Micro-analysis & ‘structures of feeling’: Convention & creativity in linguistic ethnography

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MICRO-ANALYSIS AND ‘STRUCTURES OF FEELING’
CONVENTION AND CREATIVITY IN LINGUISTIC ETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract

There is currently a reflexive debate in US linguistic anthropology about the necessity, development and shape of general models of language as culture (Duranti 2003). Coming from outside, but following Hymes’ view that “problems lead where they will… and relevance commonly leads across disciplinary boundaries” (1969:44), this paper takes the line that modelling is necessarily limited by the commitment to particularity in both ethnography and interactional micro-analysis. In their response to particularity and the fact that actors continually manage to produce actions that are “slightly ‘off’ the most conventional version of what they could have been expected to do” (Varenne & McDermott 1998:177), some researchers look respectfully away (conversation analysis), while others attempt descriptions of artful performance. Even so, though he welcomes the analysis of performance (in Richard Bauman’s sense) as an improvement on the “collection and analysis of texts”, Hymes sees this as only the second moment of three: “Continuous with the first [moment - the collection and analysis of texts -] and the second [- the analysis of performance -], this third is the process in which performance and text live, the inner substance to which performance is the cambium, as it were, and the crystallised text the bark” (1996:118). “Third moment’ experiences like this, though, involve “something a bit beyond our current concerns” (ibid).

Attempting to make sense of data on young Londoners stylising Deutsch, posh and Cockney, I have found myself glancing from interactional sociolinguistics towards the kinks of ‘inner speech’, referring to condensation symbolism, fantasy and fear (Rampton 2002, 2003). To justify this (and to clarify my methodological demeanour), I have invoked Raymond Williams’ ‘structures of feeling’. But are moves like these a dereliction of scientific responsibility, a transgressive invasion of Hymes’ ‘third moment’, or just a different kind of essentialism?

Introduction

First of all I’d like to thanks Sandro Duranti and CLIC for the invitation to participate in this seminar, and also for the marvellous description of both ‘work and social context’ in the account we were sent of three paradigms in US linguistic anthropology (Duranti 2003). I don’t think I can really say I’m a linguistic anthropologist myself, I’m not North American, and I’m not entirely sure I agree with Sandro’s periodisation of the figures he refers to, even though to me they’re really only uncles and aunties, not academic parents. But he certainly captures the stream of activity that I’m involved in when we refers to people with “no formal training in linguistics but a commitment to language, discourse, or, more broadly, communication as a central locus of social life” (p 334), and he’s also absolutely right in characterising the guiding question for someone like me as: “What can the study of language contribute to the understanding of this particular social/cultural phenomenon (e.g. identity formation, globalisation, nationalism)” (p 332). In fact, in view of Ahearn and Rumsey’s worries about people like me (2003:335, 2003:339), I’d like to use my time to try and state

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1 I’m not at all sure how much they’d go along with the views expressed in this paper, but I owe an enormous amount to work and discussion with Roxy Harris, Jan Blommaert, Jim Collins, Monica Heller, Stef Slembrouck and Jef Verschueren. But some of the more collective products of these interaction can be seen in e.g. Harris & Rampton 2002, 2003 and Blommaert et al 2001, 2003.

2 “I believe that it is essential to provide linguistic anthropology graduate students with a good background in formal linguistics… I would argue that graduate students in linguistic anthropology should be urged to acquire at least a basic grounding in typology and formal grammatical analysis” (Ahearn 2003:335). “I share Duranti’s
the relevance of this work, ending up by saying a bit more about the Hymes and Gumperz inheritance outside North American linguistic anthropology.

In my contribution today, I’d like to talk about Ray McDermott, Raymond Williams, micro-analysis and ‘structures of feeling’. I started my working life as a school-teacher, and I can contextualise what I’ve got to say straightaway by saying that one of the main things I do in my fieldwork as a researcher is stick radio-microphones on adolescents. Right now I’m looking at interaction in an inner London secondary school, with between 9 and 16 hours per individual, and data like this gives you quite a close-up view of everyday activity - you hear what people do when you’re not around, when they’re on the move outside institutional set pieces in corridors etc, and inside institutional set-pieces like lessons, you get good access to Scott’s ‘hidden transcript’ - sub rosa jokes, chats, hummings, mutterings and complaints, both during official business and after. And that’s my first reason for looking to Ray McDermott and his collaborators.

McDermott et al
Working with a number of different collaborators, McDermott has spent about 30 years doing micro-ethnography in urban schools. Among the influences he lists in his 1998 book with Hervé Varenne, there’s Garfinkel, Schegloff, Birdwhistell, Kendon, Bakhtin, Hymes and Vygotsky, and so I don’t think there’s anything unique or distinctive about his theory of communication, out-of-step with the ideas we’re talking about today. But in focusing on the ways that school and classroom processes produce educational failure, McDermott treats communication as cultural politics, and maybe because he works in a university department of education, where there’s always a chance you’ll be heard by policy-makers and professionals, he’s also very reflexive about the politics and ramifications of research.

