Ethnography and democracy: Hymes's political theory of language

JAN BLOMMAERT

Abstract

Dell Hymes's oeuvre was explicitly political, and this paper addresses this often overlooked dimension of his work. The project of ethnography was intended by Hymes to be a counterhegemonic and democratic science, which offered voice to the subjects it studied and so created a critical social-scientific paradigm that destabilized and negated established truths by dialogically engaging with reality. This critical and counterhegemonic paradigmatic dimension of ethnography is first sketched and discussed at some length. Next, we discuss Hymes's ethnopoetic work. In his ethnopoetic work, Hymes's critical concern with voice, democracy, and inequality is articulated most clearly and persuasively. It is by looking at ethnopoetics that we see the blending of a methodological and a political project.

Keywords: *Hymes; ethnography; ethnopoetics; critique; democracy.*

1. Introduction

Dell Hymes's work is, like that of Bourdieu and Bernstein, but also that of Gumperz and Goffman, highly political. Texts such as the essay "Speech and language" (Hymes 1996: ch. 3), or the introductory essay to his *Reinventing Anthropology* (2002 [1969]) explicitly testify to that; most of his oeuvre, however, can be read as a political statement, an attempt toward a critical science of language in social life, toward "a union of knowledge and social values" (2002 [1969]: 51). Hymes would often mention his own background as an explanation for this, especially his experiences as a GI enlisted so as to gain access to college education under the GI Bill, and stationed in the Far East. Hymes saw Hiroshima shortly after the bomb; the madness and scale of human rage witnessed there turned him into someone whose main concerns were peace, equality, and

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solidarity, a man of the left. And his program was an oppositional response to the direction taken by linguistics after World War II: an opposition he would compare to that of Marx to Feuerbach (Hymes 1996: 99, 189; Marx appears with amazing frequency in the introductory essay of *Reinventing Anthropology* as well). It was an approach in which the proclaimed ("idealist") equality of the Chomskyan universal language faculty was countered by an empirical and contextually grounded ("materialist") focus on real existing conditions of use, marked by inequalities. Political affinities between Hymes and Chomsky did not interfere with robust disagreements over the intellectual programs that both advocated. Hymes defined the goal of the ethnography of speaking as "to explain the meaning of language in human life, and not in the abstract, not in the superficial phrases one may encounter in essays and textbooks, but in the concrete, in actual human lives" (1986 [1972]: 41). That was an academic and intellectual program, but also a political one. He also consistently underscored the importance of broader ethical and political values in anthropological work. Anthropology, to him, needed to make general statements on human societies, and such statements would need to have a critical and radical edge:

> I would hope to see the consensual ethos of anthropology move from a liberal humanism, defending the powerless, to a socialist humanism, confronting the powerful and seeking to transform the structures of power. (Hymes 2002 [1969]: 52)

The different papers in this collection all recognize and identify this critical political aspect of Hymes's work. In what follows, I want to discuss one of the implicit political dimensions of Hymesian ethnography: the way in which, to Hymes, it could be a *democratic* and *anti-hegemonic* science. Ethnography would be a science "of the people" in the sense that it would keep its two feet in the lived experience of those whom it studied, and that it therefore would abstain from pontificating and *a priori* theorizing but instead offer voice to those it studied. In that sense, it would also be an anti-hegemonic science, one that destabilized accepted views by allowing different voices to speak: a science that constantly calls into question the status of "truth," and constantly negates what is known by going out to find more (see the discussion in Fabian 2001). Ethnography, to Hymes (1986 [1972]), was the study of "the interaction of language and social life": an approach in which language and society blended, and which consequently could yield more precise understandings of language *and* of society. It was the critical science *par excellence*.

I will develop these points first by looking at the larger theoretical edifice of Hymesian ethnography. Often, ethnography is presented in an ab-

surdly reductionist way, as a complex of methods for data collection and description (many, for instance, would speak of "ethnography" as soon as a piece of research is based on *interviews*, as if interviews would be *per se* ethnographic). Yet Hymes's oeuvre and that of other leaders of the tradition in which he included himself are littered with theoretical statements that show that ethnography is a theory complex, a paradigm, and not just a method. It is this *theory* (not the method) that makes ethnography critical and democratic in Hymes's view.

After that, I will turn to Hymes's ethnopoetic work as an example of the critical and political aspects of Hymesian ethnographic theory. Even if ethnopoetics can be seen as a form of philology, it is aimed at a reconstruction of voice—of silenced voices to be precise—in an act that "liberate[s]" them (Hymes 2003: 11).[1] The reconstruction is again more than a refined philological method: it is an *ethnography of text*, a theoretically dense and complex approach which recreates the text not for the analyst, but for its original community of users.

