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Methodological Principles for Researching Multilingually: Reflections on Linguistic Ethnography

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Abstract

Linguistic ethnography provides insight into how communication occurs between individuals and institutions, while situating these local actions within wider social, political and historical contexts (Copland & Creese, 2015) and has proven to be a particularly effective tool for developing our understanding of individuals' lived multilingual realities (see Unamuno, 2014) and societal multilingualism. Turning the 'reflexive gaze' that is central to ethnography (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) back onto linguistic ethnography itself, we argue that where complex multilingual interactions are the object of study, more attention must be given to how multilingualism affects each aspect of the process of actually doing linguistic ethnography. In this paper we outline the development of three principles that we put forward as being essential in developing and conducting contemporary linguistic ethnography in multilingual settings. The principles are: 1) Researching multilingually; 2) Researching collaboratively; and 3) Researching responsively.

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Reflections on our methodological choices and practices are not new within the field of language, linguistics, and ethnography. Gumperz's (1972) early methodological reflections are an important reminder of the need to critically evaluate, reflect upon, and take stock of both the conceptualisations of language and the research tools we take with us into the field, recognising how these shape and determine what we see, hear, and understand about language as social practice. The more we continue to engage with and understand complex language practices and repertoires, the more we must continue

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these reflexive processes and practices. As Martin-Jones and Martin (2017:1) discuss, developments in the ways that we have come to understand and conceptualise "language" and multilingualism over the last 15–20 years "have obliged us to adjust our research lenses and recast our research methodologies." In a similar way, Blommaert (2010:8), among others, highlights that the multilingual turn (May 2013) "stretches the limits of existing frameworks for analysing and understanding multilingualism and the dynamics of language change" (cited in Martin-Jones & Martin, 2017:8), and requires us to rethink our practices, procedures, and approaches. In the last 20 years, linguistic ethnographic approaches have established themselves as powerful and productive ways of understanding how language is used in day-to-day social interactions. While these approaches have offered important insights into language as a meaning-making process, changes in the ways in which we have come to conceptualise language, particularly with respect to multilingualism, means that there is a continued need for (linguistic) ethnographers to reflect on their preparation for and participation in fieldwork.

In this paper, we begin by arguing that while linguistic ethnography has played an important and fundamental role in enriching our understanding of how language is used as a resource for meaning making, there is a need to bring more focus to the role of language in the process of doing linguistic ethnography. We suggest that the "gaze" of linguistic ethnography has tended to land on the *who, what, where, and when* of ethnography rather than the *how,* with implications for what we can read and learn about researching multilingually. We then move on to outline three methodological principles that have developed out of our own work and which we put forward as being valuable in developing and conducting contemporary linguistic ethnography in multilingual settings. The principles are *(1) Researching multilingually, (2) Researching collaboratively, and (3) Researching responsively.*

One of the key strengths of linguistic ethnography, and ethnography more broadly, is the spirit of "*bricolage*" that provides opportunities to draw from a wide variety of traditions and practices to enrich our understandings (Rampton, Maybin, & Roberts, 2015; Shaw, Copland, & Snell, 2015). As such, while the focus in this paper is linguistic ethnography as it is the tradition within which our current work is located, the nature of this research means that the issues and challenges we raise here are likely to be familiar to colleagues working more broadly within ethnography (Borchgrevink, 2003, Borchgrevink, 2003; Gibb, Tremlett & Danero Iglaesias 2019, Gibb & Danero Iglaesias 2017, Holmes, Fay, Andrews, & Attia, 2013; Holmes et al., 2016).

APPROACHING LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY

For many researchers, linguistic ethnography has provided a rich "discursive space" (Rampton, 2007: 585) within which we are able to enhance our understanding of how social interaction and meaning making are mediated by and through language (Copland & Creese, 2015). Linguistic ethnographies provide insight into how communication occurs between individuals and institutions while situating these local actions within wider social, political, and historical contexts (Copland & Creese, 2015) and have proven to be a particularly effective tool for developing our understanding of individuals' lived multilingual realities (see Unamuno, 2014) and societal multilingualism more generally.

Rampton, Maybin, and Roberts (2014:1) argue that "heightened methodological reflexivity [is] the only way of responding to the inevitably very diverse ways in which LE [linguistic ethnography] gets appropriated." Similarly, Creese (2015:61) talks of ethnographers "investigating the investigation" arguing that "[t]his kind of reflexivity is usual in ethnography where it is common practice for researchers to describe the tensions they face in the field and their reconciliation of contradictions encountered." This emphasis on reflexivity, focusing on the constitutive role of language within linguistic ethnography as a method, is, we believe, essential if researchers are to continue to effectively study multilingualism.

