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Linguistic ethnography in realist perspective

Abstract

This article engages with linguistic ethnography from the perspective of sociological realism. It begins by reviewing some of the positions expressed in the linguistic ethnography (LE) literature about the extent to which LE is defined by theoretical orientation as well as by method. The article is then framed around a kind of 'generic' sociolinguistic research question - 'Which people use which kinds of language in what circumstances and with what outcome(s)?'. Taking each element in turn, it explores the ways in which an ethnographic approach contributes to the processes of: classifying speakers as members of various kinds of social groups; identifying language varieties; accounting for the influence of 'context' and identifying 'outcomes'. I suggest that each of these aspects of social linguistic research stands to benefit from the methods developed in ethnography, and from the theories and principles underlying the approaches it uses. However, drawing on the work of contemporary realist social theorists, the article concludes that ethnography is a method suited to illuminating certain aspects of such questions better than others.

Key words: linguistic ethnography, sociological realism, social categories, ethnicity

INTRODUCTION

This article suggests that linguistic ethnography is not inevitably linked to any one theoretical perspective, and that some of the most fruitful work in the field is compatible with the sociological realism developed in recent years by a number of theorists, despite relatively little explicit discussion of this in the linguistic ethnography literature. Sociological realism is a post-positivist philosophy, which insists, among other things, on a strong emphasis on human agency. Realist approaches recognize both that reality has an existence which is independent of how we choose to describe it, and that our descriptions are inevitably mediated through discourse. The approach entails an analytical separation of structure, culture and agency, which each have distinctive properties and powers[2].

In order to explore aspects of the issues raised by the UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum (Rampton et all 2004; Rampton, this issue), the discussion is framed around a kind of 'generic' research question, summarised as 'Which people use which kinds of language in what circumstances and with what outcome(s)?' This is a question attended to in sociolinguistic studies of many kinds (and not just the traditional, variationist work associated with the pioneers of the discipline). Its relevance to the issues at hand may be demonstrated by various linguistic

ethnographies, of which the following are just a very few examples; (the summaries do not imply the reduction of these studies to nothing more than the aspects highlighted). 'People' who have been studied include: 'Trackton blacks and Roadville whites' in the Piedmont Carolinas (Heath 1983: 10); black and white adolescents in 'Areas A and B' (Hewitt 1986); Chinookans (Hymes 1996); 'jocks' and 'burnouts' (Eckert 2000); 10–12 year old school children attending Middle Schools in Southern England (Maybin 2005). The 'kinds of language' identified and described in these linguistic ethnographies include, for example: 'different ways of using language in worship, for social control, and in asserting their sense of identity' (Heath 1983); 'London Jamaican'; three- and five-pattern sequences in narratives; backed /e/ and /uh/ vowels; collaborative verbal strategies, stories of personal experience and the reworked voices of others. 'Circumstances' include: a wide range of interactions in Trackton and Roadville; mixed peer group interaction; formal and informal storytelling settings; social interactions at high school; classroom and social interactions in the middle school. 'Outcomes' and potential outcomes include: mismatches of expectation between children and teachers as the children progress through school; complex negotiations of 'inter-racial friendship'; a potential 'source of encouragement and stimulation' (Hymes 1996:140) in schooling; the fulfillment of a number of simultaneous individual and social functions.

These diverse linguistic ethnographies, and many others besides, tell us a great deal – in rich and nuanced ways – about social actors and their language practices in particular situated activities.

(LINGUISTIC) ETHNOGRAPHY AND THEORY

Rampton et al (2004) provide an extensive discussion of what the UK Forum understands by the term Linguistic Ethnography, and it is not the best use of the space available to me to review issues that are covered there. However, as a brief preamble to the points below, I want to identify an issue that may not have been resolved, and this is the nature of the relationship between LE and theory. The practitioners associated with the Linguistic Ethnography Forum represent LE as connected to particular theories about the nature of the social world and of language. One of the anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this article asserted that, 'ethnography … is generally understood in (socio-) linguistic ethnography as both theory and method'; Blommaert (2005) rejects 'moves' which he claims result in a 'narrowing of ethnography,' such that 'the immense value of ethnography as a complex of theory, method, and epistemology is overlooked' (p.239 n.). On the other hand, ethnography itself has been associated with various theories about the nature of society and how it can be understood, including functionalism, Marxism, interactionism, and so on (Hammersley, pers. comm.), so that theoretical orientation cannot actually be taken as given in the ethnographic approach. Hammersley (2006) highlights the lack of consensus about the term 'ethnography', noting that, '[t]he problem is that, like many other *methodological* terms used by social scientists, "ethnography" does not form part of a clear and systematic taxonomy' (p.3, emphasis added). Hymes (1996) opines that '[a]nthropologists do not themselves have a unified conception of

ethnography' (p.3), and points out that, '[d]ifferences in analytic point of view can take different vantage points within a shared body of data … and even prescribe different definitional constructs for master-concepts such as the cultural and the social' (p.11). These continuing debates demonstrate that the difficult questions of ontology and epistemology are not resolved by adopting an ethnographic – or indeed any other – methodological approach.

