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**Literacy studies as  
linguistic ethnography**

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# LITERACY STUDIES AS LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY

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This paper makes the case for the continuing importance of literacy studies within linguistic ethnography, particularly given the nature of the kinds of societies in which we are working. It underlines the importance of continuing to develop concepts and approaches for analysis of the textually mediated nature of the contemporary social world within the linguistic ethnographic enterprise.

I will address the textually mediated nature of our social worlds, and how interactions around texts instantiate and continue social relationships, processes and structures. The importance of textual mediation is highlighted by the increased significance of communication in digital environments and of multimodal communication. This calls for an approach to linguistic ethnography which has the conceptual and methodological tools to address both the nature of the texts and the nature of these practices.

I will highlight the importance of having a robust theoretical and methodological apparatus to address questions around people's interactions involving materialised language in various forms. This goes along with the importance in linguistic ethnography of robust theoretical and methodological approaches to the analysis of spoken language drawing from interactional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis and the ethnography of communication; but as Lillis (2013) argues, focusing research on writing practices and written texts has the potential to challenge and develop ideas and methods which have become established within sociolinguistics.

I will illustrate the argument in part with reference to a range of work situated both within linguistic ethnography and literacy studies, including my own recent research on paperwork in educational workplaces, to demonstrate how an orientation to analysis of practices around texts is centrally informing the understandings linguistic ethnography is developing.

## LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY

Linguistic ethnography - "the conjuncture of ethnography and linguistics" (Rampton et al., 2004) - brings together insights and methodologies from linguistics and from ethnography with an aim of better understanding the significance of language practices in instantiating, being shaped by, and continuing social and cultural contexts. While the approach is represented by the work of a range of scholars with shared interests and overlapping connections, rather than a disciplinary orthodoxy (Maybin & Tusting, 2011), these are brought together by a belief that language and the social world mutually shape one another, and that the mechanisms and dynamics of these processes can be understood through close analysis of language use and meaning-making in everyday activity. At its heart, linguistic ethnography aims to capture "the meanings and dynamics in particular cultural settings" (Rampton et al., 2004, p. 2) using ethnographic methods, while paying particular attention to the meaning-making (particularly linguistic) processes by means of which such cultural settings are constructed and maintained.

While it shares this broad orientation with other areas in (socio)linguistics, notably critical discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005), linguistic ethnographic approaches are distinguished from these in various ways. Methodologically, there is an insistence on the central importance of participant observation in contexts, explicit reflexivity around the role of the researcher, and a central place given to

generating understandings of the emic perspectives of participants (Maybin & Tusting, 2011; Rampton et al., 2004; Tusting & Maybin, 2007). Theoretically, the relationship between ‘context’ and ‘text’ is articulated through concepts such as indexicality, recontextualisation cues, and orientation, which draw from linguistic anthropology in developing a language for describing how language use constructs contexts in meaning-making process. This gives a way of going beyond the dualism of approaches which situate ‘texts’ within ‘contexts’ (even where these contexts are ‘multi-layered’ ones, eg Reisigl and Wodak (2009)), to explore the way local and global contexts are constructed and maintained through semiotic practices (eg Blommaert et al. (2001)). Blommaert’s critique of the way context is presented almost as a pre-existing set of framing facts in CDA (Blommaert, 2001, 2005) is perhaps not as valid now, with a range of work in CDA which engages with ethnography more directly (see eg Krzyzanowski (2011) and the papers in the associated special issue of Critical Discourse Studies). Nevertheless, linguistic ethnography is distinctive in its central incorporation of anthropological concepts to address the problem of contextualisation.

The range of theoretical resources drawn on is also distinctive. As Creese (2008) argues, while linguistic ethnography is clearly rooted in Hymesian ethnography of communication (Gumperz & Hymes, 1972; Rampton, 2007), and draws on interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982) and micro-ethnography (Erickson, 1996), it is also an approach which draws more widely on work in other disciplines - anthropology and sociology particularly, as well as applied linguistics - which share the focus on processes of meaning-making and the dialectical relationship between language and culture / social structures. While “UK researchers tended to develop their commitment to ethnography in the process of working from language, literacy and discourse outwards” (Rampton et al., 2004, p. 11), such interdisciplinarity has been inherent to the linguistic ethnographic enterprise, as researchers discover the need to draw on theories of how the mutually shaping processes of language and society / culture work, in order to interpret their detailed analyses of language and literacy practices (Tusting & Maybin, 2007).

