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BOOK REVIEW

DIALOGUES WITH ETHNOGRAPHY: NOTES ON CLASSICS, AND HOW I READ THEM BY BLOMMAERT, J. BRISTOL: MULTILINGUAL MATTERS, 2018, 184 PAGES.

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Jan Blommaert's *Dialogues with Ethnography* is a collection of previously published essays including one obituary and two book reviews, all of which concern the topic of ethnography and what Blommaert dubs "the classics". This distinction is important to consider in anthropology where the "classics" are often texts such as *the Nuer* (Evans-Pritchard, 2010), *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski, 2008), and even some works by the Greeks. Here Blommaert diverts from such trends and offers us insights into a series of texts that should be considered classics to sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, linguistic ethnographers, discourse analysts and others.

SUMMARY

"True ethnography is rare", Blommaert notes (p. 1) arguing that ethnography has often been reduced to the status of being purely a method where one pays attention to minute details in the world in order to describe human experience. What is more the founding fathers of ethnography often emphasizing its methodology in terms of science. Offering such views as being too narrow to define ethnography, in Chapter 1, Blommaert sets about establishing how ethnography involves a certain amount of perspective that one brings to the study of language and communication. This perspective involves a certain level of epistemology and ontology in comprehending such experiences, perspectives which rationalized science are unable to develop. Ethnography as a perspective argues that ethnography should not be reduced to being

purely a method, but rather a perspective, or perhaps stance, that ethnographers take towards their research. This perspective includes the role of history in ethnography, the very definition of language itself and the fact that language can never be without some kind of context. To that end includes the very data we often use and the fact that speech is situated within social behavior, filled with ideologies, not to mention folk linguistic stances and categorizations, and the fact that ethnography is not just a matter of watching behavior. Rather ethnographers are embedded within the actions of the speech communities or communities of practice that they are studying. Blommaert argues that central to such stances is the fact that ethnography can be a tool that can be used to counter the hegemonic stances and language ideologies shaped by wider society.

Chapter 2 is Blommaert's obituary to Dell Hymes he notes the complexity of Hymes' written work. Usually when researcher's think of Hymes they may often think of the S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G mnemonic which is used a means of the ethnographic description of communicative events. Yet Hymes' work went well beyond description and as one of the founders of sociolinguistics Hymes' work left more than one mnemonic. To that end Blommaert offers eight points: 1) that language should be considered as part of a sociolinguistic system, 2) the difference between language with a capital L (e.g. English) and the many varieties, styles, registers, ways of speaking, and etc, that make it up, 3) such repertoires are unevenly distributed in society, 4) repertoires can only be understood by examining their respective functions, 5) ethnography is a theory that involves description, 6) such description requires attention to history, 7) ethnography is situated within the real-world and answers real-world problems and 8) such attention to real-world problems requires acute attention to detail in ethnography.

Chapter 3 is another discussing of Dell Hymes focusing upon his senses of ethnography as being both democratic and anti-hegemonic. The very idea of ethnography is a science that is grounded in democratic principles. One such principle is rooted in Hymes' discussion of two types of linguistic relativity, where type one or Whorfian relativity drew attention to form, whereas a second type would focus upon function to include the relativity of ways of speaking. Blommaert goes on to discuss some of the more political components around Hymes' work, the notion that if all languages are equal how is that some are not even considered as languages, not to mention how humans often imply a scalar reasoning on languages where some are better than others in terms of complexity, difficulty or economically speaking.

Blommaert notes that ethnopoetics may be construed with the same stigma as phonetics, "unless one understands its function, value and potential applicability, it is a very unattractive thing" (p. 27). Chapter 4 examines closely Dell Hymes' often glossed over stances and analysis of ethnopoetics and Blommaert refers to a series of book length analyses that Hymes produced on ethnopoetics as Hymes' oeuvre. Ethnopoetics for Hymes as an attempt to discern cultural ways of speaking and in analyzing traditional narratives, one can get at the cultural grammar of a group of people. Blommaert dissects the key points in Hymesian ethnopoetics noting that many of these books were often overlooked by anthropologists.

Chapter 5 introduces us to James Fabian's ethnographic work focusing upon the role of history in ethnography. As a case study of such a history Blommaert offers up Tshibumba's "A Histoire of Zaire", a handwritten document produced by Tshibumba who is a famous artist from the Congo. This chapter reflects upon Fabian's work on history in ethnographic research, Tshibumba's histories which exist in three modes: a series of paintings, a oral narration, and a the handwritten text analyzed in this chapter. The latter is the focus of Blommaert's analysis in this chapter with a particular emphasis upon the notion of voice, which if you are familiar with

the author's book *Discourse: A critical introduction*, is the unit of analysis which is the focus of much of his work. The focus of voice in this chapter has to do with grassroots literacy which entails: an unstable orthography, the use of non-standard varieties in written work, issues with genre, and the fact that the environment within which this voice is produced is not a strong literate environment. Blommaert makes not of two elements that are important features of this history: 1) the fact that there is an orientation to past events and 2) choice of language and/or code. The text was written in French not a local language. Shifts in footing and framing are of notable importance in analyzing these texts. These shifts could be found in the sources of this history: the author's own experience, the Belgian historical record, and the mass media in the Congo.

