

UKLEF e-seminar: Paths to post-nationalism

Presenter: Monica Heller (University of Toronto, Canada)

Discussant: Melissa Moyer (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain)

4 – 27 May 2011

Welcome

Jeff Bezemer

Wed 4th May, 2011

Dear UKLEF members

Welcome to the 2nd UKLEF e-seminar which will run on this list from today til May 27th in collaboration with the MOSAIC Centre for Multilingualism, University of Birmingham. As you all know our virtual guest is MONICA HELLER, and her latest book, PATHS TO POST-NATIONALISM, is our point of departure.

Last week I pre-circulated Chapter 6 Monica's book, together with her introduction to the book and the chapter and an introduction to Monica by Marilyn Martin Jones and Deirdre Martin (attached here again in case you missed it).

I'm pleased to introduce you now to our discussant, Melissa Moyer, Associate Professor of English Linguistics at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain. Melissa is interested in sociolinguistics and bilingualism/multilingualism from a linguistic and ethnographic perspective. Her recent work, in collaboration with the CIEN Research Team at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona which she leads, deals with a comparison of the management of multilingualism in private (telecommunications), public (health) and non-governmental (services for migrants) institutions in Catalonia, Spain. The goal of this multi-sited ethnographic research is to understand how major economic and political organizations of the nation-state are dealing with the linguistic and cultural diversity brought by migration.

Please find attached Melissa's response to Monica.

The floor is now open to everyone. I will be moderating the discussion. Please make sure that your subject heading starts with 'e-seminar', followed by a very short title of your post. The short title is particularly helpful if you start a new topic/thread. If you respond to an ongoing thread please make sure you reply to the latest post.

Enjoy the seminar

Jeff Bezemer

UKLEF Convenor

On the Practice of Critical Sociolinguistics, Methods and Explanation

Melissa Moyer

Wed 4th May, 2011

I'd like to begin by thanking Jeff Bezemer, Francis Giampapa & Tom van Hout from the UKLEF organization as well as Marilyn Martin-Jones & Deirdre Martin from the MOSAIC Centre for Research on Multilingualism for the opportunity to participate as a discussant in this jointly organized e-seminar on the recent work by Monica Heller.

Chapter 6 of the book *Paths to Postnationalism* by Monica Heller titled *Neoliberalism and la cause* raises some very important issues concerning the direction of current research in sociolinguistics which I believe are relevant for the discussion in which members of UKLEF are about to engage over the next few weeks. The story of social change in Canada stemming from the transformation of the economy and the changing role of the nation-state and the way these social orders shape identity and language practices provide a useful example for undertaking a critical approach to research on language in other societies.

The first point I would like to bring up has to do with the situatedness of sociolinguistic research. This is a point of departure for Heller. Situatedness implies starting off with a look at the economy in order to understand the material conditions in which people and language practices are embedded. As ethnographers seeking to provide a comprehensive understanding of local practices and the ways language gets taken up in these days and times of increased circulation of persons, information and objects, it is relevant to start by asking questions about how the economic and political order are key considerations to bear in mind. Can we as sociolinguists really afford to ignore how the transformations that are taking place in the capitalist economic system and in how nation-states are dealing with them? Would an account of language practices be complete without bearing in mind social process and the contextual influences which play such a key role and condition the way we lead our lives?

A second point I would like to bring up with respect to Heller's work is her understanding of social process and her emphasis on making sense of local social interactions by investigating the link between language and the way it reflects and, more importantly, the way it constitutes relations of power, exclusion/inclusion and structuration (Giddens 1982). Undoing the macro-micro dichotomy (Heller 2001) that has centered the attention of sociolinguistic inquiry does not capture the idea of dynamic process nor the linkages among activities and social actors over time and space. Looking at localized language practices as merely a reflection of a larger macro social order overlooks the ways processes get constituted over time and space through local language practices. A sociolinguistic approach that takes social process as the center provides a useful way of linking language and situated talk to social structure and social action. It is through language practices researchers can gain access to ideologies and the ways people draw on knowledge, reproduce it or create new knowledge.

