism about macro-sociological structure, or, what is effectively the same, an assumption that such structure need not be analyzed unless directly evident in language use. Second, there is an aloofness from, or implicitness about, normative questions, and this leads to the impression that scholarship is somehow its own reward, or that social criticism is at best an ad hoc and occasional concern.

[iii] There is, however, a line of inquiry that is robustly sociological, if not anthropological, and persistently oriented to language analysis as well as normative social critique. I refer here to **critical discourse analysis** (CDA), represented focally though not exclusively by various publications of Fairclough and collaborators (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999; Fairclough 1995). This tradition has taken education as a major area of focus, but it is not regarded as ethnographic or anthropological in its orientation to language. As contrasted with the constructivist orientation of linguistic anthropology, CDA argues a more socially determinist position - in particular, that you can study texts in (relative) isolation as simultaneously reflecting local, institutional, and societal domains. Critics have argued that CDA analyses often work with decontextualised language samples (Verschueren 2001) and that its institutional analyses are schematic at

best (Blommaert 2001); however there are promising developments by new workers in this framework. Rogers (2000), for example, presents an ethnographically grounded study of family literacy practices, which consistently applies CDA research categories, and Tusting (2000) presents a similarly grounded exploration of textual practices and religious identity formation. The determinist/constructivist contrast is a significant area of disagreement however. Essentially, it reflects from marxian commitments on the part of CDA and philosophical pragmatist commitments in LA. In addition to this philosophical difference, as Blommaert et al (2001) have discussed in a special journal issue exploring links between LA and CDA, both traditions tend to ignore each other's work" (pp 36-37, in J. Collins 2003. 'Language, identity, and learning in the era of 'expert guided' system'. In S. Wortham & B. Rymes (eds) *The Linguistic Anthropology of Education* Connecticut: Praeger. 31-60).

To summarise:

- the ethnography of communication isn't adequately tuned to contemporary conditions - post-structuralism and late modernity
- US linguistic anthropology has tended to neglect macro-sociology and to be politically agnostic, while
- traditional CDA lacks ethnography and an effective sense of how larger social processes get constituted within the contingencies of on-line interaction.

Overall, I think this is very useful sketch of the state of (quite a big) part of the art, coming from someone who's also made a substantial contribution to the new literacy studies, and as one of the Blommaert et als myself, I think it gives quite a good picture of the disciplinary juncture we're currently working in within the UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum, the kind of synthesis we could be targetting.

But rather than debating the state of the art, what I'd like to try to do here is to reflect on the ways in which our work in this theoretical/methodological space gets helped or hindered by our professional histories - more specifically,

- I want to ask what difference it makes if you come to ethnography from teaching in schools and further education?

And in trying to answer this question, I hope you won't mind if I take a rather personal line, personal not only in drawing on my own experience of moving from ESL teaching to applied linguistics and ethnography (Rampton 1992, 2002), but also in offering some fairly tendentious comments grounded in my own concerns and intuitions.¹

I'd like to begin with an impressionistic sketch of who we are and what we're like in the UK LEF, and some of the things I say may also be relevant to applied linguistics more generally. (I did say I was going to be tendentious.)

2. Professional trajectories and academic tone

I think that there are two significant things to say about LEF's origins as an institutional grouping. First, we've obviously got strong roots in British applied linguistics, where language education is an abiding concern, and second, I'm not the only person to start my professional life as a school teacher - in a show of 40 hands at the two-day LEF seminar at Gregynog in 2002, 2/3s to 3/4s had close links with schooling and education. So on the whole, I'd hazard that in the Linguistic Ethnography Forum, it's much more common for people to move *from teaching to ethnographies of education*, than to come to the study of education *from sociology or anthropology*.^{2 3} As Julian Edge pointed

¹ I hope this falls within the spirit of the Linguistic Ethnography Forum, where we've tried to foreground dialogue, and I'll be very happy to be contradicted about what I'm going to say.

² In other words, there's more of a movement (a) from professional activity to a mode of empirical study, than (b) from a disciplinary base to a field of enquiry. I would also be willing to argue that this formulation captures the rather different orientations to particularity and generalisation that you find in the UK vs the US.

