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**Liquid Methodologies: using a linguistic ethnographic  
approach to study multilingual phenomena**

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# **Liquid Methodologies: using a linguistic ethnographic approach to study multilingual phenomena <sup>1</sup>**

As you set out for Ithaka  
hope the voyage is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery.  
**C.P. Cavafy, *Ithaka***

## **Introduction**

This paper is entitled *Liquid Methodologies, using a linguistic ethnographic approach to study multilingual phenomena*. It is a methodology paper which is based on my doctoral research, *Translation and Translanguaging in Production and Performance in Community Arts*, and associated projects. This work forms part of the *Translation and Translanguaging: Investigating Linguistic and Cultural Transformations in Superdiverse Wards in Four UK Cities* (TLANG) project<sup>i</sup> which is led by Professor Angela Creese at the University of Birmingham and which also includes the universities of Birkbeck, Cardiff and Leeds.

The TLANG project aims to develop understandings of multilingual communication in superdiverse wards in four UK cities. The research design is a multi-site ethnography, across four broad categories – business, heritage, law and sport. The overarching aim of the project is to understand how people communicate multilingually across languages and cultures. It also seeks to demonstrate everyday language use in the work place and at home.

Broadly, my research aims to develop understandings of how people communicate across languages and cultures. More specifically, I ask how street artists, visual artists and makers make meaning throughout the processes of putting together a street theatre production and performance. I adopt an approach which draws from linguistic ethnography to consider how fluid languaging practices are used by creative practitioners during the stages of production.

My doctoral research involved a longitudinal ethnographic study of a UK-based grassroots community arts organization with short, intensive bursts of overseas fieldwork (Pink and Morgan, 2013) which focused on the making of a piece of street theatre<sup>ii</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a presentation delivered for a research seminar at the University of East Anglia on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2016. It draws from my PhD research and from a forthcoming book chapter (in Conteh, J. ed, published by Bloomsbury) which is published in 2017.

Throughout the research process I collected and analysed multimodal data (including video, audio interactional data, fieldnotes, photographs, interviews).

In this paper I focus on qualitative research methodologies, and specifically on what I am calling *liquid methodologies*, following Zygmunt Bauman's scholarship on liquid modernity and liquid identity (2000, 2004). I will explore the liquid processes of conducting linguistic ethnographic research in multilingual street performance and visual arts settings with a grassroots community arts organisation. I observed the group as they developed a street performance of a traditional folk story, the story of the *Zlatorog*, or *Golden-horned goat* (see Copeland, 1933a; 1933b; Kropce, 2012).

I am presenting this as an overview of my doctoral research and I am following the broad structure of a book chapter I have written which will be published in 2017 in a volume edited by Jean Conteh, which is called: *Researching Education for Social Justice in Multilingual Settings: Ethnographic Principles in Qualitative Research*. I will use examples of data which are detailed in the book chapter.

But first of all I want to ask a number of questions. To frame my research theoretically I draw from an essay written by Tim Ingold (2014), *That's enough about ethnography!* (and an earlier lecture, *Anthropology is not ethnography*, 2008). In these essays, Ingold is highly critical about so-called ethnographic methods – and I use what he says about 'generous attentiveness' (2014:384) as forming an integral part of research with people, giving examples from my longitudinal study. I ask:

- How can we, as researchers, commit 'generous attentiveness' to our work and to the people with whom we are working?
- How can we develop methodologies that are robust, yet flexible?
- How can we consider and demonstrate our ontological and ethical commitment to the people with whom we are working?

### **Structure of this paper**

In this paper, and as an approach to my work more generally, my aim is to make these processes visible and shed light on the unpredictability, complexity and chaos of research of this kind. In doing so I want to attempt to provide examples of how I integrated these questions into my research methodology. The paper is structured into two parts.

In part one I develop the theoretical underpinnings of the methodology. I do this through an explanation of the focus of my research - the trajectory of a text (Kell, 2009). I then briefly discuss *translanguaging* (Garcia 2009; Garcia and Li Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015), as a descriptive and analytical tool for understanding liquid communication

practices. I set out a framework which draws from Zygmunt Bauman's Liquid Modernity (2000).

