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## **What can ethnography offer: methodological reflections and case studies**

This paper discusses the advantages and challenges of ethnography as a research method, especially as applied to the study of language in complex multilingual contexts. In this paper, we briefly outline the theoretical and methodological foundations of ethnography, and then we reflect on our own experiences as researchers making use of this method in two different contexts — Hong Kong (Fleming) and Kazakhstan (Smagulova). We conclude by suggesting possible benefits of ethnography and ethnographically-informed approaches in relation to the study of language and education in Kazakhstan. The authors of this article specialize in the fields of language, society, and education; accordingly, the insights we offer might be of particular interest for scholars doing research in similar domains. However, we do acknowledge that the potential of the methodological application of ethnography transcends language studies. Indeed, ethnographic methods have contributed substantially to knowledge production across various academic disciplines. The strength of ethnography as a method, we believe, lies in its capacity to generate rich, deep, and context-sensitive data whether used separately or together with other approaches in multi-dimensional studies. Kazakhstan is a context where relatively few ethnographic studies have taken place, and which might benefit greatly from further studies of this type.

*Keywords:* ethnography, research methodology, language and education.

### *Introduction: What can ethnography offer?*

Ethnography as a research method has both unique advantages as well as challenges. In this brief paper, we first discuss theoretical foundations of ethnography, and then consider what it can offer us on the basis of two case studies from Hong Kong and Kazakhstan.

The authors of this paper are researchers of language, society, and education, and so this paper will particularly focus on implications of ethnography for language and education researchers, but ethnography as a method is certainly not limited to language studies. It has been used to generate new perspectives, and data in a wide variety of fields. We believe that, especially in combination with other approaches and research methods, ethnography can offer a great depth and richness of data which makes it a very valuable source of research insights.

This paper is meant as a brief introduction and personal reflection on the values of ethnography for readers who may not have used this method themselves. This article is not a comprehensive history of or detailed methodological guide to ethnography; readers who are already familiar with ethnography will find much that is missing here. Nevertheless, we hope this short piece will encourage more researchers in Kazakhstan to draw on ethnography as a methodology and methodological philosophy.

### *Theoretical background*

Ethnography as an approach has its origins in the discipline of anthropology. Research conducted under the label of ethnography has taken various forms and set out to achieve a range of goals, but certain elements and methodological philosophies are central to the ethnographic approach. These include participant observation; a desire to understand local categories and systems instead of imposing categories from the researcher themselves; and a focus on reflexivity and a rejection of overly positivist ways of seeing science and knowledge production.

Traditionally, ethnography has involved participant observation, often for very long periods of time. Participant observation involves actually participating in the daily life of the population the researcher is

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hoping to learn more about, or in general taking part in some activity along with the research participants and getting to know the people involved in the research process (Agar 1997) [1].

It is important to take time to conduct this research because ethnography places a heavy emphasis on emic understandings and descriptions; that is, trying to understand the way that research participants see the world and make sense of their own actions and decisions. This allows the researcher to attempt to understand what is actually relevant and important for research participants in a particular place and time. This means that rather than simply filling out questions or boxes that the researcher has determined, ethnography can lead to a complication or a new understanding of previous categories: «Rather than testing hypotheses against predetermined categories, ethnography is, among other things, a search for local categories. Thus while survey fieldwork focuses on filling in a sample, ethnographic fieldwork focuses on finding out what is worth sampling» (Eckert 2000) [2: 69]. This allows ethnographic studies to provide a rich explanation for what is happening in a given context, and why: «At its heart, ethnography is most focused on what happens; hence the notion that many people have that it is primarily about description. As a first step, that is certainly true: the first ethnographic commitment is to discover what is going on (without assuming beforehand that we know). But it is important not to stop there; the second key dimension of data collection has to do with what will help us explain why things happen the way they do, in the circumstances in which they occur. Such an explanation then allows us to make predictions» (Heller 2011) [3: 42]. Getting to know people carefully and spending time with them helps us to understand how people actually experience their own lives and construct frameworks within which they make decisions, which might otherwise seem difficult to understand if we have not taken the time to see things from their perspective.

One of the joys and the challenges of this aspect of ethnography is that it often leads the researcher in unexpected directions. It is important that in ethnography categories are allowed to emerge from the data, rather than imposing our own interpretations: «Instead of, for example, setting out to study the Roma in Hungary, the aim should be to analyse how ‘Roma’ circulates as a representation in Hungarian discourse, how it settles on particular humans, how it comes to channel and constrain their activity and material position» (Rampton, Maybin and Roberts 2014) [4]. This means that important, significant social forces or processes may not be what we thought they were going to be, which requires the researcher to refocus and readjust.