A third point for this discussion has to do with a critical approach to sociolinguistic inquiry. How and why should the perspective on our field of study be critical? What is implied in taking a critical approach to our object of study? As a materialist Heller maintains that the material conditions of our lives shape how we make sense of it. Critical sociolinguistic research practices involve problematising and questioning the order of social relations and associated language practices in order to arrive at an account for the unequal distribution of linguistic, symbolic and material resources. Heller's concern with the nation-state and the globalized new economy stems from the recognition of the way particular configurations of power and the way that power gets implemented has consequences for people's lives and for organizations such as the milieu associatif or the RDÉE that are discussed in chapter 6. Heller defines her stance as critical for these reasons and it is from this perspective that she is able to arrive at an understanding of how social processes of exclusion are carried out among francophones in Canada. What other ways are researchers engaging in critical sociolinguistic and ethnographic thinking? Are there certain sites, or questions we are not yet asking?

A fourth point of Heller's work has to do with the manner in which the dynamics of space and time are incorporated in her work. Language as a situated practice and as a form of social action is connected to processes of social change related to transformations of the economy which unfold over time and space. The key idea in my view is how time and space are NOT used to account for a stable social order. The Canadian space is her local unit of analysis and the way she situates language in economic change and the Canadian nation-state illustrates processes that can be observed and analyzed in other sites.

But another feature of the time and space dimensions which is important in this era of globalization is the simultaneity of being present and being absent. The multiple connections mobile people have with different local spaces in different nation-state contexts needs to be further explored in terms of globalized economic processes but there are also other aspects about how individuals are negotiating these multiple meanings and identities which have consequences for their language practices as well as how they position themselves and get positioned in multiple localities.

A final point I would like to reflect upon has to do with language and its role in the social processes taking place in francophone Canada. We can read how French in Canada is a source of pride, an insignia of francophone nationalism and identity. These ideas are already well-established along with how standardized language has come to represent the limits of nation-state boundaries. With the neo-liberal turn in the economy, language has become an added value. The changing social and economic conditions have brought about a shift from traditional discourses of language and nationalism (in opposition to anglophone terrains of power and influence) to a more modernist nationalist discourse where French identity and culture have become marketed and hence acquired an exchange value. The commodification of language arises from these new economic and political conditions. The identity and economic value of language emerge from an analysis that takes social process as its central concern. The type of language data that best elicits the analysis of social process are interviews and discourses and the spaces in

which discourses occur. Language ideologies and practices are the key data that count because they illuminate the practices and ideologies that guide key social activities, institutions and their representatives BUT the question I would like to raise is how can actual language interaction, choice of language structures, turn-taking and conversational strategies be brought into the inquiry of social process and the sort of analysis that Heller proposes in her work.

"pure" francité in Canada, and English as a gateway

Lauren Zentz

Thu 5th May, 2011

Heller's chapter is an interesting exploration of the nuances of what she describes in the final paragraph as "modernist strategies and frames" as they come into conflict with the demands of marketing an event to a local population in and surrounding Lelac that does not fit a modernistic notion of "pure" francité.

For me, it raised a couple of questions:

First, I am curious as to whether there is a francité in Canada that exists without opposition to an Other that is largely embodied by a similarly modernist notion of an Anglophone Canada? Perhaps, then, from a sort of psychoanalytic perspective, any efforts to present the event described as purely French-Canadian end up in self-defeat as they try to erase the Other that really makes up a part of who they are?

I saw notions of this as the group tried to find native French words for the words that they usually use the English-original for...

I also find it interesting to see that in order to market this event--to create paths of access that reach out to/market to a wider population, English is required; so that in the end, English becomes a path in Canada that is necessary to access 'la francité', unless one is in fact a native French speaker there.

Maybe these questions can get us started??