Chapter 6 shifts the focus to *habitus* and historical body through a discussion of the work of Ron and Suzie Scollon specifically their books *Discourses in Place* and *Nexus Analysis*. The argument begins with a discussion of synchrony and how history should be a part of ethnography. A part of history in ethnography is the historical body which is the accumulation of actions and knowledge about the world that an individual social actor has acquired over time. At the moment of social action, the historical body is activated in such a way to draw upon those previous actions. Discourse analysis is the means through which we trace the relationships between texts, actions, and the material world. Space for the Scollon's is not a neutral entity in the world and in fact becomes an actor in a sociolinguistic sense. The example of nexus analysis that Blommaert offers is using a zebra stripe crossing in Europe. Zebra crossings exist in many places in the world and even though they are meant to serve the same purpose they are vastly different sites for social action even within the same country. Using a zebra crossing in the United States is a different experience in Seattle and New York. If we compare the actions involved in crossing the street using a zebra crossing in Bangkok one conjures up a vast array of actions different in scope than one uses in Seattle.

Chapter 7 offers further discussion of the Scollon's work on geosemiotics noting how this approach to signs is a materialist theory of semiotics. In this sense signs are not just abstractions found in the mind that are reflections of things in world but rather, "as material forces subject to and reflective of conditions of production and patterns of distribution, and as constructive of social reality, as real social agents have real effects in social life" (p. 77). This chapter further explores the notion of geosemiotics in relation to linguistic landscape studies introduced in chapter 6. Blommaert notes some differences between geosemiotic approaches to signs in public and linguistic landscapes noting how the latter often takes a more quantitative approach to language in the material world not to mention some methodological issues with linguistic landscape studies. Quantitative approaches to linguistic landscape often inform of us the presence of languages without drawing attention to the multimodal nature of such signs and the fact that they are present in the material world in ordered ways. Blommaert then details how it is that signs in the material world do not just denote languages and actions but also are reflective of the identities of people who use them.

Chapter 8 introduces us to Pierre Bourdieu's analyses of language and symbolic power. The author notes three features of Bourdieu's work that are notable: 1) it is situated within Marxist new left approaches, 2) the importance of ethnography related to statistical analysis and 3) the manner in which throughout Bourdieu's writing he often reflected upon nexus type concepts meant to reflect micro and macro orders of society. Blommaert also reflects upon Bourdieu's interest in symbolic interactionism for its insistence on fieldwork and participant observation. Bourdieu in effect broke away from the sociology of the day which was routed in structuralism (i.e. Levi-Strauss) and moved toward a reflexive sociology. Such reflexivity is

rooted in the idea of intersubjective engagement with research subjects whereby the researcher acknowledges the objective and subjective qualities of the humans who are the object of our research. The Bourdieuan methodological loop, as Blommaert notes, is found in his ethnography which also blended in statistics -- ethnography/statistics/ethnography -- and returning to previous field sites. The latter part of the chapter focuses upon Bourdieu's use of nexus concepts for analytical purposes with a particular emphasis upon the notion of habitus. Habitus refers to the accumulation of bodily actions and is found in all social activity. The author then discusses how the notion of voice emerges in some of Bourdieu's work on language and its relation to habitus, which is shown to be evident in the work of linguistic anthropologists such as Agha and Silverstein.

Combining surveys and ethnographies in the study of rapid social change is the title of Chapter 9 and it offers us a fascinating and important perspective on the relationship between surveys and ethnography. Blommaert introduces us to the notion of ecological validity first established by the ethnomethodologists Aaron Cicourel in his book *Method and Measurement in Sociology* who noted that when we ask questions of people in a population how do we know that they have the knowledge as well as whether or not the content of such questions are comprehended by the population. How do we know that the questions we ask have a similar meaning among our research subjects? The answer to such problems is found in indexicality. Noting how Cicourel found survey questions to be grounded in indexicality, Blommaert argues that Silverstein's (2003) notion of indexical order is one way that we can discern how survey questions have variant meanings within a community. This is followed by a discussion of how statistics was used in ethnography by Bourdieu and how validity can be established of a survey instrument.

Data sharing is the focus of Chapter 10 where the notion that data can be shared in such a way that the context of the data are glossed over. One of the themes of this chapter has to do with transcripts from interview or discourse analysis data. A discourse analyst would be aware of the differences in transcription methods from a variety of discourse analysis paradigms from conversation analysis to interactional sociolinguistics. The notion that a researcher can analyze a transcript solely based upon their knowledge of conversation analysis methods is problematized. The role that context and background information about a transcript perform in analysis is not something that can/should be glossed over. However, Blommaert argues that data collection itself is a communicative event which often involves recording of some flavor, most frequently audio recordings. As such the data and the interview, itself are different entities. Blommaert makes two important distinctions concerning data: 1) transcription practices as data are acts of entextualization and 2) the manner in which conversation analysts and ethnographers entextualize data are different. Two important issues are noted concerning transcripts as data: one is that the "interview situation itself remains underdocumented" (p. 122) and second how we treat background information. It is often the case that in background information in discourse analysis is glossed over in research talks as well as publications. In addition, interviews are underdocumented to the degree to which we often give little details about the interviews from which we gather our data.

