Writing a Linguistic Ethnography: a different kind of journey.
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"I call ethnography a meditative vehicle because we come to it neither as to a map of knowledge nor as a guide to action, nor even for entertainment. We come to it as the start of a different kind of journey."

Stephen Tyler[1]

1. Introduction

These remarkable and thought-provoking words were formulated by Stephen Tyler as a supplementary comment or footnote to his article on post-modern ethnography in Clifford & Marcus' very influential collection of articles dealing with various aspects of ethnography as text (Clifford & Marcus, 1986).

This paper is a reflection, a meditation as it were - to borrow Tyler's words - in which I try to provide an answer to the following intriguing question which was formulated in the call for papers for this seminar, a few months ago:

How can we develop a language of description to capture the dynamic aspects of communication?

In this paper, I want to

1) First of all, briefly contextualize, frame this question, this methodological issue in the wider scope of post-modern thinking.

2) Secondly, I would like to provide a sample analysis from my own ethnographic writing on weekly meetings in a British embassy, to illustrate how I have tried to tackle this methodological issue

3) Thirdly, I want to raise a discussion, not only as to whether I've tackled it right but also on further questions relating to issues of representation, if only to keep the debate going, and to keep the pressure on ethnographers to continue experimenting with and reflecting on the ways social reality is presented.

2. The experimental moment and a crisis in representation

2.1 From Modernism to Post-modernism: shifting perspectives

According to Marcus and Fisher (1986), ethnographers have in the last 20 or so years experienced a marked shift in the way that they understand themselves and others, leading to what they have called the "Crisis in Representation." This is part of a general shift in many different disciplines towards self-reflection and problematizing the relationships among the text, the author, and the work: the reflexive turn. This perspective has changed the object of anthropological study dramatically, from the investigation and description of a *culture* to an understanding of the dynamic encounter between divergent intersubjectivities. In recent years, the clear delineation between subject and object of modernist theories made way for a post-modernist emphasis on the relational quality and the dynamic interconnectedness of object and subject. Participant observation became a key to an understanding not only of the Other, but also of the Self, and of the Self through the Other and the Other through the Self.

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[1]See Tyler, 1986:140.

2.1 Developing a language of description: the pretence of representation

The question "How can we develop a language of description to capture the dynamics of communication" very much ties in with the Crisis in Representation and with the post-modernist concern and emphasis on the relational quality and the dynamic interconnectedness of object and subject. Yet, at the same time it contains a contradiction, which, I believe, somehow causes it to divert from post-modernist views. At least, this is what I want to bring up for discussion

Post-modernism challenges the pretence of representation. It rejects the dominant mode of modernist, ethnographic prose and its "visualist ideology of referential discourse, with its rhetoric of 'describing', 'comparing', 'classifying', and 'generalizing', and its presumption of representational signification" (Tyler, 1986:130).

So, if we follow the post-modern train of thought, for a linguistic ethnographer, what is at stake, is not 'the development of a language of description'. Because that would be recommitting the crime of modernist ethnographic prose. To aspire to a 'language of description' can only give us a sense of incompleteness and failure, since its goals are always out of reach (see also Tyler, 1986). No longer is the social world, as I've mentioned before, "to be taken for granted as merely out there full of neutral, objective, observable facts. Nor are native points of view to be considered plums hanging from trees, needing only to be plucked by fieldworkers and passed on to consumers. Rather, social facts, including native points of view, are human fabrications, themselves subject to social inquiry as to their origins. Fieldwork constructs may be seen to emerge from a hermeneutic process; fieldwork is an interpretive act, not an observational or descriptive one (Agar, 1986). This process begins with the explicit examination of one's own preconceptions, biases, and motives, moving forward in a dialectic fashion toward understanding by way of a continuous dialogue between the interpreter and the interpreted (see Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979)." (van Maanen, 1988:93)"

I want to argue that our main concern, our main goal and challenge, as linguistic ethnographers, should be exactly this (*to move forward in a dialectic fashion toward understanding by way of a continuous dialogue between the interpreter and the interpreted*). And I believe that the only way to capture this dynamic dialectic of perspectives and possible interpretations, is to develop a language which focuses on transparency, more than on description, a language of explicit and self-conscious deconstruction.