Thanks so much for hosting this event,
Lauren Zentz

"pure" francité in Canada, and English as a gateway

Luisa Martín Rojo

Wed 11th May, 2011

Just to add something to the open discussion, and to corroborate the significance of the questions raised by Heller, I would like to refer to how I observe a similar process taking place in Madrid. Here, the globalised economy is stretching Spanish nationalism, which

used to be basically monolingual, and furthermore, which often resorts to the use of language (patria comun) as a tool for the neo-colonisation of Latin America by Spanish firms such as Endesa or Telefonica (just an example of the “works” of Endesa in Chile: <http://upsidedownworld.org/main/chile-archives-34/781-endesa-narrows-in-on-chiles-puelo-river>; <http://www.galeon.com/sloren/mapuche01.htm>

In the case of Madrid Region, a parallel transformation is taken place: rather than NGOs, it is schools that are being transformed by a neoliberal regional government into bilingual institutions, in which English is a new language of instruction. The significant role attributed to English in educational practice is dramatically transforming schools, in many ways (curriculum; teachers’ hierarchy; students’ selection; lower (monolingual) achievement grouping). And it is also producing tensions and conflict, and challenging the local monolingual ideology (“students do better in English than in Spanish!”). The governmental discourse seeks to neutralise criticism by presenting the inclusion of the English language as the primary/second language in schools in terms of economic development. Thus, the stated aim is to “provide young people in the Madrid region with the means to benefit from their opportunities and to compete in the best conditions possible in a world that is increasingly globalized. High quality education will enable them to obtain a better future, in both the personal and the professional spheres.” Considering Spain’s colonial past, and neo-colonial present (in economic, if not in territorial domains), it is astonishing that nationalistic arguments have not been mobilised against this, relatively uncontested, policy. One reason for this impassivity could be that, in accordance with the currently prevailing political standpoint, this policy is fully supported by an individualistic neoliberal ideology. Therefore, references to a common good are not evoked. The aim is to improve the future for your children, for yourself. It is a “pro-choice” policy, and the choice is, thus, a personal and not a national one. In Madrid Region, education and health are no longer considered social rights; while the individual choice is assured; the stated aim is each person’s individual benefit (vs. the participation of the region in a global market) (Pro-Choice is Conservative!).

(see;

http://multidoc.rediris.es/publidocnet3/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5976&Itemid=1&show=1&start=19).

Thus, in Madrid the traditional monolingual national-state frame is also challenged. In the case studied by Monica, what I see as more difficult is how to introduce this new logic into a NGO, and to maintain or redefine the collective aims. In order to do this, the structure – of the organisation, its leadership, its personnel, etc. – has to be changed, as Heller shows. In my view, the genealogy of this change is fascinating. And we can compare it with what is happening in other scenarios.

Naturally, discourse is a key element in this transformation and in legitimising it. Some time ago, some of these discourses would have been impossible to pronounce. Some changes in discursive practices are taken place (in social actors’ participation, in agency, in lexification (marketisation), in communicative practices, in the “policy” of translating, in linguistic ideologies). In relation to this I would ask you, Monica, to take a position facing the role attributed to discursive practices when you say that “an organisation shift is embedded in a discursive one?”

Luisa

"pure" francité in Canada, and English as a gateway

Luisa Martín Rojo

Fri 13th May, 2011

Dear Jeff and dear all,

I wanted to send an open question and certainly it was not clear:

In the chapter/in the book (and in my example as well) Linguistic practices play an essential part in social processes, such as the organization shift studied. Through the analysis the interrelation between local discourse practices (such as meetings) and wider, complex social processes (such as changes in the aims and in the way this organizations works) are explored. Sharing this view, I think that the role played by discursive practices can be still conceptualized in different ways, and I think it would be an interesting topic to be discussed in this forum:

do discursive shifts respond to organisational shifts?', and also the 'the other way around', 'do organisational changes go hand in hand with discursive shifts in the sense that latter make them possible?.

