

## **BAAL 2003 SIG Colloquium: Linguistic Ethnography at the Interface with Education**

### **Challenging family literacy pedagogy through linguistic ethnography**

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#### **Introduction**

In this paper, I want to compare two different contexts for examining and describing data. One is a context in which I was the teacher, in a family literacy class. The other is in the home of one of the families, who attended the class as part of a two-year ethnographic study of literacy practices in homes. What interests me when returning to these small examples of data is how the context in which the data was gathered shifts the interpretative understanding I brought to the texts. Without the detailed ethnography in the home, I was unable to understand and interpret the texts produced in the context of the family literacy class. In this paper, I look at excerpts from taped interviews and from fieldnotes, as well as drawings and photographs. In this paper, I define linguistic ethnography as ethnographically grounded detailed analysis of communicative practices (from Maybin's paper, this colloquium).

#### **Background to the data presented in this paper**

In this paper, I will focus on two contexts, a family literacy class and a home. I will use these as 'telling cases' of how texts produced in the home link to social practices observed as part of a longitudinal ethnographic study (Mitchell 1984). From the family literacy class, I will present some images, drawings by a five-year-old boy, Fatih, together with some field notes taken by myself at the time. The home data was drawn from an ethnographic study of three families. However, in this paper, I will focus on a Turkish family – Elif and her son Fatih. I initially met them through teaching family literacy. I then asked permission to conduct an ethnographic study of their home literacy practices, and the study was conducted over two years. I will include a short taped excerpt, from a longer interview with the mother, together with a multi-modal image made by her son and photographed by me at their home.

Finally, I draw the data together by asking what each provides the other. Does it help to have the home data in order to illuminate the family literacy context? How does the family literacy context support the home data? By placing the two side by side the bits of data will be considered in relation to each other.

I also acknowledge how I placed myself within the two settings. While in the family literacy context, I was 'teacher', in the home, as an ethnographic researcher, I had a more ambiguous status as 'friend' and 'researcher'. I found this field status complex and challenging. As Coffey observed,

...fieldwork is personal, emotional and identity work. (Coffey 1999:1)

I was aware that as I participated within the field work, there was a constant tension between my role as 'friend' and my role as researcher. Conversely in the family literacy class, there was an ambiguity in my role as 'teacher' and as potential researcher, as I used the family literacy site as a space in which to recruit families for the longer study.

#### **Context 1: The Family Literacy Class**

In the autumn of 1999 I worked on a family literacy project in a school in an inner city area. The project was funded through the Standards Fund, and had Basic Skills Agency Guidelines built into it. The class was situated in a larger two-form entry inner city school in North London. I worked with a Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) from the school to deliver the course. The teacher and I devised a programme which reflected the focus of the course on joint activities between parents and children, and a focus on home practices. The teacher was interested in this, and we worked together to develop a curricular option which we hoped would both engage the children and the adults in literacy activities, based on suggestions (such as the games making and environmental print) from the Basic Skills Agency, and on an interest in offering a curriculum which was responsive to parents. The curriculum looked like this:

Term planner  
Family Literacy P-----School

**Theme for term:** Food, recipes, shopping, cooking and celebrations  
**Extra activities:** Book making and dual texts production.

Date	Joint Activity
Wed 3 Nov	Playdough
Thurs 4 Nov	books on making playdough
Wed 10 Nov	Turkish pie making. Hand out cameras to use at home
Thurs 11 Nov	Make books about Turkish pie making
Wed 17 Nov	shopping in pairs and environmental print
Thurs 18 Nov	cooking
Wed 24 Nov	making alphabet cards with children
Thurs 25 Nov	making bingo game with alphabet cards
Wed 1 Dec	book making /celebrations
Thurs 2 Dec	Producing list of activities to do at home
Wed 8 Dec	taping celebration stories
Thurs 9 Dec	celebrations – cake making
	Last session – party!

