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Language and identity in linguistic ethnography

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Abstract

The study of language and identity from the perspective of linguistic ethnography (LE) has received increasing attention during the last decade. Resting upon the social and discursive turns in the social sciences, LE has ontological and epistemological consequences for the way researchers approach language, culture and community, and it has been especially relevant to instability and unpredictability in late modernity. LE originated in the UK, but scholars elsewhere are now drawing it into a fuller account of political economy, a move outlined in the latter part of this paper.

1. Introduction

Linguistic ethnography (LE) is a relatively new term that originated in the United Kingdom (UK) and broadly speaking, designates “a particular configuration of interests within the broader field of socio- and applied linguistics [which constitute] a theoretical and methodological development orientating towards particular, established traditions but defining itself in the new intellectual climate of post/structuralism and late modernity” (Creese 2008: 229). In a discussion paper on linguistic ethnography published by the UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum over a decade ago, its general orientation was described as follows:

> Although LE research differs in how far it seeks to make claims about either language, communication or the social world, linguistic ethnography generally holds that to a considerable degree, language and the social world are mutually shaping, and that close analysis of situated language use can provide both fundamental and distinctive insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural production in everyday activity. (Rampton *et al.*, 2004).

While constituting a powerful account of what LE is about, these statements open up the door to subsequent questions regarding the very contribution of the term to the existing knowledge that is “out there” in the social sciences. In line with the discovery procedures followed by practitioners of conversation analysis, we may raise at this point the fundamental question “why that, in this way, right now?” More specifically: why has this term been recently coined? What are the conditions that have resulted in its emergence and acceptance? How is LE different from other traditions across the fields of linguistics and anthropology? Is it necessary at all? How does it inform contemporary research on language and identity? How can it be applied to lines of enquiry other than those predominant among LE advocates?

This paper attempts to respond to these questions by further qualifying the working definition provided by Creese above. I begin with specification of the ontological and epistemological basis of this theoretical and methodological development (Section 2). After that, attention is paid to the ways in which this approach informs research of language and

identity in the context of this so-called “new intellectual climate” (Section 3). Later, the discussion moves on to revisiting the self-proclaimed uniqueness of LE vis-à-vis the closely related area of linguistic anthropology (Section 4). Following up on this account of well-established distinctiveness, further suggestions are made regarding ways to bridge LE and some lines of sociological work concerning political economy that are not yet analytically integrated in full (Section 5). Finally, the main issues are summarised (Section 6).

2. Ontologies and epistemology of linguistic ethnography

LE is built upon specific standpoints that involve certain ontological ways of understanding our social world as well as concrete epistemological decisions about how to approach this world empirically. As regards the understanding of our social world, the analytical focus of this framework rests generally upon the social and linguistic/discursive turns adopted in the social sciences since the mid-twentieth century. In particular, LE has come into existence under the influence of a mélange of traditions across various fields, including philosophy of language (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), linguistic anthropology (Hymes 1968, 1974; Gumperz and Hymes, 1972; Silverstein 1976; Irvine and Gal 2000), sociolinguistics (Labov 1972; Bernstein 1996; Gumperz 1982), microsociology (Goffman 1967, 1974, 1981; Erickson 1992), communication studies (Bakhtin 1986, Hanks 1996) and social theory (Foucault 1970; Bourdieu 1972, 1982, 1991; Giddens 1982).

Such fields diverge slightly in their conceptions of what counts as knowledge or as evidence of the social reality to be investigated, although the combination of all of them leads to a key axiomatic proposition about social reality as being discursively constructed, reproduced, naturalised, and sometimes revised in social interaction, in the course of large-scale historical, political and socio-economic configurations. There are two key aspects of this presupposition that need to be highlighted at this point of the discussion, in order to understand some of the theoretical underpinnings that make LE (and similar approaches derived from the above-mentioned traditions) theoretically distinguishable from other approaches in social (linguistic) disciplines.

