Linguistic Ethnography

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the developing field of linguistic ethnography. The work of scholars who are particularly influential in linguistic ethnography is discussed – in particular, Hymes, Gumperz, Goffman, and Erickson – and linked to the work of scholars currently working in this field, including Creese, Roberts, Rampton, and Lefstein and Snell. Drawing on contextual realities and mainly North American historical antecedents, it explains why linguistic ethnography is mainly a European endeavor and why it has emerged at this point in time. In particular, the chapter suggests that the formation of the linguistic ethnography forum (LEF: www.lingethnog.net) is centrally important in providing a community of practice for researchers using ethnography and linguistic analysis in their work. The chapter also points to the increasing impact of interdisciplinarity on the development of linguistic ethnography. It argues that its democratic approach to participation and interpretation of local perspectives is often a good starting point around which interdisciplinary teams can cohere. In conclusion, the chapter suggests that the ability to work collaboratively with professional groups and like-minded researchers has been one of the main benefits of the development of the field and that it is this breadth and reach which hold the most promise for linguistic ethnography.

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Introduction

Linguistic ethnography is an interpretive approach which studies the local and immediate actions of actors from their point of view and considers how these interactions are embedded in wider social contexts and structures. It is a "disciplined way of looking, asking, recording, reflecting, comparing, and reporting" (Hymes 1980, p. 105), combining an enhanced sense of the strategic value of discourse analysis (Rampton et al. 2004) with ethnography. Linguistic ethnography, a mainly European phenomenon, has been greatly influenced by North American scholarship in linguistic anthropology, and because of this we share many of the same antecedents. Indeed, a common bedrock of "metatheorists" (McElhinny et al. 2003, p. 316) such as Gumperz and Hymes, Goffman and Erickson, Agha and Silverstein, Gal and Heller, and Blommaert and Rampton highlights the theoretical and methodological backgrounds we share. The emergence and development of linguistic ethnography in Europe and rationale for its gathering momentum can be found in its ability to cluster and network groups of researchers who might otherwise be fairly isolated (for overviews, see Creese and Copland 2015; Creese 2008; Maybin and Tusting 2011; Rampton 2007b; Rampton et al. 2004; Rampton et al. 2015; Tusting and Maybin 2007).

Early Developments

In 1921, Sapir suggested "language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the textures of our lives" (p. 207). According to Sapir, language and culture are inseparable. Culture is not a fixed set of practices essential to ethnic or otherwise-defined groups. Language is not an unchanging social structure unresponsive to the communicative

needs of people. Rather languages and cultures are practices and processes in flux, up for negotiation, but contingent on specific histories and social environments. This view of language and culture as processes rather than products finds long-term support in anthropology and ethnography. Goodenough (1994) summarizes this view:

> I have found it theoretically helpful to think of both culture and language as rooted in human activities (rather than in societies) and as pertaining to groups. The cultural make-up of a society is thus to be seen not as a monolithic entity determining the behaviour of its members, but as a melange of understanding and expectations regarding a variety of activities that serve as guides to their conduct and interpretation. (p. 266–7)

The interpretation of meaning is at the heart of Goodenough's definition. We come to "understand and expect" through the mundane routines we engage in regularly. The imperative to uncover the mundane, routine, and everyday was described by leading linguistic anthropologist Dell Hymes in the 1960s when he spoke about bringing anthropological research "back home" (in Rampton 2007a, p. 598). Hymes was keen to argue that we needed to study "ourselves" rather than the "other" using the skills and knowledge of the ethnographer. In particular, Hymes brought his authority as a leading scholar in linguistic anthropology to the social sciences where he set about investigating linguistic inequality as both a practical and theoretical problem. The necessity of looking in "our own backyard to understand shifting cultural meanings, practices and variations" (Rampton 2007a, p. 598) has been well made in ethnography.

Major Contributions and Work in Progress

In this section, we draw on Creese and Copland (2015) to foreground four scholars who share an interest in language, culture, society, and interaction and whose work has had an impact on key scholars working in linguistic ethnography in the European context. We summarize the work of these scholars and link it to current work in progress.