Does the meaning of "embedded" entail the recognition that these changed are reflected; or mediated; or even produced by discursive practices?

The answer to this final question has for me methodological implications.

Luisa Martín Rojo

Minority language groups and their elites

Peter Brannick

Sat 14th May, 2011

Hello all

The question I have is at the end, in bold.

There are a number of parallels between Heller's research context & my own (South Tyrol, Italy, where 70% of the population speak German as L1, 25% Italian & 5% Ladin). People vote overwhelmingly along ethnolinguistic lines and in political science, the province is often used in comparative case studies alongside the Basque country, Catalonia and Northern Ireland.

With the transcript on p.119-20, we see a discussion between two Ottawa based civil servants about work related migrations from rural French-speaking areas to the city and the subsequent language attrition suffered by the French-speaking community. It seems migrant workers' transitions to English are viewed as far more problematic for the civil

servants than for the migrant French speakers themselves. What I see (both in South Tyrol and Heller's case study) is the promotion of group rights – most often by elite interest groups – over the rights of individual language speakers themselves. In South Tyrol this is problematic – and for some here, not only recently.

Perhaps somewhere in here lies an answer to Lauren's posted question regarding the existence of a francité outside of Othering (hello in Arizona, btw!).

I am struck by the class-based differences between the traditional residents of Lelac and members of the exec committee of the community centre in sections 6.3 & 6.4. As Heller points out, these committee members are not the local working class French-speakers themselves. The committee's transformation, from supporting la cause to becoming a 'catalysing' community support organisation, would appear an adroit response to the neoliberal ideologies that were/are transforming Canada. And so whilst the committee, formed by a social elite largely from outside Lelac, moves away from la cause per se, they attempt to maintain their class-based hegemony within Lelac. "Market" conditions change and the committee transforms itself to maintain its hegemonic position, willing to sacrifice one of its previously most effective actors (Bernard) in the process.

These passages touch on some of the uncomfortable questions I am grappling with in my research. It seems that in Quebec (and South Tyrol) the focus on group rights appears not so much to protect the interests of vast majority of speakers themselves but rather the elites within minority language groups. Within the neoliberal turn, I see the embedded discursive shift as the actions of local elites (in Lelac and South Tyrol), maintaining their position in the face of global change. Nationalism, as a mechanism facilitating consent, appears to be running its course, so other mechanisms must be sought to maintain hegemony.

The illusion of nationalistic group identity based on language is hinted at in Heller's closing comments (p.164), where she notes that the festival organisers had to face questions about who gets to decide what counts as Francophone and its linguistic wrapping – questions that I think are uncomfortable for perspectives on minority language situations that focus on maintenance of group language and culture (such as this one, or my own). So the question I have is this:

Whose interests have been served in discourses on protection of minority language group rights, based on Herdian notions of nation (such as in Quebec or South Tyrol), and whose interests are being served in the responses to the neoliberal turn (and the "repackaging" or commodification of language and culture) exemplified in the Heller text?

I'm conscious how clumsy the post is and this is obviously an extremely complex and sensitive issue, which deserves to be posited in a far more nuanced way. However I'm already over 500 words!

Cheers

Peter Brannick

Ruth Harman

"pure" francité in Canada, and English as a gateway??

Sun 15th May, 2011

Dear All,

What great questions from Luisa. I keep coming up against the same type of issues. I tend to use Fairclough's perspective on discursive changes and the dialectical relations to social structures.

Fairclough's (1992) shows how the discursive changes mirror but also shape some of the new technologies of power in our neoliberal nations.

I suppose from a critical discourse perspective, the wee bit of hope is structuration when there is resistance in discursive acts --

however, the discursive changes tend to occur very slowly. Halliday's (2004) SFL analogy between climate/ weather and system/ text can be extended here to illustrate the dialectic relationship of individual

text and system. To understand the hurricane in New Orleans in 2005, meteorologists referred to research and data about climatic conditions

(from system to text). The hurricane in New Orleans, however, had unique weather properties that, along with other natural catastrophes of 2005, will inform future studies of climate (from text to system).