In a paper with Tylbor, for example, conversation gets construed as collusion.
McDermott & Tylbor start with Dewey’s view that

“‘all action is an invasion of the future, of the unknown…’ (1922:12):… Without a tentative agreement about what the future is (no matter, for the moment, how fanciful or harmful it might be), how else could conversationalists achieve precise understandings from ambiguous materials without every really saying what is going on” (McDermott & Tylbor 1986:128)

But rather than dwelling on what this tentative agreement is and how it gets indexed, they emphasise the subjective investment that this involves, talking about ‘clean’ and ‘dirty’ versions of collusion - ‘collusion as hope’ and ‘collusion as treachery’.3 They’re highly attentive to the institutional conditions that invite people to deceive each other,4 and they’re particularly interested in what they don’t talk about:

“By its emphasis on institutional treachery, a notion of collusion… raise[s] the question of what people have to arrange not to talk about in order to keep their conversation

3 “Participation in social scenes requires that members play into each other’s hands, pushing and pulling each other toward a strong sense of what is probable or possible, for a sense of what can be hoped for and/or obscured… At its cleanest, conversational collusion is well-tuned to people’s finest hopes about what the world could be… At its dirtiest, people’s collusion amount to a well-orchestrated lie that offers a world conversationalists… can pretend to live by, a world everyone knows to be, at the same time, unrealisable, but momentarily useful as stated” (pp 124,125).

4 “The collusion [perspective]… takes it that the work members do to construct a consensus (that we are all learning how to read) while allowing, ignoring, and hiding important exceptions (namely, that some of us are here only to not get caught not knowing how to read) is a direct product of the institutional conditions under which… teacher[s] and children are asked to come to school” (1986:130)
properly consequential within the institutional pressures that invade their lives from one moment to the next… If we could ask more questions about what issues our every institution has us avoiding, we would not only have a better account of social structure, but a better account of the language tools people use to build social structure” 1986:137

Much of this is congruent with the mainstream pragmatics and interaction analysis. McDermott & Tylbor themselves link the provisional ‘as if’ qualities of collusion to technical notions of ‘trust’, ‘frame’, ‘context’, and ‘working consensus’ in Garfinkel 1967, Goffman 1974 and others, and concern for the ‘deficiencies’ and ‘exuberance’ of speech - for the fact that every utterance says both less than you want and more than you plan - animates Goffman’s ritual constraints and Brown & Levinson’s politeness (Goffman 1981; Brown & Levinson 1987; Becker 1995:299; Garfinkel 1967:70). But whereas a lot of pragmatics centres its analysis positively on the cognitive, linguistic and interactional strategies and procedures that people use to accomplish understanding, McDermott first thematises the specific historical and cultural conditions that produce the unsaid, to the point where in the notion of ‘collusion’, ideology is written into the basic definition of communication. And he’s also different, I’d say, in worrying long and hard about what’s not said and in taking the silences, deficiencies and exuberances as a moral and political cause. We can see this, for example, in his account of ‘inaudibleness’, which is not just produced as “a wellorchestrated moment in which inarticulate is invited, encouraged, duly noted and remembered, no matter how much lamented” (1988:38), but also as an “invitation to listen in a new way” (1988:40). Just as important, he’s also concerned with ‘breakthrough’, where “words flow, new things are said, and the world is temporarily altered” (ibid p 42).

All this obviously appeals to me with the ‘hidden transcript’ data that I’ve got from my radio-mics - all the stuff that’s unheard or erased in normative classroom discourse. But on its own, that underplays the other side of McDermott’s significance, his importance not just in inserting cultural politics into micro-analysis, but also in insisting on the importance of fine-grained interaction analysis for cultural theory. Micro-analysis entails some quite particular methodological commitments, and we can see these in Varenne & McDermott’s comments on social construction:

“‘construction’ as a concept intended to highlight the centrality of practical activity by concrete individuals is too central to be used imprecisely. It is not easy to capture people in the real time of their practice. When we perform practical research tasks..., apparently paradoxical things happen as we notice how actors are both continually sensitive to matter they cannot be said to have constructed, and also slightly ‘off’ the most conventional version of what they could have been expected to do…. [W]hat subjects construct in the real time of their activity can never be said to be what it would be easiest to say it is. What subjects construct may never be any particular thing that any audience may label it to be. We, as analysts, must always take the position that it is something more, something other, something that cannot be named without replacing it within the very frame the act attempted to escape” (Varenne & McDermott 1998:177; see also Williams 1977 5).