It is this meticulous process of deconstruction which I want to illustrate by means of an example from my own work.[2]

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[2]See Van Praet (2005) *Strategy and ritual in institutional encounters. A linguistic ethnography of weekly meetings in the British Embassy.* Unpublished PhD thesis. Ghent: Ghent University. https://archive.ugent.be/retrieve/1982/thesisellen+dcl.pdf
Accessed 9 March 2006.

3. on 'going native': looking for *native speakers of English*:

3.1 The setting

In the months of April, May and June 2000, I entered the closed and secluded community of the British Embassy in Brussels. I observed its weekly gatherings of Heads of Section, I interviewed the people who attended the meetings and tried to develop an understanding of the meeting's role in shaping, structuring and restructuring, forming and transforming, stabilizing and destabilizing the community's cultural system.

The sample analysis which I want to present today is taken from what van Maanen has called a *confessional* chapter (1988) in which I present an account of the early phase of fieldwork. Which values were at work at the moment of entry? What were the preconceptions that I brought to the encounter? What were the assumptions and the interests of those that I was about to study? What is the relationship between them? These are the (conventional) questions this chapter addresses.

In the analysis I explore the complex *reality* of the label, category and classification, *native speaker of English.* From the very start, in initial instances of interaction and correspondence, this label was highly prominent and value-laden. From the very start, it triggered an interpretative frame, a scenario which structured participants' perception of my presence. In the analysis, I lay bare the frames that were both unconsciously adopted and consciously constructed. In order to achieve this, I tried to answer the following questions. What are the contours of its connotations? What are the defining characteristics of *native speaker* from the perspective of a linguist? Which criteria and components assume prominence in the particular context of a diplomatic community? And finally, where do perspectives merge? Have they actually merged?

After we had met for the first time, after it had been decided that I could come and sit in on Tuesday meetings, the Deputy Head of Mission sent out the following e-mail to weekly meeting participants. The mail was intended for participants' eyes only. It was neither sent nor forwarded to me. The Deputy Head of Mission's secretary had welcomed me on the day of the first meeting, waving a print-out version of the e-mail message, which is how I managed to lay hands on it - accidentally on purpose:

Subject:	MIND YOUR LANGUAGE: WEEKLY MEETING 11 APRIL
Importance:	High

To Weekly Meeting Participants:

1. A linguistic researcher from Gent University - Ellen Van Praet - has asked to come to the Embassy to record internal staff meetings in order to analyse the language <u>native speakers</u> use in such situations. This is for a British Council-supported research project. The Ambassador has agreed in principle that she may do this.

2. **Ellen Van Praet will be present with her microphone for the first time at Tuesday's (11/4) weekly meeting.** The ground rules are that she will not record/not use/erase any confidential information we ask her to. She is interested in language not substance. She can be asked to leave the room at any time. Later in the process she may ask to record other smaller eg Section meetings; to use a video camera to analyse gesture, facial expression etc; and to interview meeting participants briefly eg on why they said what they said.

3. If anyone can offer any other meetings for recording, she would be delighted.

Figure 1: E-mail to the participants

Like a spyhole, the message allows unique and exceptional insight into the anxiety, resistance and expectations surrounding my entry into this closed community.

3.2 Mind your language

"If it is with outer humor, it must be with inner seriousness."