Ethnography typically involves a great deal of attention to detailed processes of day-to-day life. It is important to closely observe behaviors and decisions which may seem mundane but which, when closely examined, could actually reveal important dimensions of the research participants’ lives and beliefs. However, it is also important for the researcher not to simply stop there, at a detailed description of daily life. These observations should be linked to a larger social structure, so that what is observed by the ethnographer can be relevant to both a very specific local context while also generating insights about social forces on larger scales (Martín Rojo 2010) [5]. Placing interactional data within a broader ideological and social context makes it clear how «the whole social structure is present in each interaction» (Bourdieu 1991) [6: 67]. Ethnographic researchers should be careful to avoid «missing the forest for the trees,» so to speak — in other words, focusing overly on details of a particular context without making any connections to bigger processes. For researchers of language, this also means the analyst should not focus too much on the linguistic details of an utterance to the exclusion of social factors. As Rampton (2007) [7: 596] writes, «ethnography opens linguistics up... linguistics (and linguistically sensitive discourse analysis) ties ethnography down.» In other words, ethnography prevents us from understanding linguistic data without its social context, without any reference to social and ideological meaning. Linguistic data, in turn, gives us the means to see how ideologies are enacted in day to day interactions.

This attention to multiple levels of interpretation — from the very local, temporary, or personal to the long-term, national, or global — can also help researchers avoid two potential pitfalls of ethnographic work. On the one hand, researchers should be careful to avoid either ignoring phenomena which are actually quite important; or explaining them away as insignificant or minor. On the other hand, some things really are not as significant as others; practices, statements or events which really are minor should not be over-interpreted and presented as more significant and representative than they really are. Getting this balance right is one of the major challenges of ethnographic research.

Ethnographic studies have typically placed emphasis on researcher reflexivity. The idea that any researcher can be wholly objective and neutral has been challenged by many scholars; there is no «view from nowhere» (Heller 2011) [3]. Instead, ethnography encourages researchers to reflect on their own position — their own background, identity, and preconceptions. Such reflexive work helps us understand how our own

unique viewpoints as researchers influence our interpretation of data. In the end, what we write and say about a particular context is still our own partial, situation interpretation of what we have observed, and this must be acknowledged. There is no way for even the best researcher doing the most well-conducted research to observe everything in the research participants' lives, or to fully understand their thoughts, or step completely outside the researcher's own point of view. This does not mean that ethnography is not still a rigorous, serious method, but simply that such realities require careful attention and analysis as researchers decide where to draw the limits of their focus and how to account for themselves in their research.

This focus on reflexivity also allows us to consider how our presence as researchers and our unique personal qualities might impact what participants say and do. Researchers of different ages, genders, ethnic backgrounds, personality types, etc. might receive different kinds of responses from research participants. Carefully considering this reality helps us to better understand our data and can help generate important research insights, a point which will be illustrated in the case studies below. As Heller (2011) [3; 42] writes, «We are better off trying to understand how people make sense of us and our activities than trying to pretend we can disappear.»

In the following two sections, the authors provide brief reflections on their own experiences conducting ethnographic research and what it allowed them to see in their respective research contexts.

#### *Case 1: Hong Kong*

The first author of this paper, Kara Fleming, decided to carry out an ethnographic study in Hong Kong because she was interested in the portrayal and trajectories of South Asian ethnic minority students in the Hong Kong education system. In Hong Kong, working-class South Asians (primarily from Pakistani, Indian, and Nepali backgrounds) generally have less success than their ethnic Chinese peers at accessing higher education and well-paying employment. In the Hong Kong media and in political discourse, this lack of success is overwhelmingly said to be because South Asians in Hong Kong do not speak Cantonese (Cantonese is a variety of Chinese, which is the dominant spoken language of Hong Kong) — see for instance many media reports on this topic, e.g. Benitez 2018 [8], Carvalho 2017 [9], Ngo 2013 [10], etc. Many academic studies have been based on similar assumptions — that the Cantonese ability of South Asian students is lacking, and the best way to improve the social and economic position of these students is to improve their Cantonese abilities. However, Fleming was curious — to what extent was it true, firstly, that South Asians struggled with Cantonese? If they did, was this really the root from where all other problems stemmed?

