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Hymes's Linguistics and Ethnography in Education

Nancy H. Hornberger

University of Pennsylvania, nancyh@gse.upenn.edu

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Abstract

Education is one of the arenas in which Hymes has brought his scholarship and politics of advocacy to bear in the world, perhaps most visibly through his University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education deanship (1975–1987), but also through the scope and depth of his writings on linguistics and ethnography in education. Language inequality is an enduring theme of Hymes's work, in relation not only to Native American ethnopoetics, narrative analysis, and linguistic socialization, but also to educational linguistics and ethnography in education. Hymes proposed a vision and a set of ways of doing educational linguistics and ethnography in education—from ethnographic monitoring and ethnography of communication to ethnopoetics of oral narrative and ethnography of language policy—that have inspired and informed researchers for a generation and more.

Keywords

communicative competence, educational linguistics, ethnopoetics, language inequality, language planning, linguistic socialization

Disciplines

Education

Hymes's linguistics and ethnography in education*

NANCY H. HORNBERGER

Abstract

Education is one of the arenas in which Hymes has brought his scholarship and politics of advocacy to bear in the world, perhaps most visibly through his University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education deanship (1975–1987), but also through the scope and depth of his writings on linguistics and ethnography in education. Language inequality is an enduring theme of Hymes's work, in relation not only to Native American ethnopoetics, narrative analysis, and linguistic socialization, but also to educational linguistics and ethnography in education. Hymes proposed a vision and a set of ways of doing educational linguistics and ethnography in education—from ethnographic monitoring and ethnography of communication to ethnopoetics of oral narrative and ethnography of language policy—that have inspired and informed researchers for a generation and more.

Keywords: communicative competence; educational linguistics; ethnopoetics; language inequality; language planning; linguistic socialization.

1. Linguistics and ethnography in education

At Dell Hymes's first meeting with the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education (GSE) faculty in spring 1975 before his appointment as dean, he announced his intention to develop two academic emphases under his deanship, namely educational linguistics and the ethnography of education. In the ensuing years, primarily through the inauguration and evolution of academic programs in Educational Linguistics and in Education, Culture, and Society, there emerged at GSE "an environment favorable to interests in language and anthropology/ethnography, involving a variety of people, some there only for a while" (Hymes, pers. comm., 26 October 1998).

Education is one of the arenas in which Hymes has brought his scholarship and politics of advocacy to bear in the world, perhaps most visibly through his Penn GSE deanship (1975–1987), but also through the scope and depth of his writings on linguistics and ethnography in education.¹ By the time I became Hymes’s junior colleague toward the end of his tenure at Penn GSE, linguistics and ethnography had taken firm root there in scholarly, programmatic, and advocacy-oriented endeavors that continue to the present, instantiating the enormous value of the “unflinching mutual interrogation between linguistics and ethnography” which, as Rampton tells us herein, Hymes holds open.

As Hymes’s GSE colleague and sometime student sitting in on his classes, inheritor of Hymesian endeavors at GSE, and above all grateful reader of his prolific and inspirational scholarship, I partake of all three avenues (plus one) of Hymes’s effect on research (Ervin-Tripp in this issue). From this vantage point, I interweave my reflections on his enduring contributions at GSE and to education more generally with comments on themes highlighted in the collection here that have informed my own work as well.

2. Native American ethnopoetics

An indelible vision of Dell at Penn GSE is a recurring glimpse of him, through the dean’s courtyard window, seated at his typewriter tapping away on one or another of his prolific writings. Perhaps it might be one of his legendary book notices for *Language in Society* or a lengthy and detailed editor’s comment to a manuscript author, perhaps a thoughtful epistle to an inquiring prospective student or visiting scholar, perhaps a pithy memo to GSE faculty or a Penn official, perhaps enlightening comments on a student’s paper or even the honing of one of his own papers on Native American ethnopoetics.

As articulated by Blommaert and oft repeated in this collection, Hymes’s oeuvre is characterized by an “exceptionally broad theoretical and empirical outlook”—a scope perhaps most readily epitomized in his “quadruple-crown” professional presidencies and especially his trademark founding and twenty-year editorship of an extraordinarily broad and encompassing range of sociolinguistic scholarship in *Language in Society*. Yet the deep core of his scholarship is an empirical concern with the analysis of Native American narrative, and his philosophical and theoretical reflections are inevitably grounded in ethnographic and ethnopoetic work with Native American languages and communities of the US Northwest.

