[E]thnography finds its orienting and overarching purpose in an underlying concern with cultural interpretation.

(Wolcott 2008, 72)

Because of my conception of ethnography, I see in this prospect a gain for a democratic way of life.

(Hymes 1980, 89)

Introduction

The ethnographer of education Harry F. Wolcott (2008) described ethnography as a “way of seeing” human behavior through a cultural lens, and a “way of looking” based on long-term, situated fieldwork. The ethnographer of communication Dell Hymes (1980) argued that ethnography also contains within it a moral stance toward social inquiry that is humanizing, democratizing, and anti-hegemonic—what I will call a “way of being” a researcher. In this chapter, I explore these three complementary facets of the ethnographic enterprise—seeing, looking, and being—as ethnography has addressed issues in the field of educational linguistics. I focus on ethnography as a particular form of qualitative inquiry because of its long and intimate association with studies of language in education. As we will see, because of its genesis and development within the discipline of anthropology, ethnography entails “both more and less than” a general program of qualitative research (LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 4–5).

Historical Perspectives

A “Way of Seeing”: Epistemic Foundations

With its roots in anthropology, ethnography is both a social science and part of the humanities. As Blommaert and Jie (2010, 6) point out, this means that “the basic architecture of ethnography . . . already contains ontologies, methodologies and epistemologies” integral to the anthropological tradition.
That tradition can be characterized, first, by a focus on culture. An admittedly slippery construct, culture as originally conceived by anthropologists was something fixed, unitary, and bounded—a set of shared traits organized along a racialized evolutionary hierarchy. Franz Boas, a German Jewish immigrant who established the American school of anthropology at Columbia University in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, challenged the racist science underlying early definitions of culture, arguing for culture as learned rather than biologically inherited, and for cultural relativism, the notion that diverse cultural practices are understandable when viewed through their own social ecologies. Boas’s student, Margaret Mead, popularized this principle in what can be considered the first ethnography of education, a study of girlhood in American Samoa (Mead 1961 [1928]). Boas and his students applied the principle of relativity to languages as well, insisting on analyzing each in terms of its internal categories.

Since these early developments, contemporary anthropologists have put culture “in motion” (Rosaldo 1989), recognizing, as Heath and Street (2008) note, that “culture never just ‘is,’ but instead ‘does’” (7). This has meant finding new language with which to talk about culture—as processes, discourses, ideologies, and practices rather than as racialized groups or traits. This view of culture expands “our vision . . . to include issues of power and legitimation, as well as the language practices that constitute these” (González 1999, 434).

This dynamic, power-linked notion of culture carries with it ontological, epistemological, and methodological entailments with particular relevance for studies of language in education. The first is that, like culture, language is an open, dynamic system, inextricable from human social life itself. Thus, the “study of language . . . is inseparable from a study of social life” (Hymes 1980, 70). It follows that ethnographic studies of language in education must be deeply contextualized, conducted in situ over extended periods of time (an orientation traceable to Franz Boas in the U.S. and Bronislaw Malinowski in the EU).

A further entailment is a focus on the participants’ point of view and the meanings they make of communicative events. Ethnographic accounts “are built around and told in the words, views, explanations, and interpretations of the participants in the study,” LeCompte and Schensul stress (2010, 16). This is often called an “emic” perspective, a reference to an analogy proposed by the linguist Kenneth Pike (1967), which contrasted phonemics—the tacit knowledge of a sound system possessed by native speakers—with phonetics—the study of sound systems. The terms emic and etic are commonly understood to refer, respectively, to insider and outsider knowledge.

Two additional qualities characterize ethnography as a “way of seeing.” The first is that ethnographic knowledge is constructed inductively, “working from empirical evidence towards theory, not the other way around” (Blommaert and Jie 2010, 12). This, too, is a hallmark of Boasian anthropology. The goal for ethnographic studies in educational linguistics is to arrive at “grounded theories about language as it is practiced in local contexts” (Canagarajah 2006, 153). Secondly, while inductive theory building depends on the ethnographer’s ability to produce what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) called “thick description” of a particular case, ethnographic theory also relies on cross-case and cross-cultural comparisons. As Hymes (1980, 90) emphasized, the validity and transferability of ethnographic accounts are greatly enhanced by “contrastive insight” built cumulatively across time and space.

