Advanced linguistic ethnography?
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Can we really talk about *advanced* linguistic ethnography, and if so, what does it look like? This paper offers quite a personal view of training programmes, PhDs, interdisciplinary relationships and academic career structures, covering courses like ‘Security, Ethnography & Discourse’, the epistemic sensibilities emerging in doctoral projects, the challenges for talk of ‘cutting edge breakthroughs’ in an interdisciplinary programme like linguistic ethnography, as well as the need to consider organisational constraints and opportunities, career-stage included, in efforts to move forward, both individually and collectively.

Thank you very much indeed for this invitation to contribute to this advanced doctoral course in Linguistic Ethnography,¹ and I’ve really learnt a lot from the earlier seminars in the series that I’ve been able to attend. But I’ve also found myself challenged and stimulated by the ‘Advanced course’ billing itself, because it implies that I should know what elementary and intermediate courses in linguistic ethnography (LE) look like. More than that, it suggests that LE’s like chemistry, statistics or indeed conversation analysis – a relatively well-defined field in which there is cumulative progress, along with new sets of methods and findings that every expert practitioner should understand. But I don’t think linguistic ethnography works like that, so today I’m going to interrogate the idea of *advanced* LE. Can we really talk about ‘advanced linguistic ethnography’, and if so, what does it actually look like?

I’ll start by admitting right away that I’ve also myself set up linguistic ethnography courses in ‘advanced research methods’ programmes, and I’ll explain my uncertainty by describing the most recent one, *Security, Ethnography & Discourse*. Then I’ll turn to the production of a PhD in linguistic ethnography, in which students are socialised into a sophisticated epistemic sensibility where specialisation and flexibility converge around communicative practice. But what happens after graduation? Here I’ll return to Basil Bernstein’s distinction between singular disciplines and interdisciplinary regions, which are constructed “by *recontextualising* singulars into larger units which operate both [alongside other] disciplines and [beyond the academy] in the field of external practice” (1996:65). As one of these interdisciplinary regions, linguistic ethnography opens up a range of post-doctoral opportunities for individuals, and I broaden this to linguistic ethnography’s collective development, suggesting that even though its defining mission might be more about *sharing* the analytical power of linguistics than developing the tools themselves, that needn’t exclude ‘cutting edge’ contributions to the advancement of quite specialist knowledge. Of course, there are limits to the number of paths that an individual can take at any one time, and if linguistic ethnography’s going to engage with serious issues, it’s important to think

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¹ Advanced Studies in Linguistic Ethnography, Stockholm University, Autumn 2022, organised by Professor Caroline Kerfoot & Professor Christina Hedman
systemically – ethnographically, indeed – about things like career stage and university organisation.

Let me start with the most recent advanced methods course in linguistic ethnography that we’ve been running at King’s.

1) An ‘advanced methods’ course in Security, Ethnography & Discourse

Since 2018, Constadina Charalambous, Emma Mc Cluskey, Louise Eley and I have been running an 8-10 hour, 4 or 5 session course called ‘Security, Ethnography & Discourse’, as part of the advanced methods programme run by London Interdisciplinary Social Science Doctoral Training Partnership. We’re certainly covering stuff that’s good enough to be published – the sessions draw on material we’ve published in the journals Peacebuilding, Surveillance Studies and Journal of Sociolinguistics, and Dina and Emma have just brought out an edited Routledge book with the same name as our course (Mc Cluskey & Charalambous (eds) 2022). At the same time, the interdisciplinarity of all this fits very well with how people generally describe Linguistic Ethnography – e.g. Rampton et al 2004; Maybin & Tusting 2007; Rampton 2007; Copland & Creese 2015:23-5,227-8; Snell et al 2015; Tusting 2020). But before nodding it through, let’s take a closer look at what we actually do with the students.

Most of the students are in the first year of their PhDs and they’re based in a range of different disciplinary subject areas, but they always include some linguists and some people from International Relations and here’s a slide that we use right at the start:

![Shared interests table]

So what can we say about this? The key words (‘practice, discourse...’), along with Bourdieu and Foucault, pitch the course in mainline social science, and this gets just a slightly more specialist inflection with the references to linguistic ethnography and IPS (International Political Sociology). The ‘traps to avoid’ are the kinds of thing you might say to anyone starting off on an ethnographic PhD, and again, the ‘learning outcomes’ are an uncontroversial characterisation of the kinds of thing you try to do if you’re thinking...
ethnographically, actually staying rather neutral about the ontological underpinnings (in IR, there’s a big split over realism vs constructivism).

