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The humanism of the other in sociolinguistic ethnography

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Abstract: This article describes the social and ethical responsibility researchers experience in undertaking ethnographic research under conditions of neoliberalism. It acknowledges the hierarchical nature of working in large ethnographic teams in which a mixture of employment contracts and statuses exist. Drawing on relational ethics (Levinas 2003. *Humanism of the Other*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.), and its attention to the humanizing potential of difference, the paper describes researchers' propensity for relationality in the face of competitive neoliberalism. It presents a case study of a large research team and investigates the use of research vignettes to represent and relate in difference. Subjectivity is theorized not in terms of identity but rather through alterity and opacity arguing this direction opens up social and political alliances (Butler 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.). Specifically, the paper suggests the research vignette is a genre well suited to documenting the way humans live in difference, illustrating how the researcher yields to the face of the Other in field work encounters. As a form the research vignette is said to bridge the aesthetic and the scientific, demanding of its reader an engagement with a variety of interpretations. Further, the vignette is considered for its methodological potential in creating a dialogic relational space for research teams within the neoliberal university.

Keywords: ethics; subjectivity; vignettes; difference; neoliberalism; opacity

1 Introduction

The research team is the empirical context for this paper. Formed in unequal power relationships of status hierarchy, linguistic proficiency, employment security, and other power imbalances, the research team is now a familiar phenomenon in university settings. This paper refers to my own and others' experience of working in a large research team of over thirty affiliated partners with a core team of eighteen.

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Led by me, the team was made up of ten tenured academics, six contracted researchers and two doctoral researchers working across six universities nationally.

It is now well established that universities are market-oriented, quasi-businesses, operating competitively in the neoliberal economy (Duchêne and Heller 2012; Heller and Duchêne 2016; Mena and García 2021; Piller and Bodis 2022). Gershon (2011) has coined the concept of “neoliberal agency” to describe the way individuals are asked to manage their own careers and livelihoods within neoliberal environments describing the way people must calculate the profitability of their own actions in much the same way businesses do in the wider economy. This kind of personhood forces people to become “subjects *for* themselves” (Gershon 2011: 539, italics added). Gershon (2011: 537) argues that neoliberal perspectives restructure what it means to be an individual by creating relationships with others that are “morally lacking”. Gershon (2011: 537) asks, “what ethical analytical labour should anthropologists perform when confronted with neoliberal perspectives?” This question is relevant to me when I consider my own responsibility to the research teams I have participated in across my career which commenced as a contract researcher in 1996 when I worked on projects outside my discipline and led by others, to now, as a senior researcher holding a tenured post and leading my own teams (Diniz De Figueiredo and Martinez 2021).

Overall, I approach this discussion via three routes. The first is to acknowledge that while researchers operate under conditions of neoliberalism, they find ways to counter hierarchizing and asymmetrical conditions. Second, an alternative to the “neoliberal self” is proposed which understands the individual as less committed to self-fulfilment, and more embedded in ethical relations. Drawing insight from the *Humanism of the Other* (Levinas 2003) liberal and neoliberal accounts of subjectivity are inverted to present the Other as the principal player in creating these ethical relations. Third, I argue for research accounts which retain the complexity of ethical encounters by engaging with “the sensuous and affective nature of social life” (Deumert 2022: 1). To do this I present a particular form of ethnographic writing, the research vignette, a genre we used regularly within our team to share data, develop ideas, build arguments and create the team itself.

Four research vignettes are presented by Agnieszka Lyons, Daria Jankowicz-Pytel, Adrian Blackledge, and Frances Rock who were employed as researchers on the same large multi-sited sociolinguistic ethnography. Each vignette writer has kindly given permission for the use of their vignette in this article. As will be evident in the later stages of this paper, the four vignettes are presented consecutively without the interruption of my authorial and analytical voice. This is intended to give the reader a sense of the range of perspectives brought to the production of knowledge in the ethnographic team. Were each vignette to be followed by an

analytical commentary, I would need to make cuts, losing the breadth of perspectives and forms exemplified.

It is important to signal from the onset that the capitalization of the ‘Other’ in this article does not point to a more socially entrenched version of the ‘other’. While it is often used in this way in socio and applied linguistic research (e.g. Rosa 2019) to reveal harmful processes of othering, relational ethics does not conceive of the Other as socially produced in discourse. Rather the Other stands for a timeless moral relationship (Butler 2005) in whose difference we have the potential to become a better self. Notwithstanding its abstraction, the usefulness of this conceptualization of the ‘Other’ for applied linguistics will be explicated.

2 Literature review

2.1 The human subject

This paper conceives of difference as a resource and argues for an applied linguistics which considers the individual less in terms of categories of identity and languages and more in terms of relationality and human dignity. To build this discussion I turn to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and his ethics of alterity, drawing also on Judith Butler and her ethics of precarity.

Levinas argued that liberalism fails to account for generosity, trust, love, and being-for-the other. He saw that “an unhindered movement of sovereign ego, in its autonomy and its absolute freedom, leads to indifference, and ultimately tyranny” (Tahmasebi-Birgani 2014: 97). In an inversion of liberal politics, Levinas resists the self-referential prioritisation of ego. Levinas’ philosophy proposes a radical ethics which counters the liberal tradition of uncaring individualism. His philosophy has been described as “inverted liberalism” because it flips a liberal conceptualisation of individuality on its head by retaining singularity, but losing autonomy (Alford 2004: 146). For Levinas (1981) individuals no longer serve themselves, but are bound to the Other relationally. Alford argues that Levinas provides a non-liberal justification of the supreme value of the individual, a key assumption of liberalism. This is what Butler (2005) refers to when she speaks of the Other as a timeless moral relationship. It is to consider the relationships between self and alterity not in terms of ego, identity, and freedom, but in terms of responsibility, non-sovereignty and unfreedom. Butler, following Levinas, argues that we are unfree because our responsibility to the other was not chosen, but is nonetheless necessary if we are to retain our humanity. The individual is a crucial concept in Levinas’s theory because the apparatus of the state too often fails to see the individual’s suffering. Levinas proposes that in the face of a hierarchising society, we can make a difference to the way

we encounter one another as individuals, beyond the social and linguistic categories which name us. Levinas's philosophy dramatically distinguishes itself from neo-liberal accounts of "the romantic portrayal of triumphant individuals" (Rosa 2019: 29) because subjectivity commences not in sovereignty but through upholding the unassailable Other, whose difference must be heard.

