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Reinventing Linguistic Ethnographic Fieldwork During the COVID-19 Pandemic[1]

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ABSTRACT:
Our paper discusses the methodological implications of an ethnographic linguistic research project in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Starting from pertinent definitions of linguistic ethnography and interpretations of the field, we offer a demonstration of the process in which this particular participatory research project was faced with the fact that the field became unavailable and inaccessible for the non-local participants. We argue that moving the research online in this case does not mean a shift to "virtual ethnography" (Hine) or "digital ethnography" (Varis), but provides an example for the research site as an emerging construct which adds to the complexities of ethnographic research.

Keywords: linguistic ethnography, fieldwork, field, Csángó Students' Hall

1. Introduction

When schools were closed due to the coronavirus pandemic in Romania in March, 2020, our research team had just started working on a new project entitled *Language revitalisation, socialisation and ideologies among youth living in the Csángó Students' Halls*. Funding was approved in December 2019, we had a kick-off meeting on January 16, 2020 in Budapest and the following day, seven of us travelled to Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda to start fieldwork. At that time we struggled with the usual problems an international and interdisciplinary research group

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faces: different academic backgrounds, different takes on the issues on hand, different fieldwork experiences and the most important of all: a commitment to participatory research and all its intricacies.

Fieldwork did not go exactly as planned, nevertheless, it seldom does. When we left Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda, we knew we had to work on building trust in the local participants, on persuading and assuring suspicious gatekeepers and parents, on exploring the data and on understanding the context. Participatory projects were set in motion, dates of further meetings were set. Then the pandemic hit and suddenly the world came to a standstill.

Our paper gives a methodological overview of the difficulties of doing linguistic ethnographic research with this particular case in mind, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Ethnography, linguistic ethnography and possible digital approaches

It is not our goal to provide an overview of the dynamic relationship between (socio)linguistics and ethnography, nor the epistemological and philosophical shifts that transformed the two fields of study (such as the post-structuralist turn or aspects of glocalisation) and gave momentum to their combination in linguistic ethnography, as many have done this before us (see Rampton, Maybin, and Roberts 2014; Snell, Shaw and Copland 2015). We wish, however, to stress that ethnography today is understood as "far more than a complex of fieldwork techniques" (Blommaert and Jie 2020: 19), being "part of a programme of scientific description and interpretation" (Blommaert and Jie 2020: 19).

According to Rampton, Maybin, and Roberts, "meaning takes shape within social relations, interactional histories and institutional regimes, produced and construed by agents with expectations and repertoires that have to be grasped ethnographically" (Rampton, Maybin, and Roberts 2014: 4), while "language appears in reality as performance, as actions performed by people in a social environment" (Blommaert and Jie 2020: 22). These are some of the reasons why linguistic ethnography proved to be the pertinent paradigm for description and interpretation in the case of the research project in question, and not only because of methodological considerations.

As it will be shown later, in the very first months of our project we were forced to expand our scope to the online: what was planned as an offline fieldwork with a participatory approach (although we considered possibilities of integrating online linguistic practices of the pupils in the project) was soon to become a research conducted exclusively online. Therefore, we believe it is imperative to consult the existing theoretical and methodological literature on online ethnography.

During the past two decades, a new body of research has emerged that focuses on the digital approaches in linguistic ethnography,

adjusting themselves "to be able to address these new environments and their influence on communication, social relationships and societies at large" (Varis and Hou 2019: 229). Varis and Hou distinguish two waves in the history of exploring language on the internet and computer-mediated communication: the first wave focused solely on the medium, and thus "data were just conceptualised in isolation" (Varis and Hou 2019: 230) from their discursive and social contexts, and online communication was imagined as being "distinct, homogeneous and indecipherable to outsiders" (Androutsopoulos 2008: 420). The second wave of such research was greatly influenced by "pragmatics, sociolinguistics and discourse studies, emphasising situated language use and linguistic varieties" (Varis and Hou 2019: 231).

Recent studies have stressed the integrated nature of contemporary internet, where digital communication plays an integral part in people's lives (Varis and Hou 2019: 232). In his paper *From groups to actions and back in online-offline sociolinguistics*, Blommaert (2019) talks about the online-offline nexus, meaning that "the online world is now fully integrated with the offline one", where all of our activities are somehow and to some extent affected by online infrastructures. Although we agree that the complexity of any social phenomenon can only be explored in this online-offline nexus, moving our project online intended to access local knowledge in a computer-mediated environment.

3. The presentation of the research project as it was originally outlined

Our research project carried out over a four-year period (2019–2023) investigates how the mostly high-school students living in the Csángó Students' Hall from Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda get along in the Hungarian-speaking environment of a Transylvanian town, how they relate to their Moldavian homes, and how they develop the language and other practices of belonging and differentiation (Bodó and Lajos 2020: 42). The research aims to address the sociolinguistic characteristics of the day-to-day social interactions of the speakers participating in the Moldavian Hungarian language revitalisation programme.