5 Raymond Williams takes a broadly comparable position in his criticism of reification in cultural analysis: “In most description and analysis, culture and society are expressed in an habitual past tense. The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is this immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products. What is defensible as a procedure in conscious history, where on certain assumptions many actions can be definitively taken as having ended, is habitually projected, not only into the always moving substance of the past, but into contemporary life, in which relationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes. Analysis is then centred on relations between these produced institutions, formations, and experiences, so that now… only the fixed explicit forms exist, and living presence is always, by definition, receding… [I]t is the reduction of the social to fixed forms that remains the basic error. Marx often said this, and some Marxists quote him, in fixed ways, before returning to fixed forms” (1977:128)
People have the capacity to act unconventionally, and so researchers should expect to have to struggle to make sense of what their subjects are doing. In this respect, Varenne & McDermott’s approach to the tension between convention and creativity, structure and agency shares a lot with ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, with their sensitivity to ‘artful practices’ and ‘another first time’, their ‘unmotivated listening’ in preliminary data-sessions, and their “aesthetic of slowness and smallness” (Heritage 1984:122-3; Garfinkel 1967; Silverman 1999; Schegloff 1999;577-8). Indeed, there’s a lot in common with other approaches, like Becker and Johnstone’s ‘modern philology’ (Becker 1995; Johnstone 1997), and in fact working to this kind of rhythm, analysis involves something of an aesthetic experience, likened by Becker to watching “a slowly developing photograph” (1995:309). But McDermott and his collaborators bring out the political implications. If the process of analysis is rapid, tidy and definitive, then it inevitably favours the conventional aspects of human conduct, ignoring the distinctiveness and the creative agency in what’s been said or done. And since agency and the capacity to break with conventional structures and dominant discourses are fundamental to cultural politics, quick-&-neat analysis can be seen as a form of intellectual imperialism, using whatever ‘parsing’ framework the analyst prefers to overrule the participants’ own alertness to the matrix of constraints and possibilities problematically on-hand in any activity being investigated.6 Overall, I’d say that in Ray McDermott’s work, micro-analysis meets Raymond Williams - Billig marries Schegloff (1999) - and we end up with methodological tools and a historical and political perspective that we can use to take a close empirical look at both hegemony and creative practice in everyday activity - ‘hegemony’ and ‘creative practice’ in Williams’ sense.7

What are the implications of all this for models, procedures, and the reproduction of disciplines?

**Models and their limits**
According to McDermott & Tylbor, “linguists have not had enough trouble with … duplicitous talk” (1986:129), and there’s obviously a long tradition criticising linguistics for the neglect of creative improvisation (e.g. Volosinov 1973:45-63; Williams 1977:21-44). But linguistics and other kinds of structural analysis are clearly crucial aids for analysis of the conventions and constraints within which people struggle to produce their lives, as is pragmatics seen as the study of conventional inferencing (Levinson 2001). Among other things, the analysis of communicative conventions tells us a great deal about the ‘technologies of power’,8 and these conventions can also form part of emergent, residual or counter-hegemonic cultural formations, not just dominant ones. Indeed, if you want to find creative agency, you need to be extremely sensitive to the conventional expectations involved in the moment-to-moment unfolding of interaction, following the participants right up to the point where, in Heritage’s words, they have “a grasp, if only tacit, of the specific contextual moments in which they should act, and of how various possible courses of action will fulfil or disappoint the constitutive expectancies attached to those moments” (1987:244). So an

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6 These parsing frameworks can be very varied in their political colour, and inattentiveness to the situated particularity of action is sometimes found, for example, in leftist critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1989; for discussion, see Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000; Blommaert 2001; Verschuuren 2001. See also the note above).

7 Williams’ characterises *hegemony* as “the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes”, “a saturation of the… whole substance of lived identities and relationships, to such a depth that the pressures and limits of what can ultimately be seen as a specific economic, political and cultural system seem to most of us the pressures and limits of simple experience and common-sense” (1977:110). ‘*Creative practice*’ involves “the long and difficult remaking of an inherited… practical consciousness[,… a struggle at the roots of the mind - not casting off an ideology, or learning phrases about it, but confronting a hegemony in the fibres of the self and in the hard practical substance of effective and continuing relationships” (1977:212).

8 Structuralism plays an important part in Varenne & McDermott’s analysis (1998:184), and Comaroff and Comaroff’s analysis of hegemony entails ‘neo-modernist’ structuralism (1992:Ch 1). See also Kulick’s ‘cultural grammar’ 2003:141).
understanding of structure is vital to analyses of ‘construction’ of the kind described by Varenne & McDermott, and without it, it’s far harder to either apprehend or describe how utterances are “slightly off”.

But as a credentialed academic, what kind of product do you try to shape from your analytic immersion in the dynamics of structure and agency?

One route is to return to the description of convention, and the longer and fuller your involvement in the aesthetics of discovery, the richer, more delicate your accounts of the resources and constraints on human agency. The conventional structures you attend can obviously lie at lots of different levels - linguistic, interactional, institutional, cultural - and there are also the unspoken paradigmatic contrasts that make up a system, whether this system is preference organisation, the finite choices in systemic-functional grammar, or the sociolinguistic styles in Irvine’s ‘system of distinction’ (2001:22). And of course, if you thematise structure, you can start to formulate empirical generalisations, testing them out on other data.