First, this conceptualisation of social reality understands agency and social structure as mutually constitutive, beyond what is often called the micro/macro dichotomy. Instead of two different realms needing distinct analytical tools to be studied, this theoretical standpoint calls our attention to human activities as socially situated practices ordered across space and time whereby human beings engage reflexively and agentively in daily activities while at the same time reproducing the conditions that make these activities possible (Giddens 1982). Second, such a position addresses language as a domain where social processes are constituted, “both in the ways that it forms part of the social practices that construct social reality, and in the ways it serves as a terrain for working out struggles that are fundamentally about other things” (Heller 2011: 49).

With respect to the epistemological decisions about how to approach the social world empirically, LE is specifically characterised by the appropriation and combination of both ethnographic and linguistic perspectives. The ethnographic angle of LE has been greatly shaped by the work done in ethnography of communication, where researchers have traditionally been concerned with the organisation of communicative practices within a given community – meaning that linguistic forms are conceptualised as symbolic resources through which people (re)constitute their social organizations (Hymes 1974). The implications of this focus are two-fold.

On the one hand, this ethnographic perspective implies paying a good deal of attention to people’s daily activities and routines so as to derive their meaning and rationality from the

local perspective before making any abstraction for exogenous audiences. On the other, it also involves a focus on how participants' actions at particular moments and in particular spaces are connected and constrained by other interactions across space and time.

While the scope of this approach contributes to counterbalancing highly abstracted and idealised models of communication that come from formal linguistics (i.e. models detached from the social world), the use of participant observation has been regarded as not adequate for the task of giving a proper account of the local forms of social action around which people in the social groups studied construct and negotiate meaning in a situated context. This critique points out that since the traditional focus in ethnography of communication has been to characterise, compare and contrast the communicative events around which a social group constitutes itself, this often leads to a representation of communities as fixed and bounded, and of language as a true reflection of the social order (see also Pratt 1987). It is precisely this concern which has formed part of the argument about the capacity of a more linguistically-oriented analysis to "tie ethnography down" (Rampton 2006: 395).

In LE, such a linguistic orientation has been influenced by the work done in the field of interactional socio-linguistics (Gumperz 1982) and micro-ethnography (Goffman 1964, Erickson 1992). This analytical perspective introduces a focus on the routines and patterned usage of language which in turn entails fine-grained methods for data collection and analysis of audio- or video-recordings and detailed transcriptions of interactions. Thus, this close look at linguistic and textual data allows the researcher to be immersed in the moment-to-moment of the recorded activities so as to follow the process whereby the participants construct frames of common understanding. That is to say, this procedure requires a commitment from the analyst to suspend all preconceived ideas and general arguments in order to work with the recorded and transcribed activities and to look at them as unique social episodes in which meaning making and context are interactionally constructed in a situated action.

At such moments of immersion, researchers explore with great interest the linguistic/communicative (verbal and non-verbal) conventions through which participants sequentially coordinate their social actions by constructing social relations among themselves and with the surrounding material setting, in the course of recurrent everyday activities. These conventions include aspects such as turn-taking, language choice, lexical choice, proxemics, kinesics and the use of texts in interaction. In particular, attention is paid to those interactional moments in which the focal participants collaborate ambiguously since these potentially disruptive moments are considered as especially rich sites for exploring the social processes by which norms and rules (frequently tacit and unnoticed as, for most of the time, they are taken for granted by the participants) are made explicit and salient.

This analytical exercise, therefore, avoids bounded representations of communities due to its strong orientation toward the discovery of the local-uncertain-unpredictable-changeable positioning of the participants. In addition, when ethnographically driven, this type of enquiry is not carried out by permanently putting aside any connection between the fragments analysed and other observed activities in remote spaces and times, like other disciplinary traditions do, one example being the conversation analysis by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974). In this regard, LE researchers work with each recorded and transcribed interaction as part of a web of social activities that participants develop in the course of their trajectories, in interaction with the trajectories of other material artefacts and discourses being produced and circulated in the field.