2. Ethnography as a democratic science

Hymes held a firm belief in the critical potential and the emancipatory value of ethnography. According to him, "good ethnography (...) will be of perennial importance" for at least two reasons:

> On the one hand, there is much that ethnographers do that is wanted done by local communities, from preservation of languages and traditions (...) to help with problems of schools. On the other hand, where social transformation is in question, Anna Louise Strong once said that if Lenin himself came to your town, he would have to know what you know about it before he could plan a revolution there. (Hymes 2002 [1969]: 56)

So ethnography was the key to his political vision, and he saw an immense political benefit to spreading ethnography beyond the small community of anthropologists who practiced it. This has not been materialized. Ethnography is more often than not misunderstood, and some reflections on Hymesian ethnography are in order here.

Ethnography is a strange scientific phenomenon.[2] On the one hand, it can be seen as probably the only truly influential "invention" of anthropological linguistics, having triggered important developments in social-scientific fields as diverse as pragmatics and discourse analysis, sociology and historiography and having caused a degree of attention to small detail in human interaction previously unaddressed in many fields of the

social sciences.[3] At the same time, ethnography has for decades come under fire from within. Critical anthropology emerged from within ethnography, and strident critiques by, e.g., Johannes Fabian (1983) and James Clifford (1988) exposed immense epistemological and ethical problems in ethnography. Their call for a historization of *ethnographies* (rather than a singular *ethnography*) was answered by a flood of studies contextualizing the work of prominent ethnographers, often in ways that critically called into question the epistemological, positive-scientific appeal so prominently voiced in the works of, e.g., Griaule, Boas, or Malinowski (see, e.g., Stocking 1992; Darnell 1998). So whereas ethnography is by all standards a hugely successful enterprise, its respectability has never matched its influence in the social sciences.

"True" ethnography is rare—a fact perhaps deriving from its controversial status and the falsification of claims to positive scientificity by its founding fathers. More often than not, ethnography is perceived as a *method* for collecting particular types of data and thus as something that can be added, like the use of a computer, to different scientific procedures and programs. Even in anthropology, ethnography is often seen as a synonym for description (a view that has its roots in the pre-Malinowskian "Notes and Queries" tradition). In the field of language, ethnography is popularly perceived as a technique and a series of propositions by means of which something can be said about "context." Talk can thus be separated from its context, and whereas the study of talk is a matter for linguistics, conversation analysis, or discourse analysis, the study of context is a matter for ethnography (see Blommaert 2001, 2005a for a fuller discussion and references). What we notice in such discussions and treatments of ethnography is a reduction of ethnography to *fieldwork*, but naïvely, in the sense that the critical epistemological issues buried in seemingly simple fieldwork practices are not taken into account. Fieldwork/ethnography is perceived as *description*: an account of facts and experiences captured under the label of "context," but in itself often un- or under-contextualized.

Hymes has been a victim of such reductions. His theoretical program is hardly ever fully addressed and the coherence between various key parts of his oeuvre—between, e.g., his views of communicative competence and those on function and form—is hardly ever highlighted. The effects of such reductions are that many students in linguistics and adjacent disciplines only get to know Hymes through that silly mnemotechnic acronym "SPEAKING," often presented as a definition of ethnography. Or that they are given the version of communicative competence that became widely used among psycholinguists and applied linguists as a shorthand for that bit of pragmatic skill that people fortunately have in addition to

their language acquisition device—a version of communicative competence that bears only the vaguest and most distant traces of its Hymesian origins (see Hymes 1992 for comments on this topic).

It is against this narrow view that I want to pit my argument, which will revolve around the fact that Hymesian ethnography *can and should* be seen as a "full" intellectual program. Ethnography, I will argue, involves a *perspective* on language and communication, including ontology and an epistemology, both of which are of significance for the study of language in society, or better, of language *as well as* of society. It is this perspective that is theoretical and that makes ethnography into a "full" theory. Interestingly, this programmatic view of ethnography emerges from critical voices from within ethnography. Rather than destroying the ethnographic project, critiques such as the ones developed by Fabian (1979, 1983, 1995) have added substance and punch to the program.

2.1. *Ethnography as a paradigm*

Hymes was part of a long tradition, and a first correction that needs to be made to the widespread image of ethnography is that from the very beginning, it was far more than a complex of fieldwork techniques. Ever since its beginnings in the works of Malinowski and Boas, it was part of a total program of scientific description and interpretation, comprising not only technical, methodical aspects (Malinowskian fieldwork) but also, e.g., cultural relativism and behaviorist-functionalist theoretical underpinnings. Ethnography was the scientific apparatus that put communities, rather than human kind, on the map, focusing attention on the complexity of separate social units, the intricate relations between small features of a single system usually seen as in balance.[4] In Sapirian linguistics, folklore and descriptive linguistics went hand in hand with linguistic classification and historical-genetic treatments of cultures and societies. Ethnography was an approach in which systems were conceived as non-homogeneous, composed of a variety of features, and in which part–whole relationships were central to the work of interpretation and analysis. Regna Darnell's book on Boas (Darnell 1998) contains a revealing discussion of the differences between Boas and Sapir regarding the classification of North American languages, and one of the striking things is to see how linguistic classification becomes a domain for the articulation of theories of culture and cultural dynamics, certainly in Boas's case (Darnell 1998: 211ff). It is significant also that as ethnography became more sophisticated and linguistic phenomena were studied in greater detail and nuance, better and more mature theories of social units such as the speech community emerged (Gumperz 1968).

