

## LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY

### INTRODUCTION

As a term designating a particular configuration of interests within the broader field of socio- and applied linguistics, ‘linguistic ethnography’ (LE) is a theoretical and methodological development orientating towards particular, established traditions but defining itself in the new intellectual climate of late modernity and post-structuralism.

The debate about ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’ distinctive to an understanding of linguistic ethnography is current and the term linguistic ethnography itself is in its infancy. On the one hand it positions itself very much alongside anthropological traditions to the study of language, such as the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1968, 1972) and interactional sociolinguistics (IS) (Gumperz, 1972, 1982), while on the other hand, it claims a distinctiveness by keeping the door open to wider interpretive approaches from within anthropology, applied linguistics and sociology. Linguistic ethnography typically takes a post-structuralist orientation by critiquing essentialist accounts of social life. In conjoining the two terms ‘linguistic’ and ‘ethnography’ it aligns itself with a particular epistemological view of language in social context. In a recently published discussion paper on linguistic ethnography, its general orientation is described as follows:

Linguistic ethnography generally holds that language and social life are mutually shaping, and that close analysis of situated language use can provide both fundamental and distinctive insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural production in everyday activity. (Rampton et al., 2004, p. 2)

The discussion sets out an epistemological position which has much in common with contemporary sociolinguistics more generally—an interest in the interplay between language and the social, the patterned and dynamic nature of this interplay and the processual nature of meaning-creation in the making of context.

### EARLY DEVELOPMENTS AND MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Linguistic ethnography (LE) has been shaped by major developments in linguistic anthropology (LA) in the mid-twentieth century in the

USA. Particular strands of LA which have influenced linguistic ethnography are the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1968, 1974, 1980), interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982, 1999) and micro-ethnography (Erickson, 1990, 1996). These traditions have of course been shaped themselves by a *mélange* of theoretical and methodological traditions. However, they also share a genealogy in seminal publications appearing in shared volumes and in sharing a critical mass of scholars working in particular locations (see Hornberger, 1995, 2003 for a fuller account).

In the following section, I outline these traditions in brief and show their relevance to researchers in the UK, where much of this work has been done. I end this section by looking at more recent developments in the USA in Linguistic Anthropology of Education (LAE) (Wortham, *Linguistic Anthropology of Education*, Volume 3) and consider the need that both LE and LAE express to extend beyond the earlier generations of linguistic anthropological research mentioned earlier to create new approaches to analysing the social and the linguistic.

### *Ethnography of Communication*

This approach from within LA has typically been concerned with challenging assumptions about cultural homogeneity through a focus on language use in interaction. Hymes is well known for criticizing both linguistics, for not making ethnography the starting point for the analysis of language use, and anthropology, for insufficiently drawing upon linguistics to understand and describe culture and context.

... it is not linguistics, but ethnography, not language, but communication, which must provide the frame of reference within which the place of language in culture and society is to be assessed ... (Hymes, 1974, p. 4)

Even the ethnographies that we have, though almost never focused on speaking, show us that communities differ significantly in ways of speaking, in patterns of repertoire and switching, in the roles and meanings of speech. (Hymes, 1974, p. 33)

For Hymes, what was needed was a general theory and body of knowledge within which diversity of speech, repertoires, and ways of speaking take primacy as the unit of analysis. Hymes' argument was that the analysis of speech over language would enable social scientists to articulate how social behaviour and speech interact in a systematic, ruled and principled way. This view became articulated in the ethnography of speaking (Hymes, 1968) and later the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1974).

*Interactional Sociolinguistics*

Another tradition within LA is interactional sociolinguistics (IS), which focuses on discursive practice in social contexts and considers how societal and interactive forces merge. The goal of IS is to analyse how interactants read off and create meanings in interaction. Because language indexes social life and its structures and rituals, language use can be analysed to understand how presuppositions operate in interactions. Moreover, IS has looked at how interactants use language to create contexts. An important concept emerging from IS is 'contextualization cue', which according to Gumperz describes how a 'sign serves to construct the contextual ground for situated interpretation and thereby affects how constituent messages are understood' (1999, p. 461).