In part two I situate my research within the broad approach of Linguistic Ethnography (Blommaert, 2007; Rampton, 2007; Maybin and Tusting, 2011; Copland and Creese, 2015) and give examples of how this enabled me to adapt my methodology to changing research settings.

I consider how a framework of liquidity, following Bauman, and an ethical commitment to 'generous attentiveness', following Tim Ingold (2014:384), affords opportunities for rich ethnographic insights and more empathic and engaged research relationships within the field in research into language and social life.

## **Part One**

### **The trajectory of a text**

My fieldwork centred around a study of a group of multilingual aspiring street artists in Ljubljana, Slovenia from March to July 2015. The group were working with the UK-based community arts organization with whom I had set up a research collaboration on a co-produced piece of street theatre. The resulting multilingual production was performed across the country at a street arts festival in July 2015. During my fieldwork I followed the group from the inception of the collaboration through to the final performances.

I use the trajectory of a text (Kell, 2009) – in this case, the text was a traditional Slovenian folk story which is developed into a street theatre piece using puppets, promenade and song – as a heuristic to frame and to structure my research. The resultant street theatre piece itself moved from street to street and from city to city. The story shifted mode throughout the development of the production. The story is translated multimodally and across different spaces.

In working with liquidity as both a research framework and focus, I was able to explore the 'interplay between 'strangeness' and 'familiarity' which, as Ben Rampton and colleagues suggest, ethnography should enable (Rampton et al., 2014:2).

### **Translanguaging**

Translanguaging, according to Li Wei, is

both going *between* different linguistic structures and systems, including different modalities (speaking, writing, signing, listening, reading, remembering) and going *beyond* them (my italics).

We can consider translanguaging as a superdiverse practice, or descriptive lens for understanding flexible multilingualism (for example, Simpson, 2016). But we can also use it as an analytical lens when it explicitly seeks to challenge social structures producing language-based inequalities – so in terms of social justice and transformation. As Ricardo Otheguy and colleagues (2015) put it, translanguaging is:

the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of names (and usually national and state) languages.

p.281

Translanguaging in this sense can act as a disruptor to ‘the norm’ - as transformation which ‘resists the asymmetries of power’ (García and Li Wei, 2014:43). Likewise, the movement of the street arts production and the actors through the streets, from city to city (and country to country) disregards socially and politically defined boundaries, disrupting notions of spaces for performance and front-stage and back-stage. Translanguaging also means we can consider multimodality, for example gesture, the visual, objects and materiality. In the case of my research, we can consider the arts practices in progress.

In researching multilingual *street arts*, I am investigating the role of flexible languaging practices (as ‘disruptors to the norm’) in a performative practice which also aims to resist and disrupt.

### **Educational correspondence**

My research with the street artists and visual artists has been intensive. Taking Ingold’s exhortations to commit ‘generous attentiveness’ to those with whom we work, invoke a collaboration between researcher and researched. Luke Eric Lassiter states that ‘ethnography is, by definition, collaborative’ (2005:16), in that as researchers we engage with those with whom we work. These engagements take place within the context of everyday life.

By contrast, we can ask what an ‘unengaged’ or ‘uncollaborative’ ethnography would look like? We should not see ethnography as a research method. Instead, it is an ontological commitment to the people with whom we work, providing a framework which enables voices to be made audible. In committing to enabling the voices of participants to be heard, linguistic ethnographers commit to ‘flattening the relationship between researcher and researched’ (Copland and Creese, 2015b: 162).

## **Liquidity as a framework**

Mobility and fluidity have particularly characterized the research process, the site, the creative practitioners and the communicative practices within my work. I developed an emergent framework which draws from Bauman's theories of liquid modernity.

Bauman describes the world in 'liquid modern life' (2000, 2004), as 'sliced into poorly coordinated fragments while our individual lives are cut into a succession of ill-connected episodes' (2004:12-13). He goes on to explain the complexity of communities to which each of us belongs, to differing degrees. This notion can help to explain the position of the ethnographer – who can quite easily feel 'wholly or in part "out of place" everywhere, not to be completely anywhere' (p.13). He describes 'floating' identities and this, as a metaphor, rings true for researchers. Exile.