The current project has numerous antecedents as over the last one and a half decade, members of the research team carried out several studies in Moldavia (Bodó 2012; Heltai 2014; Laihonen, Kovács, and Snellman 2015; Bodó, Fazakas, and Heltai 2017; Bodó and Fazakas 2018; Laihonen 2018) and other methodologically relevant projects (Bodó, Kocsis, and Vargha 2017; Bodó, Szabó, and Turai 2019). We view our research as both interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and transsectoral, this latter aspect being realized through the active involvement of local participants in the decision-making processes regarding our research. The novelty of the project is conferred by the fact that researches in the East-Central European region aimed at dismantling hierarchies

between the researcher and the researched by involving those concerned in the academic work are quite rare.

As we have stated above, our project is intended to be a linguistic ethnography; thus, it is determined by the desire to reflect the perspective of its participants. As our objective is to observe the day-to-day interactions of those participating in language revitalisation, we do not intend to create and enforce contexts of language use controlled by the researchers. Therefore, the pupils participating in the research are free to decide when they make recordings of their interactions, whether they hand these over to us fully or partially, or at all. They are also invited to provide their very own insight in interpreting these recordings, that being so, the participants will be the ones to identify language features deemed socially meaningful in the interactions, and to categorise them as belonging to Hungarian, Csángó, Romanian or any other named language.

We also aimed to carry out a research that is participatory in its nature which implies the active involvement of the participants, thus enforcing what Appadurai calls "the right to the tools through which any citizen can systematically increase that stock of knowledge which they consider most vital to their survival as human beings and to their claims as citizens" (2006: 168). We started with the intention of offering space and platforms to the participants to formulate their own interpretations regarding the processes of language revitalisation that influence linguistic identity, shaping this way the academic analyses on the matter.

In the following we aim to reflect on how the original plans of this participatory ethnographic project had to be restructured due to a "participant" we did not take into account: a global pandemic and the resulting political, social and administrative decisions that were made in order to protect the population and mitigate the multifaceted effects of the new coronavirus.

4. Interpretations of the field of research

Blommaert and Jie point out in their guide on ethnographic fieldwork that "the 'field' is a chaotic, hugely complex place" (2020: 13). This is true in our case as well. The ethnographic approach means that fieldwork is "an intellectual enterprise, a procedure that requires serious reflection *as much as* practical preparation and skill" (Blommaert and Jie 2020: 14).

The object of investigation was imagined as spatially and temporally somewhat determinable: in the four years of the project we were to conduct our fieldwork mostly in Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda among Csángó pupils who used to attend Hungarian classes in their respective villages in the Moldavian region of Romania, either in schools or as extracurricular activities, classes organised as part of the efforts to revitalise the Hungarian language in those areas.

The group of participants was planned to include non-local participants (the ones with the academic background, what non-participatory projects would call the researchers) and the local participants, pupils currently living in the student halls, the educators responsible with running the institution, as well as any others who the participants were open to include in the group (teachers, parents, pupils who used to be part of the language revitalisation programme but decided to continue their education closer to home and in Romanian, etc.). We were aware of the fact that the group of participants would dynamically change every school year as the pupils who graduated were to leave while new participants would arrive, and we were also open to the local participants' decisions to leave the project and eventually re-join it.

In hindsight, another of Blommaert and Jie's statements proved to be of particular importance to us. According to the authors, "everyday life will never adjust to your research plan; the only way forward is to adapt your plan and ways of going about things to the rules of everyday reality" (Blommaert and Jie 2020: 13) and with the outbreak of the pandemic, Romanian schools were closed and teaching was to be continued online. That meant that the Csángó pupils learning in Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda had to move back home, and that the students' halls were also closed. The field as we had conceptualised it, became inaccessible, and in order to fulfil our research obligations we had undertaken, we needed to come up with new ways to come in contact with each other and the field.

Previously planned meetings and workshops of the research group were moved online, and thus the non-local participants of the research project could join regardless of their location. In an effort to stay connected with the research field, we invited a key figure in the administration of the students' hall to take part in these online discussions. Relying on her expertise of the field, we started working on potential online projects which could give some kind of an access to local knowledges, as it became obvious that communication with minors in this context would imply limitations the participants were not able to overcome.

5. Reinterpreting the field in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

In the spring of 2020 we asked this key figure to connect us with former pupils who used to live in the Csángó Students' Hall in Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda during their high-school years. As a result, between May 7 and May 23 we facilitated a number of 8 conversations with a total of 23 participants adding up to 8 hours of recordings.