So if this slide really is just a sketch of starting points, what do we do to take these doctoral students forward? How do we ‘advance’ them? At present, there are four sessions, with a fifth focusing on student projects:

**Course elements:**
- Session 1: Interviewing geo-political elites
- Session 2: The institutional enactment of security policy in language education
- Session 3: Conflict and the practice of diaspora
- Session 4: Surveillance in the everyday
- Session 5: Questions and issues from student projects

We list between three and six articles for each session, identifying one or two that the students should read in advance, but most of the sessions themselves are taken up with hands-on data analysis, looking closely at recordings and transcripts, trying to figure out what’s happening, trying to link what students can see and hear to broader processes, drawing on their own knowledge and interests. So the emphasis here is much more empirical and experiential than theoretical or conceptual, and we don’t spend a lot time discussing the readings we’ve recommended.

Admittedly, after our first data-session, I tell them to watch a video-lecture in which I point to some key sociolinguistic concepts, explaining how they’d work with the interview recording we’ve just listened to, and here are the slides I use. I start off with a couple of incentivising slides to invite them into sociolinguistics:

**Combining linguistics with ethnography**
- turns linguistics into a set of sensitising frameworks and procedures
- tunes into social dynamics that people sense and live but often find very hard to talk about explicitly

**Agendas that sociolinguistics can address:**
- Bourdieu’s interest in: “ways of looking, sitting, standing, keeping silent or even of speaking (‘reproachful looks’ or ‘tones’, ‘disapproving glances’ and so on) [which] are full of injunctions that are powerful and hard to resist precisely because they are silent and insidious, insistent and insinuating” (1991:53)
- Foucault’s governmentality and the need to: “track force relations at the molecular level, as they flow through a multitude of human technologies, in all the practices, arenas and spaces where programmes for the administration of others intersect with techniques for the administration of ourselves” (Rose 1999: 3-5; Foucault 1978/2003:129-145)
And then after that interdisciplinary sales pitch, I cycle through some concepts capable of illuminating social relations at different scales:

**Individuals understanding**

- **Inferencing** – figuring out the significance of an utterance by matching it against expectations, past experience etc.
- **Indexicality** – every utterance has connotations that give it much more than literal meaning.

There’s no communication independent of our more general assumptions about the world, and ideology penetrates the most instantaneous and routine sense-making.

**People interacting**

- **Adjacency** – what someone says constrains the kind of response you can then make, and your reply then positions the next contribution as well.

Foucault’s “relationship of power... as a mode of action which... acts upon the actions [of others]: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or future” (1982:220 – see also e.g. Althusser’s interpretation).

**Institutional communication**

- **communicative genres** - conventionalised expectations about particular activities, including the goals and tasks, the roles and relationships, the structures of activity and the relevant resources that they each normally entail.

Genres are the building blocks of institutions, they’re central to socialisation throughout the lifespan, but they are often contested, and generic expertise is very unevenly distributed.

**The mobility of texts**

The routes and networks that a text travels through, how it changes in circulation, and all here-and-now activity involved in its initial *entextualisation* and subsequent *recontextualisation*.

- Smith’s Institutional Ethnography,
- Ball & Maguire’s policy enactment
- Blommaert’s trajectories of text & voice etc.

These four slides flag up our core area of interest – communication as central to the constitution of society – and they cover rich concepts drawn from very big literatures which theorise, elaborate, interrogate and contest each one. But the video-lecture in which I present them only lasts 25 minutes, and when we’ve done something similar in writing, doing it all in about 4000 words, we’ve talked about ‘Methodological foundations in linguistic ethnography’, not ‘Advances in linguistic ethnography’ (Rampton, Maybin & Roberts 2014). So what’s going on? Is linguistic ethnography actually an interloper in
Advanced Methods Training, wheedling its way onto platforms where it doesn’t belong, cheating and short-changing students in the process?