Thus analysis of ethnographically generated data will involve deploying concepts other than those used by participants themselves, and, often, adjudicating between the different descriptions of similar things provided by different participants. Some linguistic ethnographers accept this either explicitly or implicitly, in their practice, where 'an independent angle on participants' views is fairly commonplace' (Rampton, pers. comm.). Others, in emphasising the importance of seeking to 'understand the world as they [the participants in the study] have understood it', and in refraining from questioning 'whether their interpretation of events was the correct or true interpretation' (Norton 2000: 58), could seem to blur the distinction between making sense of data and making knowledge claims. Discussion and debate in this area sometimes suggest that academics may be contributing to the social inequalities they deplore if they make any claims for the authority of their own accounts and interpretations.

It is well established, of course, that ethnographic researchers, like others in the academic community, need reflexivity – an awareness that 'the ethnographer himself or herself is a factor in the inquiry' – but this need not be the threat to objectivity that it is often, despairingly, portrayed as being: 'scientific objectivity resides, not in the individual scientist, but in the community of scientists' (Hymes 1996: 13). This point is very similar to that made by Popper, whose notion of World 3, 'the world of the products of the human mind,' includes 'scientific theories (whether true or false), scientific problems, social institutions' and so on (Popper and Eccles 1977: 38-39). It is articulated today by social theorists within the realist tradition; realism, 'necessarily a fallibilist philosophy,' (Sayer 2000: 2) 'must acknowledge that the world can only be known under particular descriptions, in terms of available discourses, though it does not follow from this that no description or explanation is better than any other'. Similar points are made by Williams (2005: 99) who observes that:

> Critiques of objectivity find their mark, but the problem with so many of these is that they move from the often articulated and wholly correct position that objectivity as value freedom is untenable, to the incorrect and undesirable position that objectivity is impossible;

and Bhaskar: 'there is no conflict between seeing our scientific views as being about objectively given real worlds, and understanding our beliefs about them as subject to all kinds of historical and other determinations' (Norris 1999).

One dimension of the 'reflexivity' prioritised by the LEF would add to my 'generic question' the supplementary questions, 'Where is this question coming from, who wants to know and why, and what are the implications for analysis and the afterlife of the research?' (Rampton, pers.

comm.), whereas other ethnographers strongly resist conceptualising research in light of such concerns:

> For me, the ethnographer must neither be in the service of some political establishment or profession nor an organic intellectual seeking to further the interests of marginalised, exploited, or dominated groups. Both of these orientations greatly increase the danger of systematic bias.

(Hammersley 2006: 11)

Thus it is not ethnography *per se* that situates any given inquiry in a particular relation to either values or knowledge. Linguistic ethnography is not incompatible with realist precepts, which may in turn (though this is far from inevitable) share progressive political ideals.

> Realism can help to uncover issues of power, representation, and subjectivity and how discursive and other social practices produce real effects. This can help us understand the manner in which (non-discursive) social structures are reproduced through various forms of ideology and discourse. And by knowing this, we can start to address questions concerning human emancipation and how the world is to be transformed.

(Joseph and Roberts 2003: 17)

Realist approaches recognise the social world as existing independently from our descriptions of it, and that language, structure and agency are different kinds of phenomena in that world, with different kinds of properties and powers. As Craib (1998: 63) puts it, 'people, social groups, organizations, and social structures are all different types of object which call on different forms of understanding. Nevertheless we have to understand each of them in order to understand the others.' A similar point is made by Layder (1998), who is unconvinced by analyses which, for example, privilege 'intersubjective relations' as 'exhaustive ontological characterizations of the social world' (p.86). '[S]ocial reality,' he observes, 'should not and cannot be understood as a unitary whole which is susceptible only to one kind of explanatory principle, theoretical assumption, or methodological approach'. Early work in linguistic ethnography itself sometimes hints at a stratified ontology, as when Gumperz (1982a: 203), for example, identifies a need to distinguish speech patterns at an 'interactive' level from the level of 'social rules' which are 'a function of macro-social or perhaps economic and political forces.' These, he continues, 'require different methods of analysis. We cannot confuse them or simply jump from grammar to one or the other.'

Different practitioners of linguistic ethnography may, as Hymes says, use different analytical concepts and arrive at different conclusions about similar data, but this, I would argue, will be a product of differences in their theories about language and the social world. Thus, as Rampton et al (2004: 15) acknowledge, 'concentration on the domain of face-to-face interaction may incline researchers to exaggerate the power of human agency and to neglect less visible processes of social reproduction'. In the remainder of this article, I will seek to illustrate the implications of a realist ontology for linguistic ethnographic methodology, using the framework of the research question introduced above.