## **LITERACY STUDIES WITHIN LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY**

Throughout the development of linguistic ethnography as an enterprise, the ‘New Literacy Studies’ (NLS) have been identified as one of the central strands shaping the approach, at least in the UK (Creese, 2008; Maybin & Tusting, 2011; Rampton et al., 2004), the other key strand being interactional sociolinguistics, with critical discourse analysis, neo-Vygotskian approaches, and interpretive applied linguistics also being important. Early meetings of what became the (UK) Linguistic Ethnography Forum drew together scholars with backgrounds in literacy and in interactional sociolinguistics, sharing an interest in ethnographic methods and concepts, as well as anthropologists with particular interests in language practices (see reports at uklef.net for details).

There is a theoretical and methodological coherence between literacy studies as a field and linguistic ethnography more generally, with their common historical antecedents, theoretical framings and methodological approaches. A recent collection edited by Barton and Papen (Barton & Papen, 2010), for instance, orients explicitly to the anthropological tradition, “examining writing as cultural and social practice” (p. 24), bringing together papers representing the French tradition of ‘*l’anthropologie de l’écrit*’ with the British New Literacy Studies. Literacy studies generally shares the same perspectives on language as work in linguistic ethnography more generally, as outlined in Rampton et al. (2004): an understanding of language in terms of practices specific to social groups and domains, rather than as universal systems; an appreciation that there are recurrent and relatively stable patterns in the ways people use language, which are learned and continued in interaction in social settings; and drawing on established procedures and relatively technical vocabularies for isolating and identifying these structures. In writing studies, we might for instance be talking here about detailed analysis of written

genres, or combining detailed analysis of texts with talk around them (Lillis, 2009, and see below). Just as there is variation in the extent to which other work in linguistic ethnography balances the “contradictory pulls of linguistics and ethnography” (Rampton et al., 2004, p. 4), some work in literacy studies orients more to the ethnographic pole and other work to the more technical linguistic one. But overall, the concern with taking an ethnographic stance towards the understanding of language practices is as central to most work in NLS as it is to work in other areas of linguistic ethnography.

Key concepts drawn on in literacy studies such as the ‘literacy event’ (Heath, 1983) are adapted from the ethnography of communication, which shaped Heath’s goal of developing a sociolinguistic approach to literacy. Klassen (1991) develops a case for adopting an ethnographic approach within a sociolinguistics of literacy. A few years later, Kelder (1995) was referencing Hymes’ (1974) call for a ‘linguistic ethnography’ in an argument to develop a broader focus on the ‘literacy event’ as performing a set of interpretive acts in various linguistic and social contexts, exploring how the concept of intertextuality can be drawn on in analysing the different ‘interpretive competencies’ used in different mediums (citing Heath, 1988) and how these are drawn on in different literacy events.

These perspectives were combined to develop a perspective on literacy that saw reading and writing as situated social practices (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Barton, 2007), best understood not by testing literacy ‘skills’ in a decontextualised way, but by privileging ethnographic methods (Tusting & Barton, 2005). By participating in settings and observing people engaging in literacy events, studies from this perspective developed understandings of how literacy practices are situated within and shaped by context, domain, historical setting and person (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Martin-Jones & Jones, 2000; Street, 1984, 1993). This shift from literacy skills to literacy practices mirrors the shift in focus in the ethnography of communication from the language system to its use in contexts of situation, in relation to participants’ perspectives (Maybin & Tusting, 2011).

Methods of research in literacy studies share the linguistic ethnographic orientation towards “close knowledge through first-hand participation [which] allows the researcher to attend to aspects of lived experience that are hard to articulate, merely incipient, or erased within the systems of representation that are most regular and reliably described” (Rampton et al., 2004). This aspect has manifested itself most directly in studies of people’s many everyday or ‘local’ literacies (eg Barton & Hamilton, 1998), making visible and highlighting the ‘vernacular’ literacies which constitute the majority of many people’s literacy practices and yet are undervalued and backgrounded in the dominant contemporary discussions of literacy in terms of skills and levels.

