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Claims of ‘knowing’ in ethnography: realising anti-essentialism through a critical reflection on language acquisition in fieldwork

Abstract

The experience of researching in a second language is central to the types of ‘claims’ that can be made in ethnographic fieldwork, yet the process of language acquisition is barely explored in anthropological texts. This article contributes to addressing the gap through presenting a personal reflection on language learning during the research process. Learning Hungarian was central to the fieldwork experience referred to in this article, which included 15 months in a primary school in central Hungary researching discourses surrounding Roma (Gypsy) minorities. The article focuses on a personal account of learning Hungarian, acknowledging the importance of reflecting on language acquisition in order to illuminate the context in which research claims are made. This awareness of language learning in the field led to further insight into the problematic dimensions of claims-making in fieldwork and the role of anti-essentialist theorisation in empirical research. The focus is on how the personal experience of being a second language learner in research led to a greater understanding of the importance of accountability in ethnography, and how an anti-essentialist approach can help this process.

Introduction

Anthropologists are in general agreement that the world depicted in their works is fragmented and fluctuating. However, there is criticism that anthropologists may not go far enough to elaborate on the way claims of knowing (even about this fragmented world) can be justified,

little effort has been made so far to understand the process by which anthropologists (individually and collectively) become convinced of ‘being right’, or to be in the know (Hastrup 2004, 458).

In this article, the process of learning a second language is highlighted as central to the claims of 'being in the know' that can be made by ethnographic fieldwork.

Language learning is a fundamental part of doing ethnography in a foreign country, yet the time given to discussing how an ethnographer goes about learning a language or the linguistic competence actually required to carry out research has been, in the words of Agar, 'eerily quiet', "I get the image of nervous ethnographers who are far from fluent trying not to bring up the subject" (1996, 150). Tonkin has also commented that in the face of questions about fluency, 'anthropologists have often taken refuge in silence' (1984, 178). Competence in a language has often been assumed rather than openly discussed, creating ambiguity around the question of how researchers have learnt foreign languages and of problems they may have encountered. What is actually meant by 'arduous language learning, some direct involvement and conversation' remains unexplored (Clifford 1983, 119). This article not only works to address a gap in the literature through a personal account of the process of learning Hungarian in fieldwork, but also shows how the process of language learning affected the theoretical and methodological considerations of the research project.

The fieldwork referred to in the article was undertaken as part of a PhD project entitled 'Representations of Roma: Public discourses and local practices'¹. The thesis borne out of this project examines the interface between public and local representations of Roma people. The 'public discourses' section looks at how academia and EU institutions approach 'Roma' in their literature, whilst the 'local practices' form the bulk of the study, and involved 15 months of ethnographic research in a primary school in the Southern Great Plain region of Hungary. In-depth interviews were recorded with teachers and Roma and non-Roma children, along with a photography project where all the children received a disposable camera to take pictures of their everyday lives. This data was analysed looking at when, where and how 'Roma' became relevant

¹ The PhD was undertaken in the Education and Professional Studies Department at King's College London from 2003-2007 (obtained Feb 1st 2008), with supervision from Professor Ben Rampton and Dr. Roxy Harris. The PhD was fully funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

in the course of everyday lives, and how this relates to the way Roma are written about in the public discourses.

At the start of the project, anti-essentialist theorisations were used as a means to move away from strong, homogenising notions of Roma minorities. In the beginning these ideas had not been explicitly linked to language learning. However, through continual reflection on language acquisition in the research field, anti-essentialist theorisations became more obviously appropriate to the practice of fieldwork, subsequently re-informing the research methodology and the presentation of data. This article first looks at how the process of language reflection in fieldwork emphasised and extended the anti-essentialist approach to the research. It then looks at how this thought process affected choice of data collection and presentation. The article argues that reflecting on language can have a profound impact on the overall approach to research, highlighting the importance of the interface between the theoretical and the empirical.