'WHICH PEOPLE?': SOCIAL IDENTITIES AND SOCIAL CATEGORIES

How does the linguistic ethnographer, or indeed any other social researcher, decide which social actors, which speakers, constitute a focus for study? Ethnography has long had to come to terms with the heterogeneity and complexity of the urban, bureaucratic, industrial contexts where much such research is carried out. Nevertheless, the term 'ethnographic' carries in its etymology the notion of an *ethnos*, a social group with significant characteristics in common, so the issue of social categories must somehow be addressed by (linguistic) ethnographers. 'Not even an ethnographic approach,' observes Bucholz (2003: 407), '… releases the researcher from the responsibility of determining who and what will count for the purposes of analysis'. In the linguistic ethnography literature with which I am familiar, two trends in responding to this question are discernible, though not always fully explicated.

One emphasises the importance of orienting to participants' own identifications. For example, Rampton et al (2004) set out the principle of 'anti-ethnocentricity and relevance'. A study such as Eckert's (2000, see above) demonstrates the productive potential of not allowing the assumptions found in 'prevailing definitions' and 'terms that are already given' (Rampton et al 2004) to constrain the lines of inquiry. Eckert's 'burnouts' are a self-identified category of some of the young people in her study, which shows how important insights can emerge when the researcher allows for new social groupings to be identified, so that 'the data is allowed to lead the groupings, rather than vice versa' (Meyerhoff 1994: 8), and Eckert's investigation, which is partly about male-female differences, soon reveals a distinction between 'jocks' and 'burnouts' that simply could not have been explored using a research design based on *a priori* categories. Likewise, Maybin explains that, although the children she studied might appear to have been 'a fairly homogenous group in terms of age, ethnicity, social background and locality,' she provides 'an account of the diversity of the individual experience of 10–12 year-olds who seemed, on the face of it, to come from a very similar social and ethnic background' (2005: 2).

However, linguistic ethnographers, like all social researchers, recognise that even deep immersion in participation and observation of the practices of the people being studied will not yield unmediated descriptions of their location in different kinds of social relations. Hymes (1996: 9) makes clear that 'members of a community themselves' may well not 'have an adequate model of it, much less an articulated adequate model.' This leads us, then, to the second possible position on this question, which is that the ethnographic method, and the data yielded by it, will need to be supplemented by theory - including theories about social categories - whose origins lie outside the data. Social categories, that is, are theoretical descriptions, and, as Hammersley says, '… *all* descriptions are structured by theoretical assumptions: what we include in descriptions is determined in part by what we think causes what.' (1990: 598).

Linked with a participant-oriented view of social categories is the associated concept of social identities, and contemporary research in sociolinguistics places a great deal of emphasis on people's identities as

fluid. 'We recognise [identity] now,' say the editors of a recent collection on the subject (Omoniyi and White 2006), 'as non-fixed, non-rigid and always being co-constructed by individuals of themselves, or by people who share certain core values or perceive another group as having such values.' Blommaert (2005: 205) claims similar consensus among the research community:

> Almost any significant author in the wide field of identity studies would argue that people don't *have* an identity, but that identities are constructed in practices that *produce, enact*, or *perform* identity – identity is identification, an outcome of socially conditioned semiotic work.

Not all commentators would express the point in quite these terms, however, and dangers associated with some versions of this approach are articulated by Brubaker and Cooper (2002) and by Todd (2005: 432-33), who warns what can happen when '[i]dentity becomes plural, identities proliferate, varying in each situation where a new aspect of self is performed' The concept then:

> … loses its usefulness for the analysis of social transformations. If we think of identity in terms of multiple, free-floating macro-categories that individuals may choose to emphasize or ignore … identity change loses any claim to be a significant part of the causal patterning of social change. It becomes no more than interactional change, epiphenomenal.

Others, such as Archer (2000, 2003), Layder (1997, 1998) and Craib (1998) all propose rather less evanescent versions of identity. As Craib has it, '[s]ocial identities can come and go but my identity goes on as something which unites all the social identities I ever had, have, or will have. My identity always overflows, adds to, transforms the social identities that are attached to me' (p.4). Blommaert (2005) draws attention to the unequal distribution of the power involved in the processes of enacting identity, so that individuals are differentially placed to engage in such performances and productions, and to have their 'identity work' recognised by others – and this insight is quite compatible with the realist's recognition that structured social relations, not reducible to the situated interactions of present social actors, shape the context of these interactions.