While there has been important work on the literacy practices of ‘distant’ cultures by anthropologists (Ahearn, 2001; Besnier, 1995; Street, 1993) and in relation to literacy and development (Juffermans, 2011; Robinson-Pant, 2001), a great deal of NLS work has indeed been characterised by people working outwards from real-world settings familiar to them - what Rampton (2007) describes as “an overall shift from the inside moving outwards, trying to get analytic distance on what’s close-at-hand, rather than a move from the outside inwards, trying to get familiar with the strange” (pp. 590-591). For instance, extensive work has been carried out in the literacies of higher education by academic staff (Lea, 2013; Lillis & Scott, 2007), in adult literacy (and numeracy) education classes by researcher-practitioners (Burgess, 2008; Oughton, 2007; Varey & Tusting, 2012), in workplaces by people involved with workplace education (Belfiore, Defoe, Folinsbee, Hunter, & Jackson, 2004; Farrell, 2006; Gowen, 1992; Iedema & Scheeres, 2003), in communities people have personal connections and history with such as religious organisations (Kapitzke, 1995) or rooted in people’s life experiences in other ways (Papen, 2008), including their participation in digital settings (Davies & Merchant, 2007; Lankshear & Knobel, 2001).

Work on children’s literacies in and out of school (see Hull and Schultz (2001) for an extensive review of earlier work) is also often located within the ethnographic tradition, including early work in

ethnography of communication highlighting mismatches between home and school language use for students from minority groups (Michaels, 1981; Philips, 1983) and work done from a sociocultural perspective to explore how bridges could be built between communities and classrooms by bringing in and drawing on students' 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). In line with the 'digital turn' discussed above, recent work has drawn attention to the potential of children's out-of-school digital literacy practices for educational work, demonstrating the innovation and creativity demonstrated in students' digital interactions (Bulfin & North, 2007; G. A. Hull, 2003). All of this work is characterised by the same things identified in Rampton et al. (2004): sensitivity to agency and 'creative practices', and suspicions about overarching generalisations.

### **Textually mediated society**

The NLS perspective on interactions involving written texts is very important in conceptualising and researching the construction and continuation of the social order through language interactions, in several ways. The first of these is in directly addressing the textually mediated nature of the social world, as a way of making links outwards between local ethnographies and broader social and cultural contexts. One of the issues discussed in Rampton et al. (2004) is the limitations of ethnographies focused in particular sites, when the aim of the research might be to address frustrations with prevailing and more overarching institutional discourses. Creese similarly identifies a concern that LE "does not fully engage with its social responsibility in making the connection between small scale findings and wider social implications" (2008, p. 237).

This is clearly not the case for all research written from a linguistic ethnographic perspective. Duranti (2003) identifies a historical progression in linguistic anthropology, particularly in the US, from early work in the first half of the twentieth century describing and documenting indigenous languages associated with Franz Boas and his students, through analysis of how language is used in particular contexts as developed by Hymes and Gumperz' ethnography of communication from the 1960s, through to a third paradigm from the late 1980s and 1990s onwards which turned the focus around to explore the role of language in interaction in constructing contexts, identities and relationships. Work in linguistic ethnography influenced by this 'third paradigm' has set out deliberately to explore relationships between interaction and culture / society, addressing for instance how language in interaction is saturated with indexical ideological values, which constitute gender, ethnic and class identities (Rampton, 2006). Concepts such as indexicality (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; Blommaert, 2005; Silverstein, 1976) and style (Eckert, 2000; Rampton, 2006) are drawn on to address how language choices are shaped by and shape social constructs and processes.

The work of Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck in Belgium, for instance, explored globalisation processes and the 'world system' as manifested in local interactional regimes (Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005; James Collins & Slembrouck, 2006). This work included attending to the engagements with texts characterising these regimes (eg literacy in the environment like multilingual shop signs, translation texts to support healthcare communication), and some specific examples from this work will be described in more detail below. They argue that attention to the detail of these semiotic and material processes allows us to see how processes of globalisation are constructed and playing out 'on the ground'.

But despite this, there is still a need for linguistic ethnography to develop ways of addressing the concrete processes by means of which institutions and social structures are constructed and continued, a process which relies heavily on interactions around texts of various kinds. A focus on the literacy practices which enable the textual mediation of institutional discourses is one way to address this.