Time and scales are the focus of Chapter 11 involving the relationship between language studies and Bakhtin's little used notion of chronotopes. Here Blommaert relates Bakhtin's chronotope to the notion of the scales. "Scale is best understood as the scope of actual understandability of specific bits of discourse" (p. 141). Throughout this chapter Blommaert relates scales and chronotopes through other sociolinguistic processes such as voice, register, and figure. The importance here is that when we engage in social interaction scales and

chronotopes are invoked through recognizing voices, registers, and figures. First he situates these two concepts through problematizing the concept of context where on the one hand studies of language and society often make distinctions between micro and macro, on the other hand many such studies presuppose that there is one meaning to be derived either from an interaction or the context itself. Bakhtin's conception of the chronotope was meant to illustrate the inseparable relationship between time and space in social action. These temporal and spatial histories were meant to be a part of the heteroglossia that made up the novel. Blommaert argues that chronotopes are “‘invokable histories’, elaborate frames in which time, space and patterns of agency coincide, create meaning and value, and can be set off against other chronotopes” (p. 135). The concept of chronotope in sociolinguistics has been used to reflect how sociolinguistic behavior has levels of action related to agency, power, authority, validity, as well as ideology. Combining the concept of chronotope with scale, Blommaert then illustrates how chronotopes are chunks of history embedded in discourse scales then encompass the scope of communicability of tropes

Chapter 12 is a book review of the book *Marxism Urban Culture* (Fraser 2014), interestingly the review is not a summary of the book or a critique of the minute details therein, rather he offers a discussion of Lefebvre who wrote exclusively related Marxism to the city. Blommaert's criticism notes that the notions of urban and culture are often unclear in this edited volume.

Chapter 13 is a commentary of a special issue of the journal of sociolinguistic on linguistic ethnography. Blommaert begins with a discussion of theory that focuses upon theory in ethnography noting that ethnography is meant to be “‘iconic” of its research object and good ethnography should: be an insider's view, explore the microstructure of events and be reflexive. In relation to linguistic ethnography the author notes that discourse analysis is often considered a theory of discourse not of society and that theories themselves often emerge from specific methods. Ethnography in its earlier days was known as ethnology and the problem then was that language forms were often construed as cultural groups. This I assume is a reference to the problem of 1 language equals 1 culture which Hymes proved was very problematic even among people who speak the same language. Blommaert concludes with a discussion of pedigree which is reflective of Ben Rampton's article in the collection. Pedigree I am taking to be the perspective that one is taking to ethnography — how did one come across this method from anthropology, linguistics, sociology? What is the difference between linguistic ethnography, linguistic anthropology, anthropological linguistics or ethnographic linguistics? At the root these are just terms but in terms of pedigree it implies how one engaged the field in the first place, as insider (i.e. from the discipline of anthropology) or as an outsider who happened upon it or discover or rediscovered it (i.e. linguistics?).

It is hard to find anything missing from this text and it is refreshing to observe a prominent scholar in linguistic anthropology/sociolinguistic offer us his views on the classics. Recently there has been some scholarship to suggest that ethnography is not the purview of anthropology that we had for so long believed. In his book *Before Boaz: notes the role of 19th century* (Vermeulen, 2015) German and Russian historians in adopting methods which were surely ethnographic long before Malinowski. My point here is not to suggest that the author missed anything, but more so I would really enjoy reading his stance on this text. This work is important in that Blommaert offers us a sense of what ethnography is as well as the new classics or canon of discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology. Years ago, when I first started graduate school in linguistics I recall a conference in which a number of linguists who were adherents of the Chomskyan paradigm effectively rediscovered ethnography. They noted

that as linguists doing fieldwork we need to take account of social and cultural behavior because it turns out to affect the language that we are studying. We need to make ethnography a part of the core of linguistics fitting it in to the notions of sound, form and meaning. This collection is timely also because there needs to be an emphasis on ethnography as a theory and method in sociolinguistics in Thailand. I have observed in a few cases researchers making misguided assumptions about what ethnography is. For example, I once edited a dissertation for a graduate student in Thailand who using conversation analysis to analyze video recordings of debates on Thai TV in which the author was adamant that the work they were doing was ethnography when the research did not take any inside perspective other than just using conversation analysis. Description of course is a part of ethnography, ethnographic description involves the engagement of the researcher with the local, not just observing but also doing. To make it ethnography the researcher would have talked to users (i.e. producers of the show), talked with other people who watched these debates, and compared that work with what other ethnographers have done on the subject. Ethnography is a difficult endeavor and as Blommaert noted in his work true ethnography is rare. Often, we engage in scalar examples of ethnography that perhaps fall on either end of a continuum where one end is very ethnographic and the other not so much. This book would be most influential to graduate students and professionals interested in ethnography.

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