The Educational-Linguistic Anthropology Connection

These ontological and epistemological understandings undergird the linked subdisciplines of educational and linguistic anthropology, both of which converge in the field of educational linguistics. Just as anthropological understandings of language and culture must be contextualized,
understanding this part of the disciplinary genealogy must be situated within the intellectual and
sociopolitical context of the time. On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its
historic ruling in Brown v. Topeka, Kansas Board of Education, overturning legally sanctioned racial
segregation in U.S. schools. While actual desegregation would not come for many years, within
a decade Congress passed the most massive piece of federal education legislation in U.S. history—
the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—intended to redress the inequalities laid
bare by Brown. The ESEA was central to the Johnson administration’s metaphoric War on Poverty,
in which the twin notions of “cultural deprivation” and “culture of poverty” were guiding tropes
(Stein 2004).

Scholarship in educational and linguistic anthropology, particularly in the U.S., was united in
this discursive environment. The next decades of educational-linguistic research represent a
relentless empirical refutation of prevailing deficit views, with cultural analysis as an anchoring
construct and ethnography as the “factual core” (Spindler 2000, 57). From educational anthropo-
logy came a view of education as “the process of transmitting . . . the culture of the human
being—where culture is used as a verb” (Spindler 2000, 56). From linguistic anthropology came
the ethnography of communication pioneered by John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (1972). With
the goal of illuminating diverse “ways of speaking” (Hymes 1980, 20), the ethnography of
communication reflected a “socially realistic linguistics” in which education became “a prime
arena for sociolinguistic research” (Hornberger 2003, 245–246).

Out of this paradigm emerged the seminal ethnographic treatments of language use in
practice: Cazden, John, and Hymes’s (1972) Functions of Language in the Classroom; Heath’s (1983)
Ways with Words; Philips’s (1993 [1983]) The Invisible Culture; Green and Wallat’s (1981) Ethnog-
raphy and Language in Educational Settings; and Gilmore and Glathorn’s (1982) Children In and Out
of School. These and other sociolinguistically oriented studies (discussed in the next section)
demonstrated the culturally specific ways in which talk is organized, foregrounding the “subrosa
literacies” and “language prowess” of minoritized students that are often invisibilized in school
(Schieffelin and Gilmore 1986). Moreover, this emerging socioeducational linguistic tradition
was committed to “social justice and . . . the people for whom and with whom the ethnographic
work was done” (Gilmore, cited in Hornberger 2002, para 4).

A related line of ethnographic inquiry centered on bilingual education. In 1968, the U.S.
Congress passed the Bilingual Education Act (BEA) as a Title VII amendment to the ESEA.
Although the BEA opened up new possibilities for innovative programs that used children’s first
language as the medium of instruction, like the ESEA itself, the BEA was compensatory in
nature. Six years after its passage, the Supreme Court heard a class action suit brought against the
San Francisco School District alleging that 1,800 Chinese American students were being denied
an equal education because the district was not providing adequate second language support. The
Court’s ruling in Lau v. Nichols extended Brown, arguing that school integration does not ensure
equality of opportunity if students lack access to the medium of instruction. Subsequently, the
U.S. Department of Education issued the “Lau Remedies,” which included (but did not require)
bilingual-bicultural education programs.

In the post–Lau BEA era, educational and linguistic anthropologists joined in many fruitful
ethnographic endeavors that illuminated the possibilities for such education programs. Prime
examples include Trueba, Guthrie, and Au’s (1981) Culture and the Bilingual Classroom, the
California State Department of Education’s (1986) Beyond Language: Social and Cultural Factors
in Schooling Language Minority Students, Cazden and Leggett’s (1978) Culturally Responsive
Education: A Discussion of Lau Remedies II, and a 1977 theme issue of Anthropology and Education
Quarterly exploring the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research methodol-
ogies in education, including a section on language assessment (see Cazden et al. 1977; Hymes
1977; Shuy 1977). This work demonstrated the fallacy of measuring the effectiveness of bilingual education by looking narrowly at students’ English-language performance without taking into account the culture of the classroom and community. As Foley (2005, 355) writes, these ethnographic accounts highlighted “cognitive and sociolinguistic notions of culture and ... advocate[d] a sociolinguistic version of educational ethnography as innovative and useful.”