Material (paper and digital) texts are central to the co-ordination of social processes in

contemporary societies. The social institutions which shape our lives are co-ordinated in very large part by means of the flows and trajectories of material texts. As Dorothy Smith (2001) has argued, texts and documents are “essential to the objectification of organizations and institutions and to how they exist” (p. 160). A focus on the role of texts in mediating, co-ordinating, regulating and authorizing activities is a crucial means by which ethnographies can be extended beyond the scope of the local practices under observation. Interest in “interactional and institutional discourse” (Rampton et al., 2004, p. 6) must therefore include a focus on the textual flows and practices by means of which this is constituted. Blommaert (2001) writes of the importance of paying attention to ‘text trajectories’ as one of three ‘forgotten’ sets of contexts shaping and shaped by interactions (the other two being speakers’ unequally distributed linguistic resources, and the history of the entextualisation of discourse data).

Because of the centrality of interactions around texts in the contexts in which we are working, it is rare to find work in linguistic ethnography which does not at some point need to find ways to describe and analyse practices around materialised texts as part of the practices which are focused on. Recent work is exploring, for instance, the role of computerised patient record systems in shaping the nature of interaction between doctors and patients (Swinglehurst, 2012); the repeated practices by means of which a police officer tries to change the nature of the interactions between police and members of the public by rewording and reshaping the letters sent to complainants (Rock, 2012); and the way legal decisions around insurance claims are shaped by the interaction between the insurance professional and the computerised forms which she has to deal with (Van Hout, 2012).

Literacy studies offers linguistic ethnography ways to focus attention on interactions around such texts, and thereby to explore the specific practices by means of which the macro and institutional are instantiated and co-ordinated in local language practices. Luke (2004) argues that ethnographic accounts of local literacy practices need to be indexed against global political economies of literacy and flows of information at various levels (local, regional and transnational), and one way in which these flows can be addressed is through focusing on the trajectories of texts and associated practices.

## **Digital literacies**

A related point is the need to address the changing nature of communication in societies which are, to a greater and greater extent, mediated by people’s interactions with digital and / or multimodal texts - or ‘digital literacies’, defined by Gillen and Barton (2010) as “the constantly changing practices through which people make traceable meanings using digital technologies”. Digital interactions are so ubiquitous (especially given the omnipresence of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets) that it is now inappropriate to make a distinction between online / offline or real / virtual worlds. We cannot, therefore, develop a proper understanding of the linguistic and cultural processes that linguistic ethnography is interested in, without an analytic focus which can deal both with the intricate patternings of spoken (and written) language practices, and with the literacy practices through which the textual mediation and co-ordination of contexts and cultures is achieved.

Mills (2010) argues that in recent years, literacy studies as a field of enquiry has experienced a significant ‘digital turn’, with much more attention being paid to literacy practices in digital environments, across a range of platforms and social contexts. She draws attention to research which has shown how digital literacies facilitate interest-driven online communities, destabilise traditional locations of authority and expertise, and support hybridisation of texts - particularly multimodal texts.

There is a strong strand of work in digital literacies which takes a linguistic ethnographic perspective on cultures and contexts constituted through practices involving primarily materialised, rather than spoken language. As Georgakopoulou (2006) elegantly argues, the characteristics of meaning-making interactions in digital environments highlight aspects of contemporary communication

which have been of great interest in linguistic ethnographic work and indeed in sociolinguistics more generally, such as performativity of identities, global information flows, interdependent networks and heightened reflexivity. The material form of communication in digital environments allows us to explore the ways in which communities are shaped through participation in immediately accessible ways.

Work which has taken an ethnographic stance on the literacies of online communication include Cherny's (1999) participant-observation study of chat in multi-user gaming communities; Androutopoulos' (2008) 'discourse-centred online ethnography', which includes both engagement in sites over time and interviews with participants; Gillen's (2009) 'virtual literacy ethnography', analysing fieldnotes and artefacts arising from long-term participation as an avatar in a virtual world; and insider accounts of participation in various online settings like Davies (Davies, 2006) on the photosharing website Flickr, or Davies and Merchant (2007) on academic blogging.

There is also an important strand of work in linguistic ethnography which draws on Hallidayan functional linguistics and social semiotics, influenced particularly by Kress, in analysing multimodality, exploring the ways in which the affordances of different modes are brought together to create meaning potentials, in a range of settings (eg how multimodal texts form part of learning processes in classrooms (Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn, & Tsatsarelis, 2001; Kress, 2004); or how multimodal communication is in medical settings (Bezemer, Cope, Kress, & Kneebone, 2011)). Research in digital literacies is another site in which multimodality is highlighted as a key issue.