So there always was more than just description in ethnography—theoretical problems of interpretation and indeed of ontology and epistemology have always figured in debates on and in ethnography, as did matters of method versus interpretation and issues of aligning ethnography with one discipline or another (linguistics versus anthropology being the issue in the Boas–Sapir debate on classification). In fact, it is my conviction that ethnography, certainly in the works of its most prominent practitioners, has always had aspirations to *theory* status. Hymes's oeuvre stands out in its attempt at retrieving the historical roots of this larger ethnographic program (Hymes 1964, 1983) as well as at providing a firm theoretical grounding for ethnography himself (Hymes 1986 [1972], 1996). Hymes took stock of new reflections on "theory" produced in Chomskyan linguistics, and foregrounded the issue in ethnography as well, and in clearer and more outspoken terms than before. To Hymes, ethnography was a "descriptive theory": an approach that was theoretical because it provided description in specific, methodologically and epistemologically grounded ways (see Hymes 1986 [1972] for a rich and elaborate discussion).

I will discuss some of the main lines of argument in Hymes's work at some length here, adding, at points, important elements for our understanding of ethnography as taken from Johannes Fabian's work. Fabian, like Hymes, is probably best known for his documentary work (e.g., Fabian 1986, 1996), while his theoretical reflections have not received the attention they deserve.

To start with, a crucial element in any discussion of ethnography should be its history, for inscribed in its techniques and patterns of operation are numerous traces of its intellectual origins and background. Ethnography has its origin in anthropology, not in linguistics, nor in sociology or psychology. That means that *the basic architecture of ethnography is one that already contains ontologies, methodologies, and epistemologies* that need to be situated within the larger tradition of anthropology and that do not necessarily fit the frameworks of other traditions. Central to this is *humanism*: "It is anthropology's task to coordinate knowledge about language from the viewpoint of *man*" (Hymes 1964: xiii, also 2002 [1969]; emphasis in original; recall also his remarks on socialist humanism above). This means that language is approached as something that has a certain relevance to man, and man in anthropology is seen as a creature whose existence is narrowly linked, conditioned, or determined by society, community, the group, culture. Language from an anthropological perspective is almost necessarily captured in a functionalist epistemology, and questions about language take the shape of questions of how language works and operates for, with, and by humans-as-social-beings.[5]

Let us immediately sketch some of the theory-related implications of this humanist and functionalist anthropological background to ethnography. One important consequence has to do with the *ontology*, the definition of language itself. Language is typically seen as a socially loaded and assessed tool for humans, the finality of which is to enable humans to perform as social beings. Language, in this tradition, is defined as a *resource* to be used, deployed, and exploited by human beings in social life and hence socially consequential for humans ("A general theory of the interaction of language and social life must encompass the multiple relations between linguistic means and social meaning," Hymes 1986 [1972]: 39). Further implications of this will be addressed below. A second important implication is about context. There is no way in which language can be "context-less" in this anthropological tradition in ethnography. To language, there is always a particular function, a concrete shape, a specific mode of operation, and an identifiable set of relations between singular acts of language and wider patterns of resources and their functions. Language is context, it is the architecture of social behavior itself, and thus part of social structure and social relations. To this as well I will return below.

Let me summarize what has been said so far. Central to any understanding of ethnography are its roots in anthropology. These anthropological roots provide a specific theoretical direction to ethnography, one that situates language deeply and inextricably in social life and offers a particular and distinct ontology and epistemology to ethnography. Ethnography contains, thus, a theoretical *perspective* on language which differs from that of many other branches of the study of language. It is important to remember this, and despite possible relocations and redeployments of ethnography in different theoretical frameworks, the fact that it is designed to fit an anthropological set of questions is important for our understanding of what ethnography can and cannot perform. As Hymes (1964: xxvii) says, "failure to remember can confuse or impair anthropological thinking and research, setting up false antitheses and leaving significant phenomena unstudied."

2.2. *Resources and dialectics*

Let us now get a bit deeper into the features of theory identified above: the particular ontology and epistemology characterizing ethnography.

Language is seen as a set of resources, means available to human beings in societies. These resources can be deployed in a variety of circumstances, but when this happens it never happens in a neutral way.