In brief, this was the intellectual, political, and pedagogical firmament in which ethnographic studies of language in education were seeded. Together, these braided strands of educational and linguistic anthropology underpin what Hornberger (2001, 13) calls an “inclusive, sociocultural view of language in education,” laying a theoretical and methodological foundation for educational linguistics as a comprehensive field of studies.

Core Issues and Key Findings

When Bernard Spolsky introduced educational linguistics in 1978, he cited the “language barrier” as a core issue for the emerging field. Drawing on his work with the Navajo Reading Study at the University of New Mexico, Spolsky wrote that, “A major portion of any child’s education is concerned with modifying [his/her] language, enriching, adding, or suppressing a variety” (1978, 7). Working in Philadelphia’s urban public schools, Dell Hymes and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania framed the issues in a slightly different, but complementary, way. “A latent function of the educational system is to instill linguistic insecurity, to discriminate linguistically, to channel children in ways that have an integral linguistic component, while appearing open and fair to all” (Hymes 1996 [1975], 84). These statements foreground a major artery of ethnographic research: investigating how linguistic diversity is constructed as a resource or a problem in schools and society.

For discussion purposes, I organize this section into “micro” and “macro” frames of reference, recognizing, as Philips (1993 [1983], xv) points out, that macroanalysis and microethnography “are commonly carried out together.” Microethnographic research has addressed “the ways in which dominant-subordinant relationships are formed in face-to-face interaction” (Philips 1993 [1983], xvi). Macroethnographic research has focused on sociolinguistic processes at the level of groups, institutions, and polities. As we will see, both approaches are co-dependent, and both situate “the exercise of power in practice” (Philips 1993 [1983], xvi).

Heath’s (1983) Ways with Words—extending Hymes’s notion of ways of speaking—was among the first book-length ethnographic accounts to address these issues. Prior to Heath’s fieldwork, research had begun to point out differences between the structures of “Black English Vernacular” (BEV) and so-called “standard” English. Based on long-term fieldwork with African American and working and middle class White families in the Piedmont Carolinas, Heath argued that the disjunction between the socialization processes in which BEV is acquired and the communicative practices within the culture of the school simultaneously blind teachers to their African American students’ language competencies and leave those students unprepared for the communicative practices they encounter in school.

Heath (1986) subsequently examined language socialization among Chinese American families and recent immigrants from Mexico. Among Chinese American parents, the question-asking routines (factual questions and control of topics) and other cultural expectations reinforced those their children encountered in schools. Among families from Mexico, adults tended not to give sequential orders or ask “children to verbalize what they are doing as they work” (Heath 1986, 161)—practices privileged in school-based pedagogies. Heath glossed these practices as genre—larger discursive units into which smaller units such as conversations and directives are
subsumed. The challenge Heath posed for language educators was to critically examine how closely the genres of the home approximate those of the school.

Philips (1993 [1983]) reached similar conclusions about Warm Springs Indian students in Oregon, using long-term, in-depth participant observation and interviewing to document child-adult interaction patterns, which she called *participant structures*, inside and outside of school. Warm Springs children, Philips maintained, are socialized in culturally distinctive ways that emphasize listening and observing over talking and speaking up, sharing control versus hierarchical structures, and voluntary versus involuntary participation in group activities. These “invisible” cultural differences in the regulation of talk, as well as dialect differences, caused teachers to misunderstand their Indian pupils, or to define what they heard as unacceptable (Philips 1993 [1983], 127).

Erickson and Mohatt (1988) tested Philips’ hypothesis, using direct observation, videotaping, and interviews of a Native and White teacher on a Northern Ontario reserve. These researchers found significant differences in the pacing of classroom activities, time allocated to teacher- versus student-directed activity, and the timing and pitch of communication, and tied these patterns to differential “interactional etiquette” in the Native community and the school. More than “formal, explicit patterning,” Erickson and Mohatt argued, culture involves the tacit rules and “ways of acting in everyday life” (1988, 167).

