

Linguistic Ethnography

This lecture describes linguistic ethnography and its methodological and analytical contribution to the study of language and social life. It provides examples of its eclectic stance of combining different traditions of discourse analysis with ethnography and debates the opportunities and drawbacks of disciplinary and theoretical diversity. It describes two key issues in linguistic ethnography. The first relates to interdisciplinarity and the second to the challenges linguistic ethnography faces in the post-modern era. It also looks at the balance of different methods of data collection (ethnographic field notes and interactional transcripts) and describes the relationship between the two. Several empirical studies are discussed in order to illustrate linguistic ethnography's application in the study of social contexts. Finally, team ethnography is put forward as a means to introduce voice, diversity and complexity into linguistic ethnographic accounts.

It will deal with two key issues in linguistic ethnography. The first relates to the interdisciplinarity of linguistic ethnography. The discussion here will focus on the possibilities and limitations of disciplinary openness. The second key issue is linguistic ethnography's social constructivist and postmodernist orientation and the challenge this presents for a methodology traditionally predicated on local and situated action.

While heavily indebted to early work in the ethnography of communication, linguistic ethnography offers a new perspective relevant to researchers working in the social sciences in post-modernity. Substantial developments in US linguistic anthropology, and the turn to post-structuralist accounts of discourse and meaning making in the research literature in the United Kingdom and Europe, have allowed linguistic ethnography to draw on more hybrid literatures in its analytical frameworks than those traditionally associated with the ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1968). Linguistic ethnography argues that the combination of linguistics with ethnography – and their different analytical tools – offers a greater set of resources than each field of study could offer on its own. Rampton et al. (2004) describe the linguistic ethnography endeavour as an 'enabling mechanism', and argue for leaving the intellectual space in linguistic ethnography open in terms of the kind of work which might emerge. In addition to this enabling potential, this chapter has also outlined dilemmas and criticisms facing ethnography, including the need to move forward methodologically, given the radical changes in key conceptualizations in the field.