Every act of language use is an act that is assessed, weighed, measured socially, in terms of contrasts between this act and others. In fact, language becomes the social and culturally embedded thing it is because of the fact that it is socially and culturally consequential in use. The clearest formulation of this resources view on language can be found in Hymes's "Speech and language: on the origins and foundations of inequality among speakers" (1980: ch. 2; 1996: ch. 3). In this strident essay, Hymes differentiates between a linguistic notion of language and an ethnographic notion of speech. Language, Hymes argues, is what linguists have made of it, a concept with little significance for the people who actually use language. Speech is language-in-society, i.e., an *active* notion and one that deeply situates language in a web of relations of power, a dynamics of availability and accessibility, a situatedness of single acts vis-à-vis larger social and historical patterns such as genres and traditions. Speech is language in which people have made investments—social, cultural, political, individual-emotional ones. It is also language brought under social control—consequently language marked by sometimes extreme cleavages and inequalities in repertoires and opportunities.

This has no small consequences to the study of language. For one thing, studying language means studying society, more precisely, it means that all kinds of different meanings, meaning effects, performativities, and language functions can and need to be addressed than those current (and accepted) in mainstream linguistics.[6] Second, there is nothing static about this ethnographic view of language. Language appears in reality as performance, as actions performed by people in a social environment. Hence, strict synchrony is impossible as the deployment of linguistic resources is in itself, and step by step as sentences and utterances are constructed, a process. It is this process, and not its linguistic product (statified and reified sentences or utterances), that needs to be understood in ethnography. In order to acquire this understanding, as much attention needs to be given to what is seen from the statified and reified perspective mentioned as "nonlinguistic" matters as needs to be given to strictly "linguistic" matters. It is at this point that one can understand how ethnography triggered important developments both in general sociology—Bourdieu's work is exemplary in this respect—as well as in kinesics, nonverbal communicative behavior, and indeed social semiosis in general —Goffman, Garfinkel, and Goodwin can be mentioned here. From an ethnographic perspective, the distinction between linguistic and nonlinguistic is an artificial one since every act of language needs to be situated in wider patterns of human social behavior, and intricate connections between various aspects of this complex need to be specified: the ethnographic principle of *situatedness*.[7]

It is also relevant to underscore the *critical* potential which ethnography derives from these principles. The constant feedback between communicative actions and social relations involves, as said, reflections on *value* of communicative practices, starting from the observation that not every form of communication is performed or performable in any situation. Society imposes hierarchies and value scales on language, and the looking-glass of linguistic practice often provides a magnified image of the workings of powers and the deep structures of inequality in society. It is telling that some of the most critical studies on education have been produced by scholars using an ethnographic perspective (Cook-Gumperz 1988; Gee 1996; Heller 2000; Rampton 1995). Similarly, it is an interesting exercise to examine the critique formulated from within ethnography against other language scholars involved in the study of language and power. These critiques are not merely critiques of method; they are about the nature of language–power relationships (see Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; Blommaert et al. 2001). And central to this critique is often the notion of language ideologies (Woolard et al. 1998; Kroskrity 2000): metalinguistic and hence deeply sociocultural ideas of language users about language and communication that not only appear to direct language behavior and the interpretation of language acts, but also account for folk and official "rankings" and hierarchies of linguistic varieties.

Object-level (the "acts" themselves) and metalevel (ideas and interpretations of these acts) cannot be separated in ethnography, for the social value of language is an intrinsic and constituent part of language usage itself. That is, in every act of language people inscribe and mark the social situatedness of these acts and so offer patterns of interpretation to the others. These patterns of interpretation are never fixed, of course, but require acknowledgment and interactional co-construction. So here also, strict synchronicity is impossible, for there is both a processual and a historical dimension to every act of language-in-society (Silverstein and Urban 1996), and the rankings and hierarchies of language are themselves an area of perpetual debate and conflict (Blommaert 1999). The social dimension of language is precisely the blending of linguistic and metalinguistic levels in communication: actions proceed with an awareness of how these actions should proceed and can proceed in specific social environments. And to be clear about this point, this means that every language act is intrinsically historical.

This brings me to the epistemological level of ethnography. Knowledge of language facts is processual and historical knowledge, lifting single instances of talk to a level of relevance far higher than just the event. They become indexical of patterns and developments of wider scope and significance, and these wider dimensions are part of ethnographic

interpretation. Static interpretations of context—"setting," "speech community," and so forth—are anathema and to the extent that they occur in ethnographic writing they should be seen as either a rhetorical reduction strategy or, worse, as a falsification of the ethnographic endeavor (Fabian 1983, 1995). Fabian stresses the dynamic process of knowledge gathering in ethnography, emphasizing the fact that ethnographic work also involves active—very active—involvement from the ethnographer himself (a fact known from the days of Malinowski and emphasized, e.g., by Edmund Leach, but often overlooked). This provides ethnography with a peculiar, dynamic, and dialectical epistemology in which the *ignorance* of the knower—the ethnographer—is a crucial point of departure (Fabian 1995). Consequently, ethnography attributes (and has to attribute) great importance to the history of what is commonly seen as "data": the whole process of gathering and molding knowledge is part of that knowledge; knowledge construction *is* knowledge, *the process is the product* (see Blommaert 2001, 2004; Ochs 1979).