Robert Frost[3]

The tone of the e-mail message is double-layered, jokingly reassuring while at the same time firm and factual. The subject heading uses the admonition *MIND YOUR LANGUAGE.* In fact, this caveat proves a crucial cue in identifying and measuring participants' frame. *MIND YOUR LANGUAGE* very much sets the tone for a play frame, jokingly trivializing and downsizing the potential threat caused by my presence. The warning playfully alludes to the old-fashioned caution not to use swear-words, as in *Mind your language, young lady!* [4] *Mind Your Language* was also a well-known BBC sitcom in the 1970ies[5], deriving laughter from misunderstandings in an English evening class for foreign students. Teasingly, then, *MIND YOUR LANGUAGE* outlines a script in which participants are being judged by the quality of their English. In jest, they are cast in the role of pupils, with me in the role of the teacher correcting and reprimanding them for using strong language or making language mistakes. In short, *MIND YOUR LANGUAGE* jokingly provides reassurance for a scenario picturing me as recording, observing, examining, controlling, monitoring, supervising and possibly or even probably, assessing participants' language.

The play frame set by the subject heading is juxtaposed to the factual seriousness of the body of the text. The initial script is elaborated and refined, casting me as the *linguistic researcher* with participants in the role of *native speakers* (notice emphatic underlining).

3.3 Native speaker

"Native: adj. (not gradable) relating to the country or place where you were born."

Cambridge International English Dictionary

"A native speaker is speaker of a particular language who has spoken that language since earliest childhood."

Wordnet[6]

"Patriotism is your conviction that this country is superior to all other countries because you were born in it."

George Bernard Shaw

To a large extent, these framing cues build on the scenario which I had scripted for them.[7] My initial virtual contact with the Embassy and request for data explicitly and emphatically (notice the double mentioning) attributes to Embassy members the status of *native speakers of English*:

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[3]American poet (1874 - 1963).
[4]Example taken from Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary.
[5]The show aired from 1977 to 1979, then came back in 1986 for one season. Starring Barry Evans, Zara Nutley and Dino Shafeek.
[6]WordNet is an online lexical reference system whose design is inspired by current psycholinguistic theories of human lexical memory. English nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are organized into synonym sets, each representing one underlying lexical concept. Different relations link the synonym sets. WordNet was developed by the Cognitive Science Laboratory at Princeton University under the direction of Professor George A. Miller (Principal Investigator). See http://www.cogsci.princeton.edu/~wn/
[7]The frame which I had created was narrowed down considerably. In spite of detailed and substantial briefing on my part, the scope of the research project was drastically reduced to native language concerns only.

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To:              @brussels.mail.fco.gov.uk
From: Ellen Van Praet <ellen.vanpraet@rug.ac.be>
Subject: data quest
Cc:
Bcc:
Attached:

Dear Mr ████

I am a researcher at Ghent University, Belgium, reading for a PhD degree in English
Linguistics.

The data on which my research is based are mainly taken from meetings attended by native
speakers of English. To extend my corpus of data I am looking for native speakers of
English who would be willing to have some of their meetings recorded for research
purposes. Would the British Embassy be willing to co-operate in this respect? I look
forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely

Ellen Van Praet
Universiteit Gent-Engelse Taalkunde
Rozier 44
9000 Gent
09 264 36 47
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<u>Figure 2: E-mail to the Deputy Head of Mission</u>

The fact that I give so much prominence to *native speaker* in these initial instances of correspondence reflects the significance and value of the conceptual category to me as a linguist and researcher. The extent to which the category I impose is echoed by the community shows that this was where our values matched from the very start. Apparently, the classification *native speaker* was as crucial to me as it was to them. If this was how I perceived them, they wanted to be recognized as such.

In *The Presentation of Self* (1959), Goffman indicates that each self cries out for response. Look at my presentation, my role, how do you like it? Do you believe it? I am a lady-killer, I am handsome, I am clever, I am wicked. Substantiate my image of myself.

The extent to which the category *native speaker* is echoed by the community indicates that it responds to the role they envisage for themselves. It allows them to enact the role expected from them within the social reality of their community.

What role requirements, then, does *native speaker* live up to? My answer to this question will be multi-layered.

In an interview that took place against the background of the political power circus of the Euro 2000 football cup,[8] the Deputy Head of Mission stated the following:

[BE:09.05.00:1] 0.41 min.