I therefore use the concept of liquidity not solely to provide a useful analytical framework for the street artists and their work, but also to provide a methodological framework for ethnographic research into street arts.

## **Part Two**

In the second part of this paper I use examples of the data from my fieldwork to illustrate the liquid methodologies that were developed across the course of the study.

### **The text is introduced**

Street arts performances occupy an ephemeral and transient space. The performances is iconically liquid, and packed up into a suitcase after the crowd has dispersed. Over the course of the production of the street performance, the group developed the traditional Slovenian folk story for production. The following example is taken from the workshop in which the folk tale was introduced to the group.

#### **Example 1: the telling of the tale**

The story was first told within a workshop setting in a former church in the centre of Ljubljana.

Setting: Tabor, Ljubljana, Slovenia

*We are sitting on chairs in a circle and about to break for lunch. One of the actors, Lyder, had chosen it as it was from his home region – the villages around Lake Bohinj which is surrounded by the Julian Alps. The mentor leading the workshop, Bea, is from the UK and she begins the session:*

So this might be quite hard actually, I.) hadn't considered the fact that you would know these stories in your language and would have to TRANSLATE them for ME[.]  
I'm sorry, but yes (...) <sup>iii</sup>

In saying this, Bea is drawing attention to the fact that she is from the UK and does not speak Slovene.

She is also recognising that the stories will come from the actors' own country and background and that they would be known in Slovene, rather than English. She apologises for this. Lyder begins his story:

ok, so I'm originally from Bohinj (.) for several generations you probably know the place (...) (*gestures to the group with his hand*) and you probably don't (...) (*looks at Bea*)

Lyder emplaces himself immediately as being from Bohinj, with generations of his family before him. He positions the majority of the group as being 'insiders' to this place-related knowledge – to the story being told - and Bea as being an outsider.

In telling the story, Lyder is placing it as a possible starting point for the production itself. He is instigating a claim to ownership of the production. He was also telling something of his own story, in selecting this particular tale. He was unable to perform in the final production as he was due to become a father for the first time during the same month. But he came to the performance, took photos, and assisted the performers. He expressed his pleasure in the fact that his story had been chosen and that a story that came from his region of Slovenia should form the basis for the piece.

In the case of the story which formed the basis for the production, it moved seventy-six km to the workshop space in Ljubljana. But for Lyder it was talismanic. He was about to move back to his home town with his growing family, back into the family home after having been based in the city for a number of years. Travel – or homecoming - becomes a central consideration in the telling of the tale.

### **Multimodality: liquid methods**

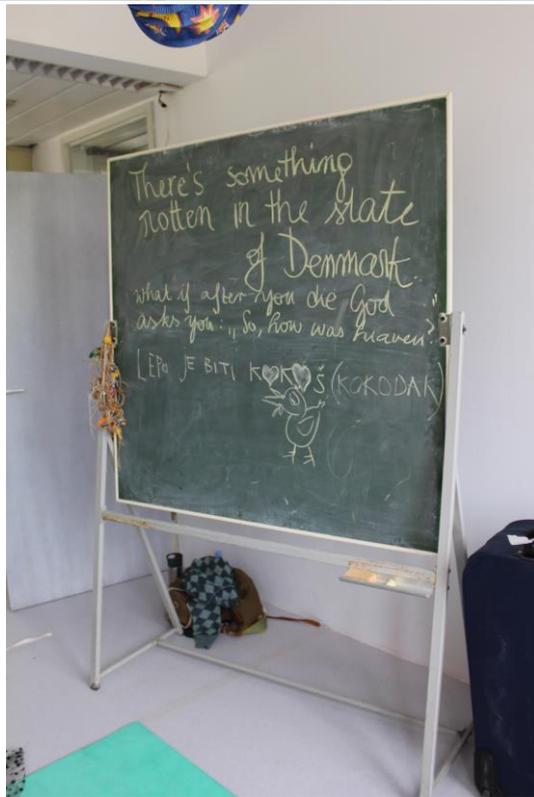
Within the multilingual street arts activities I observed, the communicative practices not only coincide with but are also entangled with the diverse creative practices within the production process.