IS is often concerned with intercultural encounters and the systematic differences in the cultural assumptions and patterns of linguistic behaviour which are considered normal by those involved. Gumperz and others (Ochs, 1993) in their empirical work show how when we speak, we have ways of conveying to the listener complex information about how we intend them to treat the message. Ochs argues,

... in any given actual situation, at any given actual moment, people in those situations are actively constructing their social identities rather than passively living out some cultural prescription for social identity ... (Ochs, 1993, p. 296, 298)

In Gumperz's 'crosstalk' studies the focus is on how people of differing cultural backgrounds make assumptions about the kind of speech event they are participating in.

The aim is to show how individuals participating in such exchanges use talk to achieve their communicative goals in real life situations by concentrating on the meaning making processes and the taken-for-granted background assumptions that underlie the negotiation of shared interpretations. (Gumperz, 1999, p. 454).

A main purpose of IS analysis is to show how diversity affects interpretation and in this respect, it has much in common with micro-ethnography and the work of Erickson (1990, 1996).

*Micro-Ethnography*

Erickson's work has used video technology to look carefully at interactions for the importance of local framing. The focus here is on how interaction is constructed locally. Micro-ethnography has shown that people do not just follow cultural rules but actively and non-deterministically

construct what they do. Erickson shows us that listening is just as important as speaking in creating these environments and that speakers are in an ecological relationship with auditors (2004). Erickson's work has been influenced by Erving Goffman (1959), whose concern with the presentation of self in daily life has done much to show us that in any encounter we give off signals revealing aspects of our identities. Erickson, like Goffman, has emphasized close detailed observation of situated interaction.

The approaches described earlier, with their emphasis on close observational and textual analysis interpreted through an ethnographic understanding of the context, have all in some way shaped the work of scholars aligning with LE. Like the early work in the ethnography of communication which argued that linguistics had wrongly occupied itself wholly with the structure of the referential code at the expense of the social (Hymes, 1974, 1980), LE's argument is also for a socially constituted linguistics.

#### WORK IN PROGRESS

As indicated above, LE shares much in common with other approaches to research in sociolinguistics in making linkages between language, culture, society and cognition in complex ways which are not easily amenable to the application of strictly controlled a priori analytic categories. In terms of current research LE is shaped by a disciplinary eclecticism some of which is described below.

##### *Linguistic Ethnography*

It is the consideration of what is to be gained by conjoining the two terms 'linguistics' and 'ethnography' which begins to define linguistic ethnography. Linguistic ethnography is an orientation towards particular epistemological and methodological traditions in the study of social life.

Linguistic ethnography argues that ethnography can benefit from the analytical frameworks provided by linguistics, while linguistics can benefit from the processes of reflexive sensitivity required in ethnography. In a recent discussion paper, Rampton et al. (2004) argue for '*tying ethnography down and opening linguistics up*' (p. 4) and for an enhanced sense of the strategic value of discourse analysis in ethnography. Ethnography provides linguistics with a close reading of context not necessarily represented in some kinds of interactional analysis, while linguistics provides an authoritative analysis of language use not typically available through participant observation and the taking of fieldnotes (p. 6).

In LE, linguistics is said to offer an ethnographic analysis of a wide range of established procedures for isolating and identifying linguistic and discursive structures (p. 3). In contrast, in ethnographic analysis is said to offer linguistic analysis a non-deterministic perspective on the data. Because ethnography looks for uniqueness as well as patterns in interaction, it 'warns against making hasty comparisons which can blind one to the contingent moments and the complex cultural and semiotic ecologies that give any phenomenon its meaning' (p. 2).

An LE analysis then attempts to combine close detail of local action and interaction as embedded in a wider social world. It draws on the 'relatively technical vocabularies' of linguistics to do this. Rampton et al. (2004) suggest that although 'there is certainly much more involved in human communication' than the issues that these technical vocabularies can reveal they 'can make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the highly intricate processes involved when people talk, sign, read, write or otherwise communicate' (p. 3).

In addition to the study of interaction, the study of situated literacy practices is also well represented in LE where the focus is on community-based literacy research (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Barton et al., 2000; Gregory, 1996; Gregory and Williams, 2000), multilingual literacy (Bhatt et al., 1996; Martin-Jones and Jones, 2000), and cross-cultural perspectives on literacy (Street, 1984). As with interactional studies in LE, such research starts from an understanding of literacy as social practice. In such studies, researchers made a distinct break from viewing literacy as a measurable cognitive achievement concerned predominantly with educational success and instead began to look at how people actually use literacy in their lifeworlds and everyday routines.