## **METHODOLOGIES**

In terms of methodology, literacy studies subscribes to the ethnographic perspectives outlined in Rampton et al. 2004: regard for local rationalities; questioning over-simplifications, particularly those of policy discourses; addressing literacy practices as part of ecologies of cultural organisation, in which a number of different levels and dimensions are interacting in the production of meaning; attention to systems and patterns (particularly in describing literacy practices), while remaining sensitive to local particularities and unique events; working with sensitising concepts and orienting theories, while remaining open to ideas and patterns which might emerge from the dialectic between theory, interpretation and data; and paying reflexive attention to the role of the researcher, with explicitness around field and analytic strategies coupled with appreciation of the need for researchers to draw on their own (participant-observation-informed) interpretive resources to understand the meanings of everyday activities.

Often, though, the dataset may look rather different from other research in linguistic ethnography which is primarily influenced by the heritage of interactional sociolinguistics. New Literacy Studies has for the most part been less directly influenced by the interactional sociolinguistic tradition, analysing the way people create and interpret meanings and social and institutional orders in interaction, which is drawn on extensively elsewhere in linguistic ethnography. There are exceptions, often in research in educational settings as discussed below, such as the work of members of the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group which has drawn on interactional sociolinguistics to interpret the way understandings of literacy are constructed through classroom interaction (Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1992); the detailed micro-analysis of discourse in the study of classroom literacy events (Bloome, 2005); or Maybin's research on constructions of literacy in children's talk in classrooms (Maybin, 2007).

However, while researching literacy events may draw on audio- or video-recordings of interaction analysed in great detail, this is not always or necessarily the case. Fieldnotes and photographs can form the central dataset, often informed by interview data (Papen, 2005). Detailed analysis drawing on the various technical linguistic apparatuses available can come into play not just in

analysis of audio- and video-recorded interactions, but also for instance in the analysis of policy texts which frame these interactions (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011), in the analysis of the specific local material texts which support people's interactions (Burgess, 2008; Hamilton, 2009), or in analysis of digital literacies through a focus on the details of multimodal digital texts.

### **Close analysis of interaction in literacy events**

The area of literacy studies which is methodologically closest to the interactional sociolinguistic end of linguistic ethnography is work in which audio- or video- recordings of literacy events are analysed in close linguistic detail, informed by longer-term involvement as a participant-observer in the particular setting in which the recording was carried out.

Much of this work has been done in school settings. Maybin (2009) reviews a range of work which "combines close attention to children and teachers' language use with an analysis of context and social practice" (p. 70), demonstrating how this work enables researchers to show connections for instance between children's language and literacy practice inside and outside school, give insights into children's language use in talking to each other, and show how broader patterns of social inequality in language use (associated with, for instance, gender, race and class) play out in specific classroom settings. This work is characterised by combining detailed analysis of what she calls "the micro-level, minute-to-minute processes of socialisation" (p. 76), with social theoretical work to link everyday experiences with broader societal structures, beliefs and values. I have already mentioned above, for instance, the work of Bloome et al. (2005) in which a very detailed micro-ethnographic focus on interaction in classroom literacy events can highlight the ways in which students' and teachers' immediate actions are shaped by and shape social identity, power relationships and broader social processes.

Beyond the school setting, similar examples of work focusing in on the detail of recorded interaction situated and interpreted within a broader ethnography of literacy practices includes Poveda et al.'s (2006) study of literacy events in a Gitano evangelical church, to analyse the interplay between the way learning is organised at interactional, institutional and social levels.

Another version of literacy studies drawing on analysis of interaction in classrooms comes with the detailed analysis of the enactment of literacy policy in practice, as in for instance Lefstein (2008), in which recordings from two literacy lessons are interpreted within the broader perspective of an ethnographic study of the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy in one school. Lefstein is able to show how, despite the teacher's adherence to materials provided within the strategy, the enactment recontextualises the policy within existing well-established classroom interactional genres, which are embodied in participants' habitus. The effects of this recontextualisation notably include the suppression of open questions which were at the heart of the aims of the lesson plan being worked with. Because of the situation of the case study lessons within a broader ethnography (drawing on fieldnotes from participant-observation, interviews, audiorecordings of lessons, and individual and group feedback conversations), he is able to move between macro, meso and micro levels of analysis (though in this case these are defined as curricular content over the course of a year, content in a lesson, and moment-to-moment interaction), to show how the relative success in implementing the strategy at macro and meso levels plays out rather differently at the micro-levels of classroom interaction.