But what about the particularity you’ve experienced in your data, your apprehension of slightly ‘off-structural acts’, your glimpse, maybe, of ‘creative practice’ and “the articulation and formation of latent, momentary, and newly possible consciousness” (Williams 1977:212). One way of displaying your respect for this particularity lies in the negative rites of avoidance that guide the formulation of claims in conversation analysis - the abstinence, prohibitions and taboos that push CA back to what Moerman calls ‘the clacking of dry bones’ (Moerman 1988; Durkheim 1972:233,234). The other lies in poetics and the study of ‘performance’ in Richard Bauman’s sense, and interest in this has obviously grown a great deal in recent years in linguistic anthropology. But I do think it’s worth asking whether or not this sometimes just ends up an extension of the first approach, simply extending the analysis of convention to stylisation strategies, artistic genres, and the workings of language ideology. And I wonder how far you can really apprehend pre- and ‘off-structural’ processes if you’ve only got 18 months do an ethnography in another language in foreign country.

Becker gives a vivid account of how hard it is, and how long it takes, to get ‘beyond translation’ to the individual voice,9 and so for someone going into a new field site abroad, maybe it’s really only realistic to expect a documentation of convention. That in itself is often a very demanding task and the intense introspective/ personal-political confrontation with cultural ‘Otherness’ is often both formative for ethnographers themselves and instructive for readers back home.10 But it’s still very important to remember the uneasy tension between the felt and the sayable that inhabits ordinary talk among the people being studied (and not just the anthropologist’s interlanguage), because if we forget the intimate integration of politics and communication that gets flagged up in a notion like collusion, we risk reducing communication to a set of rather jolly positivities - communicative competence without the inarticulateness, socialisation without the psycho-social repression.11

Varenne and McDermott elaborate quite graphically the processes and political dangers entailed in this reification. If you’re not sensitive to the tension between speakers and the language at their disposal, or if you don’t insist ontologically that actors and acts are separate from the structures and systems that serve as their resources (and enable others to try to make

9 “The hardest thing for me to do in Southeast Asia is to hear, authentically, the individual voice. The differences of culture, in their freshness and strangeness, cannot at first be - as they are to the insider - part of the background. Across distant languages, the hardest thing to hear is the individual voice, i.e. the deviation from stereotypes, the only place where self-correction, that is, change, happens - where the living organism interacts with the environment]. … Everything I observed about Javanese puppet theatre - which made me aware of new possibilities for drama - was heard by Javanese friends with an ultrapolite version of ‘So what else is new?’ My esthetic enjoyment in coming to terms with Javanese theater was at the level of the genre itself. I never heard the individual voices until I was able to background the newness of the whole tradition.” (1995:299, 300)

10 Indeed, if it’s not too tricky as a post-colonial visitor, there is often an institutionalised politics around to embed your descriptions in.

11 See the critique of ‘identity’ in Cameron & Kulick 2003:i-xvi
sense of them), then there’s a serious risk that you’ll slip from agency to personal trait, and from inhabitation to habitus (1998:144). “Thick brushstroke accounts of… Balinese”, they say, “may give some hints as to what… Balinese must deal with in their daily lives, but they can greatly distort the complexity of… Balinese as people” (1998:137; also Sapir 2002:191-2). If we forget this, “we are led away from historical institutions and into psychological constitution” (ibid 149), and in education (and elsewhere), there’s a massive institutional apparatus which, with varying degrees of delicacy, turns analysis in stereotypes and ends up blaming the victim.

So there are quite good political reasons for recognising acts that are ‘continually slightly “off” and agency-that’s-sensitive-but-not-identical-to-structure. But is that it? Is there any way of saying just a little bit more about the feelings or spirit that’s left unarticulated, outside the conventional system of expressive possibilities?

‘Structures of feeling’
Hymes recognises these processes when he welcomes Bauman’s performance as an improvement on the “collection and analysis of texts” but sees performance as only the second moment of three (1996:118):

“Continuous with the first [moment - the collection and analysis of texts -] and the second [- the analysis of performance -], this third is the process in which performance and text live, the inner substance to which performance is the cambium, as it were, and the crystallised text the bark” (1996:118).

Even so, he says, ‘third moment’ experiences of this kind constitute “something a bit beyond our current concerns” (ibid), and though I’d very much welcome correction, it strikes me that in recent linguistic anthropology, rather than the energies of feeling, it is either the cultural constitution and interactional display of emotion that holds centre stage, or it’s the meta-level, folk psychology of emotions in the groups being examined (e.g. Lutz & Abu-Lughod 1990). That is really important work and it’s a vital challenge to a lot of mainstream psychology, with its attribution of the social and cultural to the psychic and individual, its reduction and codification of experience in single measures and group types. But is there maybe a danger of babies-&-bathwater here, the refusal of mainstream psychology spilling into a denial of psyche, spilling into what Silverman calls an anti-Romantic rejection of the idea that human consciousness has a ‘deep interior’ (Silverman 1999:416). And after all, Hymes’ ‘third moment’ obviously hasn’t always been off-limits, and there are invitations to look beyond convention in, for example, Volosinov’s discussion of the ‘lower strata’ of ‘behavioural ideology’ (1973:90-92), in Bakhtin’s theorisation of ‘internally persuasive