In other words, social context construes and is reconstrued by the language system (see Martin, 1987 for an in-depth analysis of the 'perturbation' of the system by instantiation over time).

Ruth

Monica Heller

"pure" francité in Canada, and English as a gateway??

Mon 16th May, 2011

A quick response to Lauren (I'll try to respond to the other thread in the discussion, the one raised by Luisa, later). One of the things I am trying to argue in the book (it doesn't come out so well in this particular chapter), is that "francophone" probably needs to be understood largely as a labour category. Ethnolinguistic difference is constructed to make and mask political economic inequalities; the cultural legitimizes the inequality. (And so yes of course the categories are inherently relational, not essential.) The problem we are facing now is the breakdown of the possibility of masking; it is less and less possible to essentialize, even strategically. At the same time, it is the essentialized version that is marketable. Monica

"pure" francité in Canada, and English as a gateway??

Richard Barwell

Tue, 17th May, 2011

I've enjoyed engaging with this seminar, not least because I am from the UK but work in Ontario and live in Quebec. I work in a bilingual (French and English) university and my wife's family are from rural Québec. This makes me a bit outsider-ish in some ways and insider-ish in others. A few comments and questions:

- I was struck by the appearance of some of Canada's original peoples in the chapter, but in a rather secondary and 'cultural' way (e.g. an opening ceremony). This kind of presence matches my sense that the struggle between French and English leaves little room for other languages (or peoples). 'Linguistic minority' (in Ontario) generally refers to French speakers, rather than say, Cree speakers (much more of a minority). Bilingual refers to English/French, not say Inuktitut/English. My own institution has a mandate to promote bilingualism...but not any bilingualism, just French/English bilingualism. This is all rather complex - I think bilingualism is a Good Thing but I also think that the continued marginalisation of Canada's first peoples and their languages (most of which are not expected to survive) is, to say the least, problematic. These kinds of tensions are alluded to in ch. 6, such as in the reference to the original inhabitants of the area. The milieu that Heller describes must (of course) be understood within this broader sociolinguistic setting. Coming from the UK, I am intrigued by the different ways that bilingualism or multilingualism are constructed here in contrast to the UK (as examined, for example, by Adrian Blackledge). And in particular, it is interesting how these different discourses render invisible some languages or peoples. I haven't even mentioned new Canadians and their languages, for example.

- At the level of the discursive shifts in relation to franco-ontarians, I made a connection with Foucault's notion of "conduire des conduites" (the conduct of conduct), part of his account of governmentality. The discussions of what languages to include on the signs, how anglophones would be dealt with, the questions from the chamber of commerce and the regular concern to find a 'French' word for various things all seem like examples of this idea. For me, at least, it helps link Heller's discussion of the neoliberalism and the observed language practices. According to Sylvie, the chamber of commerce had merely asked "un couple de petites questions" (heavily troubled in the telling) setting off a lengthy discussion which could be seen as the participants conducting (and policing) their own conduct. From a neoliberal perspective, thinking in

terms of customer service is probably the 'right' answer.

- In terms of critical ethnographic sociolinguistics, I wanted more reflexivity (which might well be elsewhere in the book or in other publications). Did the researchers participate in the discussions? Were they ever asked what the French word for something might be? Did the participants ever express any reaction to the presence of the researcher (e.g. Embarrassment, self-consciousness with respect to language use)? Did the researchers take a position - or is the study one of neutral observation and description (which is how it reads)? Do participants in this seminar feel that it is ever appropriate to 'join the cause'? What do we mean by 'critical'?

Richard Barwell

"pure" francité in Canada, and English as a gateway??

Julie S Byrd Clark

Tue 17th May, 2011

Hello everyone,

Some of Richard's comments made me want to engage in the discussion, so here are a few thoughts.