To this end, Fleming [11], [12] conducted an ethnographic study in a Hong Kong secondary school with a large proportion of students from South Asian backgrounds. During the spring semester of 2013, she visited this school three times a week from February to June. She focused on one class in particular, class «1C», a bilingual class including both South Asian and ethnic Chinese students who were about 12–14 years old at the time of research. This involved regularly attending their English, Chinese as a second language (upper level), math, and Life and Society classes. These classes were chosen as the researcher wanted to see interactions in both language courses as well as in social studies and scientific subjects. She also attended classes of a special bilingual «Immersion Scheme» run by the school, as well as weekly practices of the drama club. She regularly ate lunch with students and spent time with them after school and during breaks. Additionally, she sat in on some class periods of form 2 English, class 1B science, form 1 Chinese as a second language (lower level) and various other school assemblies and activities. To further support her observations, she conducted a number of interviews with students in class 1C, as well as administering a short survey.

The picture Fleming came to see through this ethnographic work was quite different than what had been portrayed by all these media reports and by some non-ethnographic research. First of all, she found that South Asian minority students were virtually always treated by official and institutional actors as if they all were lacking Cantonese language ability. They were officially classified by the Hong Kong Education Bureau as «non-Chinese speaking» students (NCS), and school authorities, in many ways, reproduced this categorization system, for instance by setting up opportunities for «language exchange» where all South Asian students were expected to act as English authorities and all ethnic Chinese students as authorities on Cantonese. But in fact, some South Asian students actually spoke very fluent Cantonese, some were not particularly confident in English, and some of the ethnic Chinese students who were treated in such activities as 'locals' had ironically moved to Hong Kong fairly recently from Mainland China and were actually more comfortable in Mandarin than Cantonese. This ethnographic research was able to provide a more complex picture of categories that were treated by the government and the school as much more homogenous, bounded and essentialized than they really were.

As mentioned above, reflexivity is an important aspect of ethnography, and the researcher's reflections on her own identity and positioning in the school were also an important part of the research process. Fleming is a white American woman, and considering how students reacted to her presence at the school was very helpful in understanding how students thought about categories of race, class, and language. For instance, students on several occasions asked her, «Do you have any NCS friends?» NCS means 'non-Chinese speaking,' and, as noted above, is the term used to officially designate working-class South Asian students by Hong Kong's Ministry of Education. However, literally, 'non-Chinese speaking' could refer to quite a lot of different people in Hong Kong. If it was used in this broad sense, meaning literally anyone in Hong Kong who did not speak Chinese, the question would seem a bit strange — students otherwise assumed that Fleming socialized mainly with other 'foreigners' and English speakers. It only makes sense if it is understood more narrowly to mean South Asians in Hong Kong, and when Fleming responded that she did have friends who came originally from India and the Philippines, the students accepted this answer without surprise. The fact that 'non-Chinese speaking' has become effectively an ethnic label, rather than a description of language skills, has significant implications for language learning and racial inequality in Hong Kong. If someone is categorized as not speaking Chinese without any consideration of their actual language abilities, how will learning more Chinese help to move them out of this category?

Thus on the basis of this research Fleming argued that learning Cantonese, while helpful and important, was not the sole factor preventing Hong Kong South Asians from access to higher education or jobs, and accordingly teaching these students Cantonese cannot be said to fix all these problems. The difficulties experienced by some South Asians in Hong Kong is more closely linked to local racial / socioeconomic hierarchies, and attributing any and all issues to language is a way of masking these other social processes. Ethnography thus allowed for a complication of taken-for-granted categories making assumptions about language, race, and identity, and following from that, a rethinking of local realities and possible solutions.

#### *Case 2: Kazakhstan*

The second author Juldyz Smagulova conducted an ethnographic study in Kazakhstan. She studied language socialization practices in families of urban ethnic Kazakhs. The follow up ethnographic study aimed to address the discrepancies in large-scale surveys (Smagulova 2008 [13], Smagulova 2016 [14]). The survey data showed that the last Soviet generation differed considerably in their language preferences and choices from the generation of their children. They were more linguistically and culturally Russified: they were less likely to speak and use Kazakh, they were more skeptical of the «Kazakhization» policy and the value of Kazakh. Yet the survey results also showed that as parents they seemed to play a key role in Kazakh revival in urban areas. Unquestionably, their decision to educate children in Kazakh instead of Russian had a great positive effect on the vitality of Kazakh. In other words, the survey pointed at contradictions and complexities of language revival among urban Kazakhs. The above-stated contradictions of language revival were examined through lenses of a micro-analysis of language socialization practices. The analysis focused on what language ideologies were being transmitted in cross-generational interaction, through what practices, and to what ends.