The tension I see as unresolved here may be demonstrated by one particular kind of social category which is the focus of extensive sociolinguistic research, namely 'ethnicity'. So wide is the scope of research concerned with the links between language and ethnic identity that there are not only many conferences, journals and books in which these topics feature as components, but there is a growing number of resources that are centrally concerned with this issue. (These include, for example, Dow 1991; Fishman 1989; Fishman 2001; Fought 2006; Haarman 1986; Harris and Rampton 2003). Furthermore, an on-line search readily generates an extensive list of recent publications that: are concerned with ethnicity, use ethnographic methods and fall within the domain of social linguistics (see, for example, Aoki 2000; Creese 2003; Heller 2003; McCafferty 2001; Roberts et al 2000; Schilling-Estes 2000; 2004).

In line with the perspective on 'identity' referred to above, those currently working in linguistic ethnography generally take 'a "practice" view of ethnicity, concentrating on how ethnicities affect and get configured in people's social activity together' (Rampton, Harris and Small 2006: 7). The study reported in this presentation pays attention to 'race and ethnicity' as 'elements in ideologies that both pre-structure situations and reconstrue them afterwards,' and that 'reside in whichever signs, actions and practices reflect, invoke or produce these resources, capacities and ideologies'. There is an explicit rejection of theoretical orientations which treat ethnicity as 'naturalised' – although such perspectives are still around in sociolinguistics; (see, for example, Padilla (2001: 115) who claims that '[e]thnicity refers to an individual's membership in a social group that shares a common ancestral heritage. This ancestral heritage is multidimensional in nature and involves the biological, cultural, social, and psychological domains of life'); while other analysts have sought a compromise in the notion of 'strategic essentialism' (Bucholz 2003).

Linguistic ethnographers Harris and Rampton (2003) align themselves with a 'hybridity' or 'new ethnicities' approach, which leads them to treat the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' 'as cultural constructs promoted, transgressed, defended or reworked in language, discourse and social activity' (p.6). These formulations imply, although the ontological assumptions are not necessarily explicit, that the status of 'ethnicity' is ideational, that it is a component of Popper's World 3, a 'denizen of the Cultural system', as Archer labels ideas, once they have been voiced (1998: 50). Again, such a perspective is quite compatible with those of realist commentators on this issue. But it is the implications of this perspective that I believe warrant further exploration. There is plenty of evidence for the variability both of speakers 'ethnic' self-identifications, and of their deployment of linguistic resources in relation to this. Some people, in some circumstances, feel strongly that they do have important ties to others on the basis of ethnicity; other people, in similar or perhaps quite different circumstances, set no such store by ethnic identification; (see, for example, Fenton 2003 and forthcoming). Among the former, use of a particular language variety (unhelpfully labelled by some writers an 'ethnic language') may be a key symbolic marker of the affiliation. But among others who care deeply about their 'ethnic identity', language may be of only marginal significance, if any. For example, Williams maintains that '... one can quite readily maintain an ethnic identity without any reference to fluency in the indigenous language, as is the case in Cornwall, Scottish Gaeldom, and Ireland' (2001: 268). Conversely, fluency in a language may be nowhere near enough for others to accept you as an authentic group member (Dow 2001).

The 'thick descriptions' of ethnographic studies can demonstrate very thoroughly just how a 'cultural construct' such as ethnicity can be 'promoted, transgressed, defended or reworked in language, discourse and social activity' (Harris and Rampton 2003: 6). Yet some further interesting questions remain that are worth exploring: firstly, how does this conceptual approach accommodate – and explain - instances when 'ethnicity' is *not* attended to at all by speakers themselves?; and secondly, how adequate is this approach if we want to know more about how and why this 'cultural

construct' may come to be influential in the social world beyond the empirically observable 'domain' (Layder 1997) of situated activity?

These questions are related to each other, because it may well be that an explanation as to why the 'ethnic identity construct' is mobilised by some social actors and not others, and in some circumstances and not others, is better explained with reference to structured social relations, to the 'domains' of social settings and contextual resources, to those dimensions of social reality that are '… in large part constituted by systemic features that are relatively impersonal, inert and which represent the standing conditions confronting people in their everyday lives ...' (Layder 1998: 95).

A number of writers are currently debating social categories, identity and ethnicity from a position which is sceptical of both 'the prevailing constructivist stance on identity' and the 'essentialist claims of contemporary identity politics' (Brubaker and Cooper 2002:1). These include Banton (1998), Brubaker (2002), Carter and Fenton (in preparation), Fenton (2003), Malik (2005), Ruane and Todd (2004), Todd (2005); (see also, on 'race', Carter 2000, 2007; Hirschman 2004; Webster 1992). A key notion is the rejection of 'ethnicity' as causally efficacious. This would make problematic, for example, Rampton, Harris and Small's (2006: 7) formulation referring to 'how ethnicities affect … people's social activity together'; (see, similarly, Gumperz's formulation, 'the effects of ethnic … differences' (1982a: 210)). The key questions, according to writers such as Carter and Fenton, are, firstly, how ethnic or other identities as cultural constructs, or ideational resources, become 'practical categories' (Ruane and Todd 2004), and, secondly, how these are deployed in a system of power and resources. This is critical, because 'fluid, negotiated identity-work' is not an adequate description of what happens when political, economic and legal arrangements are based on the assumption that ethnicity is a real phenomenon and that distinct ethnic groups and populations do exist.