In sum, the idiosyncratic approach to linguistics and ethnography derived from the above-described perspectives contributes to strengthening the epistemological status of ethnography while sharpening the analytic relevance of linguistics (Rampton, Maybin and Roberts 2014: 2):

> There is a broad consensus that: i) … meaning takes shape within specific social relations, interactional histories and institutional regimes, produced and construed by agents with expectations and repertoires that have to be grasped ethnographically; ii) analysis of internal organization of verbal (and other kinds of semiotic) data is essential to understanding its significance and position in the world. Meaning is far more than just the 'expression of ideas', and biography, identifications, stance and nuance are extensively signaled in the linguistic and textual fine-grain. (ibid. p.4)

These ontological and epistemological positions are not placed in a vacuum; instead, they are linked to past intellectual debates while pointing towards forward-looking discussions. Looking backwards, such positions are viewed as the historical outcome of the breakdown of positivist approaches in social studies which resulted from a widespread critique of the structuralist search for universal scientific principles. In contrast to previous ideas about language, culture and identity as natural objects that exist on their own, in isolation from the social world to which they refer, post-structuralism has led to a reconceptualisation whereby they are seen as linguistic, discursive and cultural products that cannot be detached from the specific local and social conditions that are responsible for them coming to being.

Looking forward, the ontological and epistemological considerations that I have reviewed also place LE in a privileged position with respect to the study of new processes of sociolinguistic and cultural change. These new processes are now the focus of on-going research in the social sciences, in the context of a new intellectual shift in which instability, difference and mobility have all been put at the centre of the analysis – in contrast to previous research where they had been largely treated as peripheral. So it is now worth shifting the attention to this new intellectual climate and to focus on how it informs research on language and identity that is conducted from the perspective of LE.

3. Language and identity in late modernity

During the last decade, research in the social sciences has paid increasing attention to the dilemmas and contradictions that the so-called conditions of "late modernity" (Appadurai 1990; Bauman 1998; Giddens 1991) have posed to nationally oriented ideas about language, culture and identity. These conditions involve widespread socio-economic, institutional, cultural and linguistic changes, including the information revolution associated with rapidly changing socio-economic networks, the intensification of cultural and linguistic diversification leading to growing complexity and unpredictability of the way social life is arranged through daily practices, and the global expansion of late capitalism and its associated forms of selective privatisation of public services (Tollefson and Pérez-Milans forthcoming).

In the light of these changes, nation-states have had to reposition themselves and adjust the uniform "one state/one culture/one language" discourses that underpinned the ideological framework of modern nationalism (Anderson 1983, Billig 1995, Bauman and Briggs 2003). This is leading to what has been described as an ideological shift from defining languages as bounded/separate entities tied to supposed ethno-national communities towards a new emphasis on multilingualism where earlier linguistic ideologies coexist with new discourses in which languages are also seen as technical skills or commodities in the globalised post-industrial/services-based market (Heller 2010, Duchêne and Heller 2012, Codó and Pérez-Milans 2014).

More specifically, this set of institutional, cultural and sociolinguistic changes has been linked to the increasingly fragmented nature of the overlapping and competing identities associated with new complexities of language-identity relations and new forms of multilingual language use. Thus, this new panorama is having considerable impact on the social sciences since researchers are shifting their analytical interest away from normative institutional frames of action in fixed space-time locations. These researchers now have greater interest in trans-local, trans-cultural and trans-lingual practices whereby social actors creatively co-construct and negotiate meanings across changing social networks, communicative genres and regional/national boundaries (Blommaert and Rampton 2011, Pennycook 2012, Canagarajah 2014, Márquez Reiter and Martín Rojo 2014).

Linguistic and cultural practices are no longer examined against the background of abstract standard languages, uniform views of speakers and stable group identities. Rather, such practices are investigated with reference to the fragmented repertoires that people acquire, construct and mobilise by positioning themselves and others in ways that have consequences for their distinct degrees of control over access to different social spaces (e.g., formal versus informal), symbolic resources (e.g., institutionalised forms of recognition through certificates) and materialities (e.g., jobs) throughout the course of their life trajectories. Indeed, this view has led to the emergence of new terms like "new speakers" (Pujolar, Fernàndez and Subirana 2011), "transidiomaticity" (Jacquemet 2005), "polylingualism" (Jørgensen 2008), "translanguaging" (Garcia 2009) or "metrolingualism" (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010). Such terms are attempts to describe linguistic practices placed outside the modern ideological framework of the nation-state that involve hybrid repertoires traditionally associated with different and separate national languages.