The study was designed to examine ideological conflict; therefore, the aim was to choose a social group that had undergone dramatic changes in their practices and beliefs. The quantitative and language policy analysis pointed towards urban middle-class Russian-speaking Kazakhs as a crucial focus for ethnographic study. The following recaptures the arguments for this choice:

- Why Kazakhs? Study of ethnic Kazakhs gives us a chance to look at the effect of change in social positioning on language practices. After independence in 1991, Kazakhstan underwent a dramatic socio-economic transformation leading to power-redistribution in society in favor of Kazakhs. Firstly, Kazakhs had been officially proclaimed the «state-organizing» nationality: Kazakhstan is «a land of Kazakhs» while Kazakh is a new sole state language. Secondly, Kazakhs had become a demographic majority in their 'own' land for the first time in 60 years. Thirdly, Kazakhs had gained access to political and economic power *en masse* as they had never before. Finally, Kazakhs were quite successfully revitalizing and modernizing their 'native' language. *What do these changes mean to people? How do these changes impact their everyday lives?*

- Why urban? Rural areas had always remained Kazakh-speaking, but urban areas were almost predominantly Russian. However, ethnic mobilization, the new language policy of «Kazakhization» along with rapid urbanization of Kazakhs contested the dominance of Russian in both public and private domains. The survey showed there had been striking changes in beliefs and language choices. *How do urban Kazakhs bal-*

ance between ethnic loyalty that requires them to acquire and promote Kazakh at the expense of Russian and personal interests that require them to maintain the high value of Russian at the expense of Kazakh?

- Why middle class educated Kazakhs? The survey data revealed that Kazakh brought no economic benefit; in fact, it was quite the reverse, Kazakh proficiency is linked to lower incomes. Nevertheless, most middle-class respondents claimed that they would like to see Kazakh as a language of education for their children and believed that Kazakh proficiency could give their children economic advantages. *What are the beliefs that legitimize the linguistic and social hierarchy? What makes middle class parents, who are doing relatively well in economic terms, invest in Kazakh? And, how does it translate in everyday language practice?*

- Why third-generation urban families? These families underwent a classical three-generation language shift: the grandparents were Kazakh speakers, their parents were bilinguals, and the last Soviet generation who attended school in the 1960s-80s had very limited or no proficiency in Kazakh. The survey suggests though that we might be observing a generational makeover — these young parents try to avoid the mistakes in language socialization their own parents made. Increases in Kazakh-language school enrollment, in reported use of Kazakh at home, and in fluent proficiency among the youngest respondents suggest that. *What is the Kazakh urban parents' response to changing sociolinguistic situation? What strategies do they choose to revive Kazakh? How do they introduce Kazakh in the daily language practices? How do Russian-speaking parents deal with schooling children in Kazakh in their everyday life?*

Thus, the ethnographic study examined home language socialization practices as a crucial site of the struggle between language ideologies that underlie the processes of shift and revival. The term *site* refers to «discursive practices, texts, and cultural activities where ideological work is being done» (Friedman 2006) [15; 12]. The choice of home language socialization as a site for ethnographic study stems from the following convictions:

- Intergenerational language socialization is a «crucial site of language transmission and indicator of a code's vitality» (Fellin 2002) [16; 46].

- Intergenerational language socialization is a language renewal site where differences in language beliefs and practices are especially dramatically displayed (Kroskrity 2009) [17].

The ethnographic study focusing on Kazakh language revival efforts among urban Kazakhs, who are the most linguistically and culturally Russified, showed that the adults in the study subscribe to the official policy of «Kazakhization» and thus share the views of the majority of the mass survey respondents. However, their home language practices do not match this explicit language ideology. Their language practices privilege Russian for serious tasks, construct children as Russian-speaking, and enregister Kazakh as baby talk and as a school subject, limiting Kazakh to ritualized use, in ways that contribute to maintenance of Russian in urban families.

The multilevel approach — mass survey followed by an in-depth ethnographic study proved to be a fruitful line of inquiry for better understanding of the relationship between language ideology and language practices, between official and family policy, between local practices and the grand processes of ethnic mobilization, social mobility, and nation-building.