In the first week we recruited three students, Elif, a young Turkish woman and her son, Fatih, and two other students, who were not in the home study. The school recruited these parents because the children, all five-year-old boys, were perceived as needing more support with literacy and some also had behavioural difficulties. Fatih had been temporarily excluded from school because of disruptive behaviour. The sessions were carefully structured. The group continued to grow, and by the end of term six families regularly attended.

Besides these official discourses, other discourses began to enter the class. On the 17<sup>th</sup> November, I noted down,

*Students talked about education/bringing up children in London as opposed to village life in Turkey. Fatih, meanwhile, drew this picture of a yellow chicken.*

Figure 1 chicken

A few weeks later Fatih brought in two cut out, cardboard flags, shaped like pennants with red stars on them.

Figure 2 flags

Because I was teaching the class, I merely noted the fact that he had brought the flags in my notebook. After the class I wondered if the flags and the chicken were connected to Fatih's sense of self. However, in the following week I noticed this, of the mother and child,

Fieldnotes 13.1.00

*They speak in Turkish, voice to ear and operate as a unit. Fatih has not fully separated from his mother. That is why the flags are so extraordinary.*

Here, I am giving a value judgement, and also trying to connect up the flags with notions of identity. Because I was teaching, my observational eye was also focused on behaviour, and on ways of interpreting actions. It could not be said to be ethnographic, I had not either been detached as an observer, or able to step outside my role as teacher.

## **Context II: The home**

In Fatih's home, I adopted the approach of being, 'the familiar stranger' and learned to observe text making at home, in a more interpretative and questioning context (Agar 1996). These fieldnotes come from a very early field visit, where I was trying to establish a sense of what was in the home, and to hear the language of the home.

Fatih: at that time was five and attending reception class, and the family literacy class.

Hanif, his brother, was aged eight

Elif, his mother, recently separated from her husband and re-housed.

Fieldnotes 17.01.00

*Fatih likes, said Hanif, Pokémon, Smurfs, Tom and Jerry – they have 2 Tom and Jerry videos. Fatih took a running leap at the chair. Also Art Attack.*

*I took an inventory of the toys on the floor: 2 turtles, 3 ladybirds, 1 dog 1 turtle 1 chicken – his chicken, 1 robot 1 duck 1 bird. Fatih likes chickens because of the sound, he says. Turkish is the language Elif uses with Fatih but when she is with her sister in law who lives in M\_\_\_\_\_ road the children they speak English. He learns a little Arabic – reading only – at the mosque for 2 hours. Elif doesn't know what he does at mosque as the boys go into a separate place.*

*I asked Fatih about the Turkish flags. Elif said that he thought of it – Hanif said ruefully that he threw his away as they weren't very good. Fatih said one was Turkish, one English – the red was Turkish. They were football flags – he watches football with his father. Elif is teaching Fatih to read Turkish using Turkish books – she showed me 'Little Red Riding Hood' in Turkish. We did this story in Family Literacy.*

These fieldnotes are still observations, and since this was the first field visit, I had not established a structure for fieldnotes. However, they have a very different quality. They are situated, and contain far more information about the home, and the contexts of the home. The chicken 'his chicken' is mentioned, and I ask Fatih about the flags. Also, the home acts as a point of reflection for the family literacy class. As I continued to visit, I observed the practices I was encouraging in family literacy – playing a game called 'Shopping list' being duplicated in the home. However, the practices I observed at home, such as playing the game

‘Okey’ which was a game involving dominoes with rules the same as Rummy, and very common in Turkish gaming bars, were not duplicated in family literacy.

I will now discuss two excerpts of tape – one is Elif talking about her son’s meaning making, and one is Fatih talking about the birds he likes to rescue. This is from an interview conducted in the home about one year after the initial observations in the family literacy class and the fieldnotes cited earlier.

The drawing Fatih was referring to in the excerpt is reproduced here (Fig 3).

### **Excerpt 1**

K: What’s this? (4)

Fatih: um (it’s a) A bird nest.