³ At the meeting, David Barton also raised the question about the implications of a 'linguistics => ethnography' trajectory. A number of points emerged from the subsequent discussion: (a) it would depend on the kind of linguistics you were trained in - if your background was in formal linguistics, then the move to ethnography might be very oppositional, much more than if your background had been in sociology or anthropology) (Chris Candlin's point, referring to Hymes' original paper on communicative competence); (b) linguistics was likely to orient you to the small details of cultural activity; (c) when it came to questions about the validity of ethnographic description, linguistics was likely to tune you to 'the rigor of functional

out at last year's LEF Colloquium, this means that for a lot of us, doing ethnography on educational issues is a process of moving from the inside out, rather than the outside in - it's more a matter of trying to get analytic distance on the familiar, than trying to get familiar with the strange.

More specifically, my guess is that for quite a lot of us, the move to linguistics and ethnography was about trying to find a way of adequately rendering quite extensive personal experience - we were motivated not just by the kind of 'contrastive insight' Hymes talks about, but by quite an intense frustration and impatience with the institutional processes we found ourselves in, and we were looking for some kind of public language to make ourselves more hearable, to enable us to speak more authoritatively about what really seemed to be going on in the institutions where we worked, I think this trajectory is consequential in a number of different ways.

I may be wrong, but my sense is that if you've come into linguistic ethnography from teaching, you're less likely to worry about being academically marginal than colleagues in North America.

There are some obvious historical and organisational reasons why this might be: the UK academy is more fragmentary, less corporate; lots of us work in education departments, where colleagues tend to be rather respectful if you've any linguistics in your background, while at the same time, I don't get a very strong feeling that we should make our work accountable to formal linguists - that link was weakened in the 80s.

But I think that the language-teaching-to-linguistic-ethnography trajectory is itself a significant factor. If you start out as a classroom teacher, you often feel empowered as you become more fluent and at ease with academic knowledge. Of course you recognise that academics have traditionally stigmatised practical relevance, but you made your peace with that when you first signed up for teacher training, and rather than being anxious about marginality to disciplinary knowledge, the worry is that you're being seduced into irrelevance to real-world practice. So teaching-to-ethnography isn't a trajectory that turns academic status into an obsession, and in addition, it's not a route that nourishes the political agnosticism that Collins attributes to contemporary linguistic anthropology in the US - if you're working in the country where you're a citizen, studying an institution where you've spent a good part of your working life, then I don't think you're quite so vulnerable to the kind of uncertainty about political intervention that anthropologists feel when they working on 'exotic' cultures. On the contrary, I'd say that the teaching-to-ethnography route encourages a kind of low-church Protestantism that puts conscience above faith, prefers mission to pedigree, and gets suspicious with any whiff of popery. Indeed, more generally, it's a biographical trajectory that finds legitimation in the development of cultural studies, feminism and standpoint epistemologies, where lived experience is taken as both a valuable and inevitable starting point for academic work,⁴ and where there's a similar movement from the inside out rather than outside in.⁵

Admittedly, on top of being very impressionistic,⁶ that's rather a bullish characterisation of the kind of academic you become if you started in teaching, and there's a risk here of equating conviction and confidence with quality. That would be a big mistake, and so I'd now like to suggest one or two ways in which the teaching-to-ethnography trajectory encourages theoretical and analytic dispositions that maybe inhibit our contribution to the kind of field that Collins sketches out.

contrast', to the value of the emic contrasts, commutation tests etc as ways of identifying/describing/validating semiotic patterns and systems (without necessarily turning you into a full-blown structuralist!) (see D. Hymes 1980 'Qualitative/quantitative research methodologies in education: A linguistic perspective.' In *Ethnolinguistic Essays*, Washington: Centre for Applied Linguistics. 62-87.)

⁴ In addition, one of the effects of the post-structuralist moment that we're experiencing in the UK is that the old boundaries between paradigms and between theory-and-practice are less insistent than they used to be, and arguably, this is another factor undermining academic status concerns.

