

*Researching academic literacy
as a social practice: Developing a
text-oriented ethnography*

Theresa Lillis, The Open
University, UK.

t.m.lillis@open.ac.uk

Structure of my contribution

- Preface 1---me and research
- Preface 2---specific research project and labelling of methodology
- Answering the questions.....

What do you consider to be an ethnographic element in your research (in theoretical, methodological and/or empirical terms)?

In what ways would you say that this ethnographic element has been able to reach parts that other methods can't?

- [Using the Rampton et al 2004 paper as point of reference]

Preface 1---me and research

...I struggle with both the text/linguistic aspect and the context/ethnography aspect...(chimes with Rampton et al's account of UK training?)....

and decisions around which academic conversations and alignments?

....e.g. locating 'literacy studies' in/as linguistic ethnography??

Preface 2---specific research project

Professional Academic Writing in a Global Context (with Mary Jane Curry, University of Rochester, NY)

- The aim=to understand the significance of publishing in English for scholars who work outside of English-speaking countries, the obstacles and opportunities they encounter, and to examine which texts are successful or unsuccessful in being accepted for publication—and why.

- **Participants**

50 scholars from Slovakia, Hungary, Spain and Portugal in the fields of education and psychology

Labelling...Text oriented ethnography...

Academic texts and their production

Texts

Texts=inside texts-linguistic/rhetorical

Texts=their material existence and value, as
cultural capital

Ethnography

Production practices=who, what, where, why

Question 1:

What do you consider to be an ethnographic element in your research (in theoretical, methodological and/or empirical terms)?

Methodological –range of tools

ethnographic data

literacy history interviews, group discussions, email discussions, observations of meetings, ad hoc observations, interviews with librarians, institutional and historical documentary data *Email discussions and virtual observations 1000, correspondence with brokers around text (not quantified to date) observation notes [diaries from 2 researchers based primarily on a total of 6 (12) visits to each 'site'..more recent sites 1-3], photographs (not quantified to date), institutional documents.*

text and text oriented data

scholars' texts, scholars' commentary on the production of these texts through text-focused interviews. *Text focused interviews 155, Scholars' texts 547*

Time period 2001- on going

Interested in what participants say....

“If the text is only for [conference] proceedings, I will write the text and don't care about proofreading because it's all dependent on time and I don't have it. But if there is a competition, a selection, in that case I prefer a *native speaker* proofreading to, to the *translator* [EAL]. Because my purpose is to get more the native, 'knack', and I know the responsibility for the special talk, special discourse of the discipline is on myself, so sometimes I do not accept the recommendations of the native speaker. If it is for an international journal, then we try to have a *professional* [academic] *native speaker* like S or R. (INT 3/07/01 GI) (our emphasis).”GI

“Saying something from [Central Europe] which is new is not good, not allowed.”KW

-

[1] Repetitions and hesitations of speech have been cut. Brackets provide contextual information not evident in the talk.

Interested in what participants write...

It can be characterized by an, at least
implicit, **promotion of alcohol**
consumption in connection with casual sex
practices.

[GI]

In our case the X factor explanatory value
(among other factors) **was greater than**
in the case of Z et al [KW]

Interested in what participants do...

- *It's early evening, around 6 pm. I'm waiting to interview Fidel about his latest writings. Fidel is busy, walking in and out of his office from his desk to the printer in another office. NO and AC are discussing in Spanish the draft submissions they are preparing for an English medium European conference. The deadline is imminent and they are all anxious to get these proposals in. Fidel is engaged in several tasks at the same time. He is trying to write a single authored proposal in English, as well as support NO in producing his single authored text in English. Fidel sits at his desk AC comes in and looks at NO's draft and also adds comments. I'm there so I offer to look at NO's draft too. The phone rings and Fidel is talking on the phone to MN and they are discussing in Spanish a version of another proposal they are preparing together on behalf of two other colleagues [JK and JC], also involved in one of the research projects. Fidel listens and responds in Spanish on the phone as he writes at his computer in English, and MN writes at hers.*

Interested in the immediate
material contexts in which
participants work..

Not just a bundle of tools and data....enabling analysis and understanding of **situated** study of text production

Context as 'container' **and** constructed

For example, context as 'working in Slovakia', 'in Slovak Academy of Sciences', 'publishing in Slovak journal'= specific material conditions and consequences

But also what these 'ins' mean dynamic, processual, emergent

Question 2:

- In what ways would you say that this ethnographic element has been able to reach parts that other methods can't?

*My interest is in what combined ethnographic and textual orientation can offer.. **opening up and tying down** (Rampton et al 2004) always in tension...*

Text Histories...one way of trying to open up and tie down...

- Trajectories of texts towards English medium publication...
- How drafts change in this trajectory
- Who is involved
- What's at stake
- What do we learn about English medium academic knowledge production

Tracking changes across drafts— the text/linguistic aspect to the research.... ‘tying it down’

- *1. Additions* word, sentence, section added
- *2. Deletions* word, sentence, section added
- *3. Reformulation* words, phrase , sentences reworded
- *4. Re-shuffling* re-organisation of sentences/paragraphs/sections
- *5. Argument* claims, evidence, overall argument, what is foregrounded, backgrounded
- *6. Positioning* explicit reference to position of paper/research in relation to field/discipline/journal (CARS--Swales, 1990)
- *7. Lexical/Register* levels of formality, discipline, field specific vocabulary
- *8 Sentence level changes/corrections* to sentence level syntax, vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation
- *9. Cohesion markers* ways in which sentences/ sections linked through for example conjunctions, lexical items
- *10. Publishing conventions* specific journal or organisational conventions (such as APA)
- *11. Visuals/Representation of text* Formatting, diagrams, bullets

Example of changes...

