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Ethnography as counter-hegemony: Remarks on epistemology & method

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Remarks on epistemology and method

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Introduction

Ethnography is a strange scientific phenomenon. On the one hand, it can be seen as probably the only truly influential 'invention' of anthropological linguistics, having triggered important developments in social-scientific fields as diverse as pragmatics and discourse analysis, sociology and historiography and having caused a degree of attention to small detail in human interaction previously unaddressed in many fields of the social sciences.[1] At the same time, ethnography has for decades come under fire from within. Critical anthropology emerged from within ethnography, and strident critiques by e.g. Johannes Fabian (1983) and James Clifford (1988) exposed immense epistemological and ethical problems in ethnography. Their call for a historization of *ethnographies* (rather than a singular *ethnography*) was answered by a flood of studies contextualizing the work of prominent ethnographers, often in ways that critically called into question the epistemological, positive-scientific appeal so prominently voiced in the works of e.g. Griaule, Boas, or Malinowski (see e.g. Stocking 1992, Darnell 1998). So whereas ethnography is by all standards a hugely successful enterprise, its respectability has never matched its influence in the social sciences.

'True' ethnography is rare – a fact perhaps deriving from its controversial status and the falsification of claims to positive scientificity by its founding fathers. More often than not, ethnography is perceived as a *method* for collecting particular types of data and thus as something that can be added, like the use of a computer, to different scientific procedures and programs. Even in anthropology, ethnography is often seen as a synonym for description. In the field of language, ethnography is popularly perceived as a technique and a series of propositions by means of which something can be said about 'context'. Talk can thus be separated from its context, and whereas the study of talk is a matter for linguistics, conversation analysis or discourse analysis, the study of context is a matter for ethnography (see Blommaert 2001 for a fuller discussion and references). What we notice in such discussions and treatments of ethnography is a reduction of ethnography to *fieldwork*, but naïvely, in the sense that the critical epistemological issues buried in seemingly simple fieldwork practices are not taken into account. Fieldwork/ethnography is perceived as *description*: an account of facts and experiences captured under the label of 'context', but in itself often un- or undercontextualized.

It is against this narrow view that I want to pit my argument, which will revolve around the fact that ethnography *can as well* be seen as a 'full' intellectual program far richer than just a matter of description. Ethnography, I will argue, involves a *perspective* on language and communication, including an ontology and an epistemology, both of which are of significance for the study of language in society, or better, of language *as well as* of society. Interestingly, this programmatic view of ethnography emerges from critical voices from within ethnography. Rather than destroying the ethnographic project, critiques such as the ones developed by Fabian (1979, 1983, 1995) and Hymes (1972, 1996) have added substance and punch to the program.

Ethnography as a perspective

A first correction that needs to be made to the widespread image of ethnography is that right from the start, it was far more than a complex of fieldwork techniques. Ever since its beginnings in the works of Malinowski and Boas, it was part of a total program of scientific description and interpretation, comprising not only technical, methodical aspects (Malinowskian fieldwork) but also, e.g., cultural relativism and behaviorist-functionalist theoretical underpinnings. Ethnography was the scientific apparatus that put communities, rather than human kind, on the map, focusing attention on the complexity of separate social units, the intricate relations between small features of a single system usually seen as in balance.[2] In Sapirian linguistics, folklore and descriptive linguistics went hand in hand with linguistic classification and historical-genetic treatments of cultures and societies. Ethnography was an approach in which systems were conceived as non-homogeneous, composed of a variety of features, and in which part-whole relationships were central to the work of interpretation and analysis. Regna Darnell's book on Boas (Darnell 1998) contains a revealing discussion of the differences between Boas and Sapir regarding the classification of North-American languages, and one of the striking things is to see how linguistic classification becomes a domain for the articulation of theories of culture and cultural dynamics, certainly in Boas' case (Darnell 1998: 211ff). It is significant also that as ethnography became more sophisticated and linguistic phenomena were studied in greater detail and nuance, better and more mature theories of social units such as the speech community emerged (Gumperz 1968).