Reaching out to the former students started with the key figure from the administration making contact, informing them about the project, and asking them to sign up for a conversation in groups of 3 or 4. Once the dates and times of these events were fixed, we emailed each of the

former students providing them with more information about the project, the ethical aspects involved and the fact that two of the non-local participants would join them in these conversations. We wanted to make sure that the non-local participants did not outnumber the local ones, thus in one instance when only one person signed up for a given date, only one of the non-local participants was present. The conversations took place on a secure institutional Google Meet platform, and after the explicit consent of each of the participants, they were recorded via the built-in option of Google Meet. The recordings are stored on the project's Google Drive that can presently be accessed only by the non-local participants.

The former students were asked to talk about their current lives, the circumstances of their decision to move to Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda as high-school students, their lives in this town and their memories of the students' hall. During the conversations we found out that some of them are currently living abroad, we had participants joining from London, Budapest, Germany, France, and from different regions of Romania: university centres, smaller towns and even their respective native villages in Moldavia where some of them live or returned due to the quarantine.

The narratives of their high-school years and their shared experiences opened up new possibilities of interpreting our field of research and urged us to formulate questions regarding this particular case: what is the field? Who and what defines the field? Is it the people? As we have stated above, we were aware of the fact that the group of local participants would dynamically change with every school year. Is it the geographical location or even the building itself? The students' hall is located in a Transylvanian town, however, several different buildings were home to the institution in the past few years, as its permanent location is still being finalised. Is it the institutional context? There have been significant changes in the entities responsible for the maintenance and funding of the students' hall. Is it the social interactions and practices of the participants? Definitely yes, however these can only take place in the particular ideological context provided by the institution itself. Moreover, "locally performed social actions can involve far more people than those actually present locally" (Blommaert and Jie 2020: 137).

Further questions can be formulated regarding the ways in which non-local participants interact with the field: do their homes become parts of the field during an online conversation? Where are the boundaries between the private and the public spheres and does the separation of "the field" from "home" as a tenet of the practice of fieldwork still hold? According to Gupta and Ferguson, "in an interconnected world we are never really 'out of the field'" (1997: 35), and ethnographers need to come to terms with the fact that notions of "here" and "elsewhere" should not be assumed to be features of geography, but "sites constructed in fields of unequal power relations" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 35).

6. Conclusions

With the COVID-19 pandemic, the localities of fields that were taken for granted are indefinitely inaccessible. These circumstances are forcing researchers to reinterpret their notions of the field and to make use of existing methodological knowledge stemming from scholarly work that focuses on the integration of online and offline fields, even though we do not consider our project part of digital ethnography. The evolution of the pandemic and of the measures taken in order to contain it prevented us from carrying out fieldwork as originally planned. As we are also bound by the commitments undertaken in the government-funded research grant, we had no choice but to expand our research online, involving new participants.

With the above in mind, we argue that the conversations we had with the former students can in fact be interpreted as an integral part of the offline fieldwork we started in Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda in January. All of the "local" participants in the online conversations used to be part of the context of inquiry: they participated in the language revitalisation programme at home, during their high-school years they lived in a building that was home to the institution at that time, and their social interactions and practices were defined by their new realities and expectations they faced in both their public and private lives.

On the one hand, as the students' hall itself is currently not functioning, the field is equally inaccessible for everyone: it will emerge in the memories of present and past local participants alike, be they students who finished high-school 10 years ago or only last year. On the other hand, it is important to stress that although the conversations facilitated with former students seem to appertain to classical approaches in linguistic ethnography, the non-local participants of the research project decided to continue work with the ones willing to join. We have had several reflexive discussions with two of the former students of the students' hall, who participated in the conversations in May and we are in the process of elaborating two projects reaching out to groups of participants who used to partake in Hungarian language revitalisation processes.

In our subsequent reflexive meetings with the two former students, now participants in our research project, they shared that the conversations we had in May "did not feel like research": one of them said that even though she is in a daily contact with the girls she used to share a room with in the students' hall, they do not usually talk about their lives in Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda, and that remembering those years was a definitely positive, nostalgic experience, while the other one (who was actually in the kitchen cooking during our conversation in May) even compared remembering her high-school years to the practice of confessing.

Varis and Hou state that "instead of being predefined, a field emerges in the process of the ethnographer's reflexive engagement" (2019: 234),

and this is one of the most substantial outcomes of moving our research online: what started as a merely methodological issue, resulted in new dimensions of approaching the field itself, further nuancing our future ethnographic interpretations and the aspects of participatory research. All of the above consolidate our understanding of such emerging research fields, where computer-mediated communication facilitates practices of remembering and being "there" without actually being there.

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