⁵ This talk of movement from outside in and inside out shouldn't be mistaken for a belief that insiders and outsiders are absolute identities, or that insider claims are necessarily more authoritative. Indeed, the processes by which boundaries are constructed and policed themselves need to be analysed, as Gemma Moss observed at last year's LEF colloquium in Cardiff. Even so, people do differ in the extent of their experience of specific networks and institutions, and this does impact on how they understand the world.

⁶ This isn't, for example, based on a reading of research on teachers becoming researchers.

3. Three potentially limiting tendencies in the teaching => ethnography trajectory

a) *First tendency: Optimistically overprivileging agency.* It may be a characteristic of ethnography generally, but I think that if for example you've taught a class full of nine-year olds, then you're likely to be fairly sensitive to the exigencies of the interactional moment, and alert to many of the ambiguities of communicative conduct.⁷ More than that, optimism about interaction, and hopefulness about the potential productivity of pedagogic encounters - these are something of a professional necessity.⁸ I think that in-the-first-instance, that can put you off the kind of lock-step, people-free determinism you sometimes find in CDA, making you much more receptive to North American research for the sense it gives you of lived experience. But beyond that, ingrained pedagogic optimism can bias you towards 'learning' and 'success' as the only positivity in educational processes, obscuring the logic and rationality of failure, which is just as much as the systemic product of school social practices.⁹

b) *Second tendency: Treating ontological concepts as empirically measurable processes.* Separating description and prescription is obviously much more complicated nowadays than introductory textbooks in linguistics used to claim,¹⁰ but on the whole, I think we're fairly well-practised at monitoring the relationship between 'is' and 'ought' in the claims we formulate. But a teaching habitus often seems to skew the way in which we engage with the fundamental texts, feeding a confusion between the ontological and the empirically assessable. Very often, in source texts themselves - in Halliday and in Bakhtin for example - notions like 'the negotiation of meaning' or 'dialogicality' are seen as fundamental aspects of all human communication, even the most monological. But reading them as an ex-teacher, driven by a commitment to making things better, there's a tendency (a) to construe ontological concepts as properties that you can find to different degrees in different situations, and then (b) to assume that if there's more of it, it's better. And that, I think, can make for bad ethnography, blinding you, for example, to the empirical processes involved in 'masked pedagogies'.

c) *Third tendency: Putting rapport and relevance before theory development.*¹¹ One of the complications facing linguistic ethnographers working in educational sites is that yesterday's theoretical concepts - 'speech community',¹² 'communicative competence', to take Collins' examples - still have a lot of currency in official educational discourses. *Potentially*, this presents us with a very rich set of theoretical opportunities, not just inviting us to study the complex paths and developments of language ideology, but also pushing us to reflect personally on where we used to be and where we are today. But it's not at all easy if you're also looking for relevance and rapport with educationalists - it's a tough job actually translating back and forward between an established discourse and a new one you're still struggling to enunciate yourself, and it's tempting just to stick

⁷ Atkinson & Delamont 1995 suggest that during the 1970s and 1980s, ethnographies of education in the UK were much more focused on day-to-day interactional activity than educational ethnographies in the US, where there was much more concern with the culturally determined 'culture clash', socialisation and enculturation (Chapters 2-4). They attribute this, however, to these studies' different disciplinary bases - sociology in the UK and anthropology in the US, and don't address themselves to the question of whether or not researchers have backgrounds in teaching.

⁸ Admittedly, it could be the loss of these beliefs that drives people to research, though this didn't happen in my own case.

⁹ See Varenne & McDermott 1998 & O'Connor 2003.

¹⁰ The claims in linguistics textbooks about being descriptive rather than prescriptive are undercut by their own account of thematisation and illocutionary/perlocutionary force.

¹¹ There are some potentially pertinent comments on the relationship between rapport, relevance and theory in Atkinson & Delamont criticism of case-study and action research in education (1986). Atkinson & Delamont 1995 proposes a number of strategies for improving theory development in educational ethnography, of which they are generally very critical.

