Liminal (Linguistic) Ethnography

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Linguistic Ethnography

☐ 'linguistic ethnography generally holds that, to a considerable degree, language and the social world are mutually shaping, and that close analysis of the role of language can provide both fundamental and distinctive insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural production in everyday activity'

from: Rampton, B., K. Tusting, J. Maybin, R. Barwell, A. Creese and V. Lytra (2004) *UK linguistic ethnography: a discussion paper*.

Linguistic Ethnography: ...... 'to a considerable degree, language and the social world are mutually shaping' ....

Proposing a 'moderate' social-constructionism

- Rejection of the taken-for-granted stance of positivism and empiricism;

- Cultural and historical relativity of all forms of knowledge;

- Processual and interactional nature of knowledge;

- Interdependence of knowledge and patterns of social action (Burr 1995).

Linguistic Ethnography: ..... 'close analysis of the role of language can provide both fundamental and distinctive insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of social and cultural production in everyday activity'

- Talk and interaction as deeply **problematic** – and imbued of cultural significance
- The **textualisation** of culture: dealing with the danger of reification
- **Culturally co-constructed mundaneity**: can it be translate through talk, and interpreted through linguistic analysis?
- The interpretation of the **power and politics** of historically-situated cultural practices

Liminal Linguistic Ethnography:
On the threshold.....

- **Implications for the ethnographer**: walking on the edge, looking in (gate-keeping; membership; gender; ethics)

- **Implications for linguistics**: the role of materiality and symbolism

- **Implications for the linguistic ethnographer**: can she bring it all together?

Liminality (and communitas)

- **The monastery is a spatio-temporal construction of opposites in balance**
  - ☐ Space and time as defining dimensions (but what about materiality?)
  - ☐ Members live on the edge of society but are constantly visited (challenged) by it =   e.g. hospitality;
  - ☐ Members live as a community but thrive on full development of individual potential
  - ☐ Lives regulated by the Rule (of St Benedict); but independent of most social routines that affect us

Liminality and *communitas*

■ The work of anthropologist Victor Turner:

☐ The Ritual Process (1969)
☐ Dramas, Fields and Metaphors (1974)

Liminality

- The vocabulary of *liminality* refers to a condition and to persons that 'are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (Turner 1969/1995: 95).

- According to Turner, liminality is a cultural manifestation of *communitas,* which is a mode of human interrelatedness 'as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatuts*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders' (Turner 1969/1995: 96).

Developing a methodology for the study of Liminality

The development of a common language is instrumental to the conduct of 'conversation' as "a process of two people understanding each other. ...it is characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says' (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 347)

Conversatio

- *Conversatio* (from the Latin *conversari*, the "act of living with", and *conversare* "turn about with,") points to the *attitude* of total involvement of the speaker with her interlocutor.

Doing *conversatio*

- [] The initial condition of limited access to the monastic experience suggested 'conversatio' with the monks as an attempt to develop some understanding…..

- [] The first round of encounters with the monks took the form of face-to-face individual conversations. When I approached the abbot in the spring of 2005, I said I would like to 'interview' the monks and had in mind semi-structured or even unstructured interviews. My interlocutors were therefore prepared for a relatively formal kind of exchange during which I was expected to ask questions. …..

- [] After the first two interviews, questions only served as prompts and I was careful not to 'direct' the conversation if my interlocutor was clearly enthused by the topic. Different personalities meant that some monks talked more extensively than others, or more animatedly, and were happy to be left to expand. Age was not a determining factor in this respect but I sensed that the two most senior monks, the current abbot and the former general superior, were quite content to respond within the question-answer structure. Others appeared to relax in their role of 'informants' and related incidents and anecdotes, opinions and observations, quips and quotations (Bargiela-Chiappini *Liminal (Linguistic) Ethnography* 2006: 14).

Dealing with materiality and symbolism or why linguistics alone is not enough to study the liminality of the monastery

☐ They [liminal rituals, symbols and myths] emphatically do not lend themselves to being reduced to the terms of practitioners of a single discipline or subdiscipline, such as the various and opposed schools of psychology, emotionalists (p. 258) and intellectualists, the various schools of sociologistic reductionism from the followers of Radcliffe-Brown to those of Levi-Strauss, or philosophers and theologians who may tend to neglect the contextual involvement of these phenomena with the social structure, history, economy, and ecology of the specific groups in which they occur. What we do not want is a Manichean separation of what is purely intellectual or spiritual in such pivotal religious phenomena from what is material and specific. Nor should we separate – in considering the liminal symbol – *something* which offers itself to experience from *someone* who actually does experience (Turner 1974, pp. 257-8; original emphasis)