Being ‘less-than-fluent’ in the language of the field

Learning Hungarian was central to the fieldwork experience of this project, and highlighted the types of ‘claims’ that I, the researcher, could confidently make of my time spent doing research in Hungary. All the data collection was carried out in Hungarian - I did not use any interpreters as I had been learning Hungarian for four years prior to the study, including two years when I actually lived in Hungary. However, this still did not make me a fluent speaker, and this section will open up some possibilities for understanding how I carried out a study in Hungary while being ‘less-than-fluent’, including an account of learning Hungarian which aims to explore my language competence in the unfolding process of research². These reflections on language learning also led to a further understanding of the importance of anti-essentialist ideas.

² Reflecting on language use has been deployed as a method with multi-language users in order to gauge their language competence in everyday life, and promote self-awareness and confidence (Harris & Savitzky 1988, Harris 2006).

In an article on learning language as a part of research, Borchgrevink finds it a topic that has been shrouded in what he terms ‘fieldwork mystique’ (2003, 115). This ‘mystique’ for Borchgrevink was quickly dispelled after a difficult nine months doing fieldwork in a Nicaraguan peasant village. Even with a ‘fair command’ of Spanish prior to starting his research, he was far from achieving the initial aim of his fieldwork:

I had to admit – at least to myself – that I was a long way from understanding my informants’ innermost thoughts and feelings, and that problems with language and communication were among the factors which had prevented me from reaching such an understanding (Borchgrevink 2003, 96).

Borchgrevink points out that the lack of discussion of language learning may reflect the fact that anthropologists have generally shown ‘relatively little concern with methodological issues’ (2003, 104). And whilst admitting that ‘language is only one form of communication’, he nevertheless emphasises the importance of being more explicit in the claims for ‘what it means to know or speak a language’ (2003, 96) and to raise the question, ‘Just what is ‘language competence’?’ (2003, 113)³.

Borchgrevink uses Maxwell Owusu’s (1978) criticism of Western anthropologists’ ‘lack of use, misuse or abuse of native languages’ in fieldwork in African countries to advise anthropologists to show ‘diligence’ and ‘humility’,

³ A great influence on contemporary Romani studies has been the anthropologist Michael Stewart, who has written about Roma in Hungary. Whilst not doubting Stewart’s proficiency in both Hungarian and Romany (I had heard him speak very fluent Hungarian on the courses he ran in Budapest), he barely mentions how he learnt these languages, and how his different stages of competency may have affected his fieldwork. I could find only three references to language learning in his 1997 work *Time of the Gypsies*,

- ‘Katalin Kovalcsik of the Zenetudományi Intézet taught me Romany’ (1997 xvi)
- ‘Some two months after I arrived in Harangos, I was traveling with some Gypsies to a nearby town, and they asked me how I would greet the Gypsies we were going to visit. Pleased with my accurate responses, although my general knowledge of Romany was still barely passable, my passengers complimented me warmly: ‘You can speak Romany now!’’ (44)
- ‘I asked a young Rom who had given me some help with Romany for advice on how best to integrate into Harangos Gypsy life’ (207).

the anthropologist who is not fluent in the language must be particularly diligent in double-checking information and critically testing interpretations. There is a need to show humility and avoid what Owusu terms the ‘unethical intellectual arrogance, cocksureness, or nonchalance characteristic of Western social scientists studying societies and cultures’ (Borchgrevink 2003, 107).

In awareness of these issues, I will give a brief outline of my own assessment of my language competence in Hungarian, followed by the steps that I took during the course of my fieldwork to be ‘diligent’ about my position as a second language learner.

As already mentioned, before carrying out my academic fieldwork from 2004-5, I had lived and worked in Hungary from 2000-2002⁴. In 2000 I arrived with the knowledge of just a few words and phrases in Hungarian I had managed to learn from a cassette and book set (Pontifex, 1996). My learning of Hungarian was not immediate upon arrival, as my boss at the NGO (non-governmental organisation) where I was placed was keen to improve his English. However, I became more motivated to learn Hungarian through: wanting to socialise with other people; becoming good friends with my neighbours and their children; and helping out in a local school and a Saturday club for predominantly Roma children. I started informal language lessons with a friend and primary school teacher who lived opposite me, and I attended three intensive language courses at Debrecen University in Eastern Hungary (two during my first stay in Hungary, in 2001 and 2002, and a third one in my first few months of fieldwork, January 2005⁵).