¹² 'Speech community' itself may not figure very prominently, but the idea that people can be readily associated with one ethno-linguistic group rather than another still has a lot of currency in official thinking. See the discussion in Rampton, Roberts, Leung and Harris 2002:376-379.

with the old formulations, tweaking them here and there with new data, maybe defending them against misappropriation by the technocrats of officialdom.¹³

Not that it's not important produce expert responses to official metalinguistics, and I've done quite a bit of it myself. But it can be constraining, confining the upper and outer limits of our analytic gaze to the most obvious elements of educational policy and change, restricting the scope of our claims and generalisations to particular settings and institutions. In contrast, if we're interested in working in the problem-space identified by Collins, we also need to orient to historical analysis and to explore social and cultural theory in our empirical descriptions,¹⁴ and that's not always so easy in the teaching-to-ethnography trajectory. In the first instance, as a student in Britain anyway, you generally only get a one-year conversion MA before you're thrown on your own for your PhD,¹⁵ and then if you're lucky enough to get a job afterwards, it may well be in a university education department where the teaching loads are excessive. In circumstances like these, it's no surprise if people tend to depend very heavily on secondary digests surveying social, cultural or discourse theories rather than on primary sources, and it's not surprising if our analyses follow rather mechanistic rule-books. But it's not the best basis for cultivating our empirical intuitions, or for using ethnographic data to generate and engage with theory.

Conclusion

Twenty five years ago, Hymes outlined the vision of a democratic society where there was one pole with people who'd been professionally trained in ethnography; at the other pole, there was the general population, respected for their intricate and subtle knowledge of the worlds they lived in; and in between, were people who could "combine some disciplined understanding of ethnographic inquiry with the pursuit of their vocation" (1980:99).¹⁶ In fact, in line with his radical mission and the wider project of bringing ethnography back home that he pioneered, Hymes wanted to make the middle group as extensive as possible (that's the one combining ethnography with some kind of social commitment). So overall, I've got no doubts about the pedigree and value of the teaching-to-ethnography trajectory, and as I've often said before, I think we're flowing along in the main current of contemporary inter-disciplinarity.

Even so, ethnography is a very powerful resource for developing and testing theories, and it's not always the most accessible theories that can tell us most about our conditions. So I think it would be shame if we only aimed to deal in the kind of ideas that we can communicate to MA and INSET groups, and if we simply came to rest with arguments for critical pedagogy,¹⁷ valuable though both of these certainly are. There are some extremely widespread processes captured in our data-sets, and they're potentially significant far beyond just education. But at the same time, we need to be realistic about the labour, time, reading and experience involved in any serious attempt to use ethnography to theorise these wider processes, and I think it helps to recognise that a teaching-to-ethnography trajectory isn't necessarily the easiest starting point. But it certainly isn't a disqualification either, and one of my hopes for this Forum is that bilaterally or collectively, we can

¹³ See, for example, ethnographic criticisms of the appropriation of 'communicative competence' in SLA and language testing, or responses to the official policy formulations in the Kingman Report, the National Curriculum and the National Literacy Strategy.

¹⁴ See eg Foley 1990, Heller 1999, Jaffe 1999, 2003.

¹⁵ One year language-oriented MAs are generally much too short for any kind of decent exposure to different theoretical traditions (in my MA, for example, we did Halliday and Chomsky in about 4 sessions). Even though they're often much more motivated, MA students seldom get to cover the ground in the depth and detail that undergraduates experience.

¹⁶ "Such a vision would see ethnography as a general possession, although differentially cultivated. At one pole would be a certain number of persons trained in ethnography as a profession. At the other pole would be the general population, respected (on this view of ethnography) as having a knowledge of their worlds, intricate and subtle in many ways (consider the intricacy and subtlety of any normal person's knowledge of language), and as having necessarily come to this knowledge by a process ethnographic in character. In between - and one would seek to make this middle group as nearly coextensive with the whole as possible - would be those able to combine some disciplined understanding of ethnographic inquiry with the pursuit of their vocation whatever that might be" (1980:99)

¹⁷ When you're coming from a teaching background and grappling with social theory, critical pedagogy often seems to be the most obvious reconciliation/resolution. But there's no principled reason why we shouldn't push further in our analysis, beyond the horizon of practical application.

provide each other with the kind of encouragement, the reality-checks, the collaboration, maybe some of infra-structural support that all of us need if the long, slow, cumulative process of ethnographic theory development is a journey we want to take.