12 “In organising a cultural analysis of schooling, we need a general framework that preserves the independence of both the person and the person’s activities from the systems (economic, political, symbolic etc) that provided the resources for the person’s activities and made sense of activities by providing still other persons with the resources for plausible identifications and further actions. All acts, initially, are not part of the system that may eventually acquire them even though it is likely they are already sensitive to that system. ‘All action’, warned John Dewey, ‘is an invasion of the future of the unknown’ (1922:12). All actors, initially, are not particular kinds of persons even though they always have at their disposal the resources of the personae others let them claim. The qualities of acts and persons are not intrinsic to the actor person. They belong rather to the sequence of acts, and to the group of persons, within which acts and persons are found.” (1998:7)

13 “The qualities of acts and persons are not intrinsic to the actor person. They belong rather to the sequence of acts, and to the groups of persons, within which acts and persons are found…. Careful work with those locked in ‘special’ identifications always reveals the ingenuity of the ways they resist the constraints they cannot ignore. It makes present their resistance to being made into less than they could be or less than they are” (Varenne & McDermott 1998:144)

14 Cambium = the layer of meristem by whose differentiation in xylem and phloem new wood and bast are formed. Meristem = the formative tissue of plants, distinguished from the permanent tissues by the power its cells have of dividing and forming new cells. Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary. Scotland: Edinburgh 1972.

15 See also Gergen 1992.
discourse’ (1981), in Sapir’s interest in personality (1949, 2002), and much more recently, in Billig, Cameron and Kulick’s concern for the repressed.16 In fact in my own analyses, I’m finding Raymond Williams’ ‘structures of feeling’ rather a useful umbrella/banner to work under (1977:128-135), and though there’s obviously a lot in common with Bakhtin/Volosinov, I’d like to say little more about Williams’ concept.17

Structures of feeling are socially and historically shaped, and they “exert pressures and set effective limits on experience and action” (1977:132). But their relationship with conventions and fixed forms is complex - they’re “a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognised as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic and even isolating”,18 and so this isn’t simply a variant of Whorf. Williams is talking, I think, about the quite specific kinds of uneasiness, insecurity, optimism or satisfaction that we can glimpse both in instances and in collections of discourse - feelings and sensibilities that lie just a little beyond the articulations of communicative form, generally only finding partial expression within them. These feelings and sensibilities are plural and locally situated, and are aroused by specific social processes-phenomena and intimated in particular practices. But they do carry over from one situation to another, drawing on experiences prior to the communicative present, to the extent that one can speak of the structures of feeling characteristic of a person, a set of people, a collection of texts, or indeed a period. This isn’t, though, a tidy psychological - it’s very much a “cultural hypothesis”, grounded in roughly the same kind of methodological rhythm that McDermott emphasises, an analytic aesthetic concerned with “the presence [in a discourse] of certain elements... which are not covered by... other formal systems” (133).19 Indeed, Williams is as intense as Varenne and McDermott in his strictures on analysis that’s insensitive to the processes adumbrated in ‘structures of feeling’:

“[t]he strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is the immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products... [R]elationships, institutions and formations in which we are still actively involved are converted, by this procedural mode, into formed wholes rather than forming and formative processes. Analysis is then centred on relations between these produced institutions, formations, and experiences, so that now... only the fixed explicit forms exist, and living presence is always, by definition, receding... [I]t is the reduction of the social to fixed forms that remains the basic error.” (1977:128)

16 Williams also notes: “Great strength has been given, and continues to be given, to theories of language as individual expression, by the rich practical experience of ‘inner signs - inner language - in repeated individual awareness of ‘inner language activities’, whether we call them ‘thought’ or ‘consciousness’ or actual verbal composition. These ‘inner’ activities involve the use of words which are not, at least at that stage, spoken or written to any other person. Any theory of language which excludes this experience, or which seeks to limit it to some residue or by-product or rehearsal (though it may often be these) of manifest social language activity, is... reductive of social language as practical consciousness... [T]he sign is social but... in its very quality as sign it is capable both of being internalised... and of being continually available, in social and material ways, in manifest communication. This fundamental relationship between the ‘inner’ and ‘material’ sign - a relationship often experienced as a tension but always lived as an activity, a practice - needs further radical exploration” (1977:40-41).

17 See also the discussion and analysis in McElhinny 2003.

18 Structures of feeling: “We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as ‘structure’: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognised as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies” (1977:132)

19 Williams’ analytic demeanour in the contemplation of particular texts and discourses is one of the things that distinguishes his work from Bourdieu’s refs. Williams’ concern for ‘structures of feeling’ within ‘practical consciousness’ makes practice itself seem quite problematic, whereas in Bourdieu’s account framework, the relationship between ‘habitus’ and practice generally seems quite harmonious and uncomplicated.
Overall, I think that ‘structures of feeling’ is a useful concept, not just because it points to the importance of human processes where you can never achieve the sure-footed and/or formal lucidity one finds in linguistics, but also because it underlines the kind of methodological demeanour you need if you’re going to try to reckon with them. In the data I’ve been working on fairly recently, ‘structures of feeling’ have been quite a helpful license in at least two different contexts.