Dell Hymes (1927–2009)

A theory of language and social life is Dell Hymes' major contribution to the field. He saw multiple relations between language and society and between linguistic means and social meaning. Back in the 1960s and the heyday of Chomskyan grammatical competence, Hymes criticized linguistics for making its focus the structure of language (langue), rather than the cultural actions of communities in context (parole). In 1974 he wrote "Linguistics, the discipline central to the study of speech, has been occupied almost wholly with developing analysis of the structure of language as a referential code" (p. 32). He felt that such a focus on the part of linguistics was deliberate and the failure to provide an explicit place for

sociocultural features was not accidental (Hymes 1972, p. 272). He accused linguistics of taking a "Garden of Eden" view of language which consisted of an ideal speaker who was grammatically competent – existing as an "unmotivated cognitive mechanism, . . . not a person in the social world" (Hymes 1972, p. 273). Hymes called for an analysis of speech (parole) over language (langue) to articulate how social action and speech interact in "a systematic, ruled and principled way" (Hymes 1968, p. 101). He developed and advocated the "ethnography of communication" because linguistics was not utilizing the "multiple relations between linguistic means and social meaning" (1974, p. 31). Furthermore, he argued that humankind "cannot be understood apart from the evolution and maintenance of its ethnographic diversity" (Hymes 1974, p. 33). He therefore proposed studying "speaking" and "communication" over "language." For Hymes, and others committed to a sociolinguistic perspective, the analysis of speech over language shifted the direction away from code to actual use. This point is taken up by Blommaert et al. (2010), who similarly argue, "speech is language in which people have made investments – social, cultural, political, individual-emotional ones" (p. 8). Blommaert and Jie make a distinction between a linguistic notion of language and an ethnographic notion of discourse. This battle for a more social orientation to the study of language rumbles on to this day with linguistic anthropologists arguing that a continued focus on langue or code is restrictive, extractionist, and exclusionary (Agha 2005).

Hymes' influence has been a major influence in the field of language education. His riposte to Chomsky contributed significantly to a pedagogy based not solely on grammar but on social appropriateness. His concept of "communicative competence" (1972) redirected language education and its professionals to think about setting, people, register, function, and style. He was greatly influenced by the work of Edward Sapir (1921) and Roman Jakobson (1960) whose work focused on the components and functions of the speech situation. Hymes was committed to understanding how speech resources come to have uneven social value and saw the possibilities of applying a linguistic or discourse analysis across disciplines to "build answers to new questions thrown up by social change" (Hymes 1974, p. 32). His orientation was interdisciplinary in nature.

Angela Creese (2005) used Hymes' framework to show how different teacher roles attracted varying degrees of institutional support and the implication of this for emergent bilingual young people. Hymes' concept of the speech situation, event, and act was used by Creese to record diversity of speech, repertoires, and ways of speaking in three linguistically diverse London secondary schools. Subject teachers and teachers of English as additional language foregrounded different language functions in their interaction with emergent bilingual students resulting in different relationships, identity constructions, and learning opportunities for young people. Creese linked her micro recordings of classroom interactions to macrostructures of educational power. Today, Creese continues to work within a Hymesian framework drawing on the speech act to consider the knowledge speakers share about utterances as they translanguage in their everyday multilingual discourses (Creese and Blackledge 2015; Blackledge and Creese 2010).

John Gumperz (1922–2013)

A major contribution by John Gumperz was his development of a line of work usually referred to as "interactional sociolinguistics" which focuses on everyday talk in social contexts (Gumperz 1982). It considers how societal and interactive forces merge in the small and mundane conversations that people regularly have. The goal of interactional sociolinguistics is to analyze how people interpret and create meanings in interaction. An important concept is the "contextualization cue," which Gumperz (1999) describes as the functioning of signs "to construct the contextual ground for situated interpretation" (p. 461). Gumperz was interested in understanding how people read clues to construct meaning.

An interactional sociolinguistic (IS) approach focuses on meaning in action. It highlights the uniqueness of the moment and context while simultaneously acknowledging the social structures brought into play. That is, although the focus is on the here and now of the encounter at hand, the "there and then" of the world beyond is ever present. As Gumperz (1999) argues, even the most straightforward interaction depends on shared, tacit knowledge, both cultural and linguistic.

In the UK, Celia Roberts has pioneered an IS approach, combining the focus on interaction with social theory. For example, her 2001 work with Srikant Sarangi, "'Like you're living two lives in one go': Negotiating different social conditions for classroom learning in a further education context in England," shows how educational contexts create expectations about classroom interaction which can be upheld or subverted by participants, leading to different educational outcomes. Acknowledging the classroom as a particular cultural space, and the participants as actors belonging to social and cultural groups, means that IS can be used to examine interactions between participants living in the same country and speaking the same language. Indeed, Roberts has consistently and effectively used IS to draw attention to inequality suffered by minority ethnic groups and to show how these inequalities are realised through talk. Recently, Roberts has brought a Gumperzian perspective to job interviews (2011) and health consultations (2011, 2014, with Deborah Swinglehurst and others). She has also coedited a special issue of *Text and Talk* on the work of Gumperz with Peter Auer (2011).