Linguistic traditions which construct language and literacy as social and communicative action in the organization of culture(s) have therefore been heavily represented in LE and some of these have been described in the previous section as characteristically linguistic anthropology. However, LE attempts to distinguish itself from the antecedents of linguistic anthropology, namely the ethnography of communication, IS and micro-ethnography in several ways. First, it brings a UK research perspective to historical developments in LA and makes explicit the importance of this work. Of particular mention here is literacy research which steps outside the classroom and looks at literacy within the broader setting of the communities in which people live out their lives (see Tusting and Barton, 2005 for a summary of Community-Based Local Literacies Research). Second, it draws on different approaches to the analysis of discourse such as conversation analysis (CA) and thus moves beyond those typically associated with early work in linguistic anthropology. Moreover, it draws heavily on literatures associated with

the general movement of post-structuralism in the social sciences and therefore combines fields of study not typical in earlier linguistic anthropology, such as media studies, feminist post-structuralism and sociology. Third, much LE has emerged from traditions within UK applied linguistics (see later) rather than anthropology and for this reason typically takes language rather than culture as its principal point of analytic entry into the problems it seeks to address. Rampton et al. (2004) argues that the influence of applied linguistics in the UK, has resulted in a particular kind of response from researchers in this vein or work

So in fact, even if they had wanted to produce “comprehensive ethnography. . . documenting a wide range of a way of life” (Hymes, 1996, p. 4), they didn’t really have the accredited expertise to do so. Instead, UK researchers tended to develop their commitment to ethnography in the process of working from language, literacy and discourse outwards, and so even though they have varied in just how far ‘outwards’ they reached, for the most part the ethnography has taken the narrower focus that Hymes calls “topic-oriented” (Hymes, 1996, p. 5) (Rampton et al., 2004, p. 6).

LE has therefore been shaped by major North American research as well as constituted through research past and present emerging from British universities. With regard to the latter, Rampton et al. (2004) describe linguistic ethnography as shaped by five ongoing and recent fields of socio and applied linguistic research. These are

- A focus on local literacies described in the work of New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Barton, 1994; Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000; Gregory and Williams, 2000; Martin-Jones and Jones, 2000; Street, 1984, 1993; see Tusting, *Ecologies of New Literacies and their Implications for Education*, Volume 9) in which texts are viewed as processual and constructed in social discourse and action. Street and the NLS played a major part in introducing the post-structuralist ‘turn’ to applied linguistics in the UK, and they influenced a wider shift of interest beyond texts-as-products to texts-in-culture-as-a-process (Street, 1993; see *Literacy*, Volume 2).
- A focus on ethnicity, language and inequality in education and in the workplace (Barwell, in press; Lytra, 2003; Martin-Jones, 1995; Rampton, 1995; Roberts, Davies and Jupp, 1992). Rampton’s work on linguistic crossing and urban heteroglossia is important in this group in having shaped LE. Rampton’s work deals with the agentive and creative nature of adolescent talk in creating new identities around ethnicity and shows how ‘adolescents attempt to escape, resist or affirm the racial orderings that threaten to dominate their everyday experience’ (1995, p. 20) (see also *Language Policy and Political Issues in Education*, Volume 1).

- A focus on ideology and the cultural dynamics of globalization represented in those working in critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1990, 1993, 1996; Kress, 1993). This area of work in the UK opened linguistics up to a wider range of sociologists and social theorists.
- A focus on the classroom as a site of interaction. There are two strands represented in this area. The first is the neo-Vygotskian research on language and cognitive development. Scholars working in this field have typically used Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962), as well as the neo-Vygotskian notion of scaffolding (Bruner, 1985), to investigate teaching and learning interactions between adults and children (Mercer, 1995). The second strand of classroom work is more focused on the classroom as a cultural context with its own sites of struggle and its own local institutional imperatives and affordances for particular kinds of learning and interaction (Creese, 2005; Maybin, 2003, 2006). This work shows how interaction is multi-layered and contested within the classroom with certain discourses neglected and others privileged.
- A focus on applied linguistics for language teaching. Work in this area is associated with scholars such as Widdowson (1984), Brumfit (1984) and Strevens (1977). In the UK this work has been important in shaping applied linguistics agendas through its attention to communicative competence in EFL teaching and teacher education.

