WHAT IS CRITICAL IN LANGUAGE STUDIES?

This volume examines the notion of criticality in language studies.

Drawing on the work of the Frankfurt School – Adorno, Habermas, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, among others – the chapters in the volume examine a variety of linguistic contexts: from gender activism to web journalism, from the classroom to the open streets. It also presents theoretical and methodological guidelines to researchers interested in

- Expanding their critical outlook for meaning brought on by the notion of criticality in contemporary language studies.
- Understanding criticality in languages through historical, political, and social perspectives.
- Using linguistics and language studies as tools to dissect and disclose social injustices.

This book will be of great interest to scholars and researchers of language studies and linguistics, philosophy, politics, and sociology and social policy.

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WHAT IS CRITICAL IN LANGUAGE STUDIES?

Disclosing Social Inequalities
and Injustice

*Edited by Solange Maria de Barros
and Dánie M. de Jesus*

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CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND DIALOGIC REFLECTION IN STUDENT-LED LANGUAGE RESEARCH

A. Lane Igoudin

Linguistic ethnography as a critical method of inquiry

Ethnography in language studies is generally viewed both 'as a technique and [as] a series of propositions by means of which something can be said about "context"' (Blommaert 2015: 2). A scientific method of inquiry, ethnography attempts to describe language practices which reveal stable features of language use in a particular community, and the relationships between these features and their social context.[1] Although qualitative, descriptive methods to study language practices have flourished, their underlying epistemological stances and ideologies have been brought into question. Several important lines of critical inquiry into ethnographic studies of language are presented in this chapter.

Jan Blommaert, a Belgian sociolinguist and anthropologist, argues that ethnographic observations and conclusions are never neutral but rather are conducted through a particular *perspective* on language and communication whose ontology and epistemology affect how researchers study language use (Blommaert 2015:5). These *meaning perspectives* allow us to interpret language practices in society through a certain set of distinctive principles, which vary depending on an individual's stages of moral, ethical, and ego development and on their capacity for reflective judgement (Mezirow 1990:2). Focusing on the meaning perspective can reveal, for instance, behaviourist, cultural relativist, Freudian, Marxist, positivist, or postcolonial biases influencing how language studies are conducted, what data can be obtained, and how the conclusions drawn from it are interpreted.

Blommaert's work was closely related to that of the American sociolinguist and anthropologist Dell Hymes, who held a broader view of ethnography, and linguistic ethnography in particular, as more than a method of inquiry but rather a humanist and political endeavour, whose task is to

'coordinate knowledge about language from the viewpoint of *man*' (Hymes 1964:xiii). In other words, to study language is to study people. Language, as a resource, is central to human interaction and human survival; it does not exist without context. It encodes, regulates, and is regulated by the political and ideological customs of the society that people construct. *Language*, in Hymes's view (1996), is a theoretical construct, of little importance to the people who actually use it. Hymes distinguished language from *speech*, which is an active, real-life deployment of language in the overlapping cultural, historical, political, and power structures; or as Blommaert put it, speech is 'language brought under social control' (ibid.:8). Language function and performativity thus become central in the ethnographic study of language use as social context dictates which speech is performable.

Critical ethnography in linguistics does not separate between the study of language from the study of the context; that is, the speech act and the social act are one and the same and need to be assessed holistically in broader patterns of social behaviour. This approach, focusing on the interaction between language actions and social relations, can provide a window into power relations in society, the ideologies they produce, and their encoding in language practices. Besides describing language practices, ethnography may question their functions in the social world and possibly challenge them.

Symbolic interactionism in language

Another critical framework comes from *dialogism*, a theory put forward by the Russian linguist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. Dialogism argues that the speaker is not an isolated entity participating in communication with other isolated entities but rather an active representative of a culture, who produces speech in relation to and tension with other speakers. In other words, speech exists only in *addressivity* – that is, when addressed to someone else (Holquist 1990:48). To study language, one needs to study both the speaker, the addressee of their speech, and the relationship between the two. Even when the addressee does not speak, they continue to actively participate in the coconstruction of meaning. The presence of the addressee is therefore critical to the production of speech and, in a broader sense, to the production of language.

Bakhtin, like other new historicists, is interested in how the speaker makes meaning within a culture and acts based on those meanings. Those meanings arise from cultural influences, discourses, inferences, and ideas and are embedded in the speaker's beliefs and behaviours (Klages 2006:124–125). Meaning in speech and language at large – and here Bakhtin connects to critical sociolinguists like Blommaert and Hymes – possesses an inherent social value: it arises both from the individual psyche and in shared social experience through the medium of the sign, and 'understanding comes about as *a response to sign with signs*' (Holquist 1990:49).