These shifts in focus require an analytical refinement of some of the post-structuralist traditions that became established in the second half of the twentieth century. This is the case of the socio-critical perspectives in discourse studies in which description of language and identity vis-à-vis wider institutional, socio-political and economic processes of change are often carried out in a "top-down" fashion. Indeed, such perspectives have been criticised for relying on analytical methods that privilege propositional content of (verbal and written) texts as the empirical foci – at the expense of the view of language as social inter-action – and conceptualise context as a set of "backgrounding facts" that are imposed too rapidly by the researcher onto people's meaning making practices – instead of being taken as set of empirically trackable actions, experiences and expectations that are always being enacted and negotiated in situated encounters across space and time (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000).

The contemporary emphasis on the increasing destabilisation of bounded, stable and consensual communities and identities makes even more pertinent the situated approaches to language and identity such as LE. Rather than working from presuppositions about fixed mechanisms of power that originate in stable and abstract political and economic structures that shape local forms of social life, a combination of linguistic and ethnographic approaches provides a more nuanced angle. In particular, such approaches allow us to document empirically the ways in which social actors negotiate meaning and stance in response to the increasing uncertainty, discontinuity and lack of sharedness that is brought about by the above-mentioned institutional, socio-economic, sociolinguistic and cultural conditions of late modernity. The importance of analysing local uncertainty and instability so as to capture the wider institutional and socio-economic processes of change tied to late modernity has been particularly evident in linguistic and ethnographic research in educational settings (Jaspers 2005, Rampton 2006, Pérez-Milans 2015).

In contrast to views of the classroom as a social space where teachers and students coordinate their actions smoothly and unambiguously, the former acting as the representatives of the institution/state and the latter as social actors who can only resist or

comply with the teacher´s authority, a close ethnographic and linguistic look has in the last few years revealed a much less continuous, stable and predictable scenario. Contemporary policies require all educational actors to conform to the functioning of a neoliberal management centred upon extensive auditing practices, resulting in increasing anxiety among students and teachers.

In this new cultural setting, teachers no longer represent the authority of the State as their position is not secure and is always under evaluation. On the other hand, students are made to constantly compete with each other for the available places in higher education, on the basis of mechanisms of testing and streaming that have become key operations for most schools. Thus, inter-personal collusion among these social actors has emerged as a rich site for examining the dialogic relationship of agency and structure in the context of localised socio-emotional relations. Beyond simplified accounts reporting domination on the part of either the teachers or students, the study of forms of collusion shows how school participants often collaborate with each other in ways that allow them to overcome institutional constraints without necessarily breaking the official rules (see an example of this type of analysis in Pérez-Milans 2013: 88-122).

Thus far, we have seen how late modernity refers to both, changes in the 'real' world and a shift of attention in the social sciences. These two dimensions have direct implications for LE's suitability for the study of language and identity in contemporary societies. Given its ontological assumptions (in which social interaction and social structures are seen as mutually constitutive) and, given its epistemological approaches (linguistic and ethnographic perspectives are adopted to empirically describe fine-grained situated meaning making practices), LE is in a good position to address instability, differences and mobility as the key elements in the (re)constitution of new ideas/practices about language, culture and community. There are grounds, though, for questioning the apparently autonomous portrayal of LE that has been developed so far in this paper.

The strengths and possible weaknesses of this approach cannot be properly grasped if certain sub-disciplines in the social sciences are not brought more clearly into the picture. This is further discussed in the following section, with reference to linguistic anthropology (LA, hereafter).