Researchers from the Kamehameha Early Education Program (KEEP) took this work a step further, using ethnographic data on Native Hawaiian child language socialization to design an English language arts program modeled after an Indigenous Hawaiian oral narrative style called “talk story,” which emphasizes cooperative participation structures and co-narration (Vogt, Jordan, and Tharp 1993). These pedagogical changes led to dramatic improvements in Native Hawaiian students’ English language learning and academic achievement, despite the fact that the language of the classroom did not match the Hawaiian Creole spoken at home. KEEP researchers subsequently implemented the same approach with Navajo students at Rough Rock, Arizona, where they found that KEEP strategies required significant modification to accommodate Navajo children’s discursive styles. The inference from these studies is that educational interventions based on ethnographic knowledge must be context specific, and that such “specific cultural compatibility contributes to [a program’s] educational effectiveness” (Vogt et al. 1993, 63).

In Tucson, Arizona, the Funds of Knowledge for Teaching project illustrated the power of teachers’ ethnographic research to transform education practice. The project began in the late 1980s as a collaboration between university-based anthropologists and school-based educators to study literacy practices within Mexican American households. Conducting interviews with parents and participating in the everyday life of households, the research team elicited household knowledge essential for household functioning. In after-school study groups, teachers engaged in critical reflection on their research, applying these insights to develop curricula that incorporated the linguistic and cultural capital their students brought to school. The research process itself also established more trusting relationships between households and schools, as parental knowledge and skills became the foundation for teaching innovations (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005).

These are just a few examples of the influential microethnographic studies that have addressed the ways in which power relations are constructed through linguistic practice in and out of school. A complementary body of macroethnographic scholarship has focused on how explicit and implicit language education policies reflect and reproduce those power relationships. In 1988, Hornberger published a case study of bilingual education policy and practice in Puno, Peru. Focusing on the relationship between official policy and local language practices, she
explored whether schools can be effective agents for language maintenance. At the center of the analysis were local language uses and ideologies that positioned Quechua as the extra-school or home-community language, and Spanish as the language of schooling. At the same time, the decreasing isolation and low social status of Quechua speakers mitigated against the ayllu or community-level language transmission nexus, while problems of local implementation and government instability undermined macro-level policies for Quechua maintenance. This study was among the first to demonstrate that while official, macro-level policies can open up what Hornberger (2006) later termed “ideological and implementational spaces” for bi/multilingual education, those policies are not unproblematically adopted by local social actors and may fail without local-level support.

Building on Hornberger’s work, King (2001) used ethnography to examine revitalization prospects for Quichua in Ecuador. Adopting an ethnography of communication approach, King compared two Quichua communities, one (urban) in which a shift to Spanish was advanced, and another (rural) that was rapidly moving from Quichua to Spanish. Despite Ecuador’s official policy of bilingual-intercultural education, for members of both communities, “Quichua remained on the periphery of their daily lives” (King 2001, 185). The school affords “an important foothold” for Quichua maintenance, King concluded, but is insufficient to overcome the extreme economic and social pressures favoring Spanish.

Based on ethnographic research conducted over a 20-year period in the Navajo community of Rough Rock (discussed above), my own research analyzed the interaction of federal Indian policy with bilingual-bicultural program implementation in the first American Indian community-controlled school (McCarty 2002). Through a fortuitous (and fleeting) alignment of top-down government legislation and grassroots Indigenous political activism, Rough Rock emerged as the first Native American community to take charge of the local school and to embrace the Indigenous language and culture as both a right and a resource for children’s learning. Highlighting the realities of the Indigenous self-determination movement as it confronts a powerful neocolonial federal bureaucracy, this work has shown that bilingual-bicultural schooling can be a critical resource in local communities’ fight for educational, linguistic, and cultural self-determination.