The transformative power of critical reflection

An ethnographic study seeks to uncover meaning through *descriptions* of the data obtained from the research subjects and through *reflections* on interpreting this data. To become critical, ethnographers may also add a *self-reflexive* dimension to the study, observing their own learning and transformation through the act of the study of their subjects. Both concepts benefit from the clarification found in the works of educational sociologists such as Jack Mezirow.

Critical reflection, according to Mezirow (1990), allows us to critique our assumptions and change our beliefs through problem-solving. These new interpretations help us 'elaborate, further differentiate, and reinforce our long-established frames of reference or to create new meaning schemes' (2). The frames of references through which we view the world include values, ideals, feelings, moral decisions, and fundamental worldview concepts, such as freedom, justice, love, labour, autonomy, commitment, and democracy (3).

Various forms of language expression, including speech and writing, allow the researchers to learn *communicatively* about and from their subjects. Mezirow suggests that in this process, the researcher focuses less on testing hypotheses and more on 'searching, often intuitively, for themes and metaphors by which to fit the unfamiliar into a meaning perspective' (3). Critical reflection evaluates the new information but also re-examines vis-à-vis existing ideas, judgements, and biases.

To Mezirow, critical self-reflection – that is, 'reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling and acting' – is the most significant learning experience in adulthood and 'a uniquely adult form of metacognitive reasoning' (2003:58). Two adult capabilities are engaged in what Mezirow terms 'critical-dialectical discourse': the capacity to become critically self-reflective and to go deeper, to assess the very assumptions and expectations which belie one's beliefs, values, and feelings (ibid.:60).

Learning, therefore, has the potential to change the way we engage with the world. It can become a *transformative* experience for the adult, making their frames of reference more inclusive, discriminating, open, and reflective. What mediates this re-assessment of beliefs, feelings, and values is intrapersonal dialogue, similar to Bakhtin, through which the learner draws on the information from the speaker to make meaning of both the speaker and oneself (ibid.).

Studying others to study oneself

The project described in this chapter is a study of studies. In 2018, the researcher, a linguistics professor at Los Angeles City College, assigned his students in an introductory, university-level linguistics course a research

project, which consisted of three graded assignments: a group research paper, a group presentation, and an individual self-reflexive essay. The 17 students participating in the course were broken into seven groups of two or three and matched randomly with a university student, one per group, enrolled in an upper-level English course at the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMT) in Cuiabá, Brazil. The goal of the students in the American linguistics course was to summarize and analyze, based on the linguistic concepts learned in the course, the language use and attitudes of these Brazilian learners of English as a foreign language (Case 1).

Before the start of the research project, the course content was redirected to incorporate information relevant to the project. For example, a lecture on historical linguistics would focus on the historical development of Portuguese, first in Portugal and later in Brazil.; a lecture on regional dialectology would use the dialects of Portuguese spoken around the world, including in Brazil, as case studies; a lecture on second language acquisition was augmented with a survey of theories for language learning motivation, and a special lecture was dedicated to the university education system in Brazil and the region where their research subjects' university (UFMT) is located.

To help his students begin their investigations, the professor provided them with a loose, non-binding questionnaire to elicit information from their Brazilian informants. The interviews conducted outside of class time took place in English via Skype, FaceTime, and other video applications, and were followed up via email (Appendix 1).

The research papers that the American students produced were later turned into in-class PowerPoint presentations, evaluated by the instructor and the students in the audience (Appendix 2).

The last step of the project consisted of the individually written, free-structured essays, whose goal was to engage American students in critical reflection on their research experience (Appendix 3). Of importance to this chapter are the following questions, which helped stimulate the students' self-reflection.

You can use the questions below to help guide your thoughts. (It is not, by any means, a required questionnaire.)

- What have you gained from participation in this project – for example, setting up and conducting the interviews, writing the research paper writing, and/or doing the PowerPoint presentation?
- Was it a new experience?
- What have you learned about linguistics as a subject, cultural or language differences?
- Can you relate your interviewee's language learning experience to your own?
- What difficulties have you met?

- What have you learned about your own research skills, language learning, and language use?
- Did the project highlight any areas that you need to improve in?
- What have you learned from being a part of a research team?
- Where can you apply the knowledge gained from this project?

Leaving aside the data obtained and interpreted by the American students about the language learning attitudes and practices of Brazilian foreign learners, this study will focus on the self-reflexive aspect of the project. In other words, what did the linguistics students learn about themselves from an ethnographic linguistic study? What frames of reference or meaning perspectives guided them in their interpretation? Which of these perspectives were transformed through critical reflection?