Levinas is radical because he upends the way we conceive of ethical relations. The 'awakening' is not in the 'I am I', but in the 'I am for'. This means that at the most primary level we are acted upon by others in ways over which we have no say. It is this "passivity and impingement which inaugurates us into who we are" (Butler 2005: 90). This willingness to be commanded, this 'unfreedom', this 'trauma' is what makes humans ethical. It is to be for the Other, without the assurance that they will be for me. What Levinas does is to recast the Other as the crucial character in the process through which the moral self comes into its own.

Neither Levinas nor Butler are prepared to offer a road map to political transformation (Rushing 2015). However, both allude to the serious political consequences of not understanding that the "life of the one is bound to the life of the other" and that certain obligations emerge from this most basic social condition (Rushing 2015: 68). Similarly, both Levinas and Butler argue there is an ethical valence in unknowingness. In the relationship with the Other there is an opacity which remains forever open to impression and ethical possibility. For Levinas and Butler the encounter between self and Other is where ethics lies. Because Levinas is philosophically concerned with the ethical possibilities of human contact, he steps away from language with its proclivity to name. Language reduces the other to known categories, and hence turns otherness into sameness (Herzog 2020). Levinas' ethical stance highlights difference and the unknowability of the other, suggesting that categorising, explaining or even attempting to understand such uniqueness always reduces the Other.

Levinas proposes that signification should be conceived as face, proximity, sense, and touch. The face is a "generosity", and a "moment of faith" according to Levinas et al. (1988: 175). Levinas pushes back against semiosis as sign in the linguistic sense. His concern is not with what we know through language or other modalities, but, rather, the signification gained through being in contact with others. The face therefore provides the possibility of ethical kinship, but also political action, because observing the face of the Other is a call to address injustice. This is a point Butler adheres to in her ethics of precarity which builds directly on Levinas' philosophy.

In the ethics of alterity, 'the Other' is said by Levinas to be the beginning of a more responsive self, opening avenues to "the other in me" (Alford 2004: 162). To speak of the human subject therefore is to speak of the ethical subject (Critchley 2013), the resonant subject (Nancy 2007), and the listening subject, attending to meaning as a sense, an echo, an affect, a reverberation. The researcher as the

listening subject is an ethical, sensing, and relational subject who shapes not only social space, but also moral and aesthetic space (Bauman 1993). Aesthetics here does not refer to feelings, impressions, or spirituality. Levinas rejects a Hegelian conception of art with its expectations of beauty, idolatry, and egotism (Herzog 2020). Levinas points to the limits of an aesthetics which generates passivity making people indifferent to the suffering of the world, keepings them in indifference, allowing people to withdraw from responsibility. Rather he seeks an obliterative art which shows the incompleteness of reality. Obliterative art “denounces the easiness or light insouciance of beauty and recalls[s] the damage attendant on being”, revealing its secrets, namely “the fact that being is open to otherwise than being” (Herzog 2020: 19). Such art considers the disjuncture between proximity and incommensurability. It leads to the Other.

Levinas offers a theoretical direction which presents social action as neither located in indifferent individualism nor in descriptions of totalising subjectivities. What I take from Levinas is a non-essentializing explanation for the responsibility researchers show others in field and team relations. He provides a critique of neoliberalism because he emphasizes individual subject’s responsibility to work towards social justice. His is a social ontology which foregrounds human relationality and vulnerability, a project also shared by Butler whose ethics of precarity is an attempt to counter violence and political hatred by seeking to understand points of human connection (Cyfer 2019).

2.2 Responsibility

Difference matters deeply, as sociologist Stuart Hall puts it,

I come to the present, to who I am, by a different route from yours; and therefore, our conversation has to recognise that different histories have produced us, different histories have made this conversation possible. I can’t pretend to be you. I don’t know your experience. I can’t live life from inside your head. So, our living together must depend on a ... conversation. (Hall 2007: 148).

We each speak from a particular place, out of a particular history and set of experiences, and Hall, a Marxist sociologist, was keen to express the centrality of racial and ethnic identity in Black cultural politics in England. Hall insists on recognising difference rather than erasing it. But he also describes difference as the beginning of a conversation which might lead to wider political organisation and connection.

To scrutinize my own and others’ listening, looking, and writing within team ethnography, it is useful to work with two theorisations of difference. The first is ‘difference from’, which considers the ways in which a unique subject articulates its

difference from others (Biesta 2015). Biesta describes difference from as an instrumental difference, which involves the naming of identities to categorize and make distinctions. Here difference is an effect of discourse in which people become categorised, and knowable to themselves and others. The second theorisation refers to ‘in difference’ (Williams 2021; and this thematic issue), in which difference is a feature of being human, and demands an ethical response to the Other. To be in a state of ‘in difference’ is to respond to the ethical demand to trust the stranger, with all of the attendant hopes and disappointments (Løgstrup 1997). In the analysis of research vignettes we will see how social categories of ‘difference from’ become relevant. But we will also see researchers dwell ‘in difference’ as they respond to the precarity of others.