Well, let’s see what the students say. Of course, a few students drop out early on, but here are some responses from the seven PhD students at the end of the course in 2020:

- I really enjoyed the slideshow and primer video included in the first session. I will undoubtedly go back and reference that … similar materials would be helpful.
- I found the resource materials – presentations, content and readings very useful.
- I really enjoyed the course overall, and it helped shape my thinking concerning these key issues, so thank you very much!
- Overall, the organisation, resources and presentations were amazingly fruitful for my thinking and thesis ideas.

At the same time, we also got:

- a longer seminar would have been great – four weeks makes for a rather short course
- Would’ve been interesting to have longer sessions – if the course was spread over 2 months perhaps
- I would have liked to have this course to last longer. It seemed a very interesting topic and felt that we only touched on small topics and I would have liked to learn a few more topics
- For me, some concepts were new (security, for instance) and I wish I had more time to digest all the new things I was put in touch with.
- I would have liked the course to be longer (more than 4 sessions).... My main difficulty is that I still struggle a bit with the technicalities of the method. What is its name: text analysis? Discourse analysis? Conversation analysis?
- There should be a bit more time targeted to the discussion of concepts and the bibliography of the course

Most of them also ticked the boxes asking whether they were interested in “maintaining contact with researchers in the area of language, (in)security and everyday practice” and in “further training in ethnography, language and communication”. Indeed, people in this cohort set up their own study group, and most years, two or three course participants enrol in my 10 week module on ‘Language & Power’. This lasts 10 weeks; it sets up a conversation between Critical Discourse Analysis and linguistic anthropology that’s very familiar in linguistic ethnography; and it culminates in 6000 word empirical projects on topics of concern to students themselves. But Language & Power only a Masters course, and quite a lot of people who do very well on it don’t have any background in linguistics.

So far then, ‘advanced linguistic ethnography’ is looking a bit elusive. Can we maybe find it in the five-day Linguistic Ethnography summer school that we ran for 10 years up till the pandemic (Key Concepts in Ethnography, Language & Communication)? This was designed for third year PhD students who’d already collected their data, and it was always heavily oversubscribed. But in actual fact, its pedagogy was broadly comparable to Security, Ethnography & Discourse’s (see Rampton et al 2014:.§3), and indeed in print, I’ve characterised this summer school programme as (i) ‘coming together’, (ii) ‘getting down to basics’ in the sessions, but then afterwards, (iii) ‘anything goes’, because these students came from different places and different disciplines and we had very little knowledge or control over what they were going to do after the 5 days (Rampton et al 2014:16).
So it’s hard to find an obvious answer to what *advanced* linguistic ethnography could be in any of these training courses – not in *Security Ethnography & Discourse*, nor *Language & Power*, nor the summer school. So maybe we need to look at doctoral study itself: What about students who go on to say that their PhDs are linguistic ethnographies, and who even put the words ‘linguistic ethnography’ in the titles of their dissertations?

2) PhDs in linguistic ethnography

At least in my own experience, examiners don’t spend lots of time asking doctoral candidates what they mean by ‘linguistic ethnography’, and the students pass, which means that their work makes an original contribution to knowledge. On any elementary/intermediate/post-intermediate scale, PhDs are advanced qualifications, so let’s take a closer look at what goes into one of these PhDs.

Most of the doctoral linguistic ethnographies that I’ve supervised involve, to quote Hymes, “a social inquiry that does not abstract from verbal particulars, and a linguistic enquiry that connects verbal particulars.. with social activities and relationships” (1976/1996:87). In LE, we elaborated this in two foundational tenets, stating that:

- the contexts for communication should be investigated, not just assumed. Meaning takes shape among agents with different repertoires and expectations, in specific social relations, interactional histories and institutional regimes, and these need to be grasped ethnographically
- biography, identifications, stance and nuance are extensively signalled in the textual fine-grain, so analysis of the internal organisation of verbal data reveals much of their position and significance in the world (Rampton 2007:585).

Signing up to those two driving commitments is essential if you’re doing a doctoral linguistic ethnography, but it’s definitely not sufficient, and in contrast to the participants on *Security, Ethnography & Discourse*, students certainly do have to engage in the ‘technicalities’ of particular approaches to the analysis of communication in a PhD, building quite extensive, up-to-date ‘bibliographies’ on indexicality and language ideology, on register and enregisterment, on linguistic landscape studies, on embodied conversation analysis, on text trajectories or whatever framework it is that’s most relevant to the communicative dimensions of the problem they’re investigating. Even so, the dissertations that they write hardly ever start with the particular linguistic tradition or paradigm that they’re embracing, and it’s never, for example, an important unresolved issue in the analysis of, let’s say, embodied turn design that provides the point of departure. In fact, even when it gets to the methodology chapters, specific linguistic frameworks are often only flagged as perspectives that will be brought into operation later, and it’s in the data analysis chapters that their detailed intricacies are introduced and put to use.