In the first, I found adolescents messing around with German in their Maths, English and Humanities classes, and I could have just left these as artful performances in Bauman’s sense, resting on the Goffmanesque strategies, or dwelling on the situated indexicalities. But it was hard to hide from the fact that with considerable reluctance three times a week, these kids endured the drilling tedium of highly ritualised German language lessons, and so I went on to suggest that these lessons were an experience of suppression that lingered on, turning the German language into a condensation symbol (Sapir 1949:566) that subsequently reemerged as ‘a return of the repressed’ in the spontaneous Deutsch improvisations (Rampton 2002). In the second context (Rampton 2003), when I was looking at the stylisations of posh and Cockney described in the pre-circulated paper, I saw kids using ‘adoptive RP’ in performances of the grotesque, I fell into the arms of Stallybrass & White, and I found myself invoking a classed ‘Imaginary’ where language and ideology were joined by fantasy and fear.

Looking at artful stylisation rather than the most mundane kinds of activity, I’ve obviously taken an easier path towards the particular than McDermott et al and classical conversation analysis (Sacks 1992:293; Moerman 1988:68; Silverman 1999:415). Indeed, in grooping around ‘inner speech’ with demisemi-psycho-analytic terms, I’ve also failed to observe their insistence on negative respect and the belief that “[w]e must look away from individuals [in order] to preserve them” (Varenne & McDermott 1998:145, also 155,161). I doubt that there’d be much problem with ‘structures of feeling’ as a theoretical postulate, but I can easily imagine objections to the way I’ve treated them as an substantive empirical topic. So are my references to ‘condensation symbolism’ and to the kinks of inner speech a dereliction of scientific responsibility, a transgressive invasion of the ‘third moment’, or just a different kind of essentialism? The answer’s going to depend on a whole range of issues, but in principle, I don’t see why they should be.

First on dereliction: None of this work leaves language and discourse out, and unlike Freud and indeed most of modernist sociolinguistics, the idea is that structures of feeling, the unconscious etc are produced in what Bucholtz and Hall call the “reiterations of hegemonic (communicative) practice” (2004:381), not in early childhood. In Billig’s formulation, ‘conversation creates the unconscious’, and ‘repression depends on the skills of language’ (1999:1, xxxx).

Second, on desecration, I’d reply: If nobody ever ventures any kind of substantive engagement with ‘depth’ processes, if we surround it with respectful silence or only admit to them off-record in undocumented data-sessions, then how do we tell our readers and students that people aren’t just rational-calculating-actors, virtuosos and card-sharps (Moerman 1988:56)? How do you say to them that posh and Cockney aren’t just surface-level

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20 Varenne and McDermott certainly dwell on particularity and the unspoken in their analysis of acts, but they draw a line when it comes to persons: “Individuals must be the units of concern and justice, but they are misleading units of analysis and reform. The greater our concern with individuals, the greater must be our efforts to document carefully the social conditions in which they must always express themselves. We must look away from individuals to preserve them” 1998:145

21 See Rampton 1998

22 According to Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody note: “[R]esearch in the social sciences is overwhelmingly premised on the notion of a rational, calculating subject, but we wanted to posit a subject whose actions, behaviours and biographies are not solely determined by conscious will, agency or intent (or indeed the lack of these things). The subject of our discourse is altogether more irrational, anxious and ‘defended’…We suggest that social and cultural analysis desperately needs an understanding of emotional processes, presented in a way that
phonological resources differentially available in the later stages of utterance production to people in specific socio-geographic locales, and that actually, these two class-variety have an interior career in ‘rich communication’ with desires, anxieties, imagery, evaluations, memories of sensations etc (Hutchins 1993:61-2; Bloch 1998; Coupland 1995)?

What about the third objection - the charge that a substantive engagement with the ‘being (doing)’, not just the ‘doing (being)’, represents a relapse into the essentialism so vigorously critiqued by Varenne & McDermott, who insist again and again that “[t]o use something is not to be this thing” (1998:215). This is undoubtedly very tricky, and of course there are also lots of contingencies more or less beyond the analyst’s control, but I think I’d rebut this in two steps.

First, I’d rebut this with a warning against facile, abstract universalism of the kind that Hymes attributes to Chomsky and linguistics (1980:55-6), and that Bernstein sees in the post-sixties ‘competence theories’ rampant in both social science and education (1996:147-156). If “to respect the individual, politically and morally, one must analytically cast one’s eyes away”, if all we must do is “document carefully the social conditions in which [individuals] must always express themselves” (Varenne & McDermott 1998:155, 145), then there’s risk of underestimating the psycho-social toll involved in relations of dominance and subordination. Positioning and differential access to resources certainly are central to something like social class, but we shouldn’t let that push us to the utopian and rather comforting illusion that for the sensibility and disposition of individuals, “class has no cost” (Hymes 1996:187-8; Bernstein 1996:150).