Central to sociolinguistic ethnography are the activities of listening, observing and writing. Beyond hearing what is said, ethnographers listen to the sounds of the social context, and what those sounds reveal about another’s world. Nancy (2007: 5), a philosopher of music, defines listening as an “intensification and a concern, a curiosity or an anxiety”, in which the self enters an attentive state. To listen to the voice of the other is to attend not only to the message but also to the tone, timbre, rhythm, and vibration of how something is said. Nancy builds the concept of the ‘resonant subject’ as opposed to the ‘phenomenological subject’, posed already in its point of view. Instead, the resonant subject is attentive to the sonorous present in which the voice echoes, reverberates and rebounds. It is a subjectivity in which the body senses what is outside and inside the self, in which listening is “to be open from without and from within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other” (Nancy 2007: 14). Nancy suggests that listening is a process of both self-discovery and a willingness to be open to another’s story. It is an opportunity to connect with and share the moment. Here the past is not finished, fixed or final but open to oncoming time as it rebounds and reverberates.

2.3 Representation

The research vignette is an example of a “biographical and speaker-centred approach” (Purkardhofer and Flubacher 2022: 3) to writing ethnography, and sits within the ‘Auto-Socio-Bio-Ethnography’ continuum (Busch 2022: 290). Such accounts are often highly personal, and draw upon the experience of the author/researcher, while also incorporating multi-genre approaches such as “short stories, poetry, novels, photographs, journals, fragmented and layered writing” (Hamilton et al. 2008: 22). The biographical and personal narrative is now a well-established form of ethnographic writing, and despite ongoing concerns that it is atheoretical, too subjective, uncritical, solipsistic, interiorised, and open to commodification, it is “here to

stay” (Behar 1997: 32). In her seminal text, ‘The Vulnerable Observer’, Behar (1997: 32) is persuasive in her drive for an anthropology that wears its “heart on its sleeves”, occupying “a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, art and life” (Behar 1997: 174).

Neither field note nor diary, we might say the research vignette is a mini auto-ethnography. It is intended to highlight the importance of researcher-researched as well as researcher-researcher relations, producing accounts of “feelings, desires, needs, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions” (Hamilton et al. 2008: 20). The research vignette has come to play a specific function within our teams of researchers, serving to bring back the ethnographic moment of individual field work observations, while making those moments available to the larger group. The research vignette links individual experience in the field with the professional imperative to communicate more widely. As a genre, the research vignette bridges a person-specific text (Geertz 1996) akin to a personal diary, and a public professional text analogous to a report. It is a first instance of going public, in which there is an attempt to do justice to representations of earlier field contexts. As a genre the vignette offers stability by upholding a semi-conventionalized form, which nevertheless, remains open to reinterpretation through reenactment (Hanks 1987).

I came to the research vignette through the very route Behar critiques in her influential text.

Indeed, a recent trend among some anthropologists is to work as overseers of large teams of assistants on big research projects ... The tendency is to depersonalize one’s connection to the field, to treat ethnographic work (only a small part of which is done personally by the principal investigator) as that which is “other” to the “self,” and to accumulate masses of data that can be compared, contrasted, chartered and serve as a basis for policy recommendations, or at least as a critique of existing practices. (Behar 1997: 25)

Over the last 20 years, I have often worked in this kind of large research team. Through experience I have become aware of the dangers highlighted by Behar, including the potential for hierarchy within teams, distance from the field, othering of research participants and research team members, and the over-production of large, impersonal data sets. However, funding regimes have changed, and working in teams of researchers across disciplinary boundaries is more common than not, at least in the social sciences in the UK. And this shift requires that I engage with these issues by attending to the voices, values, thoughts, and feelings (Appiah 2007) of a linguistically, ethnically and socially diverse research team. Indeed, the research vignette became a means of listening to other researchers who are listening to themselves listen to the other/Other. Research vignettes describe what it feels like to work in a team in which there are pre-existing hierarchies. They document what happens when the researcher walks into the world of complete strangers, and is

faced with the task of subjecting them to intense scrutiny. They deal with the tensions, anxieties, missteps, recoveries, and small victories of that process. Research vignettes are intended as a space for researchers to address these tensions, and for the team to pay attention to them. They are mediated accounts of the ethnographer traversing categories while unavoidably reproducing them. While research vignettes are mediated texts and therefore problematic in Levinasian terms due to his focus on saying and doing rather than a concern with the said and the done, I will argue nevertheless that they work diachronically because they are able to document the researcher's openness to their limits of knowing and the researcher's ethical disposition to 'be in' difference.

The research vignette is available to team members and to wider audiences. It is a genre which is both evocative and analytical (Denshire 2014), connecting to broader social issues, replete with narrative components of "description, chronology, evaluation" (Ochs and Capps 2009: 18). Sociolinguistic scholarship has greatly deepened our understanding of the discursive practices of narrative evaluation and our awareness of the ways in which humans author themselves. Like other narratives, the research vignette is a site of moral evaluation (Ochs and Capps 2009: 47), in which "thoughts, and feelings are interpreted in light of local notions of goodness.". Goodness, Ochs and Capps explain, is not a ready-made set of moral tenets, but the pursuit of sense-making through narrative activity, "to air, probe, and otherwise attempt to reconstruct and make sense of actual and possible life experiences" (Ochs and Capps 2009: 7). The research vignette is therefore simultaneously evocative and analytical, personal and professional. Fundamentally it is an untidy, incomplete, and unresolved conversation, not simply between a researcher who is authoring herself, but a researcher who is authoring the other, and who finds herself responsible for this representational process, asking,

How does our writing ... reproduce a system of domination, and how does it challenge that system? For whom do we speak, and to whom, with what voice, to what end, using what criteria? (Richardson 1997: 57)

To recap, I have made the argument that in the neoliberal university the individual researcher is compelled to compete for attention and resource in an environment which values a self-interested subject. Gershon (2011) has documented the moral vacuum this creates. I have asked what other theorisations of subjectivity beyond neoliberalism are available to explain the ethical kinship researchers appear willing to develop in relations with others. I have introduced the concept of the Other as ethical invitation to search for the "the other in me" (Alford 2004: 162). Through reference to Levinas, Butler and Hall, I have considered more inclusive understanding of the subject extending the conceptualisation of the listening subject as an

ethical, sensing, and relational subject. I have suggested the research vignette is a suitable genre for retaining the complexity of ethnography and documenting accounts of difference and subjectivity.