LE, therefore, has been particularly influenced by research on literacy, ethnicity and identity, ideology, classroom discourse and language teaching. It aims to use discourse analytic tools in creative ways to extend our understanding of the role language plays in social life. It combines a number of research literatures from conversational analysis (CA), post-structuralism, urban sociology and US linguistic anthropology. It also has much in common with the North American perspective of LAE. It is worth summarizing the particularly influential elements of more recent US LAE work on LE.

Wortham describes 'contemporary linguistic anthropology of education as prioritizing educational institutions as research sites to explore how language ideologies get created and implemented' (Wortham, 2003, p. 2). Wortham, goes on to explain that,

Instead of imposing outsider categories, linguistic anthropology induces analytic categories that participants either articulate or presuppose in their action, and it insists on evidence that participants themselves are presupposing categories central to the analysis. (Wortham, 2003, p. 18)

Wortham (2003) describes major influences on LAE. In addition to the work of Hymes and Goffman (which also informed LE), research in

LAE has been influenced by the work of Michael Silverstein (1976, 2003) and others (Hanks, 1996; Lucy, 1993). Silverstein's interests in language ideology and metapragmatics has shown the unavoidable referentiality of language. He describes his work on indexicality as composed of two aspects. The first is 'appropriateness-to' contextual parameters already established and the second is, 'effectiveness-in' brining contextual parameters into being. Within LAE, this work is used to look at the interactional in relation to the macro-sociological and in considering the role schools play in cultural reproduction.

LAE has used Silverstein's work on metapragmatics and ideology (Silverstein, 2003; Silverstein and Urban, 1996) to describe how institutional social identities are interactionally accomplished and shifted in schools. In an overview chapter in the LAE volume (Wortham and Rymes, 2003), Hornberger brings a critical historical perspective to the formation of LAE:

Linguistic anthropology of education is, perhaps fundamentally, a field that seeks to understand macro-level societal phenomena, and in particular societal inequities, in terms of micro-level person-to-person interaction, in the hopes of enabling work for change from both the bottom up and the top down (Hornberger, 2003, p. 266).

LAE therefore, like LE, stresses the complementarity of anthropology and ethnography with linguistics.

From this short description of LAE we can see that both LE and LAE have their traditions in similar strands of US literature but with notable differences, the most salient of which is the influence of applied linguistics on LE. Perhaps LE can be described as more 'disciplinary eclectic' with less evidence of the strong genealogy in cultural anthropology which characterizes LAE. However, both aim to bring new analytical tools and different literatures to the study of discourse in social life. Both make education one of their core sites for research.

#### PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

At several points in this paper, it has been acknowledged that the term LE is new and under debate and we might say its future security is not certain. It faces several challenges and four of these are described below. First, certain 'linguistics' traditions when put alongside 'ethnography' do not necessarily sit comfortably together. Although as described earlier, there are established traditions of research which have addressed language and culture together, there are other traditions within linguistics which have not. The epistemological assumptions in

the two fields of study are not necessarily shared and therefore need consideration in defining what the unit of analysis is. For example, how might ethnography combine with particular approaches from within linguistics that do not take context as fundamental to analysis? As Rampton et al. (2004) suggest,

Linguistics is a massively contested field. There are a number of very robust linguistic sub-disciplines which treat language as an autonomous system (separating it from the contexts in which it is used) . . . (p. 3)

Such differing epistemological starting points can lead to different notions of what the principal object of study is. Defining an object of study requires finding a common language which can both describe and capture the dynamic nature of social life and its interactions. Debates within LE serve to consider some of these methodological and epistemological issues and look for a language of description which would enable researchers with opportunities to move beyond where we currently are.