4. Linguistic ethnography vis-à-vis linguistic anthropology

Among the sub-disciplines that have well-established links with LE, the North American area of linguistic anthropology (LA) stands out in that it explicitly appears as the most influential in recent publications by UK-based scholars (Rampton et al. 2004; Tusting and Maybin 2007; Creese 2008; Maybin and Tusting 2011; Tusting 2013, Rampton, Maybin and Roberts 2014). Indeed, the traditions that have most clearly shaped the LE epistemological approaches described in the previous sections are all strands of LA (i.e. ethnography of communication, interactional socio-linguistics and micro-ethnography). Furthermore, LE has drawn heavily on recent theoretical developments in LA which have articulated the relations between "context" and "text" providing technical vocabularies for describing how language use constructs contexts in meaning-making across space and time (e.g., indexicality, re-contextualisation, en-textualisation, multimodality, genre, register and multiple scales).

There has been extensive discussion of the extent to which we need a new label like LE as well as the magnitude of difference between LE and LA. Since the *UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum* was set up in 2001 to propose an umbrella label for scholars across different areas, the label in itself has been recurrently regarded as exploratory. Creese (2008) illustrated this in her account of LE, seven years after this forum was set up:

> It is not yet clear what the future of linguistic ethnography is. In some ways (…) it already has a long and established history through its connection to LA and other socio and applied linguistic traditions. However, in others, its newness is in the attempt to negotiate and articulate a distinctiveness. As this paper is written, LE is in the process of negotiating itself into being and its career length and trajectory is not known. The debate about 'what is' and 'what is not' distinctive to linguistic ethnography is of course, like any field of study, and ideologically and interactionally negotiated process. (p. 238)

However, there have been explicit attempts to define the distinctiveness of LE with respect to LA (the most recent in Rampton, Maybin and Roberts 2014). Compared to LA, LE's uniqueness relies mainly on its different relationship with anthropology. Contrary to the North American context where researchers interested in the study of language, culture and society have been oriented to the anthropological traditions, those with similar interests but based in UK have been socialised into such lines of enquiry within the field of applied linguistics. This, in turn, has had consequences that have set these LE researchers apart, both in the way they approach their objects of study and in how they interact with other disciplines and professionals.

LE researchers have always taken language as an entry point to the study of the interrelations between culture, language and social differences. That is to say, they have placed more emphasis on close analysis of texts and recordings of interactions as primary sites for the playing out and negotiation of socio-economic difference, often with consequences with regard to cultural differentiation. This has also been the case in recent work done in LA. However, in North American anthropology there has been a long-term tendency to emphasise ethnicity and race as the primary categories of social difference, thereby representing cultural difference as the basis of socio-economic inequality. This different approach to the object of study is also evident in research on education as a key site for social, cultural and linguistic analysis.

Different socio-cultural theories have emerged since the 1960s, offering explanations of the persistence of school failure among particular social and ethnic groups in modern societies. Among these theories, the study of the interactional processes of socialisation through which different social groups build their cultural conventions of communication occupied a central position in North American anthropology during the 20th century. From this perspective, school failure is viewed as the consequence of minority groups having to adjust themselves to the cultural conventions of the group(s) controlling the institutional spaces of the State.

This empirical work has been related to the organisation of everyday routines of schooling, which according to this view are based on the cultural conventions and assumptions of the dominant group. In this way, the social construction of students as competent or incompetent depends on the (majority and minority) students' degree of knowledge about these conventions (see, for example, Gumperz 1982; Heath 1983; Heller and Martin-Jones 2001). This stance represented an attempt to overcome previous historical explanations in which the marginalised groups were represented as culturally deficit, although it has often been pointed out that it is necessary to incorporate power relations more explicitly into the processes that cause school failure to be unequally distributed (Meeuwis and Sarangi 1994).

Meanwhile, sociological explanations that had great impact on British applied linguistics (also French or Canadian socio-linguistics) emphasised a different interrelationship between cultural differences and social inequality where the former is not represented as the basis of the latter; rather, it is seen as the consequence in many cases. In other words, cultural difference is problematised and placed at the centre of wider social processes involving

economic structures, collective identities, and strategies of contestation/cultural reproduction through daily interactions. In this view, formal education is tied to a social structure of unequally distributed economic opportunities which leads to the situated production and negotiation of differentiated cultural identities and social strategies in the school life, in ways that contribute to reinforcement of class-based societal structures (see, for example, Willis 1977).