3 Methodology

Over many years along with others, particularly Adrian Blackledge, I have designed sociolinguistic ethnographic research in teams of individuals from different linguistic and social backgrounds. Along with Blackledge I have written about these teams, viewing their constitution as another source of evidence for considering how people communicate in contexts of social and linguistic diversity. We have researched and written about team interactions, processes and dynamics as people from different backgrounds work together to deliver on research objectives (Creese and Blackledge 2012). I continue in this tradition here by referring to research material collected in a large team linguistic ethnography known as ‘TLANG’, which serves as a shorthand label for the project title, *‘Translation and Translanguaging. Investigating Linguistic and Cultural Transformations in Superdiverse Wards in Four UK Cities’* (www.tlang.org.uk).¹ TLANG was funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council, from 2014 to 2018. The research project was a multi-site sociolinguistic ethnography, which set out to examine how people communicate in contexts where they do not necessarily share similar historical, biographical, economic, legal, national, or linguistic backgrounds. Eighteen key participants took part in sixteen ethnographic case studies across the four cities. The multilingual nature of the study meant that in addition to English, we worked in Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese, Romani, and Slovak, as well as in many different varieties of these languages. This was made possible by the multilingual backgrounds of the research team members. Of the eighteen researchers who made up the core research team, eight researchers were born outside the U.K. Multilingualism and migration histories were a prominent feature of personal biographies for both research participants and researchers.

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A team of researchers in each of Birmingham, Cardiff, Leeds, and London identified research sites for linguistic ethnographic study. The researchers were interested in locating places where communicative practice was observable. In the first four-month block of ethnographic investigation, business settings were selected; in the second block cultural heritage sites; in the third, community sport settings; and in the final 4 months, welfare advice and legal advocacy sites. The four research vignettes I present here come from three of the four phases. Daria Jankowicz-Pytel's vignette reflects on the law phase, and describes relations in an advice centre for Eastern European migrants in London. Agnieszka Lyons and Adrian Blackledge describe work in the business phase, which investigated a 'Polish supermarket' in London and a fish and meat market in Birmingham. Frances Rock's vignette comes out of the sports phase, and gives an account of field relations with a community football coach in Cardiff. Over the 4 years of funding, 45 research vignettes were written, with some researchers writing up to four each. Vignettes were written after researchers had ended a phase of research and had 'departed' from the field. They were intended as reflexive pieces which allowed researchers to dwell on relations in the field, and relations in the team. Using vignettes has become a means to pay attention to researcher voices is a regular activity in the grants I lead. In the initial planning phase of any project, I schedule vignettes into the cycle of data collection describing them as core ethnographic activity. In the TLANG project the form the vignette took was left open to the researcher, although a length restriction was suggested at between 500 and 1,000 words. Because I was not a field researcher, I did not write vignettes. Although I visited all sixteen research sites across the four cities, I was not directly involved in ethnographic observation. The four vignettes presented in this paper exemplify the different forms taken, and the aesthetic and affective dimensions covered.

It is important to return to the earlier discussion of neoliberalism here. There are systemic hierarchies in place in funded research projects such as TLANG, in which the principal investigator, in this case me, sets a writing task for researchers to complete. Whenever we write ethnography there is a risk of exposure and vulnerability, and in the precarious contractual employment arrangements of neoliberal funding regimes there is a greater risk for some than others. Contract, doctoral, and early career researchers are more likely than tenured professors and co-investigators to feel that they are being appraised. Like other forms of ethnographic writing, vignettes run the risk of making the researcher vulnerable. This places a responsibility on me, as the listening subject, to mitigate evaluation and judgement, and strive for a work culture which flattens hierarchies, and attends to the tensions they may cause.

4 Four researcher vignettes

4.1 Vignette one: *Daria Jankowicz-Pytel, London*

The last phase of the project involved collaboration between two key research participants, Michalina and Barbara, in an advice centre in London. Both Michalina and Barbara were trained advisors, offering guidance to people on a range of issues, including benefits, immigration, and welfare rights.

The research partnership started joyfully, but soon revealed complex positionings. I began to wonder how far Michalina's participation in the project was her own decision, and how far it was imposed on her. At first, pushing myself into this relationship seemed uncomfortable and intimidating – I felt I was an outsider and intruder. Later, I realised it was a great position for an observer, offering a wide-angled perspective. I understood that these tensions were not personal. Rather, they were unremarkable, and a natural and necessary mechanism of the organisation. In other words, the institution was run by strong, professional women protecting their vulnerable clients. Indeed, the two women's roles in the organisation's structure were clearly defined: Michalina worked on relations with clients, and Barbara on relations with stakeholders and funders. Any initial tensions I experienced were put aside. I saw that the two women built their relationship around trust, loyalty, and the responsibility they felt to protect and support vulnerable clients.

Trust was an important and changing factor. Initially, the lack of trust was an issue for us all. I found myself relying on the 'shields' provided by the university, which made data collection more 'legitimate', 'meaningful', and by implication 'harmless'. I also sensed that the concerns of Barbara and Michalina about the research were diminished by the authority of university governance, and its responsibility for any potential mess. However, our relationships developed beyond this. Once the trust-building process started between me, Michalina, and Barbara, the interactions became informal. When I got access to their kettle, and to silly jokes shared across the team, I noticed we were all more comfortable! However, the arrival of two other TLANG co-investigators, neither of them Polish speakers, both university professors, again changed the atmosphere. Things became more uncomfortable. I saw that although interactions continued in Polish, their language towards me became much more formal. In the presence of others from the research team, Michalina maintained social distance, which vanished again when I returned to observing her alone. I could see she preferred to be observed by me only, and I suspect the argument about limited room space was sometimes just an excuse to keep the other co-investigators away.