### **Text-oriented ethnography**

One fruitful way in which literacy studies has drawn on a linguistic ethnographic perspective is in what



Lillis calls ‘text-oriented ethnography’: combining ethnographic data around the processes of text production and interpretation, with detailed linguistic analysis of textual data.

Lillis (2008) identifies three ways in which ethnography can contribute to the development of academic writing research, which she calls ‘method’, ‘methodology’, and ‘deep theorizing’. ‘Ethnography as method’ is used to indicate the kind of ‘talk around text’ research (with a long and productive history in academic literacies research), in which discussion with writers, focused on a particular text or texts, is drawn on to inform the text analysis and interpretation. ‘Ethnography as methodology’ is used to indicate the use of multiple approaches to data collection and involvement in the contexts of text production (and potentially reception) over time, to track “the dynamic and complex situated meanings and practices that are constituted in and by academic writing” (p. 355). In ‘deep theorizing’, notions from linguistic anthropology such as indexicality and orientation are drawn on in refining the social practice account of writing, to ‘close the gap’ between text and context, challenging the common analytic separation which is often made between the two in text-focused research. While Lillis situates this argument within academic writing research, it is more generally extensible to other areas of literacy studies and discourse analysis.

‘Ethnography as methodology’ is characteristic of work in academic literacies, partly as a way of resisting the ‘textual bias’ dominant in other traditions of academic writing research (Lillis & Scott, 2007). But it has also been adopted in areas outside academic writing. Pahl (2007) for instance demonstrates how ethnographic understandings built up on the basis of multiple visits to participants’ homes and schools recorded in fieldnotes (including detailed descriptions of what she calls micro-moments of text-making and interaction), audiotaped interviews and conversations, and collections of a wide range of documents and artefacts, can be drawn on to interpret the multimodal texts produced by one child from micro, meso and macro temporal perspectives. (She makes and illustrates a similar argument for the value of detailed ethnography in the interpretation of children’s texts in Pahl (2003).)

Collins and Slembrouck (2007) similarly combine analysis of texts in focus with interpretation of interviews with people interacting with these texts, but in this case exploring the diverse reading practices and positions available to interpret these signs within different ‘orders of discourse’. They draw particularly on the concept of indexicality to interpret the different ways in which informants from different backgrounds and social positions interpret the meanings of multilingual shop signs, using what they call “sustained ethnographic-discursive analysis” to show the contextuality of reading acts. They demonstrate how studying these contextualised indexical reading acts can give insight into late modern discursive orders. The work is situated within a larger project (mentioned above) which generated a rich dataset of photographs, conversations and interviews gathered in one particular area of Ghent. Their argument in this paper rests particularly on analysis of photographs of shop window signs and interviews with a range of different people reading and interpreting them.

A similar approach is taken in another paper from the same project, Collins and Slembrouck (2006), which examines the language ideologies at play in the planning and use of print materials to support communication in a healthcare clinic working with people speaking many different languages. Based mainly on data from in-depth interviews with key people working with and developing these print materials, and on the examination of documentary artefacts, the researchers argue that language ideologies around social categorisation, language competencies and multilingual repertoires shape the documentary solutions to perceived problems of non-comprehension, leading to unintended consequences in the use of the multilingual consultation manual that they focus on.

## **Fieldnotes and interviews**

Other work relies exclusively or almost exclusively on detailed ‘thick’ description of literacy practices

and their meanings in context, drawing on observational data recorded in fieldnotes. This is linguistic ethnography not in the sense of drawing on the tools of linguistics to analyse small extracts of language data, but in the sense of drawing on ethnographic data to explore and explain sociolinguistic questions around literacies and language use.

For instance, Juffermans (2011) analyses the languaging practices around a literacy event - a letter written to arrange a family member's marriage - in rural Gambia. He draws on detailed observation of the event itself at the micro-level, interpreted within an understanding of the context built up through longer-term ethnographic involvement in the setting, positioning this incident as an ethnographic 'rich point' which serves as a basis for developing an explanation of the repertoires of language practices distributed across languages and people in the setting. Juffermans demonstrates that this can be done even without access to the text itself, saying that while "[t]his analysis should ideally be coupled with a textual analysis (e.g., as done in Juffermans 2009), however in an ethnographic sociolinguistics, the analyst has to resort to whatever is available. In ethnography, the type of analysis that may be pursued depends on the type of data available, rather than the other way around."