S: Certainly f-from what I heard at the meeting you know I think the conclusion that we
       reached for example that the Home Office would co-ordinate but everybody would fit in to
                                  [that =
I: [mmm

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[8] The interview took place a few days after a media meeting at the Embassy for the Euro 2000 football cup. The purpose of the one-off meeting at the Embassy was to decide on the media and press strategy for Euro 2000. (Originally, the meeting would have taken place in London, involving all ministries and organizations in the UK with an interest in Euro 2000. When the meeting was relocated to Brussels, a number of organizations such as the British Police, NCIS and the Football Association decided not to attend the meeting. The meeting, then, was a gathering of government representatives only: Home Office and Foreign Office Representatives.)

S: = eh well I think was a sensible one and and shouldn't mean that there would be a certain coherence at least on the British side

I: mmmm

S: (1.1) it would be much harder to eh to achieve that on the the the y- know on the the Belgian side because (1.2) ( ) the Belgians would be dealing with their own (1.7) their own problems and their own media and (1.0) the instinct (1.1) won't necessarily always be: (0.5) eh **to: keep the British in the picture**.

The extract pertinently demonstrates the extent to which defending national interests is deeply ingrained in diplomatic culture: the basic *instinct* of a British diplomat is *to keep the British in the picture*.[9] Similarly, the Foreign and Common Wealth Office website[10] explicitly states that "it is the role of the Diplomatic Service to protect and promote British interests abroad".

Viewed from this perspective, the label and categorization *native speakers of English,* substantiates participants' projected role and identity as members of the Diplomatic Service, prepared to promote and defend the interests of Britain and the British people at all times.[11]

The interview with the Deputy Head of Mission furthermore shows how perceptions of identity in diplomatic thinking subtly carry meanings of difference. Emphasizing an opposition between *the Belgian side* and *the British side*, the extract is an illustration of the extent to which manifestations of diplomatic identity are rendered in terms of contrast and difference between the community whose interests the diplomat defends and promotes, and the community he resides in.

Highly similar, the category *native speaker* contains connotations of contrast and dichotomy. *Native speaker* sets members of a linguistic community apart from *non-native speakers.* If *native speaker* is what one is, non-native speaker is what one is not. *Native speaker* carries connotations of being distinct, separate and different from another language community.

Native speaker, then, substantiates participants' perception and presentation of themselves as members of a community with a distinct national, linguistic identity in the midst of a community with a different identity. It appeals to participants' role as expatriates in foreign-language surroundings.

Meanings of difference lie very close to understandings of deficit. From the perspective of a linguist, *native speaker* provokes ideas of language proficiency and competence. A native speaker provides a wealth of insights and intuitions, unconscious and perhaps unexamined understandings about language and what it can and should do. The idea that linguistic perfection solely stems from native speakers and that acquiring this perfection is ideal, is pervasive in a language learning and research context. *Native speaker* is laden with meanings of a superior, ideal and prestigious standard: a native speaker of English is someone who speaks the right variety of English.

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[9]The complex and sometimes conflicting concern of a diplomat to defend national and collective interests is a widely debated issue. Reflecting on the qualifications of an ambassador, Francis de Laboulaye, former French Ambassador to Brazil, Japan and the United States writes the following: "Today, therefore, one has to take account both of national and of collective interests, which means that an ambassador must be alert to the effects that the policies of his government may have on others. Unless he is able to encompass both the national and the collective dimension, he is not doing his job properly. [...] There can never be a stable equilibrium. What is essential is that the two concerns, the national and the collective one, be clearly understood and recognized at all times." (http://www.ediplomat.com/laboulaye.htm)

In his book *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* Henry Kissinger, former secretary of state, Nobel Laureate and a prominent diplomat, expresses contempt for figures who recoiled from the concept of national interest and distrusted the use of power unless it could be presented as being the service of some 'unselfish cause' – that is reflecting no specific American national interest. (Kissinger, 2001).