A final issue to raise in relation to the question of 'which people?' is the tendency of some writers to be less than fully consistent in their rejection of categories such as 'ethnic group' except as used by those they are studying. It is often practically adequate, at an experiential level, for people to manage their sense of their own 'ethnic identity' in ways that the ethnographer may observe and describe. But acceptance by researchers of Fenton's point (2003: 136) that, '[t]he development of a unitary theory of "ethnicity" is a mirage,' because '[o]f itself it has no precise point of reference, of itself it has no explanatory power,' entails not merely embracing a performative, hybridised, fluid conception of the concept, but abandoning its use *as a descriptive or analytical category*. Linguistic ethnographers face the same challenge as other researchers if they do aim for consistency in this regard, as the convention of labelling social actors as members of supposed ethnic groups is so well established, particularly in the United States. Yet it *is* inconsistent, surely, to represent ethnicity as primarily a fluid and changing ideational resource, and then to refer to the subjects of research in terms consistent with essentialist, naturalised conceptions. The challenge may be illustrated with just a few examples. Berryhill and Linney (2006: 247) explain about their study, of 'African

Americans and Latinos' by 'a Caucasian', that '[t]he ethnography provides a context for the principal challenge we encountered: ensuring that the group had ethnic balance'. Chuang (2003: 52) takes the familiar position that '[c]ultural and ethnic identities are dynamic and constantly in flux', and proceeds to use an unproblematised category to explain that, '[a] young African American woman may use Black vernacular when she speaks to her close friends who are also African American'. Reyes (2002: 183) simultaneously asserts that her ethnographic research illustrates how 'identity' is performatively achieved, while describing those researched as 'a panel of Asian American teens'. Schilling-Estes (2004: 163), similarly, commits herself to 'social constructionist viewpoints' and identity as 'dynamic and multifaceted', while using the description a 'tri-ethnic community'. In such discourse, the concept of 'ethnicity' as a social category has become reified (or 'naturalised'), even while the analyst explicitly renounces reified concepts of identity and ethnic category membership. I would want to argue, with Brubaker and Cooper (2002: 5), that 'we should avoid unintentionally reproducing or reinforcing such reification by uncritically adopting categories of *practice* as categories of *analysis*' (emphasis added), and that linguistic ethnography is sometimes not entirely clear or consistent in this respect.

'WHICH KINDS OF LANGUAGE?': LINGUISTIC VARIETIES IN REALIST PERSPECTIVE

As with social categories, so with linguistic varieties: how, and according to which theoretical precepts, does the linguistic ethnographer draw conclusions about language varieties and patterned variation in their use by those s/he studies?

As linguistic ethnographers explain (see Rampton, this issue), empirical research into language behaviour which is influenced by the assumptions of traditional linguistics may be rather too ready to generalise about language structure. Rampton et al (2004: 4 – 5), citing Volosinov, contrast the 'objectivism' of 'positivist', 'structuralist' linguistics with 'the "linguistic" or "discursive" turn in the humanities and social sciences' associated with post-structuralism. Relativist knowledge claims are preferred, and are linked with democratic, emancipatory politics. Indeed, Hymes (1996) explicitly envisions ethnography in such terms, emphasising the 'intricacy and subtlety of any normal person's knowledge of language' (p. 14), in the context of there being '… no reason to think professional ethnographers privileged,' (a claim which contrasts with that he makes about social actors' 'articulated models' of their community – see above). So on what grounds, if any, are linguistic ethnographers privileged in their understandings of linguistic matters?

For speakers themselves, the immediate benefits and drawbacks of different kinds of language use are likely to be practically apparent, as are the traditional labels for language varieties, and many popular judgements about accents, 'correctness', the desirability of learning English and so on. 'Lay' or 'folk' ideas about languages are at odds both with more traditional, structuralist linguistics and with more 'post-modern', 'discursive' conceptualizations of language. Pennycook (2006: 66) positions mainstream language research alongside commonsense notions

when he maintains that, '[t]he idea that languages somehow exist as ontological entities, with their attendant structures, boundaries, grammars, and forms, has become an almost unquestioned given of both academic thought and more popular discourse on language.' From his 'postmodern' perspective, he concludes that '… we no longer need to maintain the pernicious myth that languages exist' (2006: 67). Klein (1998) makes a similar claim, maintaining that for both Saussure and Chomsky the notion of 'a language' abstracts away from empirically observed variation, so that 'under both views, the object of investigation is an ideal entity' (p.540). Klein continues, '*The normal case is that every person has varying knowledge of different languages:* That is a good way to state the facts for the layman who believes that there are well-defined entities called "languages." But there aren't; a "real language" is a normative fiction' (Klein 1998: 541, italics in original). In some way or another, linguistic ethnographers may well encounter 'folk' beliefs about language among those they study that are strikingly at odds with the post-structuralism of their theoretical inclinations (Rampton, this issue).