K: oh wow cos it’s the eggs Easter. Do you remember last Easter you had a chicken that laid an egg. Bird nest

Fatih: um That’s the mummy bird

K: That’s the mummy bird and what else. That says bird doesn’t it.

Fatih: er er That writes bird and this writes bird in Turkish.

Detailed ethnographic work over two years in the home began to create a context for both the Turkish flag and the chicken image produced in the family literacy class. This gave me an understanding of the images and the talk I recorded in the home. I observed that Fatih was pre-occupied with birds at home. His mother called him ‘Kus’ or little bird in Turkish, and the family’s real name was a wild bird’s name. Fatih was fascinated with chickens. When I asked him why, he responded,

#### 28.2.00 Fieldnotes

*We talked about her parents, and Hanif described the farm – the chickens ‘I want to eat them’ he said. I began to see where Fatih’s chicken had come from.*

*Also the issue of identity. We talked of sleeping on the floor at Hanif’s grandparents and the names he calls them. We talked of the journey – Flying for 3 and a half hours to Istanbul and then the coach. ‘I like the coach’ said Elif. Then a bus journey to her parent’s farmhouse. They have cows, some chickens and a dog.*

Over many months of detailed fieldwork I had come across many images of birds by Fatih, both in and out of classroom settings. I had recorded examples of bird making within the classroom and had collected examples of drawings and models of birds from home. This complex layer on layer accretions of meaning linked both to concrete examples, stories Fatih told of the chickens at his grandparents’ village house in central Turkey, and to more imaginary spaces, where ‘mummy birds’ existed and ‘granny’ birds. The bird occupied a complex space for Fatih. He was interested in birds, and drew them constantly. The image of the chicken is more specific – an observation from the village in Turkey where he spent his summer holidays. Ethnographic fieldwork revealed the bird theme, running across spaces and across timescales. The relationships I had built up with Fatih and Elif, and the conversations which then were analysed enabled me to make these realisations.

The difference, also between the two different contexts for the data is timescale. The data I interpreted at home was part of a mass of data collected over two years, whereas the data collected in the family literacy class was collected in the timescale of the course, twelve weeks. One of the key differences, I would argue, between research in classrooms and research in homes, is the difference of timescales (Lemke 2000). The timescale of the family

literacy class was contained by the demands of the term, and the specific twelve-week course within a term. By contract, the visits to Elif's home occurred over a period of three years. For example, for three years running, I was served a special 'sweet soup' at Muharram, the Islamic New Year. This soup was composed of nuts, arrowroot and chickpeas, and represented the feast had by those left behind once Noah had come down from the Mountain, after the flood, a story which is in the Qu'ran. This soup, infused with meaning, was served annually, and over time I began to recognise the soup, and to value being served it. The timescale of the soup lay beyond the annual cycle of terms and lessons of the school, but linked to longer narratives written in the Qu'ran, and practices observed in village life in Turkey, and translated into recipes (Delaney 1991).

Finally, here is an example of Fatih's meaning making which links back to the Turkish flags. I was interested in the ways in which identity seeped into children's text making. For Fatih, as a relatively isolated Turkish child in a mostly non-Turkish community, the identity of 'Turkey' was salient, as the flags demonstrated. Here is another piece of transcript, from the same tape as the tape about the birds, talking about Fatih's meaning making:

### Excerpt 2

- E: Do you know sometimes he...(3) er...(2) just er, for mine I explain...
- K: Show me  
(She gets some prayer beads and makes a shape.)
- E: (8) Lots of these making these...
- K: Fatih makes?
- E: No!
- K: You make?
- E: No... (1) playing this.
- K: Beads?
- E: After the prayer he making. (laughs) He make it like this (2) on the carpet.
- K: Yeah?
- E: Like any//
- K: //A shape?
- E: Which country.
- K: Ah I like that!
- E: I said Ireland he make it different like how Turkey like this. I said Turkey like this I said Turkey different very different I said England, Arabia I said, he make all! (laughs)

### Fig 4

Here, the child's meaning making focuses on the making of a map with his mother's prayer beads. The affordance of the prayer beads allows the child to make the image, the game of the outline of Turkey. Fatih plays with different identities, different countries, and in doing so, reflect the geographical spaces his family drew on. Fatih's uncle was currently working in Saudi Arabia, and Elif's father had left the family to work there when she was little. The crossing over from Turkey to England was experienced through the making of shapes on the carpet.