Another reason for the influence of applied linguistics in LE, and for the way it has been differentiated from LA, lies in the specific types of interaction that LE researchers have established with other disciplines and professionals. Under university programs where most research attention is paid to literacy, ethnicity and identity, ideology, classroom discourse and language teaching, LE researchers have intended "to use discourse analytic tools in creative ways to extend our understanding of the role language plays in social life" (Creese 2008: 235). In so doing, they have developed an eclectic attitude which contrasts with a stronger sense of a well-defined genealogy in LA. In LE, there is room for cross collaboration among highly diversified traditions, including conversation analysis, new literacy studies, critical discourse analysis, neo-Vygotskian research on language and cognitive development, classroom discourse studies, urban sociology, US linguistic anthropology of education, interpretative applied linguistics for language teaching or studies of ethnicity, language and inequality in education and in the workplace.

Most importantly, LE has devoted a great deal of attention to further extending communication with non-university professionals, in what Rampton, Maybin and Roberts (2014) denominate as a "commitment to practical intervention in real-world processes" (p.16). Oriented to enabling educators and health professionals to become LE researchers, on the one hand, and to set up collaborative projects, on the other, this line of action has paved the way to fruitful and meaningful programmes where professionals have a chance to problematise pervasive ideological frameworks that still dominate the idioms of major public policies. But the setting up of a space like this not only helps trainees destabilise well-established idioms but also provides tools to address issues that concern them professionally and have practical relevance.

So far, the discussion has been centred on the distinction between LE and LA. Although this may appear to be a heavily simplified dichotomised account, my goal has been to provide a flavour of the arguments that UK-based researchers have put forward over the last decade, in their attempts to delimit their specific genealogies and sensitivities. Moreover, it is important to note that, in line with its original intention of opening up an intellectual space where different strands of work can be gathered under the common ground of ethnographic and discourse-based research (Rampton *et al*., 2004), LE has in the last few years expanded to other geographical areas, beyond the UK.

Many of these other researchers have not just taken up the UK-based developments, though. They are in many cases young scholars who have been trained in a complex mix of disciplinary traditions where the influence of British LE researchers has been combined with that of other sociolinguistic and applied linguistic scholars in other European countries and North America via research networks of collaboration based in universities in Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Netherlands, Spain, among others (see, for instance, Charalambous 2012; Patiño-Santos 2014; Dong 2013; Jaspers 2011; Karrebæk and Madsen 2013; Madsen 2013; Pérez-Milans 2015).

In this way, Creese's uncertainty about LE's future in 2008, manifest in the statement that "whether LE will emerge in the macro-socio and applied linguistic 'order' as determinant will depend on the interdiscursive possibilities of micro-interactions and their reconfiguration" (2008: 238), stands in contrast to an incipient process of flourishing. Important issues are likely to arise from the de-territorialisation of LE, and there are likely to be dilemmas

regarding the ways of ensuring meaningful appropriation, productive hybridisation, recognisable contribution and legitimate shaping of the area. The following section illustrates the need for a stronger connection with other strands of research on language and identity in LE, for which I draw on my own academic trajectory, across different universities in Spain, Canada, UK and Hong Kong.

5. Political economy under the spotlight

Although the pioneers of the LE term in the UK have always pointed out the necessity of connecting with other traditions in sociology, history, cultural studies or economics, most of the efforts during the last few years have been devoted to integrating linguistic analytical constructs from LA. As mentioned in previous sections, this has entailed meticulous work that has provided a linguistic-based technical vocabulary to empirically describe the links between situated meaning-making practices and trans-local discursive processes. Yet, little analytical base has been offered to describe the ways in which such trans-local mechanisms effectively contribute to the wider notion of structuration that is often borrowed from Giddens (1982). The appropriation of Bakhtin's (1986) empirical concept of genre, in LE, is a good example.

Driven by the principle of providing more mid-level theory, Rampton (2006) has argued for the usefulness of this notion as it prevents researchers from jumping carelessly into grand narratives that do little justice to the lived situated experience of participants in the field. Broadly defined as recognisable (and usually institutionalised) types of activity linked to specific configurations of expected goals, sequences of action, forms of participation and social relationships among involved participants, this concept allows practitioners of LE to describe social and communicative patterns upon which institutionally recognised activities are reproduced, negotiated or even resisted. In other words, this notion connects "the larger bearings that orient our moment-to-moment micro-scale actions (…) [with the] smallest units in the structural organisation of large-scale institutions" (Rampton, Maybin and Roberts 2014: 9-10).