First, I'm not sure, Richard, if bilingualism is a "good" thing, it's not a "bad" thing either, but as Monica Heller aptly encouraged me to pursue this line of thinking about eight years ago, we need to question, "good for whom?" And, why, in what ways, under which conditions, and through whose conceptions? I think Heller's chapter (and work) does justice here.

Second, you bring up an important point, Richard, about wanting more reflexivity. I agree with you. On the one hand, I think it's something that causes many of us as ethnographers and academics to struggle because it can potentially make us appear vulnerable (well, I should say our egos become very vulnerable). We try to include our own positions in the research, and yet we become subject to critique, interpretation, and (very often) scrutiny. Our field or research is not considered "scientific" or "evidence-based", I think there is a fear of not being seen as "legitimate" if we somehow include "too much" of our own voice(s), experiences, etc.. In my own ethnographic work, I've included my performances and/or different positionings, but certainly not without the risk of being criticized. Once you include your positionings and they appear on paper, they risk being seen or represented as "static", even though positionings as we know can evolve and shift. On the other hand, I personally think it is an important part of critical sociolinguistic ethnography to "come clean" and to be reflexive of ourselves as

researchers, to ask ourselves the "tough questions" and to try and be critical of being critical or what one means by critical.

We (as linguistic ethnographers) need to question our own bias, such as why we are so attached to certain representations or ways of seeing reality, as well as to question what our own investments are in doing this particular kind of research (e.g. what do we hope to gain, what are our own "stake holds", ideological positionings, etc.). I think it is possible, but I feel that in order for people to be/become reflexive, there needs to be more space available to develop and discuss reflexivity--and this may reduce the risk of becoming or appearing dogmatic or "set in our ways"... after all, our work is to some extent, about social transformation--our positionings need to be included in the complexity of how things get reproduced and transformed.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate.

With best wishes,
Julie

Reflexivity
Paul Duff
Wed 18th May, 2011

Interesting discussion.

I agree with Julia here, especially in relation the difficulties that may arise when reflexivity is effective in revealing personal and professional motivation for doing research. I think Denzin said " in qualitative research there is only interpretation" - or something similar. So what ever aspect of QR we are engaged in, it is only our interpretation we are dealing with - so our position (motivations, bias, prejudice and our personal history (if there is one) in relation to our research subject needs to be made transparent in the writing.

When Richard asked "Did the researchers take a position - or is the study one of neutral observation and description?" I would say that advocating anything like a neutral position is problematic. The notion that there are academic researcher's engaged in "no cause" or "no position" research seems to me to be unsustainable. Unless that is, they are doing it in their own time, for free, out of personal interest. Usually someone is paying for someone else to do research. The motivation to engage in research, the methods for funding research and the topic of the research (i.e. which topics will attract most funding for your uni. department, what's the latest political "hot potato") should be part of a critical researcher's agenda. I agree with Julia who calls for the position of the researcher in relation to that which is being researched to become more clearly articulated. Otherwise we are not being honest with the reader regarding our public, professional or personal positions.

Cheers
Paul

Reflexivity
Stephanie Kent
Wed 18th May, 2011

Hello Paul and everyone,

(I owe a formal introduction, apologies in advance.)

Interpretation is also a feature of quantitative research, as a recent debate about statistical methods illustrates. "[You Might Already Know This](#)" introduces a debate over reliability in psychological testing regarding the controversial subject of extrasensory perception.