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2 PhDs can take different forms, and in this section I am referring to PhDs produced as monographs. As I haven’t supervised any PhDs as collections of articles, I’m not sure about similarities or differences in the writing process, although I have examined them and it’s clear that the set-of-articles format can also generate high quality linguistic ethnography (see e.g. Jacobs 2022).
Instead, once they’ve pointed to communicative practice as the fulcrum of what’s to follow, these doctoral projects usually start off with the description of a broader social or institutional problem and process, and their literature reviews engage with academic and public debates outside linguistics – for example, UK homelessness policy (Ceri McKay-Smith), the sociology of call centres (Johanna Woydack), the legacy of conflict in Cyprus (Constadina Charalambous), research on (Filipino) transnational domestic work (Nico Guinto), madrasas and development in Bangladesh (Qumrul Chowdhury) and so forth. Indeed, in the final years of the PhD, especially when we’re trying to identify external examiners and conferences to present at, we usually deliberate over potential (sub-)disciplinary affiliations for the research – what classification fits best with work that’s emerging, what label is going to be most useful for the students afterwards? Is there enough fine-grained discourse analysis to count as ‘interactional sociolinguistics’? Do we want a specialist examiner in social policy? Should we call this sociolinguistics or language education?

As a broad umbrella term, linguistic ethnography can certainly accommodate this range. The phrase spells out the conjuncture of linguistics and ethnography, and it has a commonsense intelligibility for anyone in the social sciences – much more, for example, than ‘interactional sociolinguistics’, ‘nexus analysis’, ‘multimodal semiotics’, ‘linguistic landscape studies’ etc. There’s room here for variation in the amount of linguistic analysis that you find in different projects, but ‘linguistic ethnography’ announces the distinctive contribution that the researcher brings to the table in any interdisciplinary discussion – an approach of language and communication that’s simultaneously both flexible and specialist.

In fact, I think that this combination of flexibility and specialisation is central to linguistic ethnography’s methodological identity, and this identity lies in a set of epistemic procedures that it’s extremely hard to lay out in a standardised route map. So for example, contrary to what you might hear in standard accounts of PhD research design, the formulation of research questions doesn’t just sit tidily between the completion of your literature review and the start of your fieldwork, because as Hymes says, ethnography is dialectical and interactive-adaptive, and “it is of the essence of the method that initial questions may change during the course of inquiry” (1996:7). At the same time, the relationship between your research questions and your analytic frameworks isn’t necessarily very stable either, since linguistics only provides linguistic ethnography with a set of sensitising frameworks that suggest directions along which to look rather than prescriptions of what to see (Blumer 1969:148). So you have to figure out which bits of what frameworks you’re going to select for which questions, how far you need to go with them in your analysis, and on top of that, how you’re going to justify the particular path you’ve taken, sometimes even facing down proprietoral methodological purists (e.g. Koole 2007, cited in Rampton et al 2014:15).

This experience of uncertainty and flux is much more than a novice condition. It derives from the depth and intensity of the focus on communicative practice, the central object of analysis. While particular frameworks usually only illuminate rather specific dimensions of communication practice, linguistic ethnography – like ethnography more generally – looks at ecologies, recognising that the meaning and significance of a form or practice only ever emerges from the multiscalar interaction of a host of different cultural and semiotic processes. I mentioned a few of these processes at the start when I showed you the slides
about inference and indexicality, adjacency, genre and text trajectories, but I should have also added one more slide that I often use:

**Studying people communicating**

All this is happening at the same time

(people making inferences, constrained by adjacent actions, guided by generic expectations, alert to a text’s provenance and prospects)

so analysts face difficult choices about focus and emphasis (as in any ethnographic project)

To understand this ecology, it’s often essential to spend hours and sometimes days engrossed in the situated intricacies of what’s going on in a short strip of interaction. In the end, you have to step away from the intoxicating exhilaration of understanding better, submitting yourself to the stern discipline of the ‘so what?’ question, a question that recurs throughout your project and not just in the final chapter. And in answering, you also have to learn to work with a strong and often quite specific sense of what you’re leaving out, even though, of course, you may get to return to it later on.