I often felt I could identify with Michalina in some ways. There was this sense of shared knowledge about the reality of the ‘old Poland’ (1980s–1990s). For example, the context for sarcastic jokes about pointless queues – shelves in shops during communism were empty, so a queue meant something was offered for sale – whatever it was, it was a good idea to queue – for tea, for soap, for washing machines – grotesque; tacky glass-holders identical in each and every Polish household; or spitting with tobacco when smoking cigarettes without a filter. Our shared knowledge was also a context for bitter memories, as I could see sad similarities between Michalina’s and my mother’s life stories, which were reminders that I am happy to be right here and now. On the other hand, little tangible things like the old-fashioned crystal fruit bowl (exactly like the one my beloved Gran used to have in her kitchen), the habit of drinking tea ‘the Polish way’ with sugar and lemon, or the music of Michał Lorenc played next door to Michalina’s office. All these brought back the past Poland into present day London, and made me realise I miss people and places, which are only memories. It also made me understand I am part of something that doesn’t exist anymore, and if this is my ‘*Polishness*’, it exists neither here nor in Poland. Yet, I don’t feel ‘*British*’ either. Polish language seemed to link all these dispersed worlds into one meaningful world to me, the one in which I live. I could tell Michalina’s feelings were similar.

Michalina had the skill to find things from people just by falling silent, including from me. Sometimes I wondered who interviewed whom. Michalina kept her private life securely away from the project, therefore I focused on her work routine. I felt inexperienced in dealing with other people’s tragedies, and I struggled to manage my emotions during observations of the advice meetings. Limited space in the advice room, direct eye contact with clients, and uncomfortable silences during interactions between counsellor and client seemed to shape emotions in the room. I only realised my own emotional reactions through retrospective writing. In this process I understand I learn by doing but only if I notice; self-reflection appeared to be the tool which helped me controlling and re-defining my role as a researcher.

Michalina and I developed a friendly relationship in the project. However, this varied, appearing to weaken and strengthen at times throughout the project. I was puzzled. It was reinforced after the EU referendum when moods shifted. Barbara and Michalina rolled up their sleeves to work with the media and fight against skewed images of ‘bloody-foreigners’ which negatively portrayed Polish migrants in the U.K.

4.2 Vignette two: *Adrian Blackledge, London*

Here I am having a mug of tea in the market caff scribbling notes in my new notebook. I am looking forward to the observations but feel slightly intimidated by

the markets. I buy fish here when I get the chance and know that communication can be forthright.

ALL RIGHT MATE YOU FOUND WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR?
 EEYARE ALL THIS HALF PRICE TODAY! EEYARE MATE HALF PRICE TODAY!
 ERE YOU GO ALL THAT PORK A FIVER! ALL THAT A FIVER!

Look and listen

three seventy
 three seventy?
 three seventy
 too expensive! [laughs]
 eight pounds a kilo
 eight pounds?
 three seventy
 eight seventy
 eight seventy?
 three seventy and five pound, eight seventy

Listen

WHA' GWAAN?

Write

the head of a young goat
 crystals of ice defrosting
 on eyebrows and eyelashes
 falling as tears

Write

holds up gnarled fingers and thumbs:
 ten pigs' hearts for five pounds

Write

A woman who looks African buys a large piece of pork belly from B. He puts two pieces on the scales and she shows him which she wants. 'Do you want it cut?', making with his hands a cutting sign. 'Yes'. 'Here? How do you want it cut?' She indicates with her hand, an indeterminate sign which he seeks to clarify. He 'cuts' the meat with his hand. 'Sliced?'. She nods. He checks by showing her a thick piece of already-cut pork belly. She nods, but indicates two cutting motions with her hand. He says 'here and here?', showing her where it will be sliced. She agrees, and he takes the pork to the cutting board.

Listen

chop-chop
cheap-cheap

Look

The young man from All Seasons trundles by with empty boxes marked 'Tilapia, gutted and scaled'

Listen

A fishmonger walking past says in a heavy Brummy accent: 'you're not having a break already!' 'yeahhhhh', says the new man. 'They're too nice to ya!'

Write

Scald, cauterize, boil for three hours
with fistfuls of salt until bleached
then drench still steaming and hot
with nothing but sweet malt vinegar

Listen

A couple (possibly Romanian, Bulgarian?) buy a bag of chicken feet. They discuss further purchases and the woman points to a cut of meat. B weighs it and says 'two sixty'. The man interprets for the woman, who says 'OK'. She buys something else for one pound eighty. 'Anything else?', asks B. The man interprets. The woman shakes her head. 'Four forty altogether', says B. The man and woman have further discussion and the man asks 'how much that one?'. B gives a price, and the woman points to other pieces of meat. She says 'that one, no, that one', as B lifts selected pieces to show her. 'Six fifty', says B after weighing the meat. The man interprets. The woman, who wears a colourful, full-length skirt, nods. As they are walking away from the stall the woman says 'Can I have a receipt please?' in heavily accented English. Although the man interprets for the woman throughout, she appears to have some proficiency in English.

Write

Cows' feet line glass counter tops.
Each hoof, or toe, or toenail, or is it
fingernail, is painted vibrant pink
not carefully, but roughly, clumsily.

Look. Listen. Write.

A well-dressed, older African Caribbean woman comes to the stall. She seems to know B and he enjoys serving her. She complains that the chickens are too skinny. 'Blame the chickens, not me',

says B. Mr C intervenes, saying with a broad smile, ‘skinny ones have more flavour’. She tells them it is her birthday. Either B or Mr C asks how old she is and she says ‘I’m a young girl’, and puts on a physical mime involving hips and fingers to represent an attractive young woman seeking to draw the attention of young men. They all laugh, and B says ‘I’ll take you out’. Mr C joins in, but it is the customer’s show. She tells them she is eighty-seven. She says ‘I’ll love you and leave you. See you next week.’

Listen. Write.