Those of us who work with qualitative methods may want to be more aggressive in asserting the relevance of interpretation in all modes of research, rather than conceding the myth of objectivity to quantitative types.

best regards,
steph

Good
Richard Barwell
Wed 18th May, 2011

Julie Byrd Clark's comment about my use of 'good' is a good one, at least up to a point - in fact it's linked to some of my other comments, which were in part about our commitment as researchers to the people whose lives we become involved with. It is not really possible to declare our positionings adequately (and where would one stop?) and to do so is as much a rhetorical move as the use of neutral description. My point is not that such things are misguided, but that we have to live with the complexity of what we do. There is a link here with ethics, not in the sense of a set of rules or procedures, but in an on-going mindfulness of how we act in relation to others and what our actions may do. Which loops back to reflexivity again: researching franco-ontarians contributes to the construction of franco-ontarians as a specific group and to the construction of speakers as french-speaking or as bilingual or whatever. Such work might be seen as valuable (through contributing to language maintenance) or problematic, and critical through uncovering whose interests are served as the discourse shifts. But some would say it is

not enough to uncover 'good for whom' but to take action, to join the cause...ah, it's shifted.

Richard

On the question of critique, reflexivity and commodification
Miguel Pérez Milans
Thu 19th May, 2011

Dear all,

As in the case of Stephanie, I also owe you a formal introduction, although the participation in this e-seminar is maybe the best excuse to do it. I have to say that I do not see clearly the polarisation established by Richards between pointing out the links between discursive practices and wider socio-economic processes of change, on the one hand, and the need to take 'action' from the part of the researcher, on the other. I think pointing out such links is already a form of action. Actually, I cannot avoid to read Heller's last book by taking into account her intellectual trajectory and researchs 'actions' throughout different decades (time) and institutions (space) linked to the francophone community in Canada. In that sense, I see her work as a clear illustration of political action and engagement.

Having said that, I also missed the social position of the researchers in the situated practices that are analyzed in the chapter that we are referring to. That is, I wonder what was the role of the researchers in the meaning-making practices that took place in the analyzed site. In this regard, I have to say that I do not see reflexivity only in terms of ethics, as has been commented. I see reflexivity as something that can contribute to identify more clearly the connections between processes of economic transformation, changes in the organization of a given community, and discursive practices through which that community re-constitutes itself.

And now the example: as someone who started doing research as part of Luisa Martin Rojo's team in the institutional context of Madrid (in education, particularly), and who finally ended up doing his phd on a research conducted in schools in China, I found very similar process to those described by Heller. Thus, I found that the schools I was researching in 2006 in China were caught in intense processes or reform which were making the school communities to commodify themselves, in accordance with a particular neoliberalisation of the Chinese educational system that makes the schools to compete among themselves to get partially funded while having to stick to certain official discourses about a 'Chinese specific modernisation' which is based on a new contemporary Chinese nationalism resulting from the 80's open-doors economic policies. However, as I used to be socially categorised as 'westerner' by my participants (event though I tried to speak Mandarin as much as possible during my research), it was

interesting to see how my own presence was commodified by the schools in order for them to justify or report an 'international' orientation (as they had to engage in many different projects of reforms that they had to report), in connection to the official requirements they had to fulfil to keep a particular institutional status.

Thus, all processes of meaning-making and negotiation of social relations had to be understood in relation to the way I was socially constructed (to which I sometimes contributed to) by my participants. So, analyzing data from this stance allowed me to see clearly those processes of neoliberalisation and commodification that I was trying to understand, while at the same time making unavoidable the take my own position in the analyzed discursive practices.

Thanks for an excellent forum to discuss.
Best regards,
Miguel

Political impact and theory
Julia Snell
Thu 19th May, 2011

Thanks to all for an extremely interesting debate so far. We used the chapter for the basis of a very productive discussion in our Research Workshop in Language and Literacy at KCL this week. Our discussions generated several questions that we would like to open up to Monica and to the seminar participants. These questions fall broadly into three main areas:

What has been (or could be) the political impact of the book? How were the arguments articulated in Chapter 6 received by the Lelac community? To what extent did you consider this reception when crafting the chapter?

Were we right to read the association as being in crisis? Is it a doomed enterprise? Are the issues faced by the association to some extent internally generated (e.g. through a lack of engagement/commitment from younger members of the community)? Or are outside influences the key drivers of change? Or is not possible to distinguish between internal and external factors?