I hope this is enough to show that there is actually rather a lot behind the exhortations with which we start our course on *Security, Ethnography & Discourse* – don’t reify the textual and don’t just juxtapose policy text analysis and descriptions of local practice; aim instead for a coherent multiscalar account of how discourses are interwoven in the situations you’re interested in. In fact, in the last chapter of the book I wrote in 2006, I tried to be as explicit as I could about the methodological processes involved in linguistic ethnography (Rampton 2006:Ch.10). But I was only able to produce this schematisation retrospectively, looking back at the paths I’d eventually managed to navigate through the data and the different literatures that I’d covered in earlier chapters, and for others too, methodological explanations of linguistic ethnography seem to require very careful reflection on one’s own experience in particular studies (see e.g. Snell & Lefstein 2012; Copland & Creese 2015).

For PhD students, the implication of all this is that a grasp of linguistic ethnography’s methodological texture advances gradually – or maybe in fits and starts – over the whole course of a doctoral project, and in terms of training input, it’s project-focused interaction with supervisors that’s maybe most important (advising on literatures and frameworks, helping with formulation of arguments, pushing you on your analyses etc etc [Hymes 1969:44-45]). Indeed, I’ve found that it’s often only towards the end of writing up that students insert an explicit discussion of linguistic ethnography into their dissertations, and the discussion’s usually rather cursory because by now, students have developed an epistemic sensibility that’s displayed across the thesis as a whole. To pass, their linguistic ethnographies need to be careful, logical, accurate, accountable, sceptical, comparative and generally well-informed, resting on combinations of data analysis, inferencing and theorisation that seem solid and properly constructed. But they don’t get there by following a rulebook, and what might have felt at the start like ‘anything goes’ has now matured into
the practice of ‘rigorous eclecticism’ that Jan Blommaert always referred to (also Snell & Lefstein 2012:3; Hymes 1969:44-45).

In actual fact, we’ve thought of linguistic ethnography like this for quite a long time. Yes, linguistic ethnography can marshal some exceptionally powerful frameworks for analysing communicative practice. But lots and lots of people, both in- and outside the academy, are interested in situated practice, and LE’s mission is more about sharing this analytical power than developing the tools themselves. And this isn’t just altruism – in sharing, linguistic ethnography looks to cross-disciplinary dialogue to broaden and enrich its own understanding of language in society. So from quite early on, we’ve said that

“LE is in itself neither a paradigm, a cohesive ‘school’, nor some kind of definitive synthesis. Instead, it is more accurately described as a site of encounter where a number of established lines of research interact, pushed together by circumstance, open to the recognition of new affinities, and sufficiently familiar with one another to treat differences with equanimity” (Rampton 2007:585)

In Bernstein’s terms, linguistic ethnography is an interdisciplinary ‘region’ rather than a ‘singular’. A singular is

“a specialised discrete discourse with its own intellectual field of texts, practices, rules of entry, examinations, licences to practice, distribution of rewards and punishments (physics, chemistry, history, economics, psychology, etc). Singulars are, on the whole, orientated to their own development, protected by strong boundaries and hierarchies” (1996: 65; Rampton 2007:594).

In a singular, the training path from elementary to advanced is fairly clear. In contrast, regions “are constructed by recontextualising singulars into larger units which operate both in the intellectual field of disciplines and in the field of external practice” (ibid; emphasis added), and as I’ve tried to show, this process of recontextualisation is crucial to the hybrid specialisation in which students in linguistic ethnography learn to flourish over the course of their PhDs.

But what happens afterwards? Indeed, if, as is often said, the doctorate is just an apprenticeship, where does it lead? To answer this, we need to think about collective processes of development as well as individual ones, and reflect more on the relationship between regions and singulars

3) Individuals and the collective development of linguistic ethnography

In a doctoral linguistic ethnography, an understanding of the complex contingencies of communication gets grafted onto a way of listening, looking, reading, understanding and arguing that integrates different bodies of knowledge into the illumination of a range of real-world processes, and people emerge from their studies with an analytic habitus that’s very valuable in, for example, independent or public sector research organisations. There’s obviously also a well-established academic track in applied linguistics that’s receptive to
ethnography – university departments and centres with names like ‘Education, Communication & Society’ (where I work at King’s), publications and conferences in applied linguistics, as well as regular conferences like Explorations in Ethnography Language & Communication and networks like the Linguistic Ethnography Forum. So you don’t step into a desert when you get your PhD, and you’re not the first language researcher to enter an interdisciplinary region.