Work on the literacies of multilingual urban settings has relied on detailed fieldnotes of interaction in a similar way. Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck (2005) locate their analysis of the literacies in the environment in such 'global neighbourhoods' within a broader analysis of semiotic economies and interactional regimes which identifies local interactions in multilingual neighbourhoods as instantiating 'grassroots globalization', suggesting that local semiotic patterns of this kind serve as a clear and sensitive indicator of globalization 'on the ground'. The rich and diverse ethnographic dataset of this study incorporated recorded interaction and interviews, photographs of sites and inscriptions, and detailed fieldnotes. Language practices and language ideologies are addressed in great detail, but rather than drawing on the tools of formal linguistics to interpret specific interactions, ideas from sociolinguistics and anthropology are drawn on to explain how globalisation is reflected in and sustained by these local patterns of language practice.

## **WORKPLACE LITERACIES AND THE TEXTUAL INSTANTIATION OF AUDIT CULTURE**

A range of ethnographic research in literacy studies has focused specifically on workplace literacy practices and changing social processes (Belfiore et al., 2004; Farrell, 2006; G. Hull, 1997). My own recent work (Tusting, 2009, 2010, 2012) on paperwork and bureaucratic literacy practices in educational settings falls methodologically primarily into the fieldnotes / interviews category described above. It has been informed by linguistic ethnography in various ways. The development of linguistic ethnography as a growing field of research has provided me with a disciplinary space within which to operate and a community of other researchers whose work I read and of which I feel a member, and gives me a sense of a shared set of theoretical and methodological concerns and a wider joint enterprise to which my work contributes.

Methodologically, interviews and participant-observation focused centrally on understanding participants' perspectives, including collaborative data collection. I carried out repeated interviews with people, guided by open interview schedules which were very much oriented towards allowing participants' accounts of their own experiences to emerge. Research participants collaborated in the data collection process by keeping logs of their paperwork practices.

From a theoretical perspective, linguistic ethnography has sensitised me to the role of micro-interactional language and literacy practices in the instantiation of culture and structure. The overarching research question guiding this work was to explore how the predominant 'audit and accountability' culture in the field of education was lived out in people's workplace identities and experiences. The research is therefore an example of work which is trying to make the link between a

broad social and cultural question, with reference to in-depth long-term study of the meanings and experiences of participants in particular local site; addressing questions about language and literacy practices through ethnographic research, in order to better understand a social issue.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued in this paper that it is important to continue to include literacy studies in our conceptualisation of linguistic ethnography as a developing field, for a variety of reasons.

The shared heritage of linguistic ethnography and literacy studies is evidenced in a common set of theoretical antecedents, particularly in the ethnography of communication; common key concepts, particularly focusing on language in use and seeing communication as a set of social practices which can best be understood by focusing on specific events, studying everyday, real-world language and literacy practices in particular domains and cultural settings; an interest in how context (at various levels, from local to global) is constructed and maintained through meaning-making practices; and a readiness to draw on technical linguistic vocabularies for analysis of (part of) the ethnographic dataset.

I have identified a diverse set of methods drawn on in literacy studies, some of which draw on the interactional sociolinguistic tradition of recording and analysing spoken interactions, others drawing more on rich description of practices through fieldnotes, interviews and collaborative data collection, or combining the detailed analysis of the texts drawn on in literacy events with understandings of the practices built up through participant-observation and interviews. But while the datasets drawn on can be diverse in kind, the different methods share the methodological orientation to understanding local rationalities through participant-observation, focusing on systems and patterns within cultural ecologies; a commitment to understanding emic perspectives; being open to new understandings emerging from the data; and paying reflexive attention to the role of the researcher.

I have argued that incorporating attention to literacy events and practices within the ongoing development of linguistic ethnography is and will continue to be of particular importance in giving us a handle on the textual mediation of institutional and social organisation, following Smith (2001) and others, and on the meaning-making practices in digital environments which are playing a more and more significant role in our social lives. I therefore look forward to participating in and following the development of linguistic ethnography and literacy studies as mutually enriching and supportive areas of research in the years to come.

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