Given that the shortness of this chapter does not allow us to examine the work of all seven groups of student ethnographers, two research groups were selected as case studies in order to illustrate the process of reflexive and self-reflexive critical inquiry in language research.

Case 1. Carlos and Christopher vs Celso:[2] multiple dialogues, different meaning perspectives

Self-reflexive essays provided American students with critical space to examine speech acts of Brazilian students in social context as well as with an opportunity to engage in multiple dialogic relationships:

- Student ethnographer vs the respondent: a Brazilian peer learning English
- Student ethnographer vs their peers in the American research group
- Student ethnographer vs the professor
- Student ethnographer vs their prior experience

Dissecting, for instance, Christopher's essay, we can see all these strands emerge. Early in the essay, Christopher identifies the problems with collaborating with his group project partner:

> Carlos was extremely sweet and easy to work with, and he pulled his weight in terms of time and effort. However, the task of combining and communicating two people's completely different thoughts, ideas, voices, vocabularies made it very difficult for me to present something that I was proud of. . . . I felt I had a more firm understanding of the concepts in class and how to apply them to the prompt than my partner, as well as a more developed writing style.
>
> (Argodale 2017:1)

Ultimately, Christopher's reflexive focus turns to himself:

> I struggled to find a possibility to enmesh both our voices and our knowledge in a way that did not seem inconsistent and scattered. . . . I found it would have taken less time to simply write my own paper rather than try to puzzle pieces together in a coherent and singular way. I definitely learned that I can be more involved in a group or partner effort at every.
>
> (ibid.:2)

Christopher's conclusion exemplifies the transformative nature of his research experience, knowledge about oneself gained just as much from the task as from the problematizing discourse itself. By reflecting on his group interaction experience, Christopher exhibits what Mezirow describes as the final stage of reflective judgement – a perspective about his own perspective. And it is not surprising that Christopher's critical experience takes place in an educational setting, as 'several years of careful research suggest that age and education are major factors in critical judgment. College graduates consistently earn higher scores on tests of reflective judgment' (Mezirow 2003:61).

Sometimes, dialogic strands merge, as in this passage where Christopher is speaking both to himself and to the professor, the only other reader of his paper:

> This project brought a personal connection to the subjects and concepts that are central to the study of linguistics. . . . Conversely, the lessons learned in class added an abundance of interest and understanding – not only to the research project, but also to the self-reflexive discussions about the English language and linguistics that I had with Celso [the Brazilian respondent].
>
> (Argodale 2017:1)

Carlos and Christopher, as reported in their research paper, judged Celso's proficiency in English at 8 on a scale of 1 to 10, while Celso placed himself lower, at 6.0–6.5. American students noted both Celso's fluency in written English and the phonological and lexical challenges in his spoken communication. Carlos and Christopher anticipated those difficulties as they are 'common in L2 learning at his age, at which it becomes virtually impossible to eventually sound like a native speaker', along with the examples of interlanguage and self-correction that they found in his speech (Argodale and Salazar 2017:2). Thus, it was the fluent aspects of Celso's English that came to them as a surprise: 'We were very surprised at the virtual absence of negative transferring [despite] the great variance in syntactical and morphological structure of the two languages' (ibid.).

Carlos and Christopher were further impressed with Celso's confidence and lack of embarrassment in speaking with them, contrary to their expectation that 'speaking candidly with native speakers [would] likely [be] a daunting task', which they attributed to Celso's integrative motivation and 'his familial support and high self-esteem' (ibid.:3).

To Christopher, however,

> the most fulfilling part of the project was the inspiration I gained from Celso. He was so fearless to speak to native speakers in a language he was not totally secure in, and so resolved in his goals at such a young age. To enhance and validate my academic experience by engaging with an inspiring stranger about his academic experience . . . was an incredible, rare opportunity.
>
> (Argodale 2017:1)

Here we also witness a transformative discovery, but of a different kind. While Christopher's learning from the group collaboration with Carlos was driven by a shift in his frames of reference for interpersonal relationships and habits of mind,[3] his validation of his own academic experience was most likely driven by the changing perspective on his knowledge of *linguistic concepts* (Celso's presupposed second language proficiency) and his *stereotyped attitudes* (Celso's surprising comfort with using his imperfect command of English).

At this point, it would be interesting to contrast Christopher's reflections on this project with those of his partner, Carlos. The only dialogic strand in which Carlos echoes Christopher is his recognition of the value of the class and the project itself, which is the one addressed to the professor. The lessons learned, however, are vastly different.