Summarizing, language in ethnography is something very different from what it is in many other branches of the language sciences, and so is the status of gathering knowledge. There is no way in which knowledge of language can be separated from the situatedness of the object at a variety of levels, ranging from microscopic to macroscopic levels of "context" and involving, reflexively, the acts of knowledge production by ethnographers themselves.

2.3. *Ethnography as counterhegemony*

Walter Benjamin once wrote that the task of historians was to challenge established and commonly accepted representations of history. History, in his view, was necessarily critical and counterhegemonic, and a science such as history only had a *raison d'être* to the extent that it performed this role of challenging hegemonies. Exactly the same remark was made by Hymes with respect to ethnography: it has the potential and the capacity of challenging established views, not only of language but of symbolic capital in societies in general. It is capable of constructing a discourse on social uses of language and social dimensions of meaningful behavior which differs strongly from established norms and expectations, and that is not aligned with the interests of the powerful. As we saw earlier, it takes the concrete functioning of these norms and expectations as starting points for questioning them in relation to the really available linguistic means that people actually have. In other words, it takes them as problems rather than as facts: "The fundamental vantage point must be what means of speech are available to a group and what meanings they find in

them and give them'' (Hymes 1996: 83). Central to all of this, therefore, is the *mapping of resources onto functions*: the way, for instance, in which a standard variety of a language acquires the function of ''medium of education'' while a nonstandard variety would not. This mapping is socially controlled; it is not a feature of language but one of society. Ethnography becomes critique here: the attributed function of particular resources is often a kind of social imagination, a percolation of social structure into language structure. Ethnography deconstructs this imagination and compares it to observable real forms and functions. It is thus, of necessity, a critical enterprise.

It is also critical in another sense. Whereas in most other approaches, the target of scientific method is *simplification and reduction of complexity*, the target in ethnography is precisely the opposite. Reality is kaleidoscopic, complex, and complicated, often a patchwork of overlapping activities. Compare it to a soccer game. Usually, when we watch a soccer game on TV, we are focused on the movement of the ball and on a limited number of players in the area where the ball is. We rarely see all 22 players in the same shot on TV: the lens directs our attention to a subset of the space, the actors, and activities. What we miss is the movement of the other players, the way they position themselves in anticipation of what comes next; we also miss the directions they give to one another, by shouting, pointing, pulling faces, or making specific gestures. The 22 players perform all sorts of activities simultaneously. All the players are constantly monitoring each other, and the coach does the same, shouting instructions to players from the sideline whenever he spots a potential problem. All of this happens at the same time, it is a series of seemingly unrelated—but obviously related—activities, very hard to describe in a linear and coherent narrative *because as an activity it is not linear and coherent* but multiple, layered, checkered, unstable.

A full account of a soccer game—and think of Goffman here—should include all of that, for all of it is essential in understanding what happens during the game. Players usually do not arrive at particular positions by accident or luck; they are there because of the complex interlocking activities that produce the game. Ethnography tries to do just that: describe the apparently messy and complex activities that make up social action, not to reduce their complexity but to describe and explain it. This is what makes ethnography a demanding approach: it is not enough (not by a very long shot) to follow a clear, pre-set line of inquiry, and the researcher cannot come thundering in with pre-established truths. The procedure is what Hymes (1980: 89) calls ''democratic'': ''a mutual relation of interaction and adaptation'' between ethnographers and the people they work with, ''a relation that will change both.'' Or to be more precise:

> The fact that good ethnography entails trust and confidence, that it requires some narrative accounting, and that it is an extension of a universal form of personal knowledge, make me think that ethnography is peculiarly appropriate to a democratic society. It could of course be reduced to a technique for the manipulation of the masses by the elite. As envisioned here, ethnography had the potentiality for helping to overcome divisions of society into those who know and those who are known. (Hymes 1996: 14)

Ethnography relies on "a mutuality not only of trust, but also of knowledge" (2002 [1969]: 53) and is in that sense a science that can emancipate by sharing knowledge with those who usually are left out of the circulation of knowledge. That too is counterhegemonic.

3. Democracy and voice: the politics of ethnopoetics

Throughout his career, one of Hymes's foremost empirical concerns was the analysis of Native American narrative. Many of his theoretical reflections on communicative competence, function and functional relativity, language–culture relationships, repertoires, and linguistic inequality emerged out of questions encountered in the kind of analysis that is now known as ethnopoetics. Some of his most theoretically innovative essays present elaborate ethnopoetic analyses: "Two types of linguistic relativity" (1966) and "Breakthrough into performance" (1975) are cases in point. And his book *Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality* (1996)—his theoretically most powerful statement—has ethnopoetic analysis as its engine. Ethnopoetics was the topic of *In Vain I Tried To Tell You* (1981) and of his latest *Now I Know Only So Much* (2003).[8]