But then second, I’d emphasise the qualitative difference between ‘structures of feeling’ and the notion of ‘competence’ itself. Competence, whether ‘communicative’ or otherwise, is an intrinsically normative concept, centring on the ability to participate effectively in specifiable tasks, to complete culturally definable activities. With the notions of ‘competence’, ‘ability’ and/or ‘expertise’, there’s nothing to take us beyond the domain of ‘fixed forms and finished products’, and in fact in the realm of art, aesthetics and the ‘off-structural’, saying that a performance is ‘competent’ is just to damn it with faint praise. Following on from this, when educators and social scientists argue against deficit theories by pointing to alternative types of competence, all they’re doing is calling for the recognition of different normative frameworks for the public ratification of activity. They’re not talking about the limits of analysis itself, whereas Williams, Volosinov, Bakhtin, Sapir, Billig, Cameron & Kulick are. In contrast, if you’re looking towards ‘structures of feeling’, you’re pointing to a zone where cultural coherence, patterns and regularity are continually unsettled by - often even at war with - the idiosyncrasies and unspoken needs and desires of situated individuals. For sure, the individuality we’re interested in is situated rather than transcendent, but in any exploration of the cultural constitution of subjectivity, the oxymoron in a phrase like ‘structures of feeling’ insists on the importance of the stuff that lies beyond both standard and imaginable vocabularies of cultural analysis.

I accept, of course, that there ain’t nothing you can’t reify, and I’ve no doubt at all that there could be all sorts of typologies of ‘structures of feeling’ and ‘inner speech’ waiting in the wings. Much more than that, I’m very happy to accept that in research on, for example, interaction structures and deixis, our mappings of inter-subjectivity are becoming more and more delicate, continually pushing analytics further and further into what were once the domains of interpretive (or indeed evocative) commentary. But personally, I’ve only ever found these sensitising rather than definitive constructs, suggesting ‘directions along which to look’ rather than ‘prescriptions of what to see’ (Blumer 1969:148, also Volosinov 1973:45, cited in Duranti & Goodwin 1992:2), and I can’t see that changing, at least not while I feel any commitment to ethnography. In Hewitt’s words,

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does not reduce the psychic to the social and cultural and vice versa, but recognises their imbrication… (2001:84,87)
“[i]t is precisely th[e] double aspect of language, [its] capacity for fusing the inner and outer, for doing the one through the other, for translating the world of social plurality and contradiction into the interiority and sculpture of being, that ethnographers are frequently overwhelmed with in ‘interviewing’ ‘subjects’. This peculiar moment of intersubjectivity has somehow to be rendered into data, yet our understanding of language, of the hovering, hesitant, stepped moments of insight which the people we talk to convey, constantly seem far stronger, more charged with fullness and the immanence of language than our puny attempts to get them on the page” (1995/2003:196)

At this point, let me make a few closing comments about disciplinary identities.

**Disciplinary identities**

As I said at the beginning, I can’t really count myself as a linguistic anthropologist - in fact, I’m not sure how I could be since there isn’t really very much of it in the UK. But I’m very happy to say that I do linguistic ethnography, and we’ve now got a very active linguistic ethnography forum in Britain. In fact, I’d be quite keen to claim both Hymes and Gumperz as formative figures, and whatever their position amongst the ratified linguistic anthropologists, I’d say that outside, the relevance of their work is very contemporary, not just historic.

So the Hymes I’d refer to the one who situates himself with the social movements of the 1960s, loosely aligned with Hoggart, Williams and Hall (1999:xv-xvii), and who reflected critically not just on the abstract universalism of linguistics (e.g. 1973/1980:55-6) but also on anthropology as “the study of people not ourselves” ([1978] 1980: 89), as “the study of coloured people by whites” (1973],1980:55). This is the Hymes who advocated a ‘socialist humanism’ in anthropology and who led “the project of bringing it all back home” - where it seems to me anyway, there’s more chance of a subtle understanding of the tensions between structure and agency, and where if they want it, analysts themselves have got more of a (legitimate) political voice. It’s a Hymes who was worried that anthropology might “sequester… much of its strength on departmental hilltops” once it had “passed through the valley of colonial domination” (1969:55), and who moved a School of Education with

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24 See http://www.ling-ethnog.org.uk

25 Hymes’ reflexive stance on linguistics and its potential can be seen in his programmatic 1973 statement on research into “the origins and foundations of inequality among speakers”: “It is unusual today to think of language as something to be overcome, yet four broad dimensions of language can be considered in just that way: diversity of language, medium of language (spoken, written), structure of language, and functioning of language. Of each, we can ask:

1. when, where, and how it came to be seen as a problem;
2. from what vantage point it is seen as a problem (in relation to other vantage points from which it may not be so seen);
3. in what ways the problem has been approached or overcome as a practical task and also as an intellectual, conceptual task;
4. what its consequences for the study of language itself have been;
5. what kinds of study, to which linguists might contribute, are now needed” (Hymes [1973] 1980:21)

26 “I would hope to see the consensual ethos of anthropology move from a liberal humanism, defending the powerless, to a social humanism, confronting the powerful and seeking to transform the structure of power” (Hymes 1969:52)

27 “To my mind, Reinventing Anthropology [edited by Dell Hymes 1969] remains the classic statement of a post-sixties anthropology, which sought simultaneously to denounce the continuing colonial role played by the discipline and to urge the project of ‘bringing it all back home’” (Visweswaran 1994: 101)