Erving Goffman (1922–1982)

Erving Goffman (e.g. 1967, 1981), a Canadian-born sociologist and cultural theorist, carried out fieldwork in a number of countries and developed a range of theoretical perspectives for examining how people behave in different social settings. The resurgence in interest in his work is testament to the longevity of his ideas and their relevance for developing understanding of talk in context. Goffman observed that the social situation is the basic unit or scene in which everyday life takes place (Erickson 2004a). Through painstaking attention to the details of interaction in social situations, he noted the rituals, routines, and performances of daily life. From this study, Goffman developed a huge number of theoretical constructs that can be used

to interpret and explain everyday talk. Many of these draw on dramaturgical metaphors and draw attention to the performative aspects of identity and talk.

One of many important theoretical contributions made by Goffman is his work on face. He described face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 1967, p. 5). His conceptualization launched a whole new area of pragmatic research, with Brown and Levinson (1987) arguing that interlocutors are aware of each other's face needs, leading to engagement in complex linguistic gymnastics as they aim to protect, or not, these needs.

Ben Rampton has drawn extensively on Goffman in his work and has also been instrumental in championing Goffman in his teaching of ethnography, language, and communication. In *Language in Late Modernity*: *Interaction in an Urban School* (2006), Rampton shows how teenagers in an urban school use German, a language taught in school but to which students seem to have little or no out-of-school affiliation, to perform a range of functions (such as apologizing and commanding). He draws on Goffman's concept of "interpersonal verbal rituals" (Goffman 1981, p. 21) to suggest that students use German to do facework particularly when their independence, territory, or good character is threatened (Rampton 2006, p. 166). Using German in a ritualistic way allows the students to attend to both their own face needs and to those of their interlocutors. More recently, Rampton (2014) uses a number of Goffmanian constructs (e.g., "imprecations," "threat startles," and "grandstanding") to interrogate language and ethnicity among adolescents in London.

Frederick Erickson

Frederick Erickson (1990, 2004b) describes his approach as a "practical activity" using video recordings of "naturally occurring interactions" to look "closely and repeatedly at what people do in real time as they interact" (Erickson 1996, p. 283). Erickson's approach is known as microethnography as he examines "big social issues through careful examination of 'small' communicative behaviours on the microlevel" (LeBarron 2008, p. 177).

In the examination of "small communicative behaviors," microethnography is concerned with the local ecology of speaker and listener relations and the micropolitics of social relations between people rather than with the individual. The immediate ecology of relations between participants focuses on how people in interaction "constitute environments for each other's activities" (McDermott 1976, p. 36). This requires paying attention to the nonverbal, particularly gaze, gesture, and posture, as well as the verbal. Speaking and listening have a mutual influence on one another and can be said to have a rhythmic organization (Erickson 1996, p. 288).

Regarding "big social issues," Erickson uses microethnography in two ways. First, he identifies the relationships between interaction and processes of society.

Second, he shows how interactions are situated in historical and societal contexts (Erickson 2004a). For example, in *Seventy-five dollars goes in a day* (2004b), Erickson's meticulous analysis of dinner table talk demonstrates that the discussion focuses repeatedly on the spiraling cost of living for a lower-middle-class family in the USA in 1974. In terms of societal processes, the discussion is the opportunity for "language and discourse socialisation" (p. 50) to take place as the family learns to talk not just about the economy in general but about the particular circumstances of their dwindling financial resources. The topic of cost and limited income has clear relevance for this family given their material circumstances, and Erickson argues that the discussion is class-based as those on higher incomes would not be discussing the issue with the same level of anxiety. In terms of situating interactions in "historical and societal contexts," Erickson links the resentment talk at the dinner table to a growing dissatisfaction in similar families about rising costs, which leads in time to the formation of a discourse. He suggests that this kind of talk "acted in synergy with large-scale social processes" to "sweep Reagan into the White House" (p. 51), drawing on evidence that families such as this switched allegiance and voted in their millions for a Republican.

Erickson's belief in the value of video recording to capture nonverbal processes and their relationship with verbal processes has helped to inspire linguistic ethnographers to develop multimodal approaches to their research (e.g., the work of Lefstein and Snell 2013). Furthermore, microethnographic working, focusing on the detail of unfolding talk and action, has had an enormous influence on analytical processes of those working within linguistic ethnography, both with video (e.g., Bezemer 2015; Swinglehurst 2015) and without (e.g., Rampton 2006, 2014; Rock 2015).