Hymes's efforts in ethnopoetics can be seen from one angle as deviating from his other work, which focused on the ethnography of situated, contextualized speech events (Hymes [2003: 11] himself flags this "deviation" and amply motivates it; compare also Hymes 1981: chapter 1). Yet, there is more that ties ethnopoetics into his other work than separates it. Hymes's ethnopoetic work is one way of addressing the main issue in ethnography: to describe (and reconstruct) languages not in the sense of stable, closed, and internally homogeneous units characterizing parts of mankind, but as ordered complexes of genres, styles, registers, and forms of use: *languages as repertoires or sociolinguistic systems* (not only linguistic systems), in short. And ethnopoetics is urgently needed, because many languages are not only endangered as linguistic systems, but also, and perhaps even more critically, *as sociolinguistic systems*—genres, styles, ways of speaking becoming obsolete or unpracticed.[9] In Hymes's own words:

> sociolinguistic systems disappear before their languages, perhaps several generations before. If salvage linguistics is urgent, salvage sociolinguistics is doubly urgent. (Hymes 1966: 158)

Ethnopoetic analyses attempt to unearth culturally embedded ways of speaking—materials and forms of using them, that belong to the sociolinguistic system of a group (or groups), and that have a particular place in a repertoire due to their specific, characteristic form–function relationships. Such form–function relationships, Hymes argues, are complex and display "second linguistic relativity"—a relativity of *functions* rather than form (as in Whorf's "first" relativity) (Hymes 1966), causing a need to investigate functions empirically, that is, ethnographically.[10] In that sense, ethnopoetics fits into the general theoretical ambitions of the ethnography of speaking.

It also fits into Hymes's more general concerns with language functions, notably with narrative and performance. Hymes starts from what he calls "a narrative view of the world" (1996: 112), in which narrative is "a universal function" of language, subject, however, to all kinds of constraints and socioculturally framed restrictions on use: narrative is a way of using language which possesses limited legitimacy and acceptability (1996: 115). Furthermore, it is rarely seen as a vehicle for rational, "cognitive" communication, and often stereotyped as affective, emotional, and interpersonal (remember Bernstein's restricted codes). In contrast to this widespread view (both lay and specialized), Hymes sees narrative as a central mode of language use, in which cognitive, emotional, affective, cultural, social, and aesthetic aspects combine (see especially Hymes 1975).

They combine in *implicit form*—and here Hymes's approach to narrative starts to differ from that of many others (e.g., Labov), who focused on *explicit* form and *explicit contents*, and who saw narrative largely as a repository of explicitly voiced facts, images, and concerns. Consequently (and this defines much of the tradition of folklore studies), stories could be asked for, elicited, and performance could be invited, while its results were seen as *the* tradition, folklore, even "culture" of the performers. Hymes's approach differs fundamentally. To Hymes, the essence of narrative—what makes it poetic—is an implicit level of structure: the fact that stories are organized in lines, verses, and stanzas, connected by a "grammar" of narration (a set of formal features identifying and connecting parts of the story) and by implicit organizational patterns, pairs, triplets, quartets, etc. This structure is only partly a matter of awareness: it is the "cultural" dimension of narration; most speakers produce it without being aware of its functions and effects, and good narrators are those who

can stage a performance organized through "the synchronization of incident and measure" (Hymes 1996: 166).

Consequently, narration involves the blending of at least two kinds of "competence": the competence to organize experience, events, images in a "telling" way, and the competence to do so in a sequentially organized complex of measured form (1996: 198). This is not a random thing: narratives are "organized in ways that make them formally poetry, and also a rhetoric of action; they embody an implicit schema for the organization of experience" (1996: 121). More precisely, "the relationships between verses (...) are grouped in an implicit cultural patterning of the form of action, a logic or rhetoric of experience, if you will, such that the form of language and the form of culture are one and the same at this point" (1996: 139).

So implicitness—its recognition and interpretation—is central to Hymes's concerns. It is by recognizing that a lot of what people produce in the way of meaning is implicit, that we can reflect more sensibly

> on the general problem of assessing behavioural repertoire, and [alert] students to the small portion of cultural behavior that people can be expected to report or describe, when asked, and the much smaller portion that an average person can be expected to manifest by doing on demand. (Some social research seems incredibly to assume that what there is to find out can be found out by asking). (Hymes 1981: 84)

In other words, it is through investigating implicit form that we get to a vastly wider, richer, and complex domain of cultural-linguistic organization, one that has been overlooked by much of twentieth-century linguistics. This more complex domain is also a domain of more complex functions, the aesthetic (or "presentational," in Hymes's terms) functions being central to it. And for Hymes, narrative is the mode of language use in which such presentational functions coincide with denotational, cognitive, affective, and interpersonal ones.

Hymes's ethnopoetics addressed oral traditions that were, or were about to become, defunct. Many of his analyses address stories originally recorded, edited, and published by Sapir and other anthropologists of that generation. According to Hymes, the way in which such stories were recorded and later presented—as *prose not poetry*—had made them "function-less": they no longer had the capacity to fulfill the cultural and social roles they had in the societies that produced them. Ethnopoetics, then, was a technique used to restore such defunct traditions, a form of *functional reconstruction* (Blommaert 2006).