Carlos's essay is permeated by an acute awareness of the class and economic aspect of his research experience. Carlos focuses his reflection on learning about 'the challenges and difficulties foreign students face while learning a new language', English in Celso's case, French in Carlos's, specifically that countries that are not 'first world countries such as our United States' may offer lower-quality foreign language education because 'the amount of resources in a foreign country is much less. . . . Identifying these challenges . . . felt like an experience in real life to me' (Salazar 2017:1). It is important to Carlos because contrasting Celso's experience with his own, he notes 'the differences and challenges I have faced compared to my interviewee, [. . . which] have been overwhelming at times. For instance, I have had a few financial problems in order to pay for school in consecutive semesters' (ibid.:2).

No such references appear in Christopher's paper, most likely due to the class difference between the meaning perspectives of Carlos, a working-class Hispanic, and Christopher, a middle-class white youth. This difference in

their socioeconomic frame of reference affects what they recall as meaningful from their research experience. But what complicates the situation further is that Celso, an anticipated representative of a developing country, is not what Carlos had expected.

For many years, the higher education system in Brazil was the training ground for the country's white upper-class elite. To gain access to highly selective public universities, like UFMT, applicants had to pass rigorous entrance exams called *vestibular*, to prepare for which, they, in most cases, had to have graduated from a private secondary school (Stanek 2013:4). It hardly came as a surprise that a random federal university English class which provided the setting for this study happened to consist of five white students and only two students of Afro-Brazilian descent. In 2012, the Brazilian government passed an affirmative action law to require that half of the annual incoming class at each federal university matriculate from public secondary schools, which are predominantly lower-income students of black, Amerindian, and mixed-race descent, but racial disparity persists.

Celso, as Carlos and Chris report in their research paper, is an example of how the system works. According to the information collected by Carlos and Christopher, Celso, a white student, comes from a family of college graduates, who guide and support him in his higher education. Before his admission to UFMT, he 'received great schooling, relative to the rest of Brazil' (Argodale and Salazar 2017:1).

Carlos, in contrast, represents the Los Angeles City College student. LACC is an urban community college, which serves a student body that is 68% African American, Hispanic, or 'multi-ethnic'.[4] Of the 17 students in the linguistics course itself, 12, or 71%, were Hispanic, four white, and one Asian American. Of the incoming LACC students, 92% place in the remedial courses below the English course required for graduation and transfer (the 'freshman comp') (*LACC Institutional Self Evaluation Report* 12–15). Carlos's 'a few financial problems in order to pay for school' are hardly surprising: 63% of LACC students receive financial aid (federal, state, or both) (ibid.).

Case 2. Jasmine and Violeta vs Rita: critical coconstruction of meaning in a multilingual space

Just as in Carlos and Christopher's essays from earlier, all four strands are present in the self-reflexive essays of Jasmine and Violeta. There is, however, one marked difference: both Jasmine and Violeta are fully bilingual, which gives them a different personal and cultural frame of reference in their study of the Brazilian learner of English assigned to their team – Rita.

In her self-reflexive essay, Violeta observes that, like Rita, she learned English in the classroom. She reports growing up in a house of Spanish speakers and not learning English until starting kindergarten. 'In my first few years

of learning how to speak English I made common mistakes that English learners make' (Barajas 2017:2). This builds a personal connection to her interviewee – an English learner – but also her discovery of the usefulness of her native Spanish, an ability Violeta found to be 'tremendously helpful' (ibid.).

Jasmine, a Guatemalan-American, is bilingual in Spanish and English as well, as, it turned out, was Rita, who had taken one year of Spanish at UFMT (Barajas and Rodriguez 2017:2). Thanks to their shared fluency in Spanish, Violeta and Jasmine 'were able to switch over to Spanish whenever Rita had trouble wording her ideas in English' and produce 'a good conversation' with Rita as a result (Rodriguez 1), a statement corroborated by Violeta: 'during our interview, Rita and I found ourselves speaking Spanish to understand what either of us was saying' (Barajas 2017:2).

Interestingly, Jasmine appears so firmly rooted in both cultures that right after saying 'I have never spoke [*sic*] with anyone from a different country before' (Rodriguez 2017:1), she describes the visits of 'family members from Guatemala that have came [*sic*] to stay with us that speak only Spanish' (ibid.). In other words, to her, Guatemala does not intuitively feel to be a 'different country', like Brazil.

