Language and identity in linguistic ethnography

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Introduction

Linguistic ethnography (LE) is a relatively new term that originated in the United Kingdom (UK). It aims to provide socio- and applied linguists with theoretical and methodological perspectives for studying situated practice vis-à-vis wider sociocultural processes of change. Broadly speaking, this term offers a platform for analysing the ways in which social actors negotiate meaning and identity through language use in the context of large historical configurations that shape (and get shaped by) local instances of language use. In a discussion paper on linguistic ethnography published by the UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum over a decade ago, its general orientation was described as follows:

Although LE research differs in how far it seeks to make claims about either language, communication or the social world, linguistic ethnography generally holds that to a considerable degree, language and the social world are mutually shaping, and that close analysis of situated language use can provide both fundamental and distinctive insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural production in everyday activity.

(Rampton et al. 2004)

A few years after this discussion paper, Creese (2008: 229) pushed LE further by connecting it to new intellectual orientations in applied linguistics. She designated LE as:

a particular configuration of interests within the broader field of socio- and applied linguistics [which brings] a theoretical and methodological development orientating towards particular, established traditions but defining itself in the new intellectual climate of post-structuralism and late modernity.

While offering a powerful account of what LE is about, these statements open up the door to subsequent questions regarding the very contribution of the term to the existing knowledge that is ‘out there’ in the social sciences.
In line with the discovery procedures followed by practitioners of conversational analysis, we may raise at this point the fundamental question ‘Why that, in this way, right now?’ To be more specific we could ask the following questions: ‘What are the conditions that have resulted in the emergence and acceptance of this term in applied linguistics?'; ‘How is LE different from other traditions across the fields of linguistics and anthropology?'; and ‘How does it inform contemporary research on language and identity?’ This chapter attempts to respond to these questions by further qualifying the working definition provided by Creese above. I aim to characterise LE through outlining both the established and the new perspectives to which this frame is linked.

I argue that LE allows us to overcome long-standing binaries in the study of language, culture and identity in applied linguistics, such as that of ‘micro/macro’ or ‘local/global’, while at the same time bringing about a new sensitivity that places instability, difference and mobility at the centre of the analysis. Although LE originated in the UK, I also show how scholars elsewhere are now drawing LE into a fuller account of political economy, an area of exploration that has not yet been fully integrated in applied linguistics.

The section below begins with an overview of LE, followed by a discussion of the major issues and ongoing debates around this perspective, before concluding with a summary.

Overview

A key issue for applied linguists drawing on LE for the study of language and identity is to identify the ontological and epistemological basis of this theoretical and methodological development. Another issue is to accommodate research of language and identity to the above-mentioned ‘new intellectual climate of late modernity’. These two issues will be examined in turn in this section.

Ontologies and epistemologies

LE is built upon specific standpoints that involve certain ontological ways of understanding our social world as well as concrete epistemological decisions about how to approach this world empirically. As regards the understanding of our social world, the analytical focus of this framework rests generally upon the social and linguistic/discursive turns adopted in the social sciences since the mid-twentieth century. In particular, LE has come into existence under the influence of a mélange of traditions across various fields, including philosophy of language (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), linguistic anthropology (Hymes 1968; Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Silverstein 1976; Irvine and Gal 2000), sociolinguistics (Labov 1972; Gumperz 1982; Bernstein 1996), microsociology (Goffman 1981; Erickson 1992), communication studies (Bakhtin 1986) and social theory (Foucault 1970; Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1982).

Such fields diverge in their conceptions of what counts as, for example, knowledge or as evidence of the social reality to be investigated. However, the combination of these fields leads to a key axiomatic proposition about social reality as being discursively constructed, reproduced, naturalised and sometimes revised in social interaction, in the course of large-scale historical, political and socio-economic configurations. There are two key aspects of this presupposition that need to be highlighted at this point of the discussion, in order to understand some of the theoretical underpinnings that make LE (and similar approaches derived from the above-mentioned traditions) theoretically distinguishable from other approaches in social (linguistic) disciplines.