[10]See www.fco.gov.uk

[11]The above rejects the notion that a single international diplomatic culture has developed, which makes diplomats' native cultures largely irrelevant. It supports Cohen's (1991) observation that seasoned diplomats report that cultural differences have a significant impact and that the constitutive impact of cultures cannot be erased by mere exposure to other cultures.

Viewed from this stance, *native speaker* gives Embassy staff members the <u>privilege</u> of being a native speaker.

To which extent may connotations of linguistic elitism have appealed to participants? To which extent may diplomats have wished to be recognized as an elite?

This is a tricky question. Elitism is not something any diplomat would openly advocate, since it runs counter to the democratic ideal. On BBC Radio 4's programme *Today*, Robin Cook, Foreign Secretary at the time,[12] stepped up the government's attack on elitism by criticising Whitehall recruitment - including appointments in his own department. Mr Cook promised to ensure recruitment at the Foreign Office would be unshackled from traditional elitism. "We want to have a government for the many not the few - run by the people who represent the many," he said.

Nevertheless, the idea that diplomatic practice is something that other groups in society strive to emulate is persistent: the way diplomats do things is the right way. In an ethnographic study of the Danish Foreign Service, Mette Boritz (1998) reveals a covert, hidden and elitist attitude and culture among diplomats and illustrates this argument with a fragment from a book about etiquette by the diplomat Preben Eider (1990).

"Diplomacy is only a small, limited group in the international community. Yet, the rules of etiquette, also called 'protocol', which have developed within this circle through the centuries, have proved to set the standards, with an infectious influence on the rules of behaviour in the rest of society." (Eider, 1990:170, cited in Boritz: 1998:53)

This strongly suggest that participants may have readily accepted the role of *native speaker*, partly because it responds to a community-bound tendency to manifest a superior position vis-à-vis other groups in society.

Summarizing, one might conclude that the role of *native speaker* may have allowed participants to display a distinct cultural, national and linguistic identity. That accepting this role may correspond to their diplomatic duty and role to defend and promote the interests of the community into which they were born. That it may reflect their different and secluded position as *native speakers* in a foreign language community and may have appealed to a hidden cultural attitude and need to manifest and demarcate a special, exclusive, superior position in relation to other groups in society.

From a methodological perspective, the core message of the analysis, I believe, is this:

Behind *native speaker of English* lies an intricate and multilayered process of meaning-making and communication reflecting hidden and taken-for-granted practices. From the very start, the classification *native speaker of English* turned out to be a significant[13] trigger of interpretative frames, structuring participants' perception of <u>me</u> and at the same time allowing them to enact the role expected from <u>them</u> within the social reality of their community. It is by unravelling this hidden dynamic, this dialogic co-constructive process of meaning-making, by making it explicit in writing, by meticulously reconstructing it, by making it transparent through language, that I have tried to capture the dynamic which is at the heart not only of ethnography but of communication as a whole.

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[12]Robin Cook served as a Foreign Secretary under Tony Blair from 1997-2001, which covers the period in which fieldwork took place. On 8 June 2001, Jack Straw was appointed Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.
[13] Significant, because I may have been granted access to the community, partly on this basis.

4. Conclusion

I would like to end, again, with a citation, using the words of Clifford Geertz. "Believing, with Max Weber," writes Geertz, "that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." (1973:5) Therefore, "Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript- foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries." (1973:10)

And I want to add to these words that when writing a linguistic ethnography, I consider it a challenge to try and make the 'faded', 'the invisible' transparent through language. To unravel, deconstruct and reconstruct the complex interpretative schemes, the rich meaning-making processes in talk. To lay bare relationships of echo, dialogue and development and make the reader aware of the invisible interactive and dynamic process of meaning-making…

5. Discussion + questions

Does a post-modernist interpretative approach really avoid the pitfalls of the modernist pretence of representation?

How transparent can language be?

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