In my second year in Hungary (still ‘pre-PhD’), I ran an intercultural education project at the Teacher’s Training College, and although the course was in English, the student group and I

⁴ I began in 2000 as a volunteer in the European Commission-funded ‘European Voluntary Service’ (EVS).

⁵ The intensive courses I attended ran for two weeks and were held in the winter 2001 and spring 2002, and then a third one in winter 2005 at the ‘Debrecen Summer School’. The courses use the *Hungarolingua* teaching materials (Hlavacska, Hoffman, Laczkó and Maticsák 1991), see <www.nyariegyetem.hu>, accessed 12 Jan 2009.

carried out workshops in Hungarian primary schools in the area⁶. With this experience, along with my work with children, I realised how hard it was to organise children in Hungarian and I often felt very frustrated: for example in trying to get children to play games through shouting commands and directing their action⁷. At the same time, it was a great learning experience as the children were relentless in their enthusiasm to talk to me and teach me, and were harsh critics of my grammar mistakes. I was both grateful and surprised that often, when I tried to explain a game, one or two children would end up helping me. They would step in as my ‘interpreter’ for an activity, trying to fathom out what my instructions were, then repeat them clearly to the group.

I experienced a sharp improvement in learning Hungarian in the summer of 2002 when along with two German friends (also volunteers with the same programme but from a different organisation), I helped organise a photo and history exhibition about Roma life in the city (called ‘Mi szépek vagyunk’, ‘We are beautiful’). For the exhibition, we interviewed eleven adults from the Roma community about their lives. I felt both disheartened about how the interviews seemed to reveal my utter lack of language skills, whilst at the same time elated that I had carried out these interviews at all, some of which went on for over an hour, were very informative, and really enjoyable.

From the start of my fieldwork in September 2004, I was in the school environment all day at least three days a week. This was incredibly enriching for language learning as there were so many different ways of speaking that I was picking up⁸ (e.g. scolding; children’s slang and joking

⁶ I obtained a grant through the EVS programme called ‘Future Capital’ that was available to all EVS volunteers after their placement, see < <http://www.britishcouncil.org/connectyouth.htm>>, accessed 12 Jan 2009.

⁷ This involved using subjunctive (or imperative) formulations, which even now I still find really difficult to construct spontaneously unless they are everyday expressions, for example ‘gyertek ide!’ (‘come here!’ [plural ‘you’]) or ‘álljatok meg!’ (‘stand still!’ [plural ‘you’]).

⁸ Another factor that helped my language learning and awareness was watching television. From the start of my fieldwork, I noticed that children talked about watching a lot of television, and they often spoke of specific programmes, so I tried to watch the same programmes, sometimes with families I visited or in my flat. I felt that by watching television, I was learning both language and a certain ‘popular’ culture along with more serious ‘news’ and ‘documentary’ culture. Participating in a practice that everyone else was also doing gave me definite topics for conversation. For example, in one of my monthly reports to my supervisors, I wrote about the sudden popularity of the show *Megasztár* (where members of the public compete to be a pop star, similar to UK’s *Pop Idol*): ‘it gives me an instant shared topic of conversation with teachers and pupils alike’ (Monthly Report to supervisors, November

or teasing; science/literary language; teachers' hushed talking to each other so children couldn't hear, etc). Not only was I immersed in the vibrant and diverse setting of a school, but I also became immersed in critically reflecting on my language use through using participant observation as a research method and writing fieldnotes. The critical reflection of my Hungarian language competence in my fieldnotes and the monthly reports I sent to my supervisors (which distilled the fieldnotes into readable sections) were, I believe, central to the direction of my subsequent data collection, analysis and presentation.