First, this conceptualisation of social reality understands agency and social structure as mutually constitutive, beyond what is often called the micro/macro dichotomy. Instead of two different realms (i.e. social structure and individual agency) that need distinct analytical tools
to be studied, this theoretical standpoint calls our attention to human activities as socially situated practices ordered across space and time. That is to say, human beings are seen as engaging reflexively and agentively in socially situated practices while at the same time reproducing the conditions that make these practices possible (Giddens 1982). Second, such a position addresses language as a domain where social processes are constituted, ‘both in the ways that it forms part of the social practices that construct social reality, and in the ways it serves as a terrain for working out struggles that are fundamentally about other things’ (Heller 2011: 49).

With respect to the epistemological decisions about how to approach the social world empirically, LE is specifically characterised by the appropriation and combination of both ethnographic and linguistic perspectives. The ethnographic angle of LE has been greatly shaped by the work done in ethnography of communication, where researchers have traditionally been concerned with the organisation of communicative practices within a given community — meaning that linguistic forms are conceptualised as symbolic resources through which people (re)constitute their social organisations (Hymes 1974). The implications of this focus are twofold. On the one hand, the ethnographic perspective implies paying a good deal of attention to people’s daily activities and routines so as to derive their meaning and rationality as situated in the local context. On the other, it also involves a focus on how participants’ actions at particular moments and in particular spaces are connected and constrained by other interactions across space and time.

While the scope of this approach contributes to counterbalancing highly abstracted and idealised models of communication that come from formal linguistics (i.e. models detached from the social world), the use of participant observation has been regarded as inadequate for the task of giving a full account of the local forms of social action around which people in the social groups under study construct and negotiate meaning in a situated context. This critique points out that since the traditional focus in the ethnography of communication has been to characterise, compare and contrast the communicative events around which a social group constitutes itself, this often leads to a representation of communities as fixed and bounded, and of language as a true reflection of the social order (see Pratt 1987). It is precisely this concern that has formed part of the argument about the capacity of a more linguistically oriented analysis to ‘tie ethnography down’ (Rampton 2006: 395).

In LE, such a linguistic orientation has been influenced by work in interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982) and micro-ethnography (Erickson 1992). These analytical perspectives introduce a focus on the routines and patterned usage of language that entail fine-grained methods for the collection, transcription and analysis of spoken interaction (see Eppler and Codó, this volume). By looking closely at audio- and/or video-recorded linguistic and textual data, the researcher is immersed in the moment-to-moment actions of their participants’ activities and can follow the process whereby the participants construct frames of common understanding more fully. This procedure requires a commitment from the analyst to suspend all preconceived ideas and general arguments in order to work with the recorded and transcribed activities and to look at them as unique social episodes in which meaning making and context are interactionally constructed in a situated action.

At such moments of immersion, LE researchers explore in detail the linguistic/communicative (verbal and non-verbal) conventions through which participants sequentially coordinate their social actions by constructing social relations among themselves and with the surrounding material setting, in the course of recurrent everyday activities. These conventions include turn taking, language choice, lexical choice, proxemics, kinesics and the use of texts in interaction. In particular, attention is paid to those interactional moments in which the meaning is ambiguous. These potentially disruptive moments are considered especially rich for exploring the social
processes by which norms and rules that are frequently tacit, unnoticed and taken for granted by the participants are made explicit and salient.

Therefore, this analytical exercise avoids bounded representations of communities due to its strong orientation toward the discovery of the local–uncertain–unpredictable–changeable positioning of the participants. In addition, when ethnographically driven, this type of inquiry is not carried out by permanently putting aside any connection between the data and other activities removed from the context of the research, which is done in other disciplinary traditions (see e.g. Sacks et al. 1974). In this regard, LE researchers work with each recorded and transcribed interaction as part of a web of social activities that participants develop in the course of their trajectories, in interaction with the trajectories of other material artefacts and discourses being produced and circulated in the field.

In sum, the idiosyncratic approach to linguistics and ethnography derived from the perspectives described in this section contributes to strengthening the epistemological status of ethnography while sharpening the analytic relevance of linguistics. This is neatly put by Rampton et al. (2014: 4), who argue that:

There is a broad consensus that: i) … meaning takes shape within specific social relations, interactional histories and institutional regimes, produced and construed by agents with expectations and repertoires that have to be grasped ethnographically; ii) analysis of internal organization of verbal (and other kinds of semiotic) data is essential to understanding its significance and position in the world. Meaning is far more than just the ‘expression of ideas’, and biography, identifications, stance and nuance are extensively signaled in the linguistic and textual fine-grain.