Research Approaches

A “Way of Looking”: Ethnographic Methods

The English word *ethnography* derives from the Greek *ethos* (people) and *grapho* (to write). Ethnography is “writing about people.” As the previous sections have stressed, however, ethnography is more than “mere description”; it is “description in specific, methodologically and epistemologically grounded ways” (Blommaert and Jie 2010, 6). Wolcott (2008) refers to this as a “way of looking.” A central expectation is that the researcher is the primary research instrument, not in the sense of an antiseptic tool, but by being there in person, over an extended period of time, as a learner and an interpreter of situated human activity.

As a way of looking, ethnographic methods can be described as *experiencing* (participant observation), *enquiring* (interviewing), and *examining* (analyzing documents and artifacts) (Wolcott 2008, 48–50). Participant observation—“learning through . . . involvement in the day-to-day . . . activities of participants in the research setting”—is the starting point of ethnographic research (Schensul and LeCompte 2013, 83). Participant observation involves engaging appropriately in the social situation; observing the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation; and recording those observations in a systematic way, typically in field notes supplemented by audio and video recordings (Spradley 1980). Hymes (1974) proposed this SPEAKING mnemonic for recording observations of communicative interaction:

- the physical and psychological Setting or Scene,
- the Participants
- the Ends or goals of the communicative act,
- the Act sequence or order,
- the Key or tone,
- the Instrumentalities or forms and styles of speech,
- the Norms governing communicative interaction, and
- the Genre or category of communication (e.g., oration, lecture, joking, etc.).

Ethnographers typically have multiple participant observer roles, as illustrated in Meek’s (2010) study of language revitalization in a Yukon Kaska community. Working as an educator and child development specialist in the local Aboriginal Head Start program, a teaching assistant in Kaska language workshops, and a student of the Kaska language, her research “emerged from these multiple positions, in dialogue with bureaucrats, language professionals, local individuals, and families” (Meek 2010, xviii). Ethnographers may also participate as cultural insiders, as exemplified by Ramanathan’s (2005) study of classed and gendered language pedagogies in three colleges within Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India; Nicholas’s (2014) study of language ideologies and practices among Hopi youth in Arizona; and Lee’s (2014) study of “critical language awareness” among Navajo and Pueblo young adults in New Mexico. Such roles evolve over months and even years, as illustrated by Heath’s involvement with the Carolina Piedmont families she began following in 1969. As she wrote in a follow-up study published more than four decades later, this long-term involvement means that ethnographic accounts differ “with each passing moment, new purpose, and favored vantage point” (Heath 2012, 7). Hence, there is never a “finished” ethnographic story or single “true account” (Toohey 2008, 182); all ethnographic accounts are situated, perspectival, and partial.

Whereas participant observation attends “to the flow of natural activity” (Wolcott 2008, 49), interviewing is a more direct data collection strategy. Ethnographic interviews often include
casual conversations recorded in the course of participant observation; they may also be framed as structured or semi-structured protocols carried out one-on-one with key individuals or in small groups. Ethnographic interviews are typically open-ended, allowing for flexibility, dialogue, and the possibility of unexpected findings. Interview data are recorded in field notes and by audiotaping and/or videotaping, and are transcribed in written form.

The third “way of looking”—examining—involves the collection of document or archival data. In a recent study of Indigenous youth language practices and ideologies, for example, my co-researchers and I collected school mission statements, teachers’ lesson plans, school curriculum documents, student writing samples, and school-community demographic records (McCarty Romero-Little, Warhol, and Zepeda 2013).

Experiencing, enquiring, and examining may be further supplemented by surveys or questionnaires, censusing, social mapping, quantitative measures such as student achievement data, and elicitation techniques. In a study of Welsh vocational college students’ biliteracy practices, for instance, Martin-Jones (2011) asked the students to compile diaries of their literacy practices and to take photographs of literacy events in the college and in their workplaces. Using these artifacts as prompts, participants were then interviewed about their reading and writing practices in the different settings. Finding through these methods a “mismatch between college and workplace literacies,” Martin-Jones worked with the students’ tutors “to harness . . . the characteristics of the young people’s out-of-college literacies” in the tutors’ teaching practice (2011, 249). In another study of language use among teens attending a large multilingual-multiethnic high school in London, Rampton employed an omni-directional microphone to record lessons, later replaying the recordings in interviews with students “to elicit retrospective commentary . . . on what had been happening, said and done” (2006, 32). He also asked four students to wear radio microphones for several hours each day over 11 days. This data “trawling” enabled Rampton to engage in “extensive listening” and generated an abundance of “contrastive insights” into the official classroom talk and students’ more informal discursive practices (2006, 32–33).