For example, despite a steep learning curve in Hungarian during my fieldwork, I was aware that I could understand some interactions much better than others, as an excerpt from my monthly report to my supervisors in November 2004 shows:

I mostly understand the lessons in terms of what the teacher is saying and what the teacher wants the children to do. Where I have real difficulties in understanding, is when a situation suddenly flares up and the teacher gets cross and tells off a child. Quite often I've found that even though I've been watching the class, I can't quite understand why teachers get so cross only at certain times. As far as I've seen, there is not a really consistent way that teachers tell off the children, as sometimes they are loud and chattering and don't queue properly, and no one says anything. Then suddenly one day it becomes a problem and they are made to stand outside until they can queue 'properly', or march up and down the corridor until they do this without noise.

After such incidents of telling-off, I also often do not understand everything a teacher says to me when she is re-telling the incident. The teachers often speak in low fast tones so that children cannot hear, and because of this I feel I can't stop them to explain words I don't understand as I do in ordinary conversation (Monthly Report to supervisors, November 2004).

2004). Later on, the tensions between the teacher's loathing of the new TV reality show *Győzike*, based on the life of a flamboyant Roma pop star and his family (similar in format to the MTV show *The Osbournes*), compared to the children's complete love of it, brought to the surface both inter-generational differences as well as some interesting representations of 'Roma' (see Imre and Tremlett, under review).

This experience influenced my views on ethnography and the limits to the ‘claims’ that I might be able to make in my fieldwork based on my language (and understanding) proficiency. Obviously, I would not be able to write about all aspects of interaction if I could not really understand certain moments such as these scoldings or whispered teacher talk, both of which seemed to form significant moments in day-to-day life. For example, I knew that I would not be comfortable just ‘writing’ about representations based solely on incidents from memory or fieldnotes, in case I had not grasped the entire situation.

Nevertheless, my understanding, speaking and communication in Hungarian improved over time. I did not find it difficult to talk to children or teachers on a one-to-one informal level, during break times or on the bus or walking home. My fieldnotes were full of little exchanges I had with children and teachers. Whereas the above passage was written in November 2004, I can see that from February 2005 I started to feel a bit more confident in my Hungarian, as I noted an incident when somebody actually copied the Hungarian I used. On one cold winter’s day, boys were throwing ‘ice balls’ around the playground:

There were mostly boys outside and they were digging up the ice from the playground, it was coming up in big thick sheets and they were trying to get the biggest sheets and throw them at each other or just carried them around to show them off. When the smaller bits were thrown they were really hard like stone. I said to Mrs Edit⁹ „ez veszélyes, mert annyira kemény, mint a kő!” [„it’s dangerous, because it’s as hard as stone!”] and then I heard Mrs Edit repeat it loudly „kemény mint a kő!” [„it’s as hard as stone!”] and I was quite surprised that for once someone can take something from my Hungarian language that is worth repeating (Fieldnote diary Feb 8th 2005) [mistakes also in original script].

This growing sense of confidence was matched by a feeling that I was beginning to be able to ask the right questions when I did not understand something. In comparison to my November 2004 report (see above), the March 2005 report showed that I was becoming much more confident in understanding:

⁹ In accordance with ethical guidelines, all names of places and people have been changed in this article.

Whereas in my November Report 2004 I was concerned with areas of language that I didn't understand (e.g. telling off/specific questions), now I feel different, like I don't need to be so concerned with not understanding, as I have got more confident to ask questions/repeat back when I don't understand (not just to do with language, but also familiarity with people and the school). I feel that I understand the rhythm of how to speak, and so I can pose questions/repeat back much more quickly, so conversations are not so fragmented or disrupted as before. I am also much more aware that other people also ask a lot of questions/repeat back to ensure a conversation is understood, so it's not just me in a paranoid 'new language' dilemma, but questions/repeats back are actually very common, and it's these I had to learn, more than the correct way of saying something (Monthly Report to supervisors, March 2005).

This meant that I could 'get away' with not understanding, because I could always ask the person to repeat a section of what they had said, or ask another question that would give more information. By the time I carried out my interviews with children from mid-March 2005, and with teachers from mid-April 2005, I felt reasonably confident that, although not 'fluent', I was capable enough to ask questions and hold a conversation. The feeling of capability was grounded in the knowledge that a rapport had already been established with my interviewees and therefore they knew what 'kind' of Hungarian I spoke, and I knew them well enough not to be shy of saying if I did not understand.