As the articles herein amply demonstrate, Hymes's ethnopoetics offers a set of principles for analyzing oral narrative and compelling arguments for the value of doing so. Moore and Collins each exemplify and remind us of Hymesian principles for segmenting lines of text with attention not just to prosodic or intonational criteria, but to clausal syntax and measure, principles which I have also fruitfully applied in analysis of Quechua oral tradition (Hornberger 1992).

"Ethnopoetics helps us to see more of what is there" (Hymes 1996: 182). Whereas representing narrative as prose tends to hide its characteristic form, ethnopoetic analysis unearths the implicit poetic structure that is the essence of narrative. Such an approach, Collins emphasizes, implies a powerful critique of the literate ideologies too often used to misjudge spoken language and discriminate against certain speakers. In Hymes's own words:

The genuine difficulty, then, is this. Prejudice may stereotype the user and context in terms of a variety of language, whether written or oral, formal or informal, standard or vernacular. Language users and their means are too creative and adaptive to be reduced to such stereotypes. (Hymes 1986: 52)

Hymesian ethnopoetics aims even further than unseating literacy-biased ideologies, however, as Blommaert persuasively demonstrates. He underlines the urgent need for ethnopoetics given that languages are endangered not only as linguistic systems, but also as sociolinguistic systems—the genres, styles, and ways of speaking that ethnopoetics seeks to reconstruct. In revealing the underlying organization of narrative, he reminds us, Hymes works "to make visible and audible again the literary form in which the native words had their being—so that they can move again at a pace that is surer, more open to the voice, more nearly their own" (Hymes 1981: 384). In a "world in which difference is quickly converted into inequality," ethnopoetics thus "takes on more than just an academic import and becomes a political move"—a "program for understanding voice *and the reasons why voice is an object and instrument of power*" (Blommaert in this issue; emphasis in the original).

3. Language inequality

"Inequality in language: Taking for granted" was the topic Hymes chose for the first annual Nessa Wolfson Colloquium in October 1991, when he returned to GSE to honor the memory of his former student, colleague, and founder under his deanship of GSE's Educational Linguistics program and Language in Education division (now Language and Literacy

in Education). His talk reminded listeners of the ways in which, despite the potential equality of all languages, differences in language and language use become a basis for social discrimination and actual inequality. While (educational) linguists may take these insights for granted after a quarter-century of sociolinguistic and anthropological linguistic scholarship, we nevertheless still have our work cut out in raising critical language awareness in education and society more broadly. “We must never take for granted that what we take for granted is known to others” (Hymes 1992: 3; revised version in Hymes 1996).

Language inequality is an enduring theme of Hymes’s work (1980b, 1996), in relation not only to Native American ethnopoetics and the reconstruction of voice, but also to narrative analysis, linguistic socialization, ethnography of communication, educational linguistics, and ethnography in education. In all, and as recurrently noted in the articles here, the foundational and unrelenting insight is that language is reflective and constitutive of context; indeed, Blommaert puts it that language *is* context—the architecture of social behavior itself. Hymes’s paradigm revolves around function and context (Ervin-Tripp in this issue)—and context not as neutral background, but as a “lived environment full of inequalities and constraints” (Blommaert in this issue).

This point is crucial. Whether we are concerned in narrative analysis with emergent textuality or performed intertextuality (Moore in this issue), in linguistic socialization with the child’s learning not only how to say but what to say (Ervin-Tripp in this issue, citing Hymes 1961: 341), in ethnography of communication with describing culturally appropriate ways of speaking and norms of interaction as they are negotiated by language users, in educational linguistics with language teaching and learning but also the role of language in teaching and learning, or in ethnography in education with home–school mismatches in communicative competence (Ervin-Tripp, Collins in this issue), or the social and linguistic construction of school failure and school success, it is always context as uneven and ever-shifting terrain that is key to understanding Hymes’s view of the role of language in inequality—and in challenging inequality.