So there always was more than just description in ethnography – problems of interpretation and indeed of ontology and epistemology have always figured in debates on and in ethnography, as did matters of method versus interpretation and issues of aligning ethnography with one discipline or another (linguistics versus anthropology being e.g. the issue in the Boas-Sapir debate on classification). In fact, it is my conviction that ethnography, certainly in the works of its most prominent practicioners, has always had aspirations to *theory* status. No doubt, Dell Hymes' oeuvre stands out in its attempt at retrieving the historical roots of this larger ethnographic program (Hymes 1964, 1983) as well as at providing a firm theoretical grounding for ethnography himself (Hymes 1972, 1996). Hymes took stock of new reflections on 'theory' produced in Chomskyan linguistics, and foregrounded the issue in ethnography as well, and in clearer and more outspoken terms than before. To Hymes, ethnography was a 'descriptive theory': an approach that was theoretical because it provided description in specific, methodologically and epistemologically grounded ways.

I will discuss some of the main lines of argument in Hymes' work at some length here, adding, at points, important elements for our understanding of ethnography as taken from Johannes Fabian's work. Fabian, like Hymes, is probably best known for his documentary work (e.g. Fabian 1986, 1996), while his theoretical reflections have not received the attention they deserve.

To start with, a crucial element in any discussion of ethnography should be its history, for inscribed in its techniques and patterns of operation are numerous traces of its intellectual origins and background. Ethnography has its origin in *anthropology*, not in linguistics nor in sociology or psychology. That means that the basic architecture of ethnography is one that already contains ontologies, methodologies and epistemologies that need to be situated within the larger tradition of anthropology and that do not necessarily fit the frameworks of other traditions. Central to this is *humanism*: "It is anthropology's task to coordinate knowledge about language from the viewpoint of *man*" (Hymes 1964: xiii). This means that language is approached as something that has a certain relevance to man, and man in anthropology is seen

as a creature whose existence is narrowly linked, conditioned or determined by society, community, the group, culture. Language from an anthropological perspective is almost necessarily captured in a functionalist epistemology, and questions about language take the shape of questions of how language works and operates for, with and by humans-as-social-beings.[3]

Let us immediately sketch some of the implications of this humanist and functionalist anthropological background to ethnography. One important consequence has to do with the ontology, the definition of language itself. Language is typically seen as a socially loaded and assessed tool for humans, the finality of which is to enable humans to perform as social beings. Language, in this tradition, is defined as a *resource* to be used, deployed and exploited by human beings in social life and hence socially consequential for humans. Further implications of this will be addressed below. A second important implication is about context. There is no way in which language can be 'context-less' in this anthropological tradition in ethnography. To language, there is always a particular function, a concrete shape, a specific mode of operation, and an identifiable set of relations between singular acts of language and wider patterns of resources and their functions. Language is context, it is the architecture of social behavior itself, and thus part of social structure and social relations. To this as well I will return below.

Let me summarize what has been said so far. Central to any understanding of ethnography are its roots in anthropology. These anthropological roots provide a specific direction to ethnography, one that situates language deeply and inextricably in social life and offers a particular and distinct ontology and epistemology to ethnography. Ethnography contains a *perspective* on language which differs from that of many other branches of the study of language. It is important to remember this, and despite possible relocations and redeployments of ethnography in different theoretical frameworks, the fact that it is designed to fit an anthropological set of questions is important for our understanding of what ethnography can and cannot perform. As Hymes says, "failure to remember can confuse or impair anthropological thinking and research, setting up false antitheses and leaving significant phenomena unstudied" (1964: xxvii).

Resources and dialectics

Let us now get a bit deeper into the features identified above: the particular ontology and epistemology characterizing ethnography.