At the same time, you need to see how your arguments and findings hold up in the more specific fields you’ve referred to in your project. First, there are the ordinary people and institutions with whom you have carried out your fieldwork (Rampton 1992). What do they think of your analysis and your conclusions? Second, there are researchers with a more specialised interest in the non-linguistic literatures you referred to in the thesis – sociology, migration studies, education, health, the law and so forth. And then there are the areas of language study that you drew on in your analysis: how could your innovations and discoveries feature there? As a field of intellectual production, linguistic ethnography is itself, I think, too diffuse for talk of ‘breakthroughs’ or ‘the cutting edge’, but linguistic anthropology, interactional sociolinguistics, conversation analysis and so forth are more singular, and their exponents tend to agree on canonical achievements, standard methods, and fairly well-defined bodies of steadily accumulating ‘facts’ and findings. Here it’s easier to identify ‘the state of the art’ as it currently stands, and if you’ve invested a lot of time in a linguistic ethnography, it’s worth considering where, whether and how your work advances the sub-disciplines you’re referenced most extensively. How do their adherents assess the conceptual coherence, analytic rigour and empirical potential – in short, the ‘scientific value’ – of what you’ve produced? Let me draw on my own experience to elaborate on the importance of this.

My own career started off with a linguistic ethnography of adolescents in multi-ethnic peer groups, and as you might expect from what I’ve been saying, I made cross-disciplinary connections with Cultural Studies and drew out quite a lot of educational implications. But when I focused on kids using each other’s home languages and called it ‘crossing’ (Rampton 1995/2018), I put this forward as a potential ‘development in interactional sociolinguistics’, and the same goes for ‘(in)securitisation’, a concept we’ve been developing much more recently in dialogue with International Relations (Rampton & Charalambous 2019). I wouldn’t offer either of these concepts as potential ‘advances in linguistic ethnography’, but there are at least three interconnected reasons why I see this as strengthening rather than abandoning or betraying linguistic ethnography.

First, in interdisciplinary regions, says Bernstein, “inner commitments and dedications” are often replaced “by short-term instrumentalities” (1996: 76) and when I was an early career researcher in the 1980s and 1990s, the local configuration of language study told me that I had to choose between discovery and usefulness. So if I said I did ‘applied linguistics’, I’d be confining myself to the latter, usefulness (Rampton 1997). But that restriction is anathema to ethnography, which is centrally committed to understanding phenomena and processes that don’t make sense in established frameworks, and one of our main goals developing linguistic ethnography was to free ourselves from this false dichotomy, showing that instrumental relevance and innovative theory could be mutually inspiring. Of course it’s absolutely not obligatory for an LE project to try to advance theory in a linguistic sub-
discipline but if you can, it’s important to exercise this freedom, and maybe it’s also easier now because, two, the disciplinary heartlands have themselves been opening up to epistemologies like linguistic ethnography’s. So for example, scholars like Duranti say that linguistic anthropology had become more interdisciplinary (2003:332-3), and according to Coupland and Jaworski 2009, sociolinguistics has itself become “a broad and vibrant interdisciplinary project working across the different disciplines that were its origins”, with “ethnographic research design [having] considerable momentum” (2009:19; Rampton et al 2014:6-7).

What this actually shows, of course, is that ‘singulars’ shift and that ‘singular’ and ‘region’ are relative terms – to syntacticians, interactional sociolinguistics looks like a region while to language educationists, it’s a singular. But the fact that singulars and regions are shifting and relational identities doesn’t detract from their importance in the institutional politics of the academy, and that’s the third reason why there need to be linguistic ethnographies that feed theoretical and empirical developments back to colleagues more heavily invested in particular paradigms. Pedigree counts in all sorts of university negotiation, and if you are trying to create academic spaces for linguistic ethnography, (a) it increases the authority and voice you can bring to the task if it’s known that you’ve made contributions to what Bernstein called ‘the primary intellectual field’ (1990), working in a sphere of scientific endeavour that’s fairly well-established, and (b) you need to show that linguistic ethnography’s not just ‘a mile wide and an inch deep’ (Hymes 1977:194).