In the introductory Sociolinguistics in Education course I inherited from Nessa Wolfson in 1985 and have taught ever since, I find myself repeatedly emphasizing that Hymes’s reciprocal notions of ethnography of communication and communicative competence are not at all about prescribing appropriateness, as has so often been misconstrued by others. The goal in seeking to uncover patterns and functions of language use in context is to understand, not the replication of uniformity, but the organization of diversity; that is, not “the extent to which members of a social group . . . behave in the same way under the same circumstances,” . . . but

rather “the actual diversity of habits, of motives, of personalities, of customs that do, in fact, coexist within the boundaries of any culturally organized society” (Wallace 1961: 22, 23, cited by Hymes in class lecture, 17 March 1987).

Hymes was acutely aware of constraints, contingency, and variability in discourse:

The same behaviors, the same verbal conduct, may have different implications for different actors. The repertoires of individuals may differ in a given language and in a given range of discourse. . . . What is a meaningful choice for one person may be the only way another has of doing anything of the kind at all. . . . The relation between convention and choice is constantly subject to modification and dislocation. . . . Simple models of rational actors and participants in discourse, while seeming to clarify experience, actually may obscure and mystify it. . . . Rational choice, propositional clarity, clear turn-taking, and the like are not models from which to predict the movement of participant-particles, but half of a dialectic between convention and choice. (Hymes 1986: 87–88)

The dialectic between convention and choice is in turn only half of Hymes’s story. The other half is what to do with it. Scollon and Scollon (in this issue) take as axiomatic from Hymes’s work that this indissoluble tension between structure and creativity, as they call it (structure-and-agency, convention-and-contingency, in Rampton’s phrase), should be moved by analysts in the direction of social justice, and they demonstrate ways in which they have acted to do so in their work with Native Alaskans. Their approach to narrative in this work, similarly to Moore’s analysis of Mrs. Florendo’s *corrigenda* to the published text of her earlier telling of “Raccoon and his Grandmother,” takes increasing account of the social interaction between storyteller and audience, the context of performance, beyond or in addition to the story or text of the narrative itself.

Hymes’s (1981 [1975]: 86) argument that “especially in an oral tradition performance is a mode of existence and realization that is partly *constitutive* of what the tradition is” provides metaphor and inspiration for both these explorations. The Scollons move beyond stories as valuable sources of understanding about a people, an individual, or a language, to stories as social interactions and contexts offering opportunities for breakthrough into action. Moore takes up Hymes’s concern for the systematic study of variation in performance and raises the question whether Mrs. Florendo’s asides in her retelling of the story to him—asides as to techniques of adapting narrative style to different occasions of narration—are part of the performed text or not. Moore suggests that the focus of much Hymesian work is an emergent textuality that becomes an “enduring object” (Jakobson 1960: 365) despite the unavoidable contingencies of oral delivery, whereas might it not be that those contingencies

are also part of the text, a kind of “performed intertextuality”? He concludes that Mrs. Florendo’s retelling with corrections is one in which “multiple cultural views of what “text(uality)” is all about—including Hymes’s own—are brought into contact” (Moore in this issue)—a conclusion with which I suspect Hymes would readily agree.

Equally, Ervin-Tripp, writing on linguistic socialization, invokes Hymes both for the directions work has taken and for the as-yet-unanswered questions to be taken up.

So already in 1961 we see in kernel form the two directions in which we will find the field developing later. In the first view, we see the child’s socialization, with speech as a means to that end; in the second view, we see the individual child’s knowledge of communication going beyond the linguistic features that the psycholinguists were studying at the time to the learning of a much wider system, what we might now call sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge. (Ervin-Tripp in this issue)

These two directions, which Ochs and Schieffelin (1984; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986) famously formulated as socialization *through* language and socialization *to* language, have seen several decades of rich ethnographic exploration, illuminating our understanding of children’s language use in context, and yet needing perhaps ever more attention to the contingencies and inequalities inherent in and across those contexts and the uses to which linguistic means may be put therein. In Ervin-Tripp’s estimation, the work on socialization *through* language highlights variation through in-depth ethnographies of communication in different cultural settings, but there is a need for more systematic comparison across cases; while the work on socialization *to* language reveals changes across time in children’s development of pragmatic competence, repertoires of styles, and the like, while there is still need for a “comprehensive grounding in a view of the organization of linguistic means in the service of [situational] ends” (Hymes 1980a: viii).