This could easily be read as a classic instance of salvage linguistics or salvage sociolinguistics, and nothing would be wrong with that. But once

again, now that we know a thing or two about Hymes's overtly political approach to ethnography, there is more. The effort of reconstruction is inspired by an acute awareness of inequality and a desire for equity. Reconstructing the functions of narratives is not just a matter of reconstructing latent cultural heritage; it is a politics of recognition which starts from a restoration of disempowered people as bearers and producers of valuable culture, over which they themselves have control: recognizing one's language, to Hymes, means recognizing one's specific ways of speaking, one's voice. It is, thus, an attempt to avoid an anthropology that only provides in "a defensive source of knowledge about the exploited of the world for those who exploit it" (2002 [1969]: 51). This is how Hymes concludes *In Vain I Tried To Tell You*:

> We must work to make visible and audible again that something more—the literary form in which the native words had their being—so that they can move again at a pace that is surer, more open to the voice, more nearly their own. (Hymes 1981: 384)

Voice—this is what functional reconstruction is about. Ultimately, what ethnopoetics does is to show voice, to visualize the particular ways—often deviant from hegemonic norms—in which subjects produce meanings. As mentioned earlier, in Hymes's view (most eloquently articulated in Hymes 1996), voice is the capacity to make oneself understood in one's own terms, to produce meanings under conditions of empowerment. (Note that Hymes's notion of voice differs from, and in many ways functions as a more flexible alternative to, Bakhtinian notions of voice). In the present world, such conditions are wanting for more and more people. The Native American storytellers are obvious victims of minorization, but Hymes extends the scope of ethnopoetic reconstructions in 1996 to include other marginal groups in society—African Americans, working-class college students, other minorities. Interestingly, such groups frequently appear to be the victim of a very Bernsteinian phenomenon: the negative stereotyping of part of their repertoire, the dismissal of their ways of speaking as illegitimate, irrational, not-to-the-point, *narrative* rather than factual (Bernstein would say: restricted rather than elaborate), and

> one form of inequality of opportunity in our society has to do with rights to use narrative, with whose narrative are admitted to have a cognitive function. (Hymes 1996: 109)

More in general, Hymes observes (alongside many others, e.g., Gumperz, Labov, Bourdieu) that "making sense" often, concretely, is narrowed to "making sense *in particular ways*," using very specific linguistic, stylistic,

and generic resources, thus disqualifying different resources even when they are perfectly valid in view of the particular functions to be realized. It is in this world in which difference is quickly converted into inequality that attention to "emic" forms of discursive organization takes on more than just an academic import and becomes a political move, aimed at the recognition of variation and variability as "natural" features of societies, and at recognizing that variation in cultural behavior can result in many potentially equivalent solutions to similar problems.

This, consequently, radicalizes the issue of diversity, because it shifts the question from one of latent potential equivalence to one of effective disqualification and inequality. If all languages are equal, how come some (many!) are not recognized even as languages? How come that the latent and potential equivalence of languages, in actual practice, converts into rigid language hierarchies? That potential equality is matched by actual inequality? That "unfamiliar pattern may be taken to be absence of pattern" (1996: 174)? Part of Hymes's answers is that diversity still requires deeper understanding as to its actual forms, structures, and functions. Misunderstanding of such aspects of diversity, often resulting from errors in past work or sloppiness in current work, precludes appreciation of diversity *as a solution*. It also precludes a critical understanding of diversity in society and of the power relations in which it is couched. It fails to live up to the emancipatory potential of ethnographic work and allows work to "drift backwards into the service of domination" (Hymes 2000 [1969]: 54).

In this respect, he is particularly hopeful that a different universal dimension of human sense making may be found in the numbered patterns he discovers in Native American texts. Such patterns, he submits, could recast visions of diversity:

> In sum, there lies ahead a vast work, work in which members of narrative communities can share, the work of discovering forms of implicit patterning in oral narratives, patterning largely out of awareness, *relations* grounded in a universal *potential*, whose *actual* realization varies. To demonstrate its presence can enhance respect for an appreciation of the voices of others. (Hymes 1996: 219; emphasis in original)

This is no longer just about developing a better, more accurate philology of native texts; ethnopoetics here becomes a program for understanding voice *and the reasons why voice is an object and instrument of power* with potential to include as well as to exclude. It becomes a critical *sociolinguistic* method that offers us a way into the concrete linguistic shape of sociocultural inequality in societies. Here is democracy again in Hymes's program, and ethnography is again the instrument for that.