This paper is born out of our own experiences of and reflections on our own linguistic ethnographic research. We are currently working on a 2-year funded project exploring the ways in which teachers' and students' linguistic resources are utilised and deployed in schools, classrooms, and community settings in multiple sites in Botswana, Tanzania, and Zambia where the national language-in-education-policies promote the use of local languages as well as English at different stages of education. We are a team of 13 from a broad range of disciplines including linguistics as well as anthropology, education, and language policy. Our team is multilingual with access to the dominant language(s) and literacy practices in the research sites as well as many of the minoritised languages in use within and across these countries. It is against this background that we reflect on our own work and the challenges we have faced.

LANGUAGE AND METHODOLOGY IN LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY

While description and analysis of the ways in which language is deployed in meaning-making processes is a central output of linguistic ethnography and has significantly contributed to our understanding of multilingualism and multilingual interactions, there is (ironically) much less focus on how language is deployed in the actual doing of linguistic ethnography. At the level of practical training and the design of research, there is a tendency to treat multilingualism in terms of the practical challenges for data collection and data presentation (Copland & Creese, 2015; Holmes et al., 2013, 2016; Martin-Jones, Andrews, & Martin, 2017). Some have discussed the challenges of working with translators and the different roles, responsibilities, and identities within projects (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Creese, Kaur Takhi, & Blackledge, 2017; Gibb, Tremlett & Danero Iglaesias 2019), and others have discussed the power relations involved in and invoked by language choice and language use and the hierarchies within which languages exist both inside and outside of projects (Borchgrevink, 2003; Gibb, Tremlett & Danero Iglaesias 2019; Holmes et al., 2013, 2016). There is also some attention paid to the languages in which research is written up and presented and how what "norms" and "standards" the language is required to adhere to, how and by whom languages are translated and what is lost and gained within these processes (Vakser, 2017). A common theme we identify within these discussions is the lack of explicit training researchers receive on these issues and that these are often seen as challenges of the field to be overcome and addressed as and when they occur. These discussions constitute an important part of the reflexive practice that is central to all ethnographic work of the work, but they have yet to be taken up and incorporated into training programmes and materials. In this sense, they remain part of reflexive practice rather than catalysts for changing praxis.

Taking our cue from Holmes et al., (2013, 2016), we see an immediate concern with the ways in which current ethnographic methodology takes account of and prepares ethnographers for working multilingually (see also Hou, 2020). We share their concern that ethnographers need to be trained in how to work multilingually and to be better sensitised to the implications of the choices made about the languages through which research is conducted. As Blackledge and Creese (2010:105) suggest, researching multilingually highlights "the importance of language as a resource in the research process."

In our view, researching multilingually is built on the premise that if we set out to explore multilingualism and multilingual practices, we cannot do it monolingually. We should, instead, at all stages of the research process from its conceptualisation, design, data collection, and through to dissemination be seeking to do this multilingually and we should see this reflected in the discussions and published papers, handbooks, and guidelines within the field. We do not suggest these changes simply to add complexity for complexity's sake, but we have learned that placing multilingualism at the centre of our work has enabled us to more accurately and appropriately conceptualise, capture, and represent the complexity of multilingual social worlds. What we need then is a methodological multilingual turn within linguistic ethnography, and ethnography more broadly as a means by which we can ensure that data gathering, analysis, and interpretation are as accurate as they can and should be, and that this is reflected in our training, preparation, professional practices, and disciplinary expectations.

PRINCIPLES FOR LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY

The principles that we outline below have emerged from our ongoing work. They have been developed iteratively during our project – in discussions with colleagues, in the planning and designing stages, and throughout the processes of data analysis and dissemination. The principles serve as heuristics to interrogate questions that were otherwise left unanswered by the current literature. They have been further honed via blog posts, webinars, and conference participation and our own individual reflections on working multilingually. We do not present these three principles as an exhaustive list, or necessarily as "new" ideas (cf. Gumperz, 1972; and Holmes et al. 2013) but rather as necessary considerations that can help us ensure that as linguistic ethnographers our work has an equal commitment to the constitutive roles of language not only as the *focus* of our work but also as part of the *method*. We also acknowledge that colleagues are likely to have shared similar experiences in their own research and have had similar discussions within their own work (see Blackledge & Creese, 2010 for example); however, we recognise an absence in explicit discussion of multilingualism with regard to methodological change within linguistic ethnography and seek to make these issue more visible.

Principle 1: Researching Multilingually

The language dimension is a substantive issue in ethnographic research; however, as highlighted above, the role which multilingualism has in the methodological process of doing linguistic ethnography is often overlooked. Typically, what we find in the literature is that language is often presented as something of an operational challenge to the research project. What we see a lot less (specifically with regard to methodological training and handbooks) is discussion of the need to consider how language factors into each stage of the ethnographic project – from project design to impact, and how these considerations will shape and inform what is done, when, how, and with whom.