A number of researchers working with linguistic ethnography have acknowledged Erickson's influence in terms of both theory and method. Theoretically, Copland (2011), Rampton (2009), and Rampton et al. (2015) in discussions of genres of talk all draw on the concept of "wiggle room," that is, "just a little bit of space for innovation within what's otherwise experienced as the compelling weight of social expectation" (Rampton et al. 2015). Methodologically, the increasing focus on the body in linguistic ethnographic studies, for example, Bezemer (2008) and Lefstein and Snell (2013), has been greatly influenced by Erickson's work.

Problems and Difficulties

It will have been noted that the influential scholars listed here are North Americans. Given this, readers may well find themselves asking, why do we need linguistic ethnography? What's wrong with linguistic anthropology? As we have shown, we are keen to emphasize continuities with linguistic anthropology rather than make claims of distinction. Nevertheless, the appearance of linguistic ethnography in Europe has not happened by accident. In this section we seek to explain its emergence.

A Moment in Time

According to Rampton (2007a, p. 594), there is no "properly institutionalized" linguistic anthropology in Britain. British scholars pursuing an interest in language, culture, and society, therefore, have had no established local intellectual community in which to situate themselves. As a result, these scholars turned to the annual meetings of the British Association of Applied Linguistics (BAAL) to fine-tune their analytical conversations. BAAL meetings created a context for contact and cross-fertilization resulting in the coming together of scholars with a distinctive mix of traditions. Maybin and Tusting (2011) describe how linguistic ethnographers have been drawn to the disciplinary frameworks of linguistics and sociolinguistics through BAAL's remit.

A key moment for linguistic ethnography came in 2001 when the linguistic ethnography forum (LEF: http://www.lingethnog.org/) was established as a special interest group of BAAL. LEF scholars were "pushed together by circumstance, open to the recognition of new affinities, and sufficiently familiar with one another to treat differences with equanimity" (Rampton 2007a, p. 585). Since 2008, LEF has held a biennial conference where these affinities and differences have been debated and where emerging work in linguistic ethnography has been presented. Both LEF and the conference have also attracted many like-minded European scholars who have also lacked an intellectual home. A special issue of the journal *Text and Talk* (2010) describes European perspectives on linguistic ethnography (see Flynn et al. 2010; Jacobs and Slembrouck 2010).

Linguistic ethnography has clustered a community of scholars around its themes and heritages and brought together doctoral students, early- and mid-career researchers, and senior academics. Within these clusters of scholarship, different conversations between academics have seen some traditions of discourse analysis become established, and robust and new kinds of conversation around language and ethnography develop. Emerging researchers are now citing the work of established British and European linguistic ethnographic scholars as well as their American influences. Although too early to speak of its legacy, linguistic ethnography has created a forum to develop researcher capacity at a key moment in time.

The Interdisciplinary Agenda

Within UK higher education, and in other countries as well, there has been a general shift away from the organization of academic knowledge in terms of disciplines to one that is based on interdisciplinarity (Creese 2010; Rampton 2007a). Many universities in the UK are undergoing a reorganization in search of "effective structures and mechanisms to encourage and foster inter-disciplinary activity" (University of Birmingham website, 2009). This is mirrored in the research funding bodies in the UK and Europe. In the UK, there is a new emphasis on interdisciplinary research, and funding is made available to achieve "beneficial societal impact." Teams of academics from the social sciences, environmental sciences, and the

humanities might find themselves working together on a project and debating methodologies which can best respond to the questions being asked.

Rampton et al. (2015) describe two modalities of doing interdisciplinary research. The first approach brings different academic disciplines together to work on a problem. Cross-referencing to different paradigms can be made to investigate the phenomena at hand, and researchers commonly move out of their comfort zone in discussion with colleagues as they learn about different ways to research the phenomenon. In the second approach to interdisciplinarity, "'real-world' issues of social, technical and/or policy relevance provide the starting point" (Rampton et al. 2015), and collaborations between academic and nonacademic institutions in the private, public, and third sectors are common. Such partnerships foster joint planning, question setting, and a commitment to bring different expertises, experiences, and knowledge to address the challenge.

Ethnography with its democratic approach to participation and interpretation of local perspectives is often a good starting point around which interdisciplinary teams can cohere. Moreover, because language is at the heart of any exercise in social life, linguistic ethnographers have a key role to play. Agha (2005) speaks of the "linguistic turn" in the humanities and social sciences, which he defines as "a vast number of intellectual projects that take up particular aspects of human affairs mediated by language, in a variety of modes of departmental, disciplinary, and inter-disciplinary organizations" (p. 228). Furthermore, he describes the dangers of staying too narrowly focused within the disciplinary boundaries of linguistics:

> Linguists of a certain type might well say, 'That's not linguistics.' But no one cares. For the reciprocal fact is this: the 'linguistic turn' is an orientation to the linguistic aspect of human affairs not toward what happens in departments of linguistics. (p. 228)

Discourse analysis presents a set of methodological tools that are attractive to many in the social sciences. Linguistic ethnography in particular is open to a wide variety of discourse analytic traditions in its combination with ethnography. Through its focus on discourse and detailed interactional analysis, linguistic ethnography is already adopted in a variety of disciplines (Snell et al. 2015). However, there are productive tensions in engaging in interdisciplinary scholarship. What constitutes data may radically differ across disciplines, and the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of each discipline may fundamentally conflict. Furthermore, disciplines differ in what they constitute as their object of study or unit of analysis and this shapes the organization of research activity.