#### Discussion and conclusion

Kazakhstan is a context in which further ethnographic research is greatly needed. Our aim in this paper is not to disparage other types of research; but merely to highlight the benefits of an ethnographic or ethnographically informed approach to developing knowledge of Kazakhstani society. Other than Smagulova's research, we are aware of only a few studies that make use of this method in the Kazakh context (e.g. Kudaibergenova 2019 [18], Jaidakpayeva 2014 [19]). To that end, we identify a couple areas where we feel ethnographic research is particularly warranted.

Firstly, studies suggest that macro-level language policy initiatives seem to have limited direct impact on micro-level everyday talk. It seems that the language planning agencies need to reconsider their understanding of language policy as large-scale governmental top-down activities only. For language revival to be possible, language planning must include activities focusing on some of the micro-level constraining factors. Secondly, planning bodies should stop relying on people's explicit support as a promise of success. An ample amount of research, including Smagulova's study of language socialization practices, shows that support at the ideational level does not translate into significant changes in language practices. Thus, language revival activity should start with «ideological clarification» (Kroskrity 2009) [17; 71] aimed at «recognizing and resolving ideological conflict that would impede local effects at linguistic revitalization» (ibid).

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## Этнография зерттеу әдісі не ұсына алады: әдістемелік пайымдау және кейстік зерттеулер

Мақалада этнографияны күрделі, көп тілді контекстерде, тіл білімі салаларында зерттеу әдісі ретінде қолданудағы артықшылықтары мен қиындықтары талқыланды. Қазақстан этнографиялық тұрғыдан салыстырмалы түрде аз зерттелген контекст болып табылады, сондықтан бұндай зерттеулердің көбеюі Қазақстан үшін тиімді болуы тиіс. Осы мақалада, этнографияның теориялық және әдістемелік негіздері баяндалған және этнография әдісін зерттеуші ретінде екі түрлі контексте — Гонконгта және Қазақстанда — қолдану тәжірибесімен бөліскен. Бұл тұрғыда, Қазақстандағы тіл білімі және білім беру салаларындағы зерттеулерде, этнография және этнографиялық тұрғыда негізделген тәсілдерді қолдану артықшылықтарын алға тарта отырып, мақаланы қорытындылаған. Мақаланың авторлары тіл, қоғам және білім беру салаларының мамандары. Сәйкесінше, ұсынылған идеялар ұқсас салаларда зерттеу жүргізетін ғалымдар арасында ерекше қызығушылық тудыруы мүмкін. Алайда, этнография әдісінің қолданылуы тіл білімі немесе білім беру салаларымен ғана шектеліп қоймайды. Этнография әдісі көптеген академиялық салалар бойынша зерттеу жобаларына айтарлықтай үлес қосып келеді. Этнографияның зерттеу әдісі ретіндегі артықшылығы оның белгілі бір контекспен байланысты, ауқымды да терең дерек жинақтауға икемділігінде және басқа да тәсілдермен бірге, көп-өлшемді зерттеу жобаларында қолданыла алатындығында деп санаймыз.

*Кілт сөздер:* этнография, зерттеу әдістемесі, тіл білімі және білім беру.

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**Что может предложить этнография:  
методологические размышления и исследования кейсов**

В статье рассмотрены преимущества и проблемы этнографии как метода исследования, особенно применительно к изучению языка в сложных, многоязычных контекстах. Казахстан — это тот контекст, где было проведено сравнительно мало этнографических исследований, и который мог бы значительно выиграть от дальнейших исследований такого рода. Авторами кратко очерчены теоретико-методологические основы этнографии и приведены размышления о собственном опыте использования этого метода в двух разных контекстах, а именно: в Гонконге и Казахстане. В заключении предложены возможные преимущества этнографического и этнографически обоснованного подхода в отношении изучения языка и образования в Казахстане. Авторы этой статьи специализируются на исследованиях в области языка, общества и образования; соответственно, предложенные ими идеи могут представлять особый интерес для ученых, проводящих исследования в аналогичных областях. Однако авторами отмечено, что потенциал методологического применения этнографии выходит за рамки языковых исследований. Действительно, этнографические методы внесли значительный вклад в производство знаний по различным академическим дисциплинам. Преимущества этнографического метода заключаются в его способности генерировать обширные, глубокие и контекстуализированные данные, независимо от того, используются ли только этнографический метод или в сочетании с другими подходами в многомерных исследованиях.

*Ключевые слова:* этнография, методология исследования, изучение языка и образование.