4. Conclusions

Hymes's oeuvre is heartening to its readers, and those who get drawn to it are often attracted by the intensity of the argument he presents and by the clear opportunities he offers to build bridges between academic practice, social values, and political principle. It was a critical discourse analysis long before anyone laid claim to that term. It is a pity that its readership is so small. As mentioned before, students often only come across it in a massacred form devoid of the depth and scope it offers. And even among more sophisticated academics, his theoretical oeuvre is rarely explored—a fate he shares with one of his sources of inspiration, Benjamin Lee Whorf.

The effect is that his oeuvre, much like that of Whorf, remains an untapped source of theory of significance of current studies of language in society. Susan Ervin-Tripp's (in this issue) claim that "we have no fully developed contextual theory of language" is correct, but the different pieces we find in Hymes's oeuvre and in that of scholars inspired by his work offer already quite a bit in that direction. The theory he offers is contextual and is therefore critical. The link between both may be surprising to those who see context as a neutral canvas, as "background" to linguistic phenomena. It is not surprising to those who accept Hymes's view that context is a lived environment full of inequalities and constraints (see Collins, and Moore, in this issue). Consequently, his ethnography does not just address text, it addresses and questions context. It does so from within an elaborate epistemology and methodology in which the political is a fundamental feature, not an *a priori* or *a posteriori* claim to relevance by the analyst. This mature view of text and context, language and culture, speech, voice, and social life makes Hymes a theoretical source of fundamental importance to what we do.

Notes

1. Hymes has no problems whatsoever with the qualification of "philology." Defining ethnopoetic analysis, Hymes (1966: 141) writes: "In aim, the method is structural, but in execution it must also be philological." Note the "structural" here: Hymes (2003: 123) talks of ethnopoetics as a form of "practical structuralism."
2. The following sections are based on a paper by the author called "Ethnography as counter-hegemony"; International Literacy Conference, Cape Town 2001, downloadable from http://www.kcl.ac.uk/education/wpull.html. I am grateful to Dell Hymes, Brian Street, David Barton, and Ben Rampton for feedback and comments on the earlier version.
3. The journal *Ethnography* (launched in 2000) testifies to the impact of ethnography in a wide range of social sciences. An important, and frequent, contributor to the journal was

Pierre Bourdieu, operating alongside sociocultural and linguistic anthropologists and microsociologists. Bourdieu's own take on fieldwork and ethnography was exemplified in a special issue of *Ethnography* in 2004 (Wacquant 2004). Hymes (1996: 187–188) expresses reservations with regard to Bourdieu, comparing him unfavorably to Bernstein. Yet Bourdieu's work is fundamentally rooted in an ethnographic epistemology *pur sang*, and Bourdieu has, in that sense, contributed substantively to ethnographic theory, especially on the issues of reflexivity and generalization. See Wacquant (2004) and Blommaert (2005b).

4. Cf. Hymes (1980: 89; emphasis in original): "The earliest work that we recognize as important ethnography has generally the quality of being systematic in the sense of being *comprehensive*."
5. It may be interesting to point out that this view has percolated contemporary pragmatics. In the introduction to the *Handbook of Pragmatics* (Verschueren 1995), pragmatics is defined as a functional perspective on language and communication. Verschueren refers, significantly, to Sapir (1929) as a source of inspiration for this view.
6. At a very basic level, this pertains to the assumption that language *has* a function, and that its main purpose is *communication*. Truistic as it now may seem, at various points in the history of the language sciences these points required elaborate argument.
7. For those who wish to read up on this, Blommaert (2005a) provides an extensive discussion of this viewpoint.
8. The reflections in this section are based on a larger and more focused discussion in Blommaert (2006).
9. Moore (2000: 67) has more recently noted the emphasis "in the 'endangered languages' discussion (...) on languages qua grammatical systems (and/or systems of nomenclature), as artefacts (...) of cognition: something akin to the Elgin Marbles, perhaps, in the realm of conceptualization." See also Blommaert (2005c) for an ethnographic critique of such views of language endangerment. Hymes (1996) provides rich discussions of this point.
10. According to Hymes, modern linguistics has consistently overlooked the problem of functional relativity, often wrongly taking functional stability and formal variability as the central assumption of analysis. This point is forcefully developed in Hymes (1996); see also Hymes (1980: chapter 1). The need to empirically establish relations between forms and functions is what led Hymes to speak of ethnography as a "descriptive theory" (1986 [1972]).

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Jan Blommaert is Finland Distinguished Professor at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland and Professor of Linguistic Anthropology and director of the Babylon Centre at Tilburg University. He has published widely on language ideologies and language inequality in Africa and Europe, and he co-ordinated a Flemish Government collaboration program with the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. His publications include *Discourse: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), *Grassroots Literacy* (Routledge, 2008), *Language Ideological Debates* (edited, Mouton de Gruyter, 1999), *State Ideology and Language in Tanzania* (Köppe, 1999), and *Debating Diversity* (with Jef Verschueren, Routledge, 1998). Address for correspondence: Jozef Balstraat 11, B-2600 Berchem, Belgium ⟨Jan.blommaert@campus.jyu.fi⟩.