To be more precise about all this, let’s look at linguistic ethnography’s historical development, starting with the vision of ethnography as a ‘democratic science’ disseminated through society at large that Hymes proposed in the US in the 1970s. At one pole, Hymes suggested, there’d be anthropologists who’d been professionally trained in ethnography and at the other, there’d be the general population, respected for its subtle knowledge of the worlds it inhabited. In between, there would be people who could “combine some disciplined understanding of ethnographic inquiry with the pursuit of their vocation” (1976/1980:99). This vision travelled across the Atlantic to the UK and Europe, but when it arrived, there weren’t many anthropologists interested in language, and instead in the early 2000s, it was something more like Hymes’ middle-group – applied linguists with strong professional affiliations – who embraced the project and took on the task of training students ab initio. That process of intellectual community building has actually been quite successful, and if you search Google Scholar, the term “linguistic ethnography” crops up in 24 publications in the year 2001, 153 in 2011 and 537 in 2021. That’s quite substantial growth, and every PhD in linguistic ethnography strengthens the academic pole in the terrain that Hymes sketches. But there is still quite a long way to go if you compare the figures over 20 years with other areas – 4,640 publications with “linguistic ethnography”; 9,680 with “interactional sociolinguistics”; 33,300 with “linguistic anthropology”; 44,400 with “conversation analysis”; 102,000 with “sociolinguistics”; and 458,000 with “applied linguistics”. For someone finishing a doctoral linguistic ethnography, these figures carry two messages: first it’s worth being flexible in how you brand yourself on the academic job market, and second, once in post, linguistic ethnography’s profile and reputation still needs cultivation.
Overall, then, it looks as though doctoral graduates in linguistic ethnography are faced with quite a full list of developmental possibilities. Do you want to work in- or outside academia? Where and how are you going to position and present your research? And if you felt that you learnt a lot from the PhD process, what can you do for linguistic ethnography itself? On top of all that, of course, if you’re working in a university, how are you going to cope with the teaching and administration you’ll have to do?

4) Being realistic

The answer is of course that you don’t have to do everything at once, but maybe this is less obvious that it ought to be. There’s now very widespread agreement that researchers need to be reflexive about their own cultural identities, and gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, language background etc can all have an immediate impact on fieldwork, feeding through into analysis in ways that it’s often hard to pin down. Indeed, there’s usually an explicit discussion of this in a PhD. But even though it’s an absolutely fundamental structural element in knowledge production, how far do we systematically consider academic position and career-stage when we discuss research design and methodology, assess publications and so forth? I think we need to with linguistic ethnography, and as Hymes said, there’s actually much more to any intellectual tradition than “isolated classics”, “scientific methods and findings alone” (1983:346,365). Along with a range of broader historical influences, we also need to reckon with less visible phenomena, “local scenes,...biographies... and lesser writings” (1983:346), and once again, I’ll briefly draw on my own experience to say a little more about this – the stuff that often gets left in the background.

So I spent the first ten to 10-15 years of my scholarly career trying to turn the acute ideological unease I’d often felt as a schoolteacher into compelling academic arguments, also feeling that I had to evidence or reference every claim I made to show I belonged in a university (Rampton 2002). Then over time, team-work and doctoral supervision took over from first-hand fieldwork, the urgent sense of personal mission weakened, and I spent more of my time thinking about methodology and training, writing more suggestively, recognising that it was often more important to stimulate people than convince them. At this point, I also shifted a lot of the capacity for academic rigour that I’d developed into much more bureaucratic text production, dedicating a lot of effort to claiming and then defending space for interdisciplinary linguistics in the social sciences. As I got more senior, the scale of these organisational struggles grew, but that didn’t mean I just became an administrative manager, giving up on linguistic ethnography – the course on security, ethnography & discourse that I mentioned at the start is in fact the direct outcome of one of the cross-disciplinary conversations that I developed in a management role. And it didn’t all stop in 2019 when I stepped back from full-time employment. I started volunteering with a non-profit migrant language teaching organisation where we’ve been developing quite a practical programme of linguistic citizenship and doing a lot of teacher training. Within this, my writing’s got a lot less clotted and I’ve used concepts from sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology far more freely than I’ve ever done before (see www.kcl.ac.uk/held and https://wpull.org/product-category/hub-for-education-language-diversity-held/). So, eventually, in the end, I have managed to tick the boxes in linguistic ethnography that I’ve known about all along – specialisation, interdisciplinarity, practical impact – but it’s taken
about forty years, I’ve only just got over the line on practical impact, and inevitably, as I’ve concentrated on one area, others have been neglected.