These ontological and epistemological positions are not placed in a vacuum; instead, they are linked to past intellectual debates while pointing towards forward-looking discussions. Looking backwards, such positions are viewed as the historical outcome of the breakdown of positivist approaches in social studies that resulted from a widespread critique of the structuralist search for universal scientific principles. In contrast to previous ideas about language, culture and identity as natural objects that exist in isolation from the social world to which they refer, poststructuralism has led to a reconceptualisation whereby language, culture and identity are seen as linguistic, discursive and cultural products that cannot be detached from the specific local and social conditions that are responsible for them coming into being (see Baxter, this volume).

Looking forward, the ontological and epistemological considerations reviewed in this section also place LE in a privileged position with respect to the study of new processes of sociolinguistic and cultural change. These new processes are now the focus of ongoing research in the social sciences, in the context of a new intellectual shift in which instability, difference and mobility have all been put at the centre of the analysis – in contrast to previous research where they had been largely treated as peripheral. So it is now worth shifting the attention to this new intellectual climate, which is linked to the conditions of late modernity, and to focus on how this climate is informing research on language and identity in applied linguistics from the perspective of LE.

**Language and identity in late modernity**

During the last decade, research in the social sciences has paid increasing attention to the dilemmas and contradictions that the so-called conditions of ‘late modernity’ have posed to nationally
oriented ideas about language, culture and identity (Appadurai 1990; Giddens 1991; Bauman 1998; Castells 2010). These conditions involve widespread socio-economic, institutional, cultural and linguistic changes. Examples of these changes include the information revolution associated with rapidly changing socio-economic networks; the intensification of cultural and linguistic diversification leading to growing complexity and unpredictability of the way social life is arranged through daily practices; and the global expansion of late capitalism and its associated forms of selective privatisation of public services (Tollefson and Pérez-Milans forthcoming).

In the light of these changes, nation states have had to reposition themselves and adjust the uniform ‘one state/one culture/one language’ discourses that underpinned the ideological framework of modern nationalism (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Billig 1995; Bauman and Briggs 2003). This is leading to what has been described as an ideological shift from defining languages as bounded/separate entities tied to particular ethno-national communities towards a new emphasis on multilingualism where earlier linguistic ideologies coexist with new discourses in which languages are also seen as technical skills or commodities in the globalised post-industrial/services-based market (Heller 2010; Duchêne and Heller 2012; Codó and Pérez-Milans 2014).

More specifically, this set of institutional, cultural and sociolinguistic changes has been linked to the increasingly fragmented nature of the overlapping and competing identities that are associated with the complexities of language–identity relations and new forms of multilingual language use in contexts of superdiversity. This new panorama is having considerable impact on the social sciences since researchers are shifting their analytical interest away from normative institutional frames of action in fixed space–time locations. These researchers now have greater interest in translocal, transcultural and translingual practices whereby social actors creatively co-construct and negotiate meanings across changing social networks, communicative genres and regional/national boundaries (Blommaert and Rampton 2011; Pennycook 2012; Canagarajah 2013; Márquez Reiter and Martín Rojo 2014).

Linguistic and cultural practices are no longer examined against the background of abstract standard languages, uniform views of speakers and stable group identities. Rather, such practices are investigated with reference to the linguistic repertoires that people acquire, construct and mobilise while positioning themselves and others in ways that have consequences for access to different social spaces (e.g. formal versus informal), symbolic resources (e.g. institutionalised forms of recognition through certificates) and materialities (e.g. jobs) throughout the course of their life trajectories. Indeed, this view has led to the emergence of terms such as ‘new speakers’ (Pujolar et al. 2011), ‘transidiomaticity’ (Jacquemet 2005), ‘polylingualism’ (Jørgensen 2008), ‘translanguaging’ (Garcia 2009) and ‘metrolingualism’ (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010). Such terms are attempts to describe linguistic practices placed outside the modern ideological framework of the nation state that involve hybrid linguistic repertoires, viewed as encompassing a range of languages, dialects and varieties rather than discrete national languages.