### **Example 2: photographs as analytical objects**

Here the group were making the puppets and the props for the performances themselves, and I was a participant-observer during this process.

The making took place in the theatre studio on the outskirts of Ljubljana, and was seen by Bea as an integral part of the development of the piece. The room was a light and airy white space on the first floor of a municipal building – a concrete tower block. It was the end of May and the windows were wide open, the curtains blowing in the breeze. We had the radio on and we could hear the muffled sounds of live music coming from the arts venue below. There was a festival going on over the weekend and there was talk of us going to it later on. A whiteboard was placed to the back of the room and Kaja and Sabina, two of the performers were writing on it. The board became at times the place that the performers would congregate in to have a break from the making of the puppets. Kaja, an aspiring actress, was quoting Hamlet. Sabina was drawing chickens. There would be chickens in the production and chickens are also a symbol of Slovenia. The country itself is thought to look like a chicken. Veca, another performer, had said she was from the ‘chicken’s neck’ when describing the location of her home town. I take photos of the board:







In my data analysis, therefore, I started to move beyond linguistic communication and towards an analytical framework that encompasses the visual, the arts practices and the artistic products.

For this I draw from and critique the conceptualisation of translanguaging space, originally by Li Wei, as being space that is co-produced by translanguaging, as well as produced 'for' translanguaging (2011).

My investigation focuses on how these spaces are co-constructed by translanguaging, and how the arts practices intersect to enable 'critical and creative spaces' for production and performance in street arts. As a result, visual ethnography (for example, Pink 2014) became woven into my research design, as broadening the analytical framework to incorporate multimodality in translanguaging.

The photographs become more than simply an aide-memoire for me when writing about the workshops and conducting linguistic analyses of the interactions. They become a form of data in themselves, to be analysed using a framework of translanguaging space.

### **Liquid spaces: unexpected fieldwork**

There is a risk when presenting methodological messiness. Bourdieu describes work at this stage as being 'in a state that one may call "becoming", that is muddled, cloudy, works that you usually see only in their *finished* state' (1992:219).

These threads, therefore, are often the ones which are made invisible by the time a piece of work is published. Yet, it is these threads that demonstrate what Bourdieu calls *fermenting confusion*.

Without making these processes visible do we deny others the opportunity to not only learn from mistakes made throughout the research process? Do we also sanitize the process, thus creating the impression that we leap seamlessly from data to polished scholarly publication?

Rebecca Coles and Pat Thomson (2016) call for more scholarship that reveals the behind the scenes, back-stage writing, that takes place in ethnographic research – writing that they call 'inbetween writing'. Here my task is not to interrogate the different kinds of writing involved in the research process, but instead to make visible the *inbetween* and to attempt to describe and convey the liminality of linguistic ethnographic research as well as the chaos of the lived experience of work in progress.

### **Example 3: reporting as data**

During my overseas fieldwork visits I would communicate via email and via blog posts. These writings represented different kinds of 'inbetween writing' and became a form of data in themselves. In December, I went back to the theatre in Ljubljana to observe an education and training workshop that was being organised as part of a large European funding bid involving multiple countries, universities and practitioners. I wrote this while I was there, and then posted it on the TLANG project blog:

Thomson and Gunter (2011) write about the fluidity of researcher identity when conducting ethnographic fieldwork in schools. For me, although my work is in the street and in the theatre – not in a school – this seems to be particularly apposite. As I arrived at the studio, the group were waiting for me, and my role had been assigned: I was an observer. Officially. Of course, as a researcher drawing from ethnography, I'm used to this role. Observing. But generally I am an observer for my own research project. My observations are jotted down in notebooks, interactions are recorded onto my iPhone, my videos and photographs are stored into my own folders. But in this case, my 'outsider' status (I'm not a street artist, I have no practical experience in this area) was one that positioned me as someone who could document the workshops and produce a factual account of what was happening.