As an alternative, as I have suggested elsewhere (Carter and Sealey 2000; Sealey and Carter 2004), there is promise in the recognition of a stratified ontology which would allow for analytical distinctions to be drawn between the claims made about language as these relate to different domains of reality. We can distinguish between competing accounts and descriptions in part by recognizing that they are accounts of different kinds of things. Furthermore, these accounts are not merely the products of discourse, but are attempts to describe phenomena that do exist independently of our descriptions of them.

At an experiential level, speakers – and this includes linguists as well as other 'folk' – will, when we travel or in certain other situations, find ourselves failing to understand, or to be understood, as those around us communicate in a variety that is not in our own repertoire. Non-linguists (Klein's 'laymen') may conceptualize this experience with reference to 'well-defined entities called "languages,"' and are understandably likely to be resistant to suggestions that they are mistaken – for surely in one sense they are not. Empirical experience, in situated interactions, leads to a not unreasonable perception that different people speak different languages, or different variants of the same language. Long and Preston (2002a: xxi) maintain that it is research into the nature of these perceptions (perceptual dialectology) that provides one of the answers, perhaps the only answer, 'to the age-old question of where one language stops and another starts'.

Linguistic ethnography is by no means the only approach used in exploring this level of linguistic reality (see Preston 1999 and Long and Preston 2002 for examples of a number of methods), but it can bring an additional range of insights to bear. From participants' language choices in specific contexts, researchers can learn which contrasts are seen by them as salient and which trivial, a potential that is forcefully summarised by Blommaert (2003: 615): 'Ethnography will allow us to unravel the details of how language varieties and discourses work for people, what they accomplish (or fail to) in practice, and how this fits into local economies of resources.' Knowledge and understanding of some aspects of language practices are available most effectively – perhaps exclusively – by

ethnographic work among those who experience them. In particular, it is linguistic ethnographies that have demonstrated how variation in speakers' detailed paralinguistic and prosodic practices and expectations can lead to miscommunication (e.g. Bremer et al 1996; Gumperz 1982a, 1982b; Roberts, Davies and Jupp 1992; Roberts and Sarangi 1999). These subtle cues are routinely experienced, but 'are rarely talked about and tend to be noticed only when things go wrong' (Gumperz 1982a: 162); they are 'not readily subject to conscious recall' (Gumperz 1982a: 204); nor, we might add, do language *users* deploy the same terms and concepts to describe these phenomena as language *analysts* do. Thus empirical data, generated in situated interaction, can be analysed using the tools of linguistic ethnography. These help to explain the experiences of speakers who themselves perceive the linguistic variations in rather different ways.

Arguably, part of this difference is attributable to the distinction between what Bhaskar identifies as the 'empirical', the 'actual' and the 'real'. This distinction allows for the recognition of language as a universal human capacity inaccessible to direct empirical observation, an emergent, cultural product of the interaction between human beings and the material world[3]. Sayer (2000: 12) explains that, '[w]hereas the *real* ... refers to the structures and powers of objects, the *actual* refers to what happens if and when those powers are activated'. Language 'varieties', then, may be considered artefacts, with, as Coulmas (2005: 4) puts it, 'physical, mental and technical aspects. … Every language could be different from what it actually is. ... The existence of different languages is a historical fact, a result of language change, a result of choice'. Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer (2003: 25) provide a summary of the distinction: 'Though languages and other semiotic structures / systems are dependent on actors for their reproduction, they always already pre-exist any given actor (or subset of actors), and have a relative autonomy from them as *real* objects, even when not *actualised*' (emphasis added).

This stratified approach can also accommodate both the empirically perceived experience of 'speaking the same language' – or of *failing* to understand and make oneself understood – as well as the *actualized* phenomena identified in studies such as those by Gumperz and others, with their access to concepts such as prosodic variation and so on. It also helps to explain the second order of emergence that institutionalizes (or 'artefactualizes' (Blommaert 2006)) language boundaries; these are the processes associated with the introduction of writing systems, formal education and political priorities – referred to by Coulmas (2005: 7) as 'a language regime … a set of constraints on individual language choices'. Methodologically, ethnography is ideally suited to illuminating particular kinds of language realities, but other methods may be better equipped to explore others.

From the language description perspective, some hitherto unobserved properties of language can be seen differently now that researchers can observe patterns which emerge only when linguistic products are viewed in very large quantities, in the form of a corpus, and with specially developed software. This research reveals how 'what is frequently said' can become a constraint on what, 'although we are in principle free to say whatever we want,' subsequent speakers *can* say

(Stubbs 2001: 19; see also Louw 1993). These constraints are not simply a matter of scale: emergence concerns irreducibility, and some of the emergent properties of language are *only* apparent when the perspective is shifted away from the immediate context of production.