These shifts in focus require an analytical refinement of some of the poststructuralist traditions that became established in the field of applied linguistics in the second half of the twentieth century. This is the case of the socio-critical perspectives in discourse studies in which description of language and identity vis-à-vis wider institutional, socio-political and economic processes of change are often carried out in a ‘top-down’ fashion. Indeed, such perspectives have been criticised for relying on analytical methods that privilege propositional content of (verbal and written) texts as the empirical foci at the expense of the view of language as social interaction. Another critique is that these perspectives conceptualise context as a set of ‘backgrounding facts’ that are imposed too rapidly by the researcher onto people’s meaning-making practices instead of being viewed as empirically trackable actions, experiences and expectations that are always
being enacted and negotiated in situated encounters across space and time (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000).

The contemporary emphasis on the increasing destabilisation of bounded, stable and consensual communities and identities makes LE even more pertinent as a situated approach to language and identity. Rather than working from presuppositions about fixed mechanisms of power originating in stable and abstract political and economic structures that shape local forms of social life, a combination of linguistic and ethnographic approaches provides a more nuanced angle. In particular, such approaches allow us to document empirically the ways in which social actors negotiate meaning and stance in response to the increasing uncertainty, discontinuity and lack of sharedness that is brought about by the institutional, socio-economic, sociolinguistic and cultural conditions of late modernity.

The importance of analysing local uncertainty and instability so as to capture the wider institutional and socio-economic processes of change tied to late modernity has been particularly evident in linguistic and ethnographic research in educational settings (Rampton 2006; Jaspers 2011; Pérez-Milans 2015). In contrast to views of the classroom as a social space where teachers and students coordinate their actions smoothly and unambiguously, the former acting as the representatives of the institution/state and the latter as social actors who can only resist or comply with the teacher’s authority, a close ethnographic and linguistic look has in the last few years revealed a much less continuous, stable and predictable scenario. Contemporary policies require all educational actors to conform to the functioning of a neoliberal management centred upon extensive auditing practices, resulting in increasing anxiety among students and teachers.

In this new cultural setting, teachers no longer represent the authority of the State as their position is not secure and is always under evaluation. Students are made to constantly compete with each other for the available places in higher education, on the basis of mechanisms of testing and streaming that have become key operations for most schools. Thus, interactions among these social actors has emerged as a rich site for examining the dialogic relationship of agency and structure in the context of localised socio-emotional relations. Beyond simplified accounts reporting domination on the part of either the teachers or students, the study of forms of collusion shows how school participants often collaborate with each other in ways that allow them to overcome institutional constraints without necessarily breaking the official rules (see an example of this type of analysis in Pérez-Milans 2013: 88–122).

Thus far, we have seen how late modernity refers to both changes in the ‘real’ world and a shift of attention in the social sciences. These two dimensions have direct implications for LE’s suitability for the study of language and identity in contemporary societies. Given its ontological assumptions (in which social interaction and social structures are seen as mutually constitutive), and given its epistemological approaches (linguistic and ethnographic perspectives are adopted to empirically describe fine-grained situated meaning-making practices), LE allows applied linguists to address instability, differences and mobility as the key elements in the (re)constitution of new ideas/practices about language, culture and community. There are grounds, though, for questioning the apparently autonomous portrayal of LE that has been developed so far in this chapter.

The strengths and possible weaknesses of this approach cannot be properly grasped if other strands of research on language and identity are not brought more clearly into the picture. This is further discussed below, with reference to some of the major issues and ongoing debates around LE.
Issues and ongoing debates

Two issues emerge as particularly important regarding the place of LE with respect to other related areas of research. The first is the self-proclaimed uniqueness of LE vis-à-vis the closely related area of linguistic anthropology (LA, hereafter), and the second involves what I argue is a lack of a political economy approach that still predominates in the field. The following two sections will address each of these issues in detail.