Ethnographic analysis begins the moment the ethnographer enters the field and continues through the writing of the final report (LeCompte and Schensul 2013). Regardless of the analysis strategy employed—narrative analysis, thematic analysis, within-case or cross-case analysis, discourse analysis, or other approaches—the goal is to situate linguistic and educational processes within the larger sociocultural context of which they are part. In their examination of bilingual education policy and practice in officially English-only California, Stritikus and Weise (2006) refer to this as “deep dish analysis,” a positioning that enables the ethnographer to move beyond top-down policies to the level of teachers’ practice where policy actually takes shape. Similarly, in a seminal collection of articles on LPP for English language-teaching professionals, Ricento and Hornberger (1996) use an onion metaphor to describe these multi-layered processes: The outer layers of the onion represent broader policy processes, and the inner layers represent local policy accommodations, resistances, and transformations as they occur in everyday practice. By “slicing the onion ethnographically” (Hornberger and Johnson 2007), researchers can attend to the fine-grained detail of each layer and its position within an organic whole.

New Debates

Two simultaneous and seemingly paradoxical 21st-century forces shape current ethnographic work in educational linguistics. On the one hand is intensified (trans)migration resulting from massive global flows of people, information, capital, and technology. These processes create what
scholars have called “super-diversity” (Blommaert 2011)—globalized urban neighborhoods and virtual spaces characterized by multilayered and crisscrossing cultural, linguistic, religious, national, and racial/ethnic identifications. On the other hand is the mounting worldwide endangerment of human linguistic and cultural diversity, as the same globalizing forces serve to standardize and homogenize, even as they stratify and marginalize. Language endangerment is particularly grave for Indigenous peoples, who, although they constitute 4% of the world’s population, speak 75% of the world’s languages.

These processes call for rethinking anthropological notions of culture in ways that recognize that “multiple cultures can exist in one space and . . . one culture can be produced in different spaces,” and for reconceptualizing language as mobile sociolinguistic resources and repertoires (Blommaert 2011, 63). This in turn has implications for our understandings of what constitutes speakerhood, language fluency, and speech communities. As Moore (2012, 59) describes the issues, the existence of both super-diversity and language endangerment “complicate inherited notions of the unitary, fully fluent . . . native speaker as . . . the normal starting point for description and analysis.”

The simultaneity of super-diversity and language endangerment also complicates the micro-macro analytical distinctions discussed in previous sections and related conceptions of the local and the global. In a recent theme issue of Anthropology and Education Quarterly, Wortham suggests that micro and macro have outlived their utility as explanatory tools and argues for pushing beyond these heuristics to engage more directly with “complex multiscale realities” (2012, 135). In an example of this, Warriner (2012), in the same theme issue, presents a study of the language ideologies of refugee women in a U.S. English-as-a-second-language program. Her fine-grained analysis of the women’s life narratives shows how these micro-level speech acts interrupt oppressive macro-level ideological, historical, and institutional constraints on their language practices and life opportunities.

A related stream of ethnographic work has investigated the ways in which globalizing forces are taken up and reconfigured in local language practices and ideologies—what Hornberger and McCarty (2012) call “globalization from the bottom up.” In an ethnographic analysis of bilingual education in Mozambique, for example, Chimbutane and Benson (2012) show how local appropriations of top-down curricular reforms open up new spaces for the promotion of Indigenous languages and cultures. Working in a South African undergraduate language program, Joseph and Ramani (2012) show, similarly, how a focus on additive multilingualism in teacher preparation can unseat the hegemony of English within the “new globalism.” In these and other ethnographic cases, relatively small-scale education reformulations create new options through which marginalized languages historically constructed as “traditional” (and hence not useful in the global economy) can be resignified as “modern” (Joseph and Ramani 2012, 32).