4. Educational linguistics

Educational Linguistics, as practiced at Penn GSE since its founding in 1976, is an enduring programmatic expression of Hymes’s (1980a: 139) profound belief “in the need for change in the way we understand language, and in what we do with language in schools.” In educational linguistics, we focus centrally on language learning and teaching and the role of language in learning and teaching, taking up a call initially formulated by Spolsky (1974: 2024) “to show how linguistics and its various

fields can help define and solve problems that reflect the centrality of language in the educational process,” and addressing (language) educational problems and challenges with a holistic approach integrating theory and practice, research and policy.

Consistent with the five questions Hymes says we need to ask when language is approached as a human problem (Hymes 1980b: 21, cited by Rampton in this issue), faculty and students in Educational Linguistics assume that any language-in-education problem to be addressed is more likely implicit than explicit, that a linguistic problem seen from a different vantage point may turn out not to be a problem but rather a linguistic right or a linguistic resource (cf. Ruiz 1984), that there are likely to be not only pedagogical but epistemological dimensions to the problem, that the problem will likely teach us about language rather than the reverse, and that what we might do about the problem is rarely self-evident but rather remains to be discovered in collaboration with others, including centrally the local participants. These assumptions underpin a wide range of research undertakings along the dimensions of language diversity, medium, structure, and functioning which Hymes also points to (1980b: 21), research which I describe elsewhere as follows:

Communicative competence, first proposed by Hymes in 1966 (1972) in reaction to Chomsky’s (1965) use of the term competence in a much narrower sense, describes the knowledge and ability of individuals for appropriate language use in the communicative events in which they find themselves in any particular speech community. This competence is by definition variable within individuals (from event to event), across individuals, and across speech communities, and includes rules of use as well as rules of grammar. Hymes’ functional and multiple conception of language ability and use in communicative context gave impetus to the development of not only a whole branch of sociolinguistics (the ethnography of communication) but also a language teaching movement (communicative language teaching), both of which have endured to the present.

The influence of these ideas on Penn’s Educational Linguistics program is readily evident, perhaps most noticeably in the inclusive, sociocultural approach to language education practiced in the program, an approach which, among other things, emphasizes the learning and teaching not only of linguistically defined grammatical knowledge (rules of grammar) but also of culturally embedded ways of speaking (rules of use); acknowledges the role of not only the immediate interactional context but also the historical, sociocultural, economic, and policy context surrounding language learning and teaching; recognizes the value of learning and teaching not just one standard language variety, but multiple varieties and patterns of language use; and perhaps most importantly, addresses not just language learning and teaching per se, but also the role of language in the construction and negotiation of both academic knowledge and social identity. (Hornberger 2001: 11–12)

Like Ron and Suzie Scollon in their extended work with the Alaska Native Language Center, I often find, as educational linguist working in multilingual education and Indigenous language revitalization in the Andes, the United States, and elsewhere, that the “problem, as stated, is not of much use” and that “one has to move into the problem indirectly.” Like them, too, I find myself pressed by the demands of educational systems and timelines to breakthrough into action—to “use what [I have] and return the problem to those who [have] the most abundant information,” namely the participants. Indeed, in my work with the continua of biliteracy in different multilingual settings (Hornberger 2003), as for the Scollons’ employment of nexus analysis in their work, what is often most needed and most appropriate is a “perspective that ... reframe[s] the situation for the participants so that they ... look at it in a new way” (Scollon and Scollon in this issue).

5. Ethnography in education

Language planning is a subject that is sometimes associated with the sociology of language, rather than with sociolinguistics. In other words, it is sometimes thought of as concerned with the “macro-sociological” sphere, the level of government, politics and policy, and the like, and not with the “micro-sociological” sphere, the level of face-to-face interaction. The ethnography of speaking is sometimes associated primarily with this latter sphere.

One of the major concerns of social theory at the present time is the relationship between these two spheres and ways in which they can be integrated. Discuss how the ethnography of speaking might contribute to the integration of these two levels in regard to problems of language planning. Cite and evaluate studies which have sought to do this.

Hymes composed this question in the early 1980s for the doctoral preliminary examination in Educational Linguistics and it remains in the active repertoire of questions given to students today. The posing of a role for ethnography in language policy formulates an agenda for research that has gathered increasing momentum in recent years (Canagarajah 2005; Freeman 1998; Hornberger 1988, 1996; Hornberger and Johnson 2007; Johnson 2007; McCarty forthcoming; Ramanathan 2005; Ramanathan and Morgan 2007). Here, as in so many fields of sociolinguistic research, Hymes “was ahead of his time in identifying problems as well as research areas” (Ervin-Tripp in this issue). He also reveals in this question his vision of a multilevel ethnography in education, encompassing policy as well as practice.