In order to avoid what Owusu called the 'unethical intellectual arrogance' of western scholars in their claims on language learning (in Borchgrevink 2003, 107), and in the knowledge that there are vast areas of the Hungarian language I have not accessed in-depth (poetry, literature, deep political debates, etc), I continue to call myself a learner of Hungarian who is 'less-than-fluent' (probably a label for life)¹⁰. On arriving back from my fieldwork, I continued with Hungarian lessons at the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies (University College London), as

¹⁰ In official terms my linguistic competence looks like this: I obtained the ECL (European Consortium of Languages) intermediate level of Hungarian in oral and written in November 2005 ('Level B2'), and the Hungarian state accredited advanced level of Hungarian in oral and written ('Level C1') in November 2008.

well as attending a semester of an MA course in Hungarian reading and translation. Both of these were run by Peter Sherwood¹¹, whose teaching methods were in tune with my needs as he has extensive experience in teaching British students Hungarian. His teaching style helped me to improve my skills of reading and translating, which became all the more important in dealing with recorded data and transcripts post-fieldwork¹².

Despite my improving competency in Hungarian, being ‘less-than-fluent’ was still a status that I had to handle during my fieldwork, and one that I felt was necessary to deal with in the presentation of my fieldwork. I could not claim to ‘know everything’ about the lives of the people and children I researched. Whilst anthropologist Michael Stewart (well known in Romani studies for his work on the Vlach Rom community in Hungary) wrote, ‘when I talk of the Rom and the Rom ways of doing things it is to them alone I refer’ (Stewart 1997, 10), I could not even begin to imagine writing ‘when I talk of the pupils and teachers at the primary school it is to them alone I refer’. From my experience, the problem in this sentence is ‘them alone’. I could not imagine how I could ever presume that I could know everything about one school or even one group of children in one school. I had always been aware that generalisations of ‘the Roma’ or any such derivative was something I wanted to investigate and avoid in my own research. But it was the sheer volume and variety of daily interactions that surrounded me, along with awareness of my (changing) personal language competence that in the end gave me an insight into the true problematic nature of claiming knowledge in fieldwork. Reflecting on language competence and use became my particular in-road that made the writings around ‘anti-essentialism’ very pertinent to everyday fieldwork practices, writing and analysis.

Problematizing knowledge claims

¹¹ Peter Sherwood was a contributing editor to the Hungarian-English dictionary that I have used to help with translations (Magay, Országh and Sherwood 2001).

¹² However, in my thesis I took full responsibility for all transcriptions and translations of Hungarian in the thesis, and any mistakes were of course entirely my own.

The very real experience of being ‘less-than-fluent’ can be set against a wider context of problematising knowledge claims. As I have shown, my ethnographic language experience became connected to theoretical formulations of anti-essentialism not usually linked to empirical investigations (Harris 2006, 18). In my case, being ‘less-than-fluent’ led to a greater awareness of the difficulties in writing about a minority such as the Roma which I now discuss in more detail.

The Roma are frequently depicted as a marginalised, extremely discriminated minority mired in deep poverty. They are also often used in heavily symbolic ways: as an exemplar of a free, different, fascinating Bohemian other; or as a parasitic, hapless, unruly, unseemly other. How, then, to write about such a minority? Previous academics have seen their work as enabling a positive view of the minority, a way to help ‘dispel the prejudice that sustained the fear of the Gypsy’ (Stewart 1997, 18, see also Acton 1998: 1; Gay y Blasco 1997, 518-519; Matras 2002, 4; Okely 1992, 14; Stewart 1997, 17; Sutherland 1992, 276; Tong 1998, ix). But as any grounding in anti-essentialist theoretical formulations on ethnicity would tell us, showing a ‘positive’ picture can also be heavily problematic and does not necessarily free us from homogenising portrayals:

This [a certain anti-racist approach] has led to a position where politically opposed groups are united by their view of race exclusively in terms of culture and identity rather than politics and history. Culture and identity are part of the story of racial sensibility but they do not exhaust that story (Gilroy 2002, 251) [my addition].