Jasmine describes her and Violeta's surprise at Rita's fluency in English and by the fact that 'the interview went very smoothly and we had little trouble communicating with each other' (Rodriguez 2017:1). Another surprise, or a 'shocking' similarity in Violeta's words, came in how much Jasmine and Violeta had in common with Rita when it came to their pop-culture interests – the same American artists, bands, and films (Barajas 2017:2; Rodriguez 2017:1). Both Jasmine and Violeta went beyond simply noting the fact to critically assessing what Violeta termed 'a long reach' of American culture.

'Through this experience I have gained insight on how our American culture and mainstream media has made a big impact in their country and probably around the world' (Rodriguez 2017:1). Learning from Rita 'how so much of our pop culture is integrated in their culture and society . . . has changed my outlook on the language and the importance it has on society' (ibid.:2). Violeta saw that the reason why the American 'mainstream lingo is able to reach so many people far away from the United States [is] due to the Internet' (Barajas 2017:2).

Mezirow describes three areas of common distortion in meaning perspective: 'epistemic (the nature and use of knowledge), sociocultural (taking for granted belief systems that pertain to power and social relationships), and psychic (presuppositions that prevent action)' (Mezirow 1990:5–6). Reflecting on their ethnographic experience with Rita, Jasmine and Violeta are correcting their sociocultural and epistemic knowledge about both language learning and the hegemony of American culture.

Furthermore, all three speakers exist in social and cultural environments marked by complexity. These environments, as exemplified by the research

project, now extend into virtual spaces. Despite the 5,300 miles separating Jasmine and Violeta in Los Angeles from Rita in Cuiabá, their interpersonal communication and coconstruction of meaning are immediate. The 'real' physical geography, along with its linguistic attributes – Spanish in Guatemala, Spanish and English in the US, and Portuguese and English in Brazil – now finds its fourth dimension in the nonphysical space of the Internet and telecommunications.

Mobility is another feature of this environment. It could be represented directly in the geographic trajectory of Jasmine's Guatemalan family, who fled the country's 30-year civil war to settle in the US but also in the social and economic advancement that multilingualism offers.

The Brazilian students study English, a highly hegemonic lingua franca of the crosscultural communication and commerce, the mastery of which promises significant instrumental benefits. The same benefits are no less important to minority students like Jasmine and Violeta. The shared command of a third language, Spanish, creates an unexpected, immediate benefit for communication but also, indirectly, for the students' success in the assignment, which will affect their course grade.

Conclusions

Student researchers engage in multiple dialogic relationships in order to elicit and critically interpret language data. Those dialogic strands may converge and diverge in post-research self-reflexive assessments.

The reflective judgement of the same language research experience may vary dramatically depending on the researcher's sociocultural and psychological frame of reference – for example, in a focus on the economic implications of language learning (Carlos) vs the emotive, motivational aspect (Christopher). When critical perspectives are embedded in research design, studying another person's language practices can become an instrument to activate one's own reflections on one's knowledge and identity.

This study shows linguistic ethnography as capable of producing critical discourse on the social use of language and making it a transformative experience for the ethnographer. This transformation can occur during group interaction within the research group and with the language respondents or afterwards in individual self-reflection. It may lead to belief correction and/or a shift in the researcher's frame of reference, such as stereotyped attitudes and linguistic concepts (Carlos), habits of mind (Christopher), or sociocultural and epistemic knowledge (Jasmine and Violeta). Critically guided, ethnographic study thus encourages the researcher, even a student researcher in an introductory linguistics course, to move from knowledge telling to knowledge transforming.

The Internet provides a new, multilingual sociocultural space for communication through both speech (application-assisted interviews) and writing

(email) forms of expression, a space fertile for the coconstruction of meaning and for critical reflection.

Notes

1 See, for instance, these contemporary sociolinguistic studies that use ethnographic methodologies: Cook-Gumperz (1988), Gee (1996), Heller (2000), and Rampton (1995).

2 The names of the Brazilian students were changed. Those of the American students, whose papers are cited as references, were not.

3 Mezirow lists 13 types of frames of reference that influence critical judgement:

> interpersonal relationships, political orientations, cultural bias, ideologies, schemata, stereotyped attitudes and practices, occupational habits of mind, religious doctrine, moral-ethical norms, psychological preferences and schema, paradigms in science and mathematics, frames in linguistics and social sciences, and aesthetic values and standards.
>
> (2003:59)

4 Although both the US and Brazil are multiracial countries, their racial categories do not match. While Celso would be considered white and Hispanic in the United States and as such a minority member like Carlos, in Brazil, he would be seen as unmarked white since his appearance does not visibly project African heritage.

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