A second challenge with LE is the danger of not keeping up with major developments either in linguistics or in ethnography and therefore taking a too narrowly defined position on both. To counter this argument, there already exists a range of traditions in linguistics and in ethnography which have an established history of working together, e.g. in linguistic anthropology as described earlier. However, there are also examples where relations between the two fields are more strained. Hymes (1983) shows how over the last 100 years, there have been moments/projects where linguistics and ethnography have been working in tension and moments when they have operated fairly smoothly.

A third challenge is germane to many areas of the social science and concerns the difficulty of relating micro-level phenomena and broader social trends and theories. In articulating linguistic ethnography a concern has been expressed that LE does not fully engage with its social responsibility in making the connection between small scale findings and wider social implications. That is, rather than simply raising issues of power and inequality and offering a balanced perspective, a question remains about what LE offers in addressing these inequalities.

A fourth challenge is concerned with this institutional pressures that researchers in micro-interpretive methods face. A potential problem with the micro-focus of linguistic ethnography described above is that it is out of step with research councils and their agendas for funding research, which is generalizable and large scale, generating statistical findings of significance and validity to a number of different contexts.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It is not yet clear what the future of linguistic ethnography is. In some ways, as this chapter has argued, it already has a long and established history through its connection to LA and other socio and applied linguistic traditions. However, in others, its newness is in the attempt to negotiate and articulate a distinctiveness. As this chapter is written, LE is in the process of negotiating itself into being and its career length and trajectory is not known. The debate about ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’ distinctive to linguistic ethnography is of course, like any field of study, an ideologically and interactionally negotiated process. As Silverstein argues,

the macro-sociological is really a projective order from within a complex, and ever changing, configuration of interdiscursivities in micro-contextual orders, some of which, it turns out, at any given moment of macro-order diachrony asymmetrically determine others (Silverstein, 2003, p. 202)

Whether LE will emerge in the macro-socio and applied linguistic ‘order’ as determinant will depend on the interdiscursive possibilities of micro-interactions and their reconfiguration, ‘entextualization and regimentation’ (see Silverstein, 2003; Wortham, 2003). Following Silverstein further, LE’s future will depend on its ability to reflect ‘appropriateness to’ already well established sociolinguistic parameters and ‘effectiveness-in’ bringing about new conversations and analytical frameworks.

Rampton argues for leaving the intellectual space open in terms of the kind of work which might emerge and sees the endeavour as an ‘enabling mechanism’ rather than setting goals and purposes to pursue.

LE in the UK isn’t a large, rich and well-oiled machine. Instead, there are scholars and research students scattered around lots of different institutions, a few with quite a few other LE researchers but a lot of people working more or less solo, and all of us operating in a highly competitive audit culture (Rampton, February, 2005, email correspondence).

A continuing aim in linguistic ethnography is to build a community and extend dialogue to develop theory and methodology.

In recent years, there has been a recognition of the emergence of ‘linguistic ethnography’ as an umbrella term bringing together these areas of work, and the need for scholars in these areas to engage in informed dialogue to develop the field methodologically and theoretically. In 2001, a group of UK-based researchers therefore came together to set up the *UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum* ([www.ling-ethnog.org.uk](http://www.ling-ethnog.org.uk)), a group which holds regular seminars and colloquia to explore these issues. Such events have covered a range of thematic areas including

asymmetrical discourses, the interface of linguistic ethnography with other fields of study (e.g., education, feminist post-structuralism and US linguistic anthropology) linguistic diversity and multilingualism, NLS, reflexivity, representation and translation, and urban heteroglossia. This group serves as one important site for dialogue around and development of work in linguistic ethnography in the UK. The linguistic ethnography forum attempts to raise questions, provoke discussion and formulate some answers about whether and how reasonable it is to speak of 'linguistic ethnography' in social science research (Rampton et al., 2004, p. 1).

Although heavily indebted to early work in the ethnography of communication, LE also sees itself as offering a new perspective relevant to researchers working in the social sciences in post-modernity (Rampton, Maybin and Tusting, in preparation). Substantial developments in US linguistic anthropology and the turn to post-structuralist accounts of discourse and meaning making in the research literature in the UK and Europe, have allowed LE to draw on more hybrid literatures in its analytical frameworks than those traditionally associated with the ethnography of communication.

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*See Also: Karin Tusting: Ecologies of New Literacies and their Implications for Education (Volume 9)*

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