Ethnography as Hymes understands and writes about it is far from the all-too-commonly encountered and “absurdly reductionist” equation with field work, participant observation, narrative description, or even more simplistically with interview (“as if,” in Blommaert’s apt phrasing, “interviews would be *per se* ethnographic”). Blommaert makes clear that Hymes belongs instead to an anthropological tradition in which ethnography is understood as a descriptive theory, an “approach that [is] theoretical because it [provides] description in specific, methodologically and epistemologically grounded ways” (Blommaert in this issue). Further, Hymes calls for an ethnological orientation to complement ethnographic description. He proposes that an emphasis on ethnological analysis that is comparative across space, cumulative across time, and cooperative between analyst and practitioner, would serve ethnographers, American schooling, and constructive change well (Hymes 1980a: 119–125, cited by Collins and Rampton in this issue).

Importantly for Hymes (as Blommaert emphasizes), ethnography is both democratic and counterhegemonic. It is democratic in that it “entails trust and confidence, . . . requires some narrative accounting, and . . . is an extension of a universal form of personal knowledge” (Hymes 1996: 14); and counterhegemonic in that it has the capacity to construct an alternative discourse on social uses of language and social dimensions of meaningful behavior and in that it seeks to describe and explain, rather than reduce and simplify, the messiness and complexity of social activity (Blommaert in this issue).

In his writings, and in his leadership of Penn’s Graduate School of Education, Hymes proposed not only a vision but a set of ways of doing ethnography in education—from ethnographic monitoring and ethnography of communication to ethnopoetics of oral narrative and ethnography of language policy—that have inspired and informed researchers for a generation and more. Penn GSE’s Ethnography in Education Research Forum, founded at Hymes’s initiative and now celebrating its 30th consecutive year, is a concrete instantiation of both the vision and the doing. Ethnography as theory and perspective, as description and analysis of messy and complex social activity, as counterhegemonic and democratic, accessible to expert and novice alike, and its companion ethnology as comparative, cumulative, and cooperative, are visible and annually renewed in the Ethnography Forum. Notably, the Forum has from its beginnings maintained social justice in education as its core focus, participation of educational practitioners as integral to its mission, an ethos of welcome to novice as well as expert ethnographers, a dedicated grappling with the messiness of data analysis and interpretation as its signature session strand, and comparative-cumulative-cooperative ethnological

analysis as its motive for convening (see Hornberger 2002 for a brief history of the Forum).

Early in his career, Hymes (2001 [1969]: 7) called upon those of us “for whom ‘the way things are’ is not reason enough for the way things are . . . who ask of anthropology what [we] ask of [ourselves]—responsiveness, critical awareness, ethical concern, human relevance, a clear connection between what is to be done and the interests of mankind” to reinvent anthropology. Forty years on, it is clear that Hymes’s scholarship and political advocacy have in no small measure led the way in that task—with a social justice impact reaching beyond anthropology to linguistics and discourse studies, Native American ethnopoetics and narrative studies, educational policy and practice, and far more importantly, to the lives and well-being of countless individuals, communities, and schools around the world.

Notes

- * My intellectual and personal debt to Hymes is great and only partially captured here. I thank Jan Blommaert for organizing the session on Hymes at the 6th International Pragmatics Conference, held in Reims, France in July 1998, from which most of these papers originate; and for inviting me to contribute to this special journal issue. My thanks also to the authors for a rich and engaging set of papers.
1. I adapt this phrase intentionally from Hymes’s (1986) essay, “Discourse: scope without depth.”

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Nancy H. Hornberger is Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include sociolinguistics in education, ethnography in education, language

policy, bilingualism and biliteracy, Indigenous language revitalization, and heritage language education. She has taught, lectured, and advised on multilingualism and education throughout the world, as visiting professor, Fulbright Senior Specialist, US State Department English Language Specialist, and United Nations consultant. Recent publications include the ten-volume *Encyclopedia of Language and Education* (Springer, 2008) and *Can Schools Save Indigenous Languages? Policy and Practice on Four Continents* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Address for correspondence: Language and Literacy in Education Division, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, 3700 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216, USA <nancyh@gse.upenn.edu>.