Linguistic ethnography vis-à-vis linguistic anthropology

Among the sub-disciplines that have well-established links with LE, the North American area of LA stands out given its influence in recent publications by UK-based scholars (Rampton et al. 2004; Tusting and Maybin 2007; Creese 2008; Maybin and Tusting 2011; Tusting 2013; Rampton et al. 2014). Indeed, the traditions that have most clearly shaped the LE epistemological approaches described in the previous sections are all strands of LA (i.e. the ethnography of communication, interactional sociolinguistics and micro-ethnography). Furthermore, LE has drawn heavily on recent theoretical developments in LA that have articulated the relations between ‘context’ and ‘text’ and provided technical vocabularies for describing how language use constructs contexts in meaning-making across space and time. Some examples of this technical vocabulary include indexicality, recontextualisation, en-textualisation, multimodality, genre, register and multiple scales.

There has been extensive discussion of the extent to which LE is needed as a new label. Since the UK Linguistic Ethnography Forum was set up in 2001 to propose an umbrella label for scholars across different areas, the label in itself has been recurrently regarded as exploratory. Creese (2008: 238) illustrated this in her account of LE, seven years after this forum was set up:

> It is not yet clear what the future of linguistic ethnography is. In some ways … it already has a long and established history through its connection to LA and other socio and applied linguistic traditions. However, in others, its newness is in the attempt to negotiate and articulate a distinctiveness. As this chapter is written, LE is in the process of negotiating itself into being and its career length and trajectory is not known. The debate about ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’ distinctive to linguistic ethnography is of course, like any field of study, an ideologically and interactionally negotiated process.

However, there have been explicit attempts to define the distinctiveness of LE with respect to LA (the most recent in Rampton et al. 2014). Compared to LA, LE’s uniqueness relies mainly on its different relationship with anthropology. Contrary to the North American context where researchers interested in the study of language, culture and society have been oriented to the anthropological traditions, those with similar interests based in the UK have been socialised into such lines of inquiry within the field of applied linguistics. This, in turn, has had consequences that have set these LE researchers apart, both in the way they approach their objects of study and in how they interact with other disciplines and professionals.

LE researchers have always taken language as an entry point to the study of the interrelations between culture, language and social differences. That is to say, they have placed more emphasis on close analysis of texts and recordings of interactions as primary sites for the playing out and negotiation of socio-economic difference, often with consequences with regard to cultural
differentiation. This has also been the case in recent work done in LA. However, in North American anthropology there has been a long-term tendency to emphasise ethnicity and race as the primary categories of social difference, thereby representing cultural difference as the basis of socio-economic inequality. This different approach to the object of study is also evident in research on education as a key site for social, cultural and linguistic analysis.

Different sociocultural theories have emerged since the 1960s, offering explanations of the persistence of school failure among particular social and ethnic groups in modern societies. Among these theories, the study of the interactional processes of socialisation through which different social groups build their cultural conventions of communication occupied a central position in North American anthropology during the twentieth century. From this perspective, school failure is viewed as the consequence of minority groups having to adjust themselves to the cultural conventions of the group(s) controlling the institutional spaces of the State.

This empirical work has been related to the organisation of everyday routines of schooling, which according to this view are based on the cultural conventions and assumptions of the dominant group. In this way, the social construction of students as competent or incompetent depends on the (majority and minority) students’ degree of knowledge about these conventions (see e.g. Gumperz 1982; Heath 1983). This stance represented an attempt to overcome previous historical explanations in which the marginalised groups were represented as culturally deficit, although it has often been pointed out that it is necessary to incorporate power relations more explicitly into the processes that cause school failure to be unequally distributed (Meeuwis and Sarangi 1994; Heller and Martin-Jones 2001).

Meanwhile, sociological explanations that had great impact on British applied linguistics (also French and Canadian sociolinguistics) emphasised a different interrelationship between cultural differences and social inequality where the former is not represented as the basis of the latter; rather, it is seen as the consequence in many cases. In other words, cultural difference is problematised and placed at the centre of wider social processes involving economic structures, collective identities and strategies of contestation/cultural reproduction through daily interactions. In this view, formal education is tied to a social structure of unequally distributed economic opportunities, which leads to the situated production and negotiation of differentiated cultural identities and social strategies in the school life, in ways that contribute to reinforcement of class-based societal structures (see e.g. Willis 1977).