From the social description perspective, the properties and powers of the social structures that are implicated in the physical, economic, cultural and political inequalities which intersect with language practices in all sorts of ways are also less accessible to the kinds of direct observation that linguistic ethnography typically involves. This leads to the final section of my 'generic question', about the contexts in which people use language to varying effects.

'IN WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES AND WITH WHAT OUTCOMES?': CONSTRAINTS AND ENABLEMENTS

The final component of the generic question I am addressing in this paper acknowledges that language use, and the cumulative effects of individuals and groups deploying linguistic resources, are context specific. Champions of the ethnographic method celebrate its potential for holistically encompassing the detailed specifics of times, places, settings and relationships in which speakers act. Critics query what the point may be of descriptions that are so specific there can be no general conclusions drawn. A potential resolution arises from consideration of the properties and powers of the constituents of the social world, where distinctions are drawn between these different kinds of things. Let us explore this issue with reference to another specific example.

> The English acquired by urban Africans may offer them
> considerable prestige and access to middle-class identities in
> African towns. It may be an 'expensive' resource to them. But the
> same variety of English, when spoken in London by the same
> Africans, may be a crucial object of stigmatization and may qualify
> them as members of the lower strata of society
> (Blommaert 2003: 616).

Our knowledge of these speakers' experiences may well be acquired best through the kinds of ethnographic methods under discussion. It will certainly not be generated in an experimental setting, or via introspection. What, though, is it knowledge of? One interpretation – recognisable no doubt to teachers, politicians or employers – is that this is best understood by identifying the features of this 'African English' and comparing them with standard British or American English. An alternative interpretation would focus on 'urban Africans' with 'middle-class identities' as the social group in question, and would seek an explanation through thick descriptions of the situated interactions between these speakers and those they encounter in London. More productive, though, I would suggest, is a recognition that the operative mechanism is not to be found at either of these levels of reality.

What these speakers encounter is structured by existing institutional arrangements, which can act as constraints or enablements in respect of the projects they pursue. Recognition of the likely advantages has led many speakers, of many empirically distinct varieties, to invest resources in

acquiring an additional language variety. (Most obviously and most recently the disproportionately 'targeted' variety has been English, but other varieties have had a similar appeal at other times, albeit not on such a scale.) At an individual level, the resources invested may be experienced as emotional as well as financial, and the concept of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu) is well established. In addition, the relatively new field of 'language economics' (Grin 2006) is concerned with the literal costs of such an enterprise. What is the financial outlay (for an individual or a polity) of learning (or providing schooling in) an additional variety? How do inequalities of earnings correlate with linguistic variation? How do changes in the relative 'dominance' of varieties modify the costs for which subsequent learners will be liable? And how do such changes modify the costs of *not* learning a variety? As Graddol (2006: 38) puts it, 'English is widely regarded as a gateway to wealth for national economies, organisations, and individuals. If that is correct, the distribution of poverty in future will be closely linked to the distributions of English.'

These factors operate at a level of social structure that is neither empirically observable (except indirectly, through the collection of statistics, for example, which themselves rely on dense networks of theoretical assumptions), nor reducible to the wishes or actions of those experiencing their effects. Constraints and enablements '… are transmitted to us by shaping the situations (structural or cultural) in which we find ourselves, such that some courses of action would be impeded and others would be facilitated' (Archer 1995: 4). They are, however, neither context-neutral nor invariant. The same linguistic resources, in the repertoire of the same individual, may be associated with different kinds of outcome in different settings, as the example of African migrants demonstrates; the 'cultural capital' associated with the ability to speak English can diminish over time (see below). In other words, what was an enablement in one social setting becomes a constraint in another. In this sense, the decision to learn English – or not to do so – is likely to carry *objective* consequences, irrespective of actors' interpretations of these. As analysts, we can if we choose reject the evaluation of access to British citizenship or to the labour market as necessarily 'beneficial', but we cannot deny that current configurations of structured social relations deny such opportunities to some while offering them to others. I agree with Blommaert's claim (2003: 615) that ethnography 'allows us to check, at the lowest level, how larger patterns and developments are set down in the actual realities of language usage,' but I am not so sure that the issue is merely one of scale. He continues, 'We obviously need studies of the different levels and scales – studies of linguistic variation, of history and policy – but it would be a fallacy to regard ethnography merely as "the study of small things". It is an indispensable ingredient of a toolkit for the study of big things.' This claim too is unexceptionable, in my opinion, but equally indispensable is a methodological means of accessing and interpreting the *structural* realities involved in the experiential realities of these speakers. To extend Blommaert's analogy, linguistic ethnography could benefit from being more explicit about the characteristics of the other 'ingredients in the toolkit', and about how exactly various tools of analysis are differentially selected and deployed in complementary ways. Realist theorists such as