Language is seen as a set of resources, means available to human beings in societies. These resources can be deployed in a variety of circumstances, but when this happens it never happens in a neutral way. Every act of language use is an act that is assessed, weighed, measured socially, in terms of contrasts between this act and others. In fact, language becomes the social and culturally embedded thing it is because of the fact that it is socially and culturally consequential in use. The clearest formulation of this resources view on language can be found in Hymes' essay *Speech and language: on the origins and foundations of inequality among speakers* (1996, chapter 3). In this strident essay, Hymes differentiates between a linguistic notion of language and an ethnographic notion of speech. Language, Hymes argues, is what linguists have made of it, a concept with little significance for the people who actually use language. Speech is language-in-society, i.e. an *active* notion and one that deeply situates language in a web of relations of power, a dynamics of availability and accessibility, a situatedness of single acts vis-à-vis larger social and historical patterns such as genres and traditions. Speech is language in which people have made investments – social, cultural, political, individual-emotional ones. It is also language brought under social control -

consequently language marked by sometimes extreme cleavages and inequalities in repertoires and opportunities.

This has no small consequences to the study of language. For one thing, studying language means studying society, more precisely, it means that all kinds of different meanings, meaning effects, performativities and language functions can and need to be addressed than those current (and accepted) in mainstream linguistics.[4] Second, there is nothing static about this ethnographic view of language. Language appears in reality as performance, as actions performed by people in a social environment. Hence, strict synchrony is impossible as the deployment of linguistic resources is in itself, and step by step as sentences and utterances are constructed, a process. It is this process, and not its linguistic product (statified and reified sentences or utterances) that needs to be understood in ethnography. In order to acquire this understanding, as much attention needs to be given to what is seen from the statified and reified perspective mentioned as 'nonlinguistic' matters as needs to be given to strictly 'linguistic' matters. It is at this point that one can understand how ethnography triggered important developments both in general sociology – Bourdieu's work is exemplary in this respect – as well as in kinesics, nonverbal communicative behavior and indeed social semiosis in general – Goffman, Garfinkel and Goodwin can be mentioned here. From an ethnographic perspective, the distinction between linguistic and nonlinguistic is an artificial one since every act of language needs to be situated in wider patterns of human social behavior, and intricate connections between various aspects of this complex need to be specified: the ethnographic principle of *situatedness*.

It is also relevant to underscore the *critical* potential which ethnography derives from these principles. The constant feedback between communicative actions and social relations involves, as said, reflections on *value* of communicative practices, starting from the observation that not every form of communication is performed or performable in any situation. Society imposes hierarchies and value-scales on language, and the looking-glass of linguistic practice often provides a magnified image of the workings of powers and the deep structures of inequality in society. It is telling that some of the most critical studies on education have been produced by scholars using an ethnographic perspective (Cook-Gumperz 1988, Gee 1996, Heller 2000, Rampton 1995). Similarly, it is an interesting exercise to examine the critique formulated from within ethnography against other language scholars involved in the study of language and power. These critiques are not merely critiques of method, they are about the nature of language-power relationships (see Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000; Blommaert et al, eds 2001). And central to this critique is often the notion of language ideologies (Woolard, Schieffelin & Kroskrity 1998; Kroskrity 2000): metalinguistic and hence deeply sociocultural ideas of language users about language and communication that not only appear to direct language behavior and the interpretation of language acts, but also account for folk and official 'rankings' and hierarchies of linguistic varieties.

Object-level (the 'acts' themselves) and metalevel (ideas and interpretations of these acts) cannot be separated in ethnography, for the social value of language is an intrinsic and constituent part of language usage itself; That is: in every act of language people inscribe and mark the social situatedness of these acts and so offer patterns of interpretation to the others. These patterns of interpretation are never fixed, of course, but require acknowledgment and interactional co-construction. So here also, strict synchronicity is impossible, for there is both a processual and a historical dimension to every act of language-in-society (Silverstein & Urban 1996), and the rankings and hierarchies of language are themselves an area of perpetual debate and conflict (Blommaert 1999). The social dimension of language is precisely the blending of linguistic and metalinguistic levels in communication: actions proceed with an awareness of how these actions should proceed and can proceed in specific social

environments. And to be clear about this point, this means that every language act is intrinsically historical.