Another reason for the influence of applied linguistics in LE, and for the way it has been differentiated from LA, lies in the specific types of interaction that LE researchers have established with other disciplines and professionals. Under university programmes where most research attention is paid to literacy, ethnicity and identity, ideology, classroom discourse and language teaching, LE researchers have intended ‘to use discourse analytic tools in creative ways to extend our understanding of the role language plays in social life’ (Creese 2008: 235). In so doing, they have developed an eclectic attitude that contrasts with a stronger sense of a well-defined genealogy in LA. In LE, there is room for cross-collaboration among highly diversified traditions, including conversational analysis, new literacy studies, critical discourse analysis, neo-Vygotskian research on language and cognitive development, classroom discourse studies, urban sociology, US linguistic anthropology of education, interpretative applied linguistics for language teaching or studies of ethnicity, language and inequality in education and in the workplace.

Most importantly, LE has devoted a great deal of attention to further extending communication with non-university professionals, in what Rampton et al. (2014: 16) denominate as a ‘commitment to practical intervention in real-world processes’. Oriented to enabling educators and health professionals to become LE researchers, on the one hand, and to set up collaborative
projects, on the other, this line of action has paved the way to fruitful and meaningful programmes where professionals have a chance to problematise pervasive ideological frameworks that dominate major public policies. The setting up of a collaborative space with educational and health professionals has not only helped to destabilise taken-for-granted assumptions about language, bi/multilingualism and language learning and teaching in these settings but also provided tools for addressing issues related to professional practice.

So far, the discussion has been centred on the distinction between LE and LA. Although this is a simplified account, my goal has been to provide a flavour of the arguments that UK-based researchers have put forward over the last decade about the nature of LE and its interests. Moreover, it is important to note that in line with its original intention of opening up an intellectual space where different strands of work can be gathered under the common ground of ethnographic and discourse-based research (Rampton et al. 2004), LE has in the last few years expanded to other geographical areas beyond the UK.

Many of the LE researchers based outside the UK have not just taken up the UK-based developments. They are in many cases young scholars who have been trained in a complex mix of disciplinary traditions where the influence of British LE researchers has been combined with that of sociolinguistic and applied linguistic scholars in other European countries and North America via research networks based in universities in Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Spain or Sweden, among others (for a range of examples published by young scholars based in different European universities see King’s College London Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies).

It is now the case that the uncertainty about LE’s future, manifest in the statement that ‘whether LE will emerge in the macro-socio and applied linguistic “order” as determinant will depend on the interdiscursive possibilities of micro-interactions and their reconfiguration’ (Creese 2008: 238), has been overcome given the flourishing body of LE literature. Important issues are likely to arise from the de-territorialisation of LE and there are likely to be dilemmas regarding the ways of ensuring meaningful appropriation, productive hybridisation, recognisable contribution and legitimate shaping of the area. The following section illustrates the need for a stronger connection with other strands of research on language and identity in applied linguistics, for which I draw on my own academic trajectory across different universities in Spain, Canada, the UK and Hong Kong.

**Political economy under the spotlight**

Although the pioneers of LE in the UK have always pointed out the necessity of connecting with other traditions in sociology, history, cultural studies or economics, most attention to date has been devoted to integrating linguistic analytical constructs from LA. As mentioned in the previous sections, this has entailed meticulous work that has provided a linguistic-based technical vocabulary to describe empirical work that seeks to make links between situated meaning-making practices and translocal discursive processes. Yet, little analytical base has been offered to describe the ways in which such translocal mechanisms effectively contribute to the wider notion of structuration that is often borrowed from Giddens (1982). The appropriation of Bakhtin’s (1986) concept of genre in LE is a good example.

Driven by the principle of providing more mid-level theory, Rampton (2006) has argued for the usefulness of genre as it prevents researchers from jumping carelessly into grand narratives that do little justice to the lived situated experience of participants in the field. Broadly defined as recognisable (and usually institutionalised) types of activity linked to specific configurations
of expected goals, sequences of action, forms of participation and social relationships among involved participants, this concept allows practitioners of LE to describe social and communicative patterns upon which institutionally recognised activities are reproduced, negotiated or even resisted. In other words, this notion connects ‘the larger bearings that orient our moment-to-moment micro-scale actions … [with the] smallest units in the structural organisation of large-scale institutions’ (Rampton et al. 2014: 9–10).