28 Or as Hymes put it, “locat[ing] the local situation in space, time and kind, and discover[ing] its particular forms and center of gravity, as it were, for the maintenance of social order and the satisfaction of expressive impulse” (1978/1980:100)

29 «Productive scholars know that problems lead where they will and that relevance commonly leads across disciplinary boundaries. Yet many an insecure academic compensates for his[or her] own lack or loss of
“the vision of a democratic society [where ethnography] was seen as a general possession, although differential cultivated” (1978/1980:99). The Gumperz I’d invoke is maybe politically more muted than Hymes, but it’s a figure who never stopped pushing for the tools to describe the experience of encounters with difference, who achieved extraordinary syntheses of variationist dialectology, cognitive linguistics and conversation analysis, who hated the thought of ‘interactional sociolinguistics’ being a ‘paradigm’, but who nevertheless ended up, way back in 1982, with most of the apparatus that Duranti lists in ‘the third paradigm’ in linguistic anthropology (2003:333),31 32 as well as a set of ground-breaking procedures for working on all of this with factory workers and their managers (1979).

Admittedly, if you’re following the path established by these versions of Hymes and Gumperz, it’s often quite difficult to contribute directly to the cumulative of development of analytic tools in linguistics. Indeed if we take Hymes seriously in his observation that in anthropology, “problems lead where they will and that relevance commonly leads across disciplinary boundaries” (1969:44), then I think that when you come to write up ethnographic fieldwork, you have to learn to live the anxiety that you might be being pretentious. That’s not to say that you don’t feel very grateful of the gifts provided by scholars like Brown and Levinson, Hanks, the Goodwins and the Clarks (to name but a few), and like a lot of other appliers, I’ve found that these analytic tools really do provide a quite distinctive angle on the everyday meaning of general processes - in my case, cultural hybridisation and the destabilisation of ethnicity, the penetration of classrooms by popular culture, and the reproduction of social class in late-modernity (Rampton 1995, 2003, 2006). But the use of language isn’t just a technical interest, and I don’t accept that if you’re teaching in a university, you’re really only entitled to treat it non-technically if you’re talking to ordinary people or to other scholars in other disciplines. In fact, this brings me to Duranti’s call to clarify “what it means to study language as culture” for the sake of our students, and in response, I’d say two things. First, I’d follow the emphasis that Hymes gives to undergraduate teaching when he suggests that

intellectual [potency] by making it difficult or impossible for students and junior colleagues to benefit from theirs. There are sure tests for this, tests for what may be considered ideological and institutional, as against intellectual criteria of relevance. [Worthwhile ]intellectual criteria involve questions such as

‘Can you prove it?’
‘What does it show?'
‘If you want to do that, you’ll have to learn X (a genuine prerequisite)’

[Fatuous i]deological and institutional criteria involve statements such as:

‘That’s not anthropology’
‘That’s all very well, but first you should study X’ (an unrelated subject, a tradition in the field, favored by the person in question, or both)
‘You’re not an anthropologist if you haven’t done/studied X” (Hymes 1969:44-45)

See also e.g. the “step beyond shaking in our boots or throwing up our hands at the complexity of socio-cultural knowledge and its impact on language practice and interpretation” (p 212) represented by Ochs 1988.

30 “When Hymes having shifted to the university’s School of Education, he was no longer relying exclusively on anthropology for institutional or intellectual support” (Duranti 2003:328)
31 “The features of the third paradigm may be summarised as follows: Goals: the use of linguistic practices to document and analyse the reproduction and transformation of persons, institutions, and communities across space and time. View of language: as an interactional achievement filled with indexical values (including ideological ones). Preferred units of analysis: language practice, participation framework, self/person/identity. Theoretical issues: micro-macro links, heteroglossia, integration of different semiotic resources, entextualisation, embodiment, formation and negotiation of identity/self, narrativity, language ideology. Preferred methods of data collection: socio-historical analysis, audio-visual documentation of temporally unfolding human encounters, with special attention to the inherently fluid and moment-by-moment negotiated nature of identities, institutions and communities.” (Duranti 2003:332).
32 In fact, it would be fascinating to investigate the extent to which Gumperz’s framework represents a systematisation of the extraordinary (literary) pragmatics that Williams outlines in the third part of Marxism and Literature (1977:145-212).
“[t]he greatest contribution of anthropology departments might be to send into the world many lawyers, historians, activists, workers for various institutions and agencies, [who] are well trained in anthropological work” (1969:57)

Second, I’d follow a lot of others in saying that while the linguistics often helps, it can actually end up as a major “barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity” (Williams op cit) if it’s not embedded in the cultivation of ethnography, not just as “a set of techniques or methods for fieldwork and description”, but as a sensibility open to ‘structures of feeling’ (Blommaert 2001b).

References
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33 This comes from a discussion of whether graduate or undergraduate students should be given priority, and Hymes suggests that
“much graduate time is spent on activities required, not for training, but for induction into the hegemony of a particular department and a prospective profession…. Undergraduates would be freer to acquire relevant training and do good work, having in mind long-range plans not under the control of their teachers” (1969:56-57)
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