Postmodernity

Modernist ideas of language seek order and purity and reject "hybridity" (Blommaert et al. 2012). In structuralist linguistics, various techniques were and still are employed to identify and classify features of sentence structures and to categorize these into constituent parts. Modernist ideologies of language "centered

on denotational functions" and sought to count, bound, and structure strings of signs, particularly at the sentence level (Blommaert 2010, p. 10). Such a view of language is often put to work for "higher-scale institutional hegemonies" like national language policies and educational policies, resulting in the "national language" constructed as one of the purest icons of the nation state. As Blommaert et al. (2012) point out, if you are viewed as speaking a pure language, you are authenticated as a real member of a particular culture, a common modernist view.

Postmodernist approaches to the study of language deconstruct these "entitlements" or social constructions. Deconstruction involves processes of scrutiny which pull apart dichotomies such as "order versus disorder; purity versus impurity; normality versus abnormality" (Blommaert et al. 2012, p. 5). Linguistic ethnography is well placed to investigate the construction and robustness of social categories and categorization processes and taken for granted assumptions about groups, categories, and peoples. Indeed to date, linguistic ethnographers have played their part in the rapid debunking of reifications and essentializations about languages, dialects, ethnicities, and cultures in the economic and social processes of globalization (e.g., Blackledge and Creese 2010, 2014; Lefstein and Snell 2013).

Postmodernism makes clear that assumptions are dangerous. In linguistic ethnography, assumptions about communicative practices in particular are challenged and must be empirically investigated as the earlier review of Erickson illustrated. However, as Maybin and Tusting (2011) point out, this is a "formidable" task. Heller (2011) explains why:

> The challenge is to capture the ways in which things unfold in real time, and the ways in which they sediment into constraints that go far beyond the time and place of specific interactions. (p. 400)

Linguistic ethnographers see attention to the "sign" in discourse as a means to linking to wider historical, social, political, and cultural structures as one way forward to responding to this challenge (Creese and Copland 2015).

Future Directions

Linguistic ethnography views language as communicative action functioning in social contexts in ongoing routines of peoples' daily lives. It looks at how language is used by people and what this can tell us about wider social constraints, structures, and ideologies. It achieves this by investigating the linguistic sign as a social phenomenon open to interpretation and translation but also predicated on convention, presupposition, and previous patterns of social use.

With no local scholarship to turn to researchers doing work combining linguistics and ethnography in Europe had no natural home. Linguistic ethnography has provided one. In the European context, an interdisciplinary orientation is gaining momentum, and scholars who can combine approaches to data collection and analysis to work collaboratively with differently minded researchers are likely to

be in demand. Linguistic ethnographers have a tradition of working with professional groups (see Lefstein and Snell 2013; Roberts 2012) and have already made a significant contribution to the interdisciplinary agenda. Research "with" rather than "on" follows in the interdisciplinary orientation first advocated by Hymes. In addition, linguistic ethnographers' contribution to postmodernity and its deconstruction of social categories have been particularly relevant in terms of new and emergent constructions of language, culture, ethnicity race, and diversity (Blommaert and Rampton 2014; Creese and Blackledge 2012). Indeed, Blommaert and Rampton (2012) recently argue in a paper on superdiversity that the combination of linguistics and ethnography "produces an exceptionally powerful and differentiated view of both activity and ideology" (p. 3) and so is well placed to support research into this complex and exciting area.

More than this, linguistic ethnography continues to provide an important home for a wide range of disciplines including those working in literacy studies, health policy and communication, workplace interaction, classrooms and educational settings, language and superdiversity, online and digital worlds, and narratives and identity. Perhaps, it is breadth and reach that hold the most promise for linguistic ethnography.

Cross-References

▶ Discourse Analysis in Educational Research
▶ Ethnography and Language Education
▶ Ethnography of Language Policy
▶ Microethnography in the Classroom

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

Betsy Rymes: Language Socialization and the Linguistic Anthropology of Education. In Volume: Language Socialization
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