This type of mid-level theorisation exemplifies the strong orientation of LE to fill the gap between the so-called ‘micro’ and ‘macro’ societal levels, though it does not address the fundamental question of how local interactions lead to unequal distribution of resources. Thus, more work is required to deal with this fundamental question, which is at the core of social structuration processes. The area of political economy presents itself as a relevant candidate at this point, and indeed this area has also been very influential in certain strands of North American LA and other European and Asian socio- and applied linguistic traditions (see Gal 1989; Lin and Martin 2005; Heller 2011; Duchêne and Heller 2012). Block, who has recently emphasised the importance of incorporating a political economy approach into applied linguistics more seriously and directly, provides the following definition:

> Political economy is understood here as an area of inquiry and thought with roots in a Marxist critique of classical economics and society in general. It focuses on and analyses the relationship between the individual and society and between the market and the state, and it seeks to understand how social institutions, their activities and capitalism interrelate.

(2014: 14)

There have been already substantial theoretical developments regarding the interrelations between the individual and the society and between the market and the state. Some of these well-known developments include the work done by Bourdieu and Foucault, who proposed notions such as ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu 1982), ‘legitimate language’ (Bourdieu 1977) and ‘power’ (Foucault 1984). These notions conceptualise language, culture and identity as ‘fields’, ‘markets’ or ‘discursive spaces’ that are traversed by historical processes of socioeconomic organisation. In other words, language, culture and identity are conceived of as socially and discursively produced resources that are unequally distributed, resulting in people having different degrees of control over the very processes of attribution of value and circulation as well as over their discursive legitimisation.

While such theoretical constructs have been widely acknowledged in sociolinguistic and applied linguistic literature, they are difficult to operationalise analytically in a bottom-up LE. However, Rampton’s (2006) call for more mid-level theory in LE can be more fully realised by stretching the analytical scope in order to include, in a more explicit way than is often done, the work done by sociologists, such as Cicourel, who have engaged with wider theories of language, identity and power in close-up description of communicative practice in institutional settings. Indeed, Cicourel’s notion of ‘ecological validity’ (1996), as well as his previous work during the 1960s and 1970s, always dealt with detailed ethnographic analysis of recordings without losing sight of the broader context that multi-sited ethnographic research brings into view by placing a given encounter in a wider context of institutional practices, texts and trajectories of interactions and in the social networks that shape it (see also Cicourel 1992).

Anticipating later developments in the social sciences, Cicourel took sociology away from an understanding of the social world as independent of human action, towards the vision of social reality as produced and transformed through social interaction (Cicourel 1964). But beyond
doing so, the most relevant contribution of Cicourel (for the purpose of the study of language and identity in LE research) has been his empirical work describing the ways in which normative forms of knowledge (i.e. what counts as appropriate forms of contribution) and categories (i.e. how participants position themselves and others by reference to which institutional types of persona) get constructed and negotiated in daily communicative arrangements discursively (and textually) through the particular organisational logic of a given institution.

Cicourel provides a classical analysis of socio-institutional genres, showing how such genres are connected to a logic of institutional practice that has to be empirically tracked down. This analytical direction also has more socio-economic direction since description of meaning-making practices addresses the fundamental sociological question of ‘Who gets to decide what counts, how, when, where and with what socio-institutional consequences for whom?’ The link between Cicourel’s work, on the one hand, and the wider accounts by Bourdieu and Foucault, on the other, has been developed by Monica Heller in particular (Heller 2007). Heller relies on Cicourel when she calls for an analysis of the web-like trajectories of linguistic, social and moral orders to understand how and why institutional spaces get discursively configured in specific ways. Description of the normative forms of knowledge and categories by Cicourel allows LE researchers to account for the discursive processes whereby situated communicative and linguistic practices produce moral categories about actors, situations, forms of participation, and linguistic and cultural repertoires (i.e. ‘good’ or ‘bad’ participant, form of participation and/or language). All of these categories become institutionalised and have social consequences for participants in the course of their interactions (which are describable through interactional analysis) and in these participants’ access (or lack of access) to future interactions throughout their individual trajectories in a given institution and beyond (which is describable through ethnographic analysis of the linkages between the different interactions).