Archer (1995; 1996) have drawn attention to the different timescales relevant to understanding the social world. Likewise, Blommaert (2005: 127-8) cites Braudel's insight about 'the slow patterns of history' being 'beyond the grasp of subjects-in-history', a recognition which would seem to render the empirical methods of ethnography not particularly well suited to the identification or analysis of the social structures which constrain and enable the actions of present agents, since these '… are the effects of *past actions*, often by long dead people' (Archer 1995:148). This is not to deny that the effects of such forces on contemporary 'subjects-in-history' may well be explored ethnographically. Nevertheless, as Layder (2005: 108) puts it, '… to reduce power, institutions, organisations and the distribution of various resources to local practices is to confuse and conflate very different kinds of social phenomena.' The distinctive properties of social structures include their 'anteriority': that is, they pre-exist the people whose activities are constrained or enabled by the organisations, institutions and cultural products which provide the contexts for their actions; they also, as has been noted, endure and develop on a timescale different from that of the individual lifespan. Moreover, while they are undeniably products of human actions and intentions, social structures cannot be easily modified, nor are they readily apparent, at the level of everyday experience; nor can we know (except within a very circumscribed ambit) what the effects of our actions on them will be.

The realists who have developed most helpfully the analytical dualism of the structure-agency relation also emphasise the importance of emergence, glossed in these terms by Benton and Craib (2001 :180):

> When elements are combined together into more complex entities, the latter often have properties which are qualitatively distinct from those of the original elements. This is known as 'emergence', and the properties which 'emerge' in this way are 'emergent properties', or powers – a new level of organization.

Like contrasting language varieties, some of the effects of the growth in demand for English documented by Graddol (2006) are 'emergent' in this sense. To give one brief example, there is a rapidly diminishing amount of 'cultural capital' accruing to native speakers: 'As English becomes entrenched as a lingua franca, the cost of learning it for non-native speakers lowers and the benefits of acquiring it rise. In much of the world, learning English becomes easier and the benefits it brings rise, as more of the world speaks it' (p.122). Every one of the individuals whose knowledge of English features in the billions counted makes a contribution to the global context in which, for example, Blommaert's African migrants experience *their* use of the language. But the changing nature of that context is *not* reducible to the cumulative effect of individuals' choices and actions. A similar point is made by Archer (2000: 467), who identifies as 'third order effects' 'the academic privileges which today's native English speaking academics enjoy'. These, she maintains, 'cannot be *explained* as other than the unintended resultant of these powers [mass production, the Industrial Revolution and the resultant wealth generating powers of Britain], exercised seriatim, but irreducible to the individual people involved' (original emphasis).

(Linguistic) ethnography, then, *can* reveal in detail how speakers negotiate the constraints and enablements attendant on their particular situated experience, but it *cannot* account for the pre-existing structural properties and powers which are experienced as constraints and enablements by these social actors: different kinds of research methods are needed to explore this dimension of social reality. As Archer (2000: 469) notes, 'Matters of ontology are not settled by interviewing people about them!' – nor, we might add, are they likely to be settled by participant observation or the other methods most centrally associated with (linguistic) ethnography.

CONCLUSION

As Rampton (this issue) illustrates, linguistic ethnography in the UK has benefited from its multidisciplinary provenance, and it is clearly providing important insights into a range of social and discursive practices. The contribution that I would hope to make to this enterprise is in encouraging its practitioners to engage with sociological realism. It is not methodologically prescriptive, and can readily accommodate those explorations of the domain of situated activity which ethnography can so aptly accomplish. Rather than succumbing to 'impatience with analyses devoted to structural systems' (Rampton, this issue), ethnographers might perhaps welcome such analyses as complementary to their own. Future collaboration could then include more precise identification of the ontological assumptions underpinning LE research, and the implications of these. It could also facilitate explorations of how the differential properties and powers of language, structure and agency help to explain which kinds of people come to use which kinds of language in what circumstances and with what outcomes.

NOTES

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2 Realism's detractors often seem to misunderstand its implications, as Sayer notes in his introduction to *Realism and Social Science* (2000: 2): 'I am aware that in certain quarters, "realism" is synonymous with a form of naive objectivism, claiming unmediated access to the Truth. This misconception prevents realism getting a hearing. At the same time, I am also wary of naive supporters of realism who assume that it will indeed guarantee the production of true knowledge, when the independence of the world and the entrapment of knowledge within discourse imply the impossibility of any such guarantees.'

3 Note that this kind of claim about the unobservable properties of language does not entail convergence with the Chomskyan

tradition, and it is quite possible to accept that some properties of language are not empirically available to us without accepting that language belongs exclusively to an intra-individual, cognitive domain.

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