### Conclusion

There are two key points to be made here. Firstly, the understanding I came to about the bird and the bead shape of Turkey came through the affordances of linguistic ethnography. This

enabled me to examine home interactions and tape discussions about the images made at home. The relationships I built up in the home allowed me to make connections between texts and contexts in a very different way from the family literacy class.

Secondly, the issue of timescales enabled a way of seeing meanings as they accrued over time. This gave the images context. The combination of linguistic ethnography, the attention to multimodal texts, and the focus on timescales, gave me the lens in which to understand these images.

The isolated images of the chicken and the flags began to become contextualised through the ethnography I was doing. By layering the observations, and referring back to field notes, tape recordings and images from the household, the complex web of identities, the chicken, and the Turkish flags, and the map of Turkey, become embedded and given a context.

Ethnography here is revealed to be a messy, chaotic enterprise, which involves a constant re-visiting of data, both when in the field, and afterwards (Blommaert 2003, Bourdieu 2000). Much of my ethnography had an improvised quality (Lareau 1996). I wanted to present the way in which the home context led to the notion of timescales and the work around identity. However, finally, I want to consider what implications this work has for pedagogy.

I think the issue of timescales is key. Lemke, in an article, 'Across the Scales of Time' argues that schools have particular timescales, which can be placed in contrast to other timescales, for example, in his article, the case of a story about the samurai sword, which has,

A years-long historical process of cumulating meanings and value envelops the heirloom sword, but this long-term process intersects with and determines action in a very short-term event. (Lemke 2000)

Lemke describes how,

The samurai acts in the situation, not just in relation to present events and material relations, but also in relation to his interpretation of the appropriateness of using the sword and his own education in the traditions of his family and culture – a process on a timescale intermediate between that of the sword's history and the present event. (Lemke 2000)

By contrast, school time is differently organised, argues Lemke, and classrooms include meaning-inscribed objects which have their own timescales within them. The school year was organised around the terms, and nods at major religious festivals, such as Eid and Muhharam, within the confines of the school year. However, it does not allow for the complex accretion of meaning, that Fatih's meaning making over time showed.

The context for the bird and the flag was altered by the fieldwork I did in the home. The value of linguistic ethnography was to contextualise, to provide a connection between 'fragments and fields',

...it is the relations between fragments and fields that pose the greatest analytic challenge. (Comaroff J. and J. 1992: 17)

This making connections as an interpretative activity was key to the fieldwork. to re-construct the processes by which meanings were constructed. Texts are created within contexts, which ‘have to be constructed analytically’, (Comaroff J. and J. 1992), and because of this,

...we have to confront the complexities of our relations to our subjects, texts and audiences – especially because the impact of our work is never fully foreseeable. (Comaroff J. and J.1992:12 )

The complexity of this data was that while it was clear that in the home context the flags and the chicken operated as strong markers of identity in practices, in the schooled context the chicken and the flags were not explored further. The home and school contexts were riven with discontinuities (Hull and Schultz 2002). The joining of school and home was not achieved, although my interest in the continuities between home and school pushed for more ‘joining up’. A more joined up curriculum, which some teachers do construct through dialogic approaches to constructing meanings in classrooms, would have looked at Turkey, and would have taken birds as the theme, the chicken the bird and the way birds were perceived within Turkish cultural texts. This would have supported Fatih’s meaning making structures and given the ethnography a way back into pedagogic practice.

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