This is Mandarin. I cannot understand. Rachel transcribes. I can understand. Teamwork works.

KC: pig’s stomach. pig’s head

MC: always wanted to eat pig’s ear

KC: there is no pig’s ear today. they will be delivered on Monday morning. you want pig’s head?

MC: I am going. remember that

KC: I will remember.

MC: write it down on a piece of paper and stick it on your forehead so you can see it every day when you look at yourself in mirror

KC: I don’t need to look in the mirror, I know I am smart

MC: so you say yourself you are smart?

KC: yeah, so I don’t need to check the mirror. Hehe

Listen. Mandarin.

KC: Are you coming on your own today? Where’s the professor?

4.3 Vignette three: *Agnieszka Lyons, London*

When I first started working on the project, I felt both excited and anxious. Excited because I’d be working with Polish language and Polish speakers, and anxious because ... I’d be working with Polish language and Polish speakers! Indeed, I felt the weight of being THE Polish speaker in the team, which meant I would be relied on as an expert on the language and culture, which I didn’t necessarily think I was. Working with Polish speakers was fascinating with respect to my exploration of my own Polishness. I worked as an English teacher in London for a number of years, and being Polish felt to me like a disadvantage, because how could I teach English (including teaching ‘native speakers’) if English was not my mother tongue?! I felt the need to prove myself, and to give myself more credibility. I even avoided telling students I was Polish (my distinctly Polish name was a bit of a giveaway though). What a change the project made! I was now openly a Polish native speaker, and appreciated for it! I also re-discovered my other foreign languages, especially Russian, which proved very useful. As the project went on, I found myself more and more proud to be Polish, and joined our key participant in singing the praises of Polish food, and actively participated in socialising senior researchers Zhu Hua and

Li Wei into the Polish culture during our joint visits to the shop. I also felt right at home in the mixture of languages which surrounded me as we were doing fieldwork.

Thinking back on my relationship with our key participants, I think I worried about it a lot, especially during the preparation stage. Later I eased into it a bit more. The reason for this was that I knew we would be asking a lot of our key participants, and I guess I was expecting them to at some point say they'd had enough, and were now out. I didn't want that, so made sure I listened to all the little noises they made, to tackle any potential problems as soon as possible. It seems that my worries were unnecessary. Both Edyta and Tadeusz seemed very happy to help with the data collection, and didn't seem to think about dropping out at all. In fact, they proved very co-operative, and I soon started feeling at ease with them.

Researching a couple who were shop owners was very interesting. At the beginning, it was Tadeusz I interacted with more, but as the weeks went by, my relationship with Edyta strengthened and developed into a sort of friendship. Edyta wanted me to visit when she, rather than Tadeusz, was around, and was pleased to have someone to talk to when there were no customers in the shop. It's such a small shop that you can't avoid interacting with each other. It's also not very busy in general, so Edyta and I spent a lot of time talking about pretty much everything, bar academic stuff. I knew she thought there was a big divide between me – being quite academic – and her – being not academic at all. She often brought it up, saying she wasn't intelligent or studious. I found myself covering up behind a jokey, down to earth manner, and did my best to shed this academic self. I felt very protective of Edyta at the same time, playing down the scariness of the forthcoming visit from the “big professor” (that would be Angela), and trying to cushion Edyta's interactions in the academic context. In conversations with the key participants, I often asked myself how much I should say or ask to maintain good relationships with them but not cross “the line” (and what is “the line” anyway?). In the end, in the emptiness of the shop, I tried to be myself rather than some researcher with a magnifying glass, through which I'd “inspect” participants' lives. After all, I was asking them to record and video-record, and give me insight into their private lives.

The fact that the project team is so large and multi-disciplinary has meant working in a mix – of levels of experience, personalities, working patterns, and knowledge. It's a great privilege to observe how these differences are mediated, and positive outcomes negotiated. On the local level, working with two extremely busy co-investigators, I've been my own boss, and taken the lead in getting things done. On a more global project level, I was confused at the beginning as to which decisions are taken centrally, and which are a more local matter. It's also extremely interesting to observe the dynamics in each of the local teams, and speak to other Research Fellows. Although we do the same job, our work and experiences in the field are so different! It's been a learning curve, and I'm really pleased we'll get to run the whole process three more times. By the third one, I should have a tried and tested system in place.

4.4 Vignette four: Frances Rock, Cardiff

I feel strangely reticent to write this vignette, as if something from this site hasn't quite come into focus yet and I keep wondering whether just a little more distance might help.

The sports site has consisted of observations of a coach and his charges engaged predominantly in football. We attended football training twice per week, with different groups of boys. One group in a school the other a friendly club in a park. We also attended a few table tennis sessions in a youth club.

The sports site was a surprise to me. Amal had found our Key Participant (KP) for this site early and he seemed extremely eager to participate. However, once we were in the site, he presented reservations about and resistance to getting fully involved and these reservations were persistent. There were a lot of teething problems in the Cardiff sports site, some of which went on beyond the teething phase, in fact. Our KP seemed reluctant to help with getting consent, securing data collection opportunities by negotiating sites and telling us about some aspects of his professional life, particularly his school-based teaching. In the fullness of time, most of these fell away, however. I also began to wonder whether these problems (as we perceived them at the time) told us something about the world of a sports coach – on the edges of other institutions, peripatetic in every sense of the word and keen not to make any 'sudden moves' in case work from a particular source dries up.

Life as a coach seems precarious. The sports coach usually has to pay for their own training and qualification, buy, or at least organise the purchase of, their own kit and keep both the training and the kit up-to-date. The sports coach must be quite entrepreneurial in sniffing out new opportunities to coach, dogged in securing these opportunities and committed in maintaining them once established. I have had a growing impression that our coach was concerned, once push came to shove, that the presence of two strangers in the professionally safe spaces that he had created for himself was something that he realised would potentially unsettle the work gigs he had worked so hard to secure and develop. We were never able to observe him working in a secondary school and I wonder whether this was because he saw this site as high-risk. Where he did give us access, but was reluctant to help with securing consent, my understanding now is that he was concerned not about the decision-makers, but the local, every-day connections he had built. In one site in particular, where we never managed to undertake what we saw as satisfactory consent exchanges, his reluctance surely indexed more than simply not wanting to bother to help, in hindsight.