This brings me to the epistemological level of ethnography. Knowledge of language facts is processual and historical knowledge, lifting single instances of talk to a level of relevance far higher than just the event. They become indexical of patterns and developments of wider scope and significance, and these wider dimensions are part of ethnographic interpretation. Static interpretations of context – 'setting', 'speech community' and so forth – are anathema and to the extent that they occur in ethnographic writing they should be seen as either a rhetorical reduction strategy or worse, as a falsification of the ethnographic endeavor (Fabian 1983, 1995). Fabian stresses the dynamic process of knowledge gathering in ethnography, emphasizing the fact that ethnographic work also involves active – véry active – involvement from the ethnographer himself (a fact known from the days of Malinowski and emphasized, e.g. by Edmund Leach, but often overlooked). This provides ethnography with a peculiar, dynamic and dialectical epistemology in which the *ignorance* of the knower – the ethnographer – is a crucial point of departure (Fabian 1995). Consequently, ethnography attributes (and hàs to attribute) great importance to the history of what is commonly seen as 'data': the whole process of gathering and moulding knowledge is part of that knowledge; knowledge construction *is* knowledge, the process is the product (see Blommaert 2001; Ochs 1979).

Summarizing, language in ethnography is something very different from what it is in many other branches of the languages sciences, and so is the status of gathering knowledge. There is no way in which knowledge of language can be separated from the situatedness of the object at a variety of levels, ranging from microscopic to macroscopic levels of 'context' and involving, reflexively, the acts of knowledge production by ethnographers themselves.

Ethnography as counter-hegemony

Walter Benjamin once wrote that the task of historians was to challenge established and commonly accepted representations of history. History, in his view, was necessarily critical and counter-hegemonic, and a science such as history only had a *raison d'être* to the extent that it performed this role of challenging hegemonies. Exactly the same suggestion can be made with respect to ethnography: it has the potential and the capacity of challenging established views, not only of language but of symbolic capital in societies in general. It is capable of constructing a discourse on social uses of language and social dimensions of meaningful behavior which differs strongly from established norms and expectations, indeed takes the concrete functionings of these norms and expectations as starting points for questioning them, in other words, it takes them as problems rather than as facts.

Central to all of this is the mapping of resources onto functions: the way, for instance, in which a standard variety of a language acquires the function of 'medium of education' while a non-standard variety would not. This mapping is socially controlled, it is not a feature of language but one of society. Ethnography becomes critique here: the attributed function of particular resources is often a kind of social imagination, a percolation of social structure into language structure. Ethnography deconstructs this imagination and compares it to observable real forms and functions.

What does this mean for the study of literacy? The lack of an ethnography of writing has been lamented in the past, but in the meantime, thanks to scholars such as Brian Street, David Barton and others, a considerable body of scholarship has been composed and has become influential. It seems to me that the peculiarities of ethnography could induce a *materialist* approach to writing, in which the social-resources and social-evaluative aspects of

literacy in relation to empowerment or disempowerment can be favorably studied. To the extent that such an approach to literacy draws the attention away from statified and reified concepts such as "literacy = written text", and delves into the conditions of production and the process of production so to speak, rather than to the product, I believe this approach has an enormous critical potential.

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Notes

1. The recently launched journal *Ethnography* testifies to the impact of ethnography in a wide range of social sciences. An important, and frequent, contributor to the journal was Pierre Bourdieu, operating alongside sociocultural and linguistic anthropologists and microsociologists.
2. Cf. Hymes (1980: 89): "The earliest work that we recognize as important ethnography has generally the quality of being systematic in the sense of being *comprehensive.*"
3. It may be interesting to point out that this view has percolated contemporary pragmatics. In the introduction to the *Handbook of Pragmatics* (Verschueren 1995), pragmatics is defined as a functional perspective on language and communication. Verschueren refers, significantly, to Sapir (1929) as a source of inspiration for this view.
4. At a very basic level, this pertains to the assumption that language *has* a function, and that its main purpose is *communication*. Truistic as it now may seem, at various points in the history of the language sciences these points required elaborate arguing.

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