Admittedly, for anyone thinking about moving from a PhD to a university career with linguistic ethnography, this account of an extended trajectory may sound more like a warning than an invitation, a deterrent rather than an incentive. So let me say right away, defensively, that that story’s actually a little bit of a simplification and, much more assertively, that of course there are other ways of shifting across the different spheres of activity that constitute linguistic ethnography as a complex but coherent intellectual programme. For someone like Jan Blommaert, the movement to and fro across spheres was much swifter (Rampton 2021). Jan made major contributions to sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, did fantastic academic work building a pedigree for linguistic ethnography (e.g. Blommaert 2009, 2018a, 2018b), and he also said, looking back, that “whenever I doubted the importance of what I was doing academically (and that happened very frequently, believe me), the answer was given by my activism. The answer was: because THEY need it, these activists, trade union people... school teachers” (Blommaert & Van Der Aa 2020:6).

Indeed, Jan “set up a system of democratic knowledge sharing wherever he went” (Van der Aa 2021) and “created communities of academics from all corners of life” (Al Zijdaly 2021). So it’s definitely not just same-old same-old drudgery if you carry on in linguistic ethnography, and there’s much more involved in a well-developed career than policing the boundaries and curating the canon. But at the same time, and crucially here, Jan also insisted on shining a spotlight backstage, demystifying the organisational side of knowledge production, and when he himself experienced burnout, “he talked about lying fallow, taking back control... normalising vulnerability and fallow time in the interest of science”. For younger scholars like van Hout and Karrebaek, it was “an eye-opener” (van Hout 2021; Karrebaek 2021), and this openness and honesty about academic conditions, structural positions and current personal priorities is actually vital to taking on some of the big issues we’ve been talking about in this doctoral seminar series.

So for example, we’ve been discussing decoloniality, and regardless of your career stage, there are aspects of linguistic ethnography that dovetail quite well with a decolonial research programme (Rampton 2019:8-9). Contemporary linguistic ethnography’s generally rather cautious about ‘truth[s] applicable everywhere’ (Masters & Makoni 2019); it allows us to focus on situated interactional practices, rather than ‘peoples’ and ‘cultures’ (Escobar 2007:200); and there’s often a commitment to collaborative data exploration, engaging with people outside the academy, which encourages “artisanal rather than architectural work, work of committed witnessing rather than clairvoyant leadership” (Santos 2012:51). But when it comes to the crucial structural issues like access and the circulation of knowledge, it’s well-placed and quite senior scholars who become the protagonists, faced with all sorts of practical choices about centres, networks and channels of communication. In contrast, wherever they’re positioned, North or South, the challenge for early career researchers is to

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3 I’m also grateful to Natalia Volvach and Ceri McKay-Smith for insisting on the importance of this at the doctoral stage.
get their work read and assessed as widely as they can, figuring out where they themselves fit in.

That’s just one issue, but more generally if we want to operate effectively in and across the different discourse communities that linguistic ethnography seeks to engage with, it’s important to be reflexive about our biographies and institutions as well as our theories and methods. What Van Der Aa & Blommaert call ‘epistemic solidarity’ (2015) depends on explicit recognition and acceptance of these differences, and it’s also vital for teamwork, which can itself be an effective organisational strategy for advancing the programme on different fronts at the same time (the group running the Security, Ethnography & Discourse course is one example of this). Maybe a lot of this actually self-evident, part of the common-sense trade-craft you develop as a scholar over time. And maybe that’s fine within a paradigm or a singular, where, says Kuhn, “scientists seldom evoke overt disagreement over fundamentals” (Kuhn 1962:11). But in an interdisciplinary region like linguistic ethnography, the negotiation of compatibility, authority and relevance never really stops, repeatedly pushing you back to a careful reconsideration of fundamentals (Rampton 2007:596-8), and as any decent ethnographer should know, institutional structures and positions are an ineradicable part of this.

References