There are a number of challenges, which can arise when working in multilingual contexts, with multilingual teams. The timeframe within which research work tends to take place rarely allows enough time to learn the focal languages. The focus on the researcher learning a language in order to carry out their work implies that they will be working alone and that this is both practical and sufficient (See Phipps, 2013 for a powerful discussion of the notion of competence in researching multilingually). In reality, we know that most ethnographic work draws and relies heavily on guides, translators, and informants to help in the process with much of this work going unmentioned (Borchgrevink, 2003; Gibb & Danero Iglesias 2017; Gibb, Tremlett, & Danero Iglesias 2019). A key concern in our approach to researching multilingually is that we do not view multilingualism as an issue only related to data collection and analysis. Language needs to be considered at all stages of the work to ensure that research activities are not being conceptualised and conducted from a position of unwitting monolingualism.

In our collaborative ethnographic work, the challenges of researching multilingually come to the fore. We work across countries with a total of at least 220 named languages with a team all of whom have unique multilingual repertoires. Part of researching multilingually for our work means allowing space for individuals' multilingual repertoires to be used freely at all stages of the project. Multilingualism is not only used as a tool for data collection and data analysis but also in "behind the scenes" aspects of the project such as project planning, meetings, training sessions, email, and WhatsApp communication and dissemination activities such as social media, blogs, and publications. By researching multilingually, we are not restricting ourselves to using particular languages when we are collecting data, analysing data, and discussing and sharing data. In our work, we are actively encouraging the use of languages other than English and, where appropriate, we put English last (this approach draws form the work of Phipps, particularly Phipps, 2019).

When researching multilingually, we will not always understand everything that is happening within the research. This can be uncomfortable, and can lead to hierarchal tensions if collaborators have (more) resources in particular languages at different stages in the project. This may sometimes be strange but it is a necessary discomfort, which must be addressed. Holmes et al. (2013:297) highlight that an important stage in researcher awareness is "that multilingual research practice is indeed possible and permissible"; we would take this a step further to say that in research contexts such as our own, as well as others mean that researching multilingually is a methodological necessity. As highlighted by Blackledge and Creese (2010), a multilingual team can act as a valuable resource for linguistic ethnography through the diversity of repertoires and perspectives which are brought to the research process. Taking this a step further, we might also add that if the goal of linguistic ethnography is to understand and accurately represent the ways in which language functions as a meaning-making resource and an important aspect of social practice, then attending to language at all stages of any linguistic ethnographic work is not only a methodological responsibility but also an ontological imperative.

Principle 2: Researching Collaboratively

The original conception of a "lone ethnographer" exploring an unknown "Other" has been widely critiqued (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Horner, 2002; Rosaldo, 1989, Wasser & Bressler 1996). Despite this, in writing about researching in (multilingual) teams, Creese acknowledges that "[w]ithin the Academy it is still the lone researcher's ethnographic journey which is the default position" (Creese, 2015:61 in Copland & Creese) and may still be the main model for training graduate students in ethnography in some contexts (Jesse et al. 2015). As a result, the process of collaboration, which exists and is a fundamental part of the method, is often under-represented in the writings on linguistic ethnography (Budach, 2019).

Discussions around collaboration tend to focus on collaboration with participants or collaboration with other researchers. Following Horner (cited in Brown, 2012), we view all (linguistic) ethnography as collaborative in nature and, as noted by Lassiter (2005:15) collaboration should be at the centre of all stages of (linguistic) ethnography from planning to "fieldwork to writing and back again." The principle of collaboration has to be viewed as an integral part of linguistic ethnography particularly when the research is taking place in complex multilingual contexts.

Tusting and Maybin (2007:579) highlight that collaboration poses challenges and note that as such "Linguistic ethnographers need to take on the epistemic authority to make truth claims which may differ from those of their research participants." In practice, this means that an important concern in our own ethnographic work has been for us to make sure that we extend our notion of collaboration to include all of those involved throughout the various stages of the research. Furthermore, we have tried to foster not just a collaboration for smooth and efficient team working but which is also an epistemic collaboration in which all collaborators are part of creating the framework for conducting, understanding, and sharing the linguistic ethnography. Our collaborators are numerous – co-investigators, research assistants, community partners, practitioners, and research participants. In coming together through the core aims of the project, all collaborators bring their research interests, expertise, linguistic repertoires, positionalities, and lived experiences. There are therefore multiple authorities and the relationships between these authorities are not fixed in a rigid hierarchy through the project, but are fluid and can change over time, and depending on what data are being discussed (See Lefstein & Isreali 2015 for their experiences of working with different "professional visions").