In all of our sites so far, I have felt that I have had the opportunity to enter a world which was other to me. In the business site, where we conducted fieldwork in a shop, this was the world of an Iraqi business person as they forge a new direction in a strange land. My visits to the shop sometimes felt like visits to a different country. In the university library, our second data-collection site, I felt that my access was to a backstage area, one whose frontstage area I was very familiar with. This felt like an insight into a part of a machine which I'd not seen inside before although I knew it was there. In the sports site, my access was to a world of parenthood, of dropping everything on evenings and weekends to get to training; of standing on the chilly side-lines when there were other things to get on with; and of taking an interest in children's concerns, successes and failures, their ways of expressing themselves and their inventive logic and brash sense of right and wrong. Here were the supportive but fleeting conversations with other 'parents' and the pleasant but monotonous connections with the increasingly familiar faces. I was reminded, on many occasions, of my parents' commitment in taking me to swimming training and competitions often twice-a-day as a child and teenager, 10 or 12 times per week including 6am training sessions before a full day's work. Yet the world of being a parent on the side-lines is not one that I know so in this site too, I was treated to a view of a new side of a familiar activity.

This was a site of discovery and contrasts. This was the site where we finally got to observe the language play of children first-hand. It was a site where we found out that our research was genuinely offensive and unsettling to some people. It was a site where we reappraised our ethical commitments in various ways and weren't afraid to walk away from data collection opportunities when we were unhappy with this side of our research.

More excitingly, this was a site where we got to try out something completely new, without even realising it was happening at first. Our KP here flipped, more completely than any of our other participants, into the role of researcher. He began conducting his own research project. Holding interviews with his social contacts, providing commentaries on his home life, guiding us around his walks and activities. He embraced the role of researcher and, in the process, taught us something quite unique about his understandings of the place of language and communication in his world.

Since we finished our data collection in this site, I have been given a table tennis bat and have been to play, following a training session with Mr S at the end of our sports fieldwork...

5 Discussion

It is immediately clear that the vignettes take different forms which personalise, aestheticize, and poetise by attending to the researchers' dialogue with others. Daria, Agnieszka, and Frances' vignettes take the form of a personal narrative, while Adrian's is more akin to the form of a poem, making use of space on the page to request its audience to engage differently with the text. Frances uses the visual image of a football pitch to conjure up the environment of sport. Innovations in vignette form come from the two tenured staff members.

Each vignette evokes but also analyses, introducing arguments even at this early stage of project work. Topics including embodied communication, and multilingualism as entrepreneurial and community resource, are emergent within the vignettes. Indeed, these themes were picked up for publication as the project moved forward. However, the vignettes also produce rich aesthetic accounts of researchers' senses, of time spent in the field, in community centres, shops, markets and sport venues. I propose that these accounts enrich our understanding of interactional encounters, and document researchers' ethical engagement with the other/Other. As acknowledged earlier, these reflections also take place in a particular context of unequal power relations within a team setting. Indeed, both Agnieszka and Daria are attuned to differential status, and the disruption it causes. Agnieszka finds herself involved in both 'socializing senior researchers' and working to mitigate 'the scarieness' of Angela's forthcoming visit, at a time when building a relationship of trust with Edyta was crucial. Daria speaks of the disruption caused when key participants are affected by the visit of 'co-investigators'/'university professors' requiring her to rebuild relationships with Michalina and Barbara. Adrian ventriloquates the key participant's voice, addressing Rachel, 'Are you coming on your own today? Where's the professor?'

The use of social categories is abundant. In the vignettes language is often referred to. Polish and Polishness attract the attention of both Agnieszka and Daria. Agnieszka speaks of positioning around Polish as both an imposition and an opening for employment, while Daria speaks of Polishness as both an assumption and a re-positioning. Certainly, it would be possible, through a textual analysis, to magnify these signs, and connect them to grander asymmetries of power. However, if we shift for a moment from signification as 'meaning-oriented' to 'presence-oriented' we might notice how the researchers refer to language in terms of its sensory register beyond its symbolic value. Adrian has access to Mandarin through his co-researcher Rachel's bilingualism, and this exposes him not only to the meaning of words, but also to the humour of the research participant. Agnieszka associates the mixing of languages with feeling 'right at home'.

Daria in particular describes how the arrival at the community centre of two non-Polish-speaking researchers results in the disruption of a fragile relationship. The ‘uncomfortableness’ created by a switch to English results in a change of rhythm in both auditory and visual senses among the participants, as the manner of communication changes. Similarly, Daria reports on particular objects which point to various narratives of Polishness, such as the old-fashioned crystal fruit bowl, and its associations with a beloved family member. Daria honours the suffering of the unnamed, long-suffering Other, a life lived in anxiety, hardship and political indifference. In her writing Daria opens up a moral space which honours what she has seen and heard, and through her vignette articulates a point of human connection. Recalling times of political and social hardship in Poland, she uses the form of the vignette to remember human relationality and vulnerability.

Another common feature on which all four researchers comment is listening itself. Researchers listen for referential meaning, but also as a sensing activity. To ‘listen’ is not only to capture the sounds and voices of the market, but serves as a structuring device for the vignette itself. ‘Look, Listen, Write’ name the central activities of the researcher in Adrian’s vignette, allowing him a form of representation which pulls together narrative and poetics within the vignette, moving away from chronological time sequences and linear representations. Adrian listens to the sounds and voices of the markets and represents them without direct commentary, bringing a poetic sensibility to his truth of the research site. This does not mean his voice disappears entirely from the representation. For example, his use of stylistic features such as capitalized letters illustrate the experience of ‘forthright’ market voices. The poem develops its own form of rigour, different from that of science, but no less demanding. It holds the capacity to affirm the moral and existential irreducibility of the Other by allowing characters to stand for themselves, without explanation.