Recent youth language research further illuminates these “complex multiscale realities” (Wortham 2012) and their implications for education. Recognizing that youth, like adults, act as agents, this research examines youth’s “emic views, language ideologies, and identities [to] provide insights into how social and political processes are lived and constructed through language use” (Wyman, McCarty, and Nicholas 2014, 4). Paris (2011), for example, looked at youth language practices in a multiethnic high school in the western United States. Building on Rampton’s (1995) classic ethnographic study of youth linguistic “crossing” (see also Rampton 2006, discussed above), Paris explored language sharing—“momentary and sustained uses of . . . the language traditionally ‘belonging’ to another group [and] ratified as appropriate by its traditional speakers” (Paris 2011, 14). Understanding such processes, Paris maintains, helps us see the sociocultural, sociopolitical, and sociolinguistic forces that alternately reinforce or cut across
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ethnic divisions “toward spaces of interethnic unity” (2011, 16)—a requirement, he argues, for a pluralistic society.

This research also foregrounds the ways in which youth “translanguage,” a term used by García to explain the heteroglossic language practices she observed in urban bilingual classrooms. Translanguaging goes beyond code switching and involves the “multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds” (García 2009, 44). Although García’s use of the term is situated in “super-diverse” urban spaces, ethnographic research with Indigenous youth in semi-urban and reservation and village settings shows the salience of this construct, and related notions of linguistic hybridity and heteroglossia, for understanding dynamic processes of language shift and endangerment. In the large-scale study of Indigenous youth language ideologies and practices discussed above, for instance, my co-researchers and I found that, contrary to educators’ perceptions of youth as disinterested in their heritage language and of Indigenous languages as largely absent from their daily lives, Native youth were growing up in highly complex sociolinguistic environments that included multiple languages and language varieties to which they had differential exposure and in which they had differential receptive and productive abilities—sociolinguistic resources that might be marshalled for Indigenous-language reclamation, but which, for the most part, went undetected or were stigmatized in school (McCarty et al. 2013). Studies by Nicholas (2014) with Hopi youth, Lee (2014) with Navajo and Pueblo youth and young adults, Messing (2014) with Mexicano (Nahuatl) young adults, and Wyman (2012) with Yup’ik youth in Alaska, shows how young people translanguage and negotiate “mixed messages” about the value of their heritage language in sociolinguistic environments undergoing rapid language shift.

These studies problematize yet another set of binaries: “speaker” versus “non-speaker,” “fluent” versus “non-fluent,” and “extinct” versus “living” with reference to languages (Leonard, 2011; McCarty et al. 2013, 173). The studies also provide nuanced ethnographic portraits of the often “closeted” multilingual repertoires of Indigenous and minoritized youth. As Wyman et al. write, these studies demonstrate the fallacy of deficit assumptions of youth linguistic practices, highlighting “the sociolinguistic strengths of heritage language learners in settings of language endangerment” (2014, xx).

Three additional lines of ethnographic inquiry are important here. The first concerns the lingering debate on the role of schools in structuring diversity in complex sociolinguistic ecologies, and specifically whether schools can serve as resources for the reclamation and maintenance of endangered mother tongues. Since Hornberger’s groundbreaking (1988) ethnographic study of these issues for Quechua in Peru, a great deal of ethnographic effort has been poured into answering this question (for a treatment across four continents, see Hornberger 2008; for an analysis of the U.S. and Canada, see McCarty and Nicholas 2014). It seems clear from this research that, while schools cannot substitute for intergenerational language transmission in the family, when aligned with other social institutions, schools can reinforce, in significant ways, family- and community-based efforts. Moreover, when we look around the world, we find few examples of successful language revitalization in which schools have not played a prominent role.

A recent strand of research growing out of this work asks whether schools can promote the dual goals of language revitalization and enhanced academic achievement among Indigenous/minoritized students. As Hill and May (2011) observe with reference to Māori-medium schooling, “[T]here remains a dearth of information on the factors that contribute to the educational effectiveness of such programs” (162). Drawing on ethnographic research at the Rakaumanga-manga School in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Hill and May show the efficacy of “high” levels of Māori-language immersion (i.e., instruction through the Indigenous language for 80–100% of the school day) alongside careful planning of English-language instruction in achieving the goal of full Māori-English bilingualism and biliteracy. Programs such as this also show the value
of building on Indigenous/minoritized students’ linguistic hybridity as a resource rather than treating hybridity as a liability for learning in school.