Was one of the book's aims the generation of theory, for example on neoliberalism (and if so, what might that theory be)? How would you describe the relationship between ethnographically informed work and theory?

Best wishes,
Julia

Reflexivity, critique, social action and change

Monica Heller

Fri, 20th May, 2011

Many thanks to all those who have been engaging in what is for me a terrifically stimulating discussion. Some issues have been addressed directly to me, others not, but this seems like an opportune moment to add my two cents' worth. I am not sure I will cover everything, but I'll try anyway to respond to some issues.

First, I should say that we are to some extent limited by the fact that what you have is one chapter of a book, not a stand-alone piece. Most of the issues raised so far are addressed explicitly in Chapter 1 ("Sociolinguistics as Social Practice") and Chapter 2 of the book ("Critical Ethnographic Sociolinguistics"). But they also speak to a difficulty I faced in doing the actual writing: how to tell a substantive story about something going on in the world from an ontological perspective which embraces subjectivity, reflexivity and interpretivism (as positive strengths). The ontological crisis in North American anthropology in the 1980s, for example, as well as some of the discussions going on currently in French sociolinguistics, have sometimes led to a bit of navel-gazing: one can end up focussing more on the epistemological process than on things that are happening in the world. At the same time, the narrative tools available to us can too often recall positivism. The result for me was that I lived the writing as a challenge, and I am sure some bits were more successful than others. This tension also lies behind what I chose to emphasize in my introductory comments here, about critique and materialism.

Having said that, I certainly see my job as providing description, interpretation and explanation (in this sense, I think ethnography is particularly powerful). Stance-taking has to be based on that, for me. But usually what I find is that things are pretty complicated: they work out well in some ways, not so well in others; or well for some, not so well for others. Still, an ethnographic approach helps us figure out where to intervene if that is what one wants to do. I don't at all see it as my job to necessarily agree with the people I work with, rather, to engage in conversation with them as well as with other stakeholders (of which obviously I am one — and in my life I am directly involved in these discussions in all kinds of ways, of which the book is only one; this is an attempt to respond to Julia). In the particular case of nationalism, I am trying to de-naturalize it, to show how (and why) it operates as a legitimating ideology; this approach has earned me the title of destructrice de la nation in certain quarters, but (and?) that too has opened a space for debate about what the "nation" is, who gets to define it, whom that privileges and who gets marginalized. But clearly (and here I am trying to respond to Peter), in my view, the nation has fairly consistently been defined by a certain elite; change has been more in the form of the discourse and social practices of that group than in personnel. How and why it works (why the marginalized don't change that, for example), is an important question, and is what I spend most of the book trying to answer.

This brings me to Luisa's question about discourse and organizational change. This is hard to answer quickly, but let me give it a shot. Fundamentally, I'm a materialist; I think

political economy is really important. The question I ask is how we make sense (discursively) of the conditions we find ourselves in. What I think I see is that certain discursive formations can hold as long as they make sense out of life conditions; sometimes their logics shift those conditions in ways that make them unsustainable, sometimes stuff happens which they can't account for, and which can't be erased or shoved under the table. That's when we get moments (such as this one) of intensive discursive work, which might be oriented towards saving the market (as in the case I presented here), towards restructuring it, towards destroying it, towards building new ones: which of those scenarios we actually get is an empirical question, but examining those cases can also help us understand why we get what.

I'll stop here, there is more to say about theory and ethnography, about ethics and politics, but let's see where the conversation goes. Best, Monica

Thank you
Jeff Bezemer
Mon 30th May, 2011

Dear all

The e-seminar is now closed.

I'm sure you will all join me in thanking Monica Heller, Melissa Moyer, and all the other contributors for a really inspirational discussion. It's been terrific to host this event on the mailing list and give uklef members from around the world a chance to interact with Monica about some of the key issues in linguistic ethnography. Thank you all!!

Those of you who haven't had a chance to follow this can check out the transcript which will be made available on our website, www.uklef.net.

Best wishes
Jeff Bezemer