Submitted text –

- **difference** from the Z et al study is that in our procedure–(I)*
- **The difference between** the strongest factor of Z (author) **and ours--(I)**
- **In our case** this is accompanied by--**while in Z (author) study ... (D)**
- **In our case** the X factor explanatory value (among other factors) **was greater than in the case of Z et al (D)**

Published text-

- results (see Table 1) **are consistent** with those of Z et al. in that ... (R & D)
- These results **appear to be supported** in a different linguistic and cultural setting ... (R & D)
- The X also **correlated significantly** with ... (R & D)

Our (researchers) summary...

In the published version, there are a total of ten overt shifts from signaling difference towards signaling confirmation.

Example of changes...

Additions to submitted text (and in published text)

- X (nationality) subjects (A)
- Specifically we wished to assess whether the XXX . . . would obtain in **a different linguistic and cultural setting (I)**
- Subjects . . . responding from a **different linguistic and cultural background (I)**
- the present study was designed with the intention of replicating P et al's findings---and to determine if the results held across **another culture (I)**
- Subjects ---responding from a **different linguistic and cultural background...(I)**
- **a different sample (I)**
- **a different linguistic version of all measures (I)**

Our (researchers) summary...

Whereas there are only three mentions of nationality/national context in the first version submitted for publication, there are 14 in the published version. Moreover the additional phrases such as 'different linguistic and cultural settings', 'cultural differences' are clearly intended to constitute a 'referential chain' with nationality/the national and linguistic context of the study.

Tracking who was involved....

Focus on text data			Focus on interview/email/field note discussions			
Changes made to draft	Draft number and section (e.g., AIMRDC)	Text reference/extract	Suggested/made by? When?	Response by Author(s)	Rhetorical/knowledge significance	
					Named author(s) perspective	Researcher Comments
1.Additions word, sentence, section added	D2 A	<i>as well as</i> , line 6 D2	S	accepted	See interview GI 16/10/01	
	D2 I	Figure on X nationally	S	accepted		
2.Deletions word, sentence, section added	1 D2 A	Sections re methodology cut: lines 5-9 D1.	S	accepted		
	3 D2 I	Line 19 cut--emphasis on intervention cut.	S	accepted		
	4 D2 I	Lines 28-29 cut--ref	S	accepted		

Tracking how changes came about- our representation as agreed with main author

- ...these additions were made following the involvement of the additional scholar and the editor throughout took an active part; in correspondence with the lead author and the additional scholar, the editor refers to his 'refining' of the text and his hope that they—the lead author and the additional scholar--would not take offence at such considerable intervention.

Views of participants---our representation as agreed with main author

- The shift in the overall argument of the article was evident to the main author. She accepted it, acknowledging that it would be easier to publish ‘if we focus on the similarities rather than the differences’. However she had mixed feelings. In considering the shift from contrast to confirmation, the author foregrounds the position of her national context as a peripheral location for academic production: “Saying something from [Central Europe] which is new is not good, not allowed. Of course it’s absolutely their perspective to see [Central Europe] as, I don’t know, a tribe trying to do something scientific” (INT 22/06/03 KW). She sees this publication, and the compromise it implied in terms of the shift in the main argument, as a necessary first step for researchers writing out of her national context who are marginal to, in her words, the ‘mainstream’. In practical-epistemological terms, it provides her research group with an authorised citation to use to reference their work in future publications in English-medium international journals.

What does ethnography (or ethnography plus..) offer? Theoretical...

- ethnography ‘as perspective on language’- language as socially culturally situated and ‘consequential in use’ (Blommaert 2006)
- ‘holistic pull’ (Hammersley 2006)
- valuing of participants’ perspectives and articulations over period of time ...‘being in the field’ necessary to get close to participants’ practices and meanings/opening up of what counts as meaningful data, ‘gifts’

ethnography as intellectual tradition--- range of questions, concerns

etic-emic/us-them/familiar-strange to research and knowledge making made explicit and valued, reflexivity, performance, representation

Tensions, dimensions in this project....

...national, cultural, linguistic (what counts?)

...academics/scholarly 'communities'

...researching up, down, across

...life cycles, age, gender

Ethnography's roots in anthropology...

...about 'them', about 'us'...mirrors...

academic knowledge production in global context

References

- **References cited in presentation**

Barton, D., Hamilton, M. and Ivanič, R. (eds) (2000) *Situated literacies: reading and writing in context*. London, Routledge.

Blommaert, J. (2006) 'Ethnography as counter-hegemony: remarks on epistemology and method', *Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies*, Paper 34, Institute of Education, London.

Hammersley, M (2006) 'Ethnography: problems and prospects', *Ethnography and Education*, 1, 1: 3-14

Rampton, B., Tusting, K., Maybin, J., Barwell, R., Creese, A. and Lytra, V. (2004) 'UK Linguistic ethnography: a Discussion paper', UKLEF Website

- **Publications from the project**

Curry, M.J. and Lillis, T. (2004) 'Multilingual scholars and the imperative to publish in English: Negotiating interests, demands, and rewards', *TESOL Quarterly*, 38,4:663-688

Lillis, T. and Curry, M. J. (2006) Professional academic writing by multilingual scholars: interactions with literacy brokers in the production of English medium texts, *Written Communication*, 23, 1:3-35.

Lillis, T. and Curry, M.J. (Forthcoming 2006) 'Re-framing notions of 'competence' in multilingual scholarly writing' in *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* .