In sum, these notions, dimensions and guiding questions constitute a bridge between analysis of local interactions, institutional genres and the abstract sociological concepts of ‘symbolic capital’, ‘legitimate language’ or ‘power’; they shed light on the processes whereby certain participants and their (linguistic and/or cultural) repertoires get undervalued through a given organisational arrangement that, if followed up through linguistic and ethnographic inquiry, opens up a window on participants’ differential access to institutional spaces and on the associated materialities in their life trajectories. In addition, this integrated analysis of linguistic practices, institutionally produced/negotiated moral categories and trajectories of social inclusion/exclusion allows us to trace the emergence and the changing configuration of ideas of identity, nation and State in a given location at a particular point of time in history.

Ethnographically and discourse-based research on educational institutions gives us, once again, an illustrative example. Based on description of practices and institutional forms of social/discursive organisation, the study of who gets constructed as a ‘good student’ in a given school, within a certain national educational system, is a good case for pinpointing wider ideological discourses about citizenship or moral education that connect regional, national and international policies of economic reform. In my own study in the People’s Republic of China, I devoted special attention to show how the arrangement of daily interactions inside and outside the classroom contributed to a definition of the ‘good student’ in the local context in which the blending of ideas about academic internationalism, Chinese socialism and Asian cultural traditionalism featured as particularly relevant (Pérez-Milans 2013).

To be considered as a ‘good student’ required having high marks in all academic subjects and also a good performance in moral education activities involving community service, collectivist physical exercises and patriotic events. This analysis provided me with a basis for further
historisation, in line with those linguists who have called for more historical approaches in the field (Pujolar 2007). In particular, the ideas on identity, nation and state discursively associated with the emerging moral categories in the schools that I studied are connected with those mobilised in the wider Chinese national policies that have historically shaped the organisational logic of the educational field since the open-doors economic reforms carried out by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s.

More collaborative work is needed in this direction. While maintaining the key sensitivities that set LE apart from other traditions in linguistic and anthropological disciplines, stretching the analytical scope in order to reach less-explored lines of study (without necessarily sacrificing empirical scrutiny) may be one way (among many) of pushing fertile inter-institutional and international hybridisation in the future.

Summary

This chapter has traced the origins of LE in its geographical, disciplinary and intellectual contexts. Derived from poststructural developments in the social sciences, LE is characterised by specific ethnographic and discourse-based analytical perspectives that have become deeply established in the UK-based tradition of applied linguistics. Closely linked to the work done in the North American area of LA, such an approach is characterised by a linguistically oriented analysis of situated meaning-making practices which are taken as an entry point to exploring wider institutional, sociocultural and ideological processes. In this sense, culture is not a taken-for-granted entity but rather is conceived of as the outcome of processes of social differentiation that are enacted and negotiated (and therefore empirically trackable) in daily interactions.

This sensitivity to fine-grained description of practices makes LE research of particular relevance to the study of language and identity under contemporary conditions of late modernity since it takes account of both intellectual shifts of attention and ongoing transformations in the ‘real’ world. In particular, LE allows the placing of mobility, instability and uncertainty at the centre of the picture in that bounded notions of language and community are never conceived of as a starting point for data interpretation; instead, these notions are examined as possible emerging constructs that are interactionally constructed, negotiated and transformed by social actors in situated encounters, in the course of large-scale institutional and societal processes.

It has also been argued that while making sense within this specific context, LE is being shaped by researchers with inter-institutional and transnational trajectories, who have been influenced by UK-based advocates of LE and by other scholars based in other linguistic and anthropological traditions across different geographical regions. To conclude, the case for more explicitly socio-economically oriented accounts has been made. I have argued that certain sociological constructs from the field of political economy can be better integrated analytically in LE without necessarily jeopardising the analytical perspectives that set this approach apart from others in applied linguistics.

Related topics

Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Linguistic practices and transnational identities; A linguistic ethnography of identity: adopting a heteroglossic frame; Challenges for language and identity researchers in the collection and transcription of spoken interaction; Beyond the micro–macro interface in language and identity research; An identity transformation? Social class, language prejudice and the erasure of multilingual capital in higher
education; Styling and identity in a second language; Exploring neoliberal language, discourses and identities.

Further reading


Linguistic Ethnography Forum [www.lingethnog.org]. (This website offers a wide range of resources, including the foundational history of LE, examples of definitions, and news on LE-related events and publications.)

References


Language and identity in linguistic ethnography