This type of mid-level theorisation exemplifies the strong orientation of LE to fill the gap between the so-called "micro" and "macro" societal levels, though it does not address the fundamental question of how local interactions lead to unequal distribution of resources. Thus, more work is required to deal with this fundamental question that is at the core of social structuration processes. The area of political economy presents itself as a relevant candidate at this point, and indeed this area has also been very influential in certain strands of North American LA and other European and Asian sociolinguistic traditions (see Gal 1989, Duchêne 2009, Heller 2011, Lin and Martin 2005). Block (2014), a researcher based in Europe who in the last few years has emphasised the importance of incorporating more seriously and directly a political economy approach into applied linguistics, defines it as follows:

> Political economy is understood here as an area of inquiry and thought with roots in a Marxist critique of classical economics and society in general. It focuses on and analyses the relationship between the individual and society and between the market and the state, and it seeks to understand how social institutions, their activities and capitalism interrelate … Thinking and writing within a political economy frame means working in an interdisciplinary manner, drawing on work in human geography, sociology, political theory, anthropology and cultural studies. The focus is on the interrelatedness of political and economic processes and phenomena such as aggregate economic activity, resource

allocation, capital accumulation, income inequality, globalisation and imperial power. (p. 14)

There have been already substantial theoretical developments regarding the interrelations between the individual and the society and between the market and the state. Some of these well-known developments include the work done by Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault who proposed notions such as “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1982), “legitimate language” (Bourdieu 1977), or “power” (Foucault 1984) that conceptualise language, culture and identity as “fields”, “markets” or “discursive spaces” traversed by historical processes of socioeconomic organisation, that is to say, they are conceived as socially and discursively produced resources which are attributed unequally distributed value, resulting in people having different degrees of control over the very processes of attribution of value and circulation as well as over their discursive legitimisation.

While such theoretical constructs have been widely acknowledged in sociolinguistic and applied linguistic literature, they are still hard to operationalise analytically from the perspective of a bottom-up linguistic ethnography like the one that has been portrayed in this paper. However, Rampton’s (2006) call for more of mid-level theory can also be fully realised by stretching the analytical scope in order to include, in a more explicit way than is often done, the work done by sociologists, like Aaron Cicourel, who have engaged with the above wider theories of language, identity and power through close-up description of communicative practice in institutional settings. Indeed, Cicourel’s notion of “ecological validity” (1996), as well as his previous work during the 1960s and 1970s, always dealt with detailed ethno-methodological analysis of recordings without losing sight of the broader context that multi-sited ethnographic research brings into view by placing a given encounter in a wider context of institutional practices, texts and trajectories of interactions and in the social networks that shape it (see also Cicourel 1992).

Anticipating later developments in the social sciences, Cicourel took sociology away from an understanding of the social world as independent of human action, towards the vision of social reality as produced and transformed through social interaction (Cicourel 1964). But beyond doing so, the most relevant contribution of Cicourel (for the purpose of the study of language and identity in LE research) has been his empirical work describing the ways in which normative forms of knowledge (i.e. what counts as appropriate forms of contribution) and categories (i.e. how participants position themselves and others by reference to which institutional types of persona) get constructed and negotiated in daily communicative arrangements discursively (and textually) through the particular organisational logic of a given institution.

In this way, Cicourel provides a classical analysis of socio-institutional genres with more institutional depth in that such genres are interconnected within a logic of institutional practice that has to be empirically tracked down. This analytical direction also has more socioeconomic direction since description of meaning making practices addresses the fundamental sociological question of “who gets to decide what counts what, how, when, where and with what socio-institutional consequences for whom?” This link between Cicourel’s work, on the one hand, and the wider accounts by Bourdieu and Foucault, on the other, has been developed by Monica Heller in particular (Heller 2007).