Frances’ remembrance of her parents’ sacrifice in her early years brings a humanity to the monotony of small talk, as she listens on the side lines of a football pitch. Agnieszka comments on the ‘little noises’ made, while Daria mentions ‘silence’. Here again researchers appear less interested in perceived meaning, and more concerned with the perceiving senses. The noises made by Edyta and Michalina are read in terms of quality of voice, or the rebounding of voice into silence. When Agnieszka says she ‘made sure she listened’, she is paying attention to Edyta, not simply because she wants to deliver on the project but because she feels ‘protective’ of her. As Daria and Agnieszka occupy the position of listening subject they draw a great deal on their senses, opening themselves from without, but also from within (Nancy 2007).

We might say that relationally the researchers create a moral space for structuring subjectivities formed both within, but also beyond discourse. While terms like

researcher, ethnographer, key participant, counsellor, shop keeper and coach are certainly relevant in structuring their relations, they are inadequate to explain the responsibility Daria, Agnieszka and Frances describe in their personal narratives. Agnieszka is aware of social class as an essentialising category, and she describes how both she and Edyta work to transcend this. Edyta's exposure to the academic world is 'cushioned' by Agnieszka, who is attentive to her own manner as she sits observing Edyta. Edyta's uniqueness must be heard. The ethnographer does not seek to make the strange familiar. She wishes to uphold Edyta's singularity while looking for points of contact. Relationally, Agnieszka decides in the 'emptiness of the shop' to be herself, rather than 'some researcher with a magnifying glass through which to "inspect" participants' lives'. Daria too concerns herself with the Other, showing concern for clients she does not know, but whose suffering troubles her. In the Other's vulnerabilities, and through her observation and listening to Michalina, Daria engages in self-reflection, understanding 'I learn by doing but only if I notice'. Frances explicitly refers to entering the world of the other and reinterpreting earlier conclusions. She sees that key participant Mr. S is not in fact 'denying access', but is dealing with a 'high risk' precarious livelihood. In each of these examples, we might say the researcher "interrupts her own views, finding ways to deprivilege her own voyeuristic and powerful eye" (Behar 1997, p. 25) or the possession of a 'self-sufficient "I"' (Butler 2005: 136). In the emptiness of the shop, in the closeness of the meeting room, on the windswept sidelines of a football pitch, and in the cut and thrust of the market hall, all four researchers are faced with interpreting meaning beyond the referential and the indexical.

Proximity, both actual and metaphorical, brings new meanings through sensing the Other. Space is both narrow and expansive. Morality is spatial and temporal because 'the being' of the human is always 'a being' in place (Malpas 2017). It is 'here' we are human, and responsible for one another. It is 'in this place' where we feel answerable. Signification is held open to reconfigure the injustices of the past. Proximity keeps the individual in focus, and retains what is strange and unique. Individuality is essential to retaining the capacity of the other/Other to be heard. Difference from, and in difference are both essential to the formation of the researchers' own becoming, and to the narratives/poems they go on to write. In their research vignettes Daria, Adrian, Agnieszka, and Frances are not prepared to encompass or determine the other/Other. In field observation they find ethical kinship in the face of the other. Here they are reminded of social injustice and the need for action.

The face therefore provides the possibility of ethical kinship, but also political action, because observing the face of the Other is a call to address injustice. This is a point Butler adheres to in her ethics of precarity which builds directly on Levinas' philosophy.

Vignettes reveal complexity, moral ambiguity, contradiction, and contingency. They widen examples of signification, allowing us to retain the sensing present, disrupting the apparent logic of unifying academic storylines. Indeed, vignettes retain polyphony. They produce texts which emphasise the manner, affect, movement, values, and beliefs of researchers and research participants, in voices rich with prosody and unfinished meaning. They capture the “manyness” of worlds of sense (Deumert 2022: 9) offering an aesthetic engagement (Blackledge and Creese 2022, 2023).

Vignettes were more than an empirical approach to collecting data in TLANG. As the principal investigator I was removed from the details of in-depth fieldwork impossible anyway over 16 sites. Vignettes provided an account of individual researchers in relations with others which would otherwise have alluded me. I came to appreciate researchers’ alertness to social practice and ethical relations. The researchers documented their experience of moral and social action, allowing me insight into their values and beliefs. In reading their accounts I was offered the opportunity to see the world of others.

Beyond my own learning, there are wider channels of engagement. Neoliberalism is an oppressive ideology, which creates isolation and competition. In this paper I show that there are possibilities for moving beyond judgement and evaluation, to create instead empathy, inclusiveness and positive emotions (Dovchin 2022). My argument has been that listening to a polyphony of relational voices offers a different perspective on individuality – one which starts not with the sovereign subject, but the ethical subject, rethinking conceptualizations of responsibility and difference.

6 Coda

A discourse analytic approach has to date brought socio applied linguistics political purchase pointing as it does to the social construction of hierarchy and therefore also to the potential to unsettle and up-turn it. However, as Gershon (2011: 537) explains neoliberalism has ‘wilted the efficacy of this formerly reliable insight’, potentially making critical observations impotent. If neoliberalism similarly approaches the social as if it ‘could be otherwise’ albeit motivated by very different theories of change, we run the risk of a toothless critique. As socio and applied linguists we are therefore compelled to explore other forms of political action which responds to the inequity and injustice of the social world reproduced in neoliberalism and its winner take all philosophy. Applied linguistics makes an important contribution to understanding how language discriminates, shames and distorts the human subject, perhaps

it has done less to know how language humanizes and dignifies (McElhinny 2010). More literary forms of writing, such as vignettes, poems, plays, graphic novels, might be one way forward.

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