Notwithstanding the challenges which collaboration can face, partnership is a valuable tool in "*extend[ing]* traditional fieldwork" (Bezemer, 2015: 210) and can positively influence the direction of ethnographic research, the analytical insight, and the impact potential of findings. We would also argue that the fluidity, flexibility, and plurality of multiple authorities are an appropriate and in many ways necessary resource for ethnographic work in multilingual contexts. As a first step towards successful collaborative ethnography, there must be an acknowledgement of these pluralities, and a willingness to incorporate them into the research process. For detailed discussion of collaboration within ethnography, see Moore, Bradley, and Simpson (2020) and the work of Angela Creese and Adrian Blackledge (e.g. Blackledge & Creese, 2010, 2019; Creese & Blackledge, 2012).

So, rather than viewing any one individual or sole "linguistic ethnographer" as the "epistemic authority" within the project, those involved in collaborative ethnography should aim to decentre this authority position. Discussion, reflection, negotiating, and compromise are key elements of this decentring which can open a path to fuller and more fruitful collaboration by providing collaborators with an investment in the research project – from design and data collection, to dissemination and impact activities (see Blackledge, Creese, & Hu, 2017 for an ethnographic account which seeks to challenge hierarchal positions in reporting research and Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005 for an account of how to capture and represent complementary and conflicting positions).

Principle 3: Researching Responsively

This final principle combines necessarily when the other two principles are in play. By researching responsively, we recognise the necessity of ethnographic work to be tailored to specific contexts and to adapt towards the multiple variables which will make each linguistic ethnography unique – the collaborators involved and their positionalities, the geographical, institutional, social, and policy contexts under study, and the multilingual repertoires involved both as the object of the study and in the process of conducting the ethnography. We can and should explore topics, which arise during the research in and through language resources that are appropriate to and led by our collaborators and participants. Linguistic ethnography must be fundamentally flexible in nature. We must remind ourselves that by researching responsively we are not restrained by a strict set of research practices but rather we can, and need, be flexible and adapt to the contexts that we are working in. This also affords all collaborators a freedom to be flexible when research does not proceed as intended.

The interdisciplinary flexibility which is inherent within the foundations of linguistic ethnography (Rampton et al., 2015) enables ethnographers to adapt their approaches which can offer an opportunity for the "diversification of... approaches to data collection" as exemplified by Moriarty's (2020) use of mobile filmmaking and smartphones when conducting linguistic ethnographies of signing deaf people. Adopting a flexible approach also ensures that collaborators have the agency and freedom to make choices during the data collection, which can be approached with fluidity. This means that, during a collaborative ethnography project with multiple researchers and research sites, the research design and data collection across sites do not have to be identical but can adopt different strategies that are locally responsive.

Bradley (2016) highlights the messiness, fluidity, and changing roles which are inherent within ethnographic work and notes the importance of making this messiness visible to other researchers. This flexible and responsive approach also entails considering how best to disseminate research findings – what will be most beneficial? Who is the research being shared with? What languages will ensure that the research findings are inclusive and accessible? (See Blackledge & Creese, 2019, 2020 for innovative approaches to sharing ethnographic findings).

Researching responsively also involves collaborators being flexible with how the partnerships within the project are managed – who fills what role and how this changes over time to meet the specific needs of the project. Encouraging individual members of the collaboration to be flexible themselves is also valuable when there is a need for discussing important aspects of, for example, data analysis. Within our collaborative ethnographic work, researching responsively entails responding to specific research contexts and responding to issues which arise during the research. For example, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of our original plans had to be revised. Research assistant training and team meetings had to be moved online, and the sites for data collection, and periods of data collection, had to be revised in line with lockdown restrictions in many countries.

FINAL COMMENTS

Our concern in this paper has not been to question multilingualism as the object of study within linguistic ethnography but rather to add our voices to the calls for increased reflection and critical engagement on the ways in which multilingualism impacts the process of conceptualising, designing, and carrying out (any) ethnographic work. We put forward these developing principles as a contribution to establishing a contemporary linguistic ethnography. We end with illustrative questions that we think can (and should) profitably be asked at different stages of any research being carried out multilingually. As with the principles outlined above, we see these questions as a starting point and a way of focusing the researcher(s)' gaze to language and an important means by which to reflect on the role of multilingualism as both focus and process within linguistic ethnography.

Design:

- What is the range of language that is likely to be needed during the research? How will these needs be met, with whom?
- Who is this research for? Who will it benefit, and how?
- How is communication within and outwith the research team navigated and how are these practices decided? How do they shape what happens and how?

Data collection:

- What is the status of the different languages? Will a particular language practice be the dominant mode of interaction? If so, what are the implications of this data and participants and how will this be managed?
- Who will be using different languages, with whom, for what ends? How does language use change with different participants and how will this be managed?
- What plans are in place to analyse the data multilingually and how are these processes managed?

Dissemination:

- What languages are needed to represent the findings?

- What traditions, standards, and norms of presentation are being made use of and how do these connect with the data?
- Who is included and excluded by the choices that are made and whose voices are heard and where?

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