Heller relies on Cicourel when she calls for an analysis of the web-like trajectories of linguistic, social and moral orders to understand how and why institutional spaces get discursively configured in specific ways. Description of the normative forms of knowledge and categories by Cicourel allows LE researchers to account for the discursive processes whereby situated communicative and linguistic practices produce moral categories about actors, situations, forms of participation, and linguistic and cultural repertoires (i.e. “good” or

"bad" participant, form of participation and/or language). All of these categories become institutionalised and have social consequences for participants in the course of their interactions (which are describable through interactional analysis) and in these participants' access (or lack of access) to future interactions throughout their individual trajectories in a given institution and beyond (which is describable through ethnographic analysis of the linkages between the different interactions).

In sum, these notions, dimensions and guiding questions constitute a bridge between analysis of local interactions, institutional genres and the abstract sociological concepts of "symbolic capital", "legitimate language" or "power"; they shed light on the processes whereby certain participants and their (linguistic and or cultural) repertoires get undervalued through a given organisational arrangement that, if followed up through linguistic and ethnographic enquiry, opens up a window on participants' differential access to socio-institutional spaces and on the associated materialities in their life trajectories. In addition, this integrated analysis of linguistic practices, institutionally produced/negotiated moral categories and trajectories of social inclusion/exclusion allows us to trace the emergence and the changing configuration of ideas of identity, nation and State in a given location at a particular point of time in history.

Ethnographically and discourse-based research on educational institutions gives us, once again, an illustrative example. Based on description of practices and institutional forms of social/discursive organisation, the study of what gets constructed as a "good student" in a given school, within a certain national educational system, is a good case for pinpointing wider ideological discourses about citizenship or moral education that connect regional, national and international policies of economic reform (Heller 1999, Heller and Martin-Jones 2001, Moyer and Martín-Rojo 2007, Jaffe 2009, Martín-Rojo 2010, Pérez-Milans 2013). This, in turn, provides a basis for further historisation, if the ideas on identity, nation and state associated with the emerging moral categories in the field are connected with those mobilised in the policies that have historically shaped the organisational logic of the studied institutional field (Pujolar 2007).

More collaborative work is needed in this direction, though. While maintaining the key sensitivities that set LE apart from other traditions in linguistic and anthropological disciplines, stretching the analytical scope in order to reach less explored lines of study (without necessarily scarifying empirical scrutiny) may be one way (among many) of pushing fertile inter-institutional and inter-national hybridisation ahead.

6. Summary

This paper has traced the origins of LE in its geographical, disciplinary and intellectual contexts. Derived from post-structural developments in the social sciences, this approach is characterized by specific ethnographic and discourse-based analytical perspectives that have become deeply established in the UK-based tradition of applied linguistics. Closely linked to the work done in the North American area of LA, such an approach is characterised by a linguistically oriented analysis of situated meaning-making practices which are taken as an entry point to exploring wider institutional, socio-cultural and ideological processes. In this sense, culture is not a taken-for-granted entity but rather is conceived as the outcome of processes of social differentiation that are enacted and negotiated (and therefore empirically tracked) in daily interactions.

This sensitivity to fine-grained description of practices makes LE research of particular relevance to the study of language and identity under contemporary conditions of late modernity since it takes account of both intellectual shifts of attention and ongoing

transformations in the “real” world. In particular, LE allows the placing of mobility, instability and uncertainty at the centre of the picture in that bounded notions of language and community are never conceived of as a starting point for data interpretation; instead, these notions are examined as possible emerging constructs that are interactionally constructed, negotiated and transformed by social actors in situated encounters, in the course of large-scale institutional and societal processes.

It has also been argued that while making sense within this specific context, LE is being currently shaped by researchers with inter-institutional and transnational trajectories, who have been influenced by UK-based advocates of LE and by other scholars based in other linguistic and anthropological traditions across different geographical regions. To conclude, the case for more explicitly socio-economically oriented accounts has been made. I have argued that certain sociological constructs from the field of political economy can be better integrated analytically in LE without necessarily jeopardising the analytical perspectives that set this approach slightly apart from others in the social sciences.

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