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Appendix:
Accompanying handout (containing a resume of key points)

Contribution to LEF Colloquium on *Linguistic Ethnography at the Interface with Education*
BAAL Annual Meeting, September 2003

COMING TO LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY FROM A BACKGROUND IN TEACHING

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Sections:

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1 My aims within the current state of play

- a) *The current state of play*: Collins (2003) on three approaches to language in contemporary education:

“[i] ... writings on the **ethnography of communication** (Gumperz & Hymes 1986)... provided an orientation and inspiration for much qualitative research in education (eg Cook-Gumperz 1986; Heath 1983; Philips 1982), [but they] would need considerable retooling before being of much help in understanding the nature of identity and inequality in the so-called information society (Castells 1996)... Three quick points are pertinent here. First, core concepts of this tradition, such as ‘speech community’, look quite different in an era of transnational capital, global media, and postmodern identity dynamics (Rampton 1998). Second, many key social institutions, such as family, school, and work, which were taken as stable and predictable within the E of C tradition, have undergone radical change in the last 30 years (New London Group 1996; Heath 2000). Third, processes such as emergence were either absent from or underdeveloped in E of C concepts such as ‘communicative competence’ (a point made by Wortham [2003], as well as by Gumperz 1982).

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(In short: (i) the ethnography of communication isn't adequately tuned to contemporary conditions [post-structuralism and late modernity]; (ii) US linguistic anthropology has tended to neglect macro-sociology and to be politically agnostic; (iii) traditional CDA lacks ethnography and an effective sense of how larger social processes get constituted within the contingencies of on-line interaction.)

b) *My questions here:*

- how far and in what ways is our work in this theoretical/methodological space helped or hindered by our professional histories?
- More specifically, what difference does it make if you come to ethnography from teaching in schools and further education?

2. Professional trajectories and academic tone

UK LEF participants' biographical trajectories (including mine):

- teaching \Rightarrow ethnography, much more than sociology/anthropology \Rightarrow education
My impression is that people tend to move from teaching (as a professional activity) into ethnography (as a mode of study), more than from anthropology or sociology (as disciplines) into education (as a field of study)? This is likely to mean that UK LE is often more about trying to get analytic distance on the familiar, than getting familiar with the strange?
 - academic insecurity?
The trajectory of 'teaching \Rightarrow ethnography' entails an experience of gaining, rather than losing, 'voice', and my guess is that we worry more about being seduced by the academy than marginalised/abandoned by it?
 - political neutrality?
'Teaching \Rightarrow ethnography' probably makes you more confident about political intervention (see also feminism and cultural studies).

3. Three potentially limiting tendencies in the teaching \Rightarrow ethnography trajectory

a) Optimistically overprivileging agency

Does teaching engender a deeply ingrained optimism about interaction and the potential productivity of the moment, blinding one to the institutional rationality of failure?

b) Treating ontological concepts as empirically measurable processes

Rather than construing 'dialogicality' (Bakhtin) and the 'negotiation of meaning' (Halliday) as fundamental features of all communication, notions like these are often seen as properties you can find to different degrees in different situations (and the more the better).

c) Putting rapport and relevance before theory development

- *talking intelligibly/intelligently to professionals and policy makers while staying at the conceptual cutting edge?*

- *interpreting the 'macro' as government policy, rather than as the constraints and movements of history?*
- *canonising secondary digests and essentially pedagogic texts, rather than primary sources?*

4. Conclusion

- a) The value and pedigree of the 'teaching => ethnography' trajectory (Hymes 1980)
- b) LEF as an additional support for the long, slow, cumulative process of ethnographic theory development (encouragement, collaboration, reality-checks, & maybe infra-structural support).

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