TLANG blog post, January 21, 2016

Here I am attempting to make visible the interwoven stories, or, following Bruno Latour, the 'delicate networks traced by Ariadne's little hand thread' (1993:4). The doctoral research project, or indeed any research project, is one that is limited. It is limited by both time and funding. It falls upon the doctoral researcher, therefore, to make decisions throughout the process – decisions that lead to the research focus, the research detail, and final thesis. Sometimes these decisions fall outside the researcher's hands, however, as was my experience.

As a researcher working with, and 'attending to', community artists and street performers, key factors which affected the focus of my research were austerity and funding regimes. One project I had anticipated using as a case study changed its form and focus. It disappeared from my research design. Another project that I had initially integrated into my research design received a number of funding rejections. However these factors also created opportunities.

These opportunities were not solely in terms of my doctoral research, but also in terms of developing what Ingold refers to as 'educational correspondence' (2014:390). Ingold describes the act of participant observation (as distinct from ethnography, which he sees as a 'practice of description') as being correspondence:

to practice participant observation, then, is to join in correspondence with those with whom we learn or among whom we study, in a movement that goes forward rather than back in time.

p.390

#### **Example 4: theorizing shifts in fieldwork focus**

Entering into this 'educational correspondence' required me to make a series of decisions about how I would 'follow' those with whom I was working and where I would go. In my research blog entry from December 2015, I wrote down a quotation from Zygmunt Bauman's 'The Art of Life':

I was assessing whether the decisions to follow the arts group with whom I was working to Slovenia had been the right ones, and whether the final fieldtrip I took in December during which I observed the beginnings of an education and training in street arts network had been a wise decision. I wrote:

'There's something that Zygmunt Bauman says in his book, The Art of Life. Something about choices and decisions. A PhD seems to me to be a series of decisions. A series of decisions that you have to make as an 'apprentice independent researcher' who is on the path to becoming

an 'independent researcher'. So does making these decisions, theorising them, backing up your decisions and explaining why you didn't choose the different path - does all this mean that at the end of the three years you are suddenly 'independent'? When I've finished this process, will I have a new-found sense of clarity and faith in my decisions?

Back to Bauman:

'All that, however, only soon to find out that our choice of guiding star was in the last account our choice, pregnant with risks as all our choices have been and are bound to be - and our choice, made on our responsibility, it will remain to the end.'

(xxx)

It's a weird dynamic with a PhD. I find myself questioning my every move. In contrast, I find myself with a new sense of confidence in what I used to do, coupled with a growing sense of confidence in what I am doing.

But. I still make decisions that I don't feel completely sure about.

Research blog entry, 2 December 2015

### **Liquid roles: researcher positioning**

For the novice researcher, the unsteadiness caused by the fluid and shifting landscape I was catapulted into, was not without its challenges. As Amy Shuman writes, 'doing ethnography places us on the verge' (2011:149).

When we, as researchers, are placed on the 'verge', we are also positioned in a 'meeting place' -in terms of our status as insider or outsider. The binary division between these two 'positions' is problematic. Ethnographic research entangles and complicates the roles and responsibilities of the researcher and researched, making the divisions between insider and outsider unclear. Not simply unclear, these roles shift and mutate throughout the process.

### **Example 5: from researcher to collaborator**

Over the course of my research my position changed dramatically. This was, at times, confusing and messy. After a year of developing a research relationship with the arts group, and conducting my fieldwork, we developed and submitted a funding bid together to work on a co-produced project relating to the wider research to which my doctoral study was attached. This project ([www.welcomeutopia2016.wordpress.com](http://www.welcomeutopia2016.wordpress.com)) would lead to a festival in London as part of a year's celebration of 500 years of Thomas More's Utopia. This was not the focus of my doctorate, but did consolidate the research relationship, the methodologies I was developing and my understanding of key analytical concepts. In doing so, however, my position shifted from PhD researcher to project manager and representative of the higher education institution (HEI) in which I was working, a role which mirrored that of my previous professional position of almost

a decade for the same HEI. I had started my research as an outsider, to a certain extent. My 'practice' is not in community arts, and much less in street arts. Yet across the process of my fieldwork, I gained more knowledge and understanding of the lived realities of being a small community arts organisation. An insider, perhaps, but only to a certain extent, and only during certain activities. Our Expression of Interest (EOI) documentation for the funding grant stated the following:

The project design will allow for the ongoing sharing of, reflection on, and analysis of the work as it progresses. The researchers, artists, creative practitioners and community groups will work closely together to develop practice and theory through the research findings and through an interdisciplinary approach to reflection and evaluation. We will explore how current cutting edge language research can be interwoven into community-based, participatory arts projects and how the two areas can mutually inform to produce innovative and creative outputs as well as engage with wider communities. We will also investigate how arts-based activities can be worked into research projects, such as TLANG, to make their rich, multilingual data accessible.

TLANG EOI, AHRC CC, December 2016

Working on a co-production of this kind provided a completely different perspective altogether to my fieldwork. I experienced the very nuts and bolts of a short-term project, the lived experience of funding, the contractual complexity of co-production and the challenges of intellectual property for a collaborative project of this kind. The 'educational correspondence' and 'generous attentiveness' (following Ingold, 2014) for which I was striving and through which I hoped to gain deeper insights into the communicative practices at play in community arts, became almost technicolour.

One of Tim Ingold's criticisms of ethnography is that it creates a distinction between researcher and researched. He warns against the use of 'ethnographic methods' or 'ethnography' – a term he considers much over-used. His argument being that in positioning our research as 'ethnographic' 'the priority shifts from engagement to reportage, from correspondence to description, from the co-imagining of possible futures to the characterization of what is already past'.

## **Conclusions**

What conclusions can be drawn from the explicitation of this research process, and its unpicking? What does understanding more about the liquidity of research and generous attentiveness bring to the field? What does making visible the threads and the messiness mean for future research into translanguaging and community arts? For researchers to commit to what Lassiter describes as 'ethnography that is grounded in the ongoing ethical and moral co-commitment' (2005:133), 'generous attentiveness'

shifts towards a co-produced, collaborative framework. This framework allows for the liquidity and chaos of research into social and cultural knowledge. It also affords a space in which the messiness and liquidity of research can be accepted as fundamental and in which a commitment is made to making the threads visible.

I started this presentation with three lines from a poem by C.P. Cavafy, *Ithaca*. I was reminded of this poem as I started to write this book chapter, and it seemed apposite when considering research as a journey, a process, as *liquid*. In the second verse of the poem Cavafy writes:

Hope the voyage is a long one.  
May there be many a summer morning when,  
with what pleasure, what joy,  
you come into harbors seen for the first time;

The poem itself was introduced to me by one of my PhD supervisors, and I remember thinking what an apt metaphor for the doctoral process it was – a voyage. I reproduce it here for three reasons: one, to provide a metaphor for research and as an exhortation to consider the process itself as of importance, as a site itself to be theorized and critiqued; two, to conceptualize this process as being one of *becoming* (in Bakhtinian terms); and three, to demonstrate the way in which the community of scholars – also familiar with the fluidity, liquidity and chaos of research which takes an ethnographic approach – provides support and mentorship for the novice researcher.

So finally I want to return to the questions I raised at the beginning of the presentation. These are questions that underpin my work and which are integral to the methodologies with which I am working.

- How can we, as researchers, commit generous attentiveness in our work?
- How can we develop methodologies that are robust, yet flexible?
- How can we consider and demonstrate our ontological and ethical commitment to the people we're working with?

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<sup>iii</sup> **Transcription conventions**

(adapted from Georgakopoulou, 2007)

(0.03) time from beginning of extract

Overlapping utterances [ ]

Intervals (.) less than 0.1 seconds; (..) between 0.1 and 0.5 seconds; (...) greater than 0.5 seconds

(*italics*) a gesture to the group or laugh from the group

CAPITALS speech louder than surrounding talk