A final line of inquiry concerns the role of education practitioners in the LPP process. A decade after Ricento and Hornberger (1996) placed English language teaching professionals at the center of the LPP “onion,” Ramanathan and Morgan (2007, 447) offered a reconsideration of the “everyday contexts in which [language] policies are interpreted and negotiated.” Emphasizing practitioner agency and a view of policy texts as “multifaceted signs . . . whose interpretations and enactments rest in our hands,” these comparative case studies afford “glimpses into complex interplays between policies, pedagogic practices, instructional constraints, and migrations” (Ramanathan and Morgan 2007, 451, 459). A growing body of ethnographic research positions educators “at the epicenter” of the LPP process, as researchers move “beyond top-down, bottom-up, or even side-by-side divisions to a conceptualization of language policy as a far more dynamic, interactive, and real-life process” (Menken and García 2010, 4).

All of these studies contribute to the New Language Policy Studies, a paradigmatic shift away from conventional treatments of policy as disembodied text to a view of policy as a situated sociocultural process: “the complex of practices, ideologies, attitudes, and formal and informal mechanisms that influence people’s language choices in profound and pervasive everyday ways” (McCarty, Collins, and Hopson 2012, 335). Influenced by Hymes’s (1980) emphasis on “ethnographic monitoring” and on language-in-use, this theoretical perspective helps us understand the diffuse bases of linguistic inequalities in education. Perhaps even more importantly, this critical sociocultural, processual view of language policy guides us to new possibilities for transforming those inequalities (McCarty 2011)—a topic I turn to next.

Implications for Education

A “Way of Being”: Ethnography as a Form of Praxis

From Mead’s early contributions to the anthropology of education, to the ethnography of communication, to recent work addressing the “complex multiscale realities” (Wortham 2012) and “chronicles of complexity” (Blommaert 2013) of super-diversity, language endangerment, and practitioners’ roles in the LPP “onion,” ethnography has afforded rich, multilayered insights into the ways in which linguistic diversity is constructed as a problem or a resource in schools and society. Those insights stem from a distinctive “way of seeing” through a holistic cultural lens and a “way of looking” firsthand, up-close, and over extended periods of time. By “casting an ethnographic eye on language . . . at the individual, classroom, school, community, regional, national, and global levels,” Hornberger and Johnson (2007, 24) observe, researchers can “uncover the indistinct voices, covert motivations, embedded ideologies, invisible instances, or unintended consequences” of language policies and pedagogies as they are manifest in particular sociocultural and educational contexts.

In an era of growing global diversity, we are witness to language education policies designed to curb and control diversity through reductive literacy practices and, especially in the United States, the banning of languages other than English in schools. In this political and educational climate, ethnography and qualitative approaches in general have been marginalized in official policy discourse, which privileges English-only standardized tests and large-scale random clinical trials. Yet ethnography—and ethnographers—have a crucial role to play in this policy environment. As a form of knowledge production, ethnography is intrinsically democratizing, as its primary goal—to “learn the meanings, norms, and patterns of a way of life” (Hymes 1980, 98)—is precisely what people do everyday. Ethnography, therefore, has the potential to break down
hierarchies between the ‘knower’ and the ‘known,’ and to bring local stakeholders—education practitioners and community members, including youth—directly into the research process. Doing this requires exercising what Wyman et al. (2014, 18) call triple vision: an ethnographic stance that forwards academic, youth, and broader community concerns.

This commitment to praxis represents the third pillar in the contributions of ethnography to education—a clear values position that puts ethnography to practical use. In this ‘way of being,’ researchers intentionally dislodge allegedly value-free methodologies, replacing them with grounded forms of collaborative critical inquiry. Taking such a research stance requires that ethnographers work in partnership with local stakeholders, using the unique tools of our discipline to illuminate not only the injustices in language education, but the concrete possibilities for positive change.

References