Rather than positioning ethnicity in terms of a single culture and identity, certain authors from British Cultural Studies (BCS), see the concept of ethnicity as open to multiple meanings. Plurality (or ‘hybridity’) of identities becomes not just a possibility, but rather recognition of how identity is lived day to day. BCS scholars have taken up this challenge and have introduced terms to describe this plurality, for example ‘unfinished identities’ (Gilroy 1993, 1); ‘multi-acculturality’ (Mercer 1994, 60); ‘cultural hybridity’ (Morley 1996, 331). These scholars show that the plurality of identity (i.e. drawing on many influences) is not unusual, and actually could be envisaged as a kind of norm.

Linking these ideas back to my empirical research, the frustrations and revelations generated through close, continual (reflexive) awareness of language and interactions in the field highlighted how knowledge claims are always problematic. In my fieldwork, I struggled with the idea of writing ‘an’ ethnography about ‘a’ people, as my January 2005 report shows:

In my Upgrade Chapters¹³ I indicated that I did not want to position myself as an ‘ethnographer’ going to collect data and writing up ‘an ethnography’. The more time I am here the more I agree with this. I cannot pretend that I know anyone or anything inside out like presenting data as ‘an ethnography’ might presume. Although I am in school quite a lot, and the school is not very big, I still cannot keep track of the multitude of things that go on in there. Let alone what goes on with the children in the streets or at home (Monthly Report to supervisors, January 2005).

As mentioned before, even if I had narrowed my claims to only writing about the teachers and children of the primary school (instead of slipping into talk about ‘the Roma people’ or ‘the Hungarian people’) I was still aware that my knowledge would be insufficient to make big claims about knowing everything about life in the school. I saw a link to anti-essentialist theorisations which are committed to challenging the notion that people have an unchangeable ‘essence’. I argue that the fieldwork itself does not have a particular core or ‘essence’ that can obviously be laid out for the reader with a claim that ‘this is how it was’. The more experience I had of learning Hungarian, the more keenly aware I was of the diversity of interactions and discourses amongst families, the public, different geographical locations and different institutions. I became even more determined not to risk portraying a homogenous image of Roma people or Hungary. Building an awareness of the importance of language into my research project reaffirmed the usefulness of anti-essentialism in empirical research, and enabled a critical interrogation of the types of claims I could make. The article now moves on to looking at the practical decisions I

¹³ ‘Upgrade Chapters’ refer to a part of the British PhD process when a student moves from MPhil to PhD status, generally between 12-18 months after starting (for full-time students). Students present some initial chapters to an internal panel, in which they have to demonstrate that they are well placed to complete their thesis within the required time limit.

made in my fieldwork methods and presentation in order to take into account an awareness of the complexities involved in being ‘less-than-fluent’.

Anti-essentialist ethnography: being explicit and accountable

As Borchgrevink was quoted earlier as saying, it is important for ethnographers in a second language to be ‘particularly diligent in double-checking information and critically testing interpretations’ (2003, 107). This section now looks at the methods of data collection I used (or ‘ethnographic tools’, Bloome and Green 1996), and how they became integrated into the anti-essentialist stance of the project. As already stated, before my research began, I was aware of the problems of assuming one fixed ‘ethnic people’. I therefore chose to research in a school with both Roma and non-Roma pupils, allowing a comparative approach. Then, after becoming even more aware of the limitations of claims of knowing through my fieldwork, I looked towards how to present the data I had produced. Rather than write a narrative about my fieldwork, I decided to focus on recorded data.

Recording data through electronic means and visual images formed an important part of my fieldwork as it enabled me to overcome some anxieties I felt in being a second language learner. By recording interviews, my analyses could focus on discourse that could be re-played to check exact phrasing and the tone used:

The ability to stop the flow of discourse or the flow of body movement, go back to a particular spot and replay it allows us to concentrate on what is sometimes a very small detail at the time, including a particular sound or a person’s small gesture (Duranti 1997, 116).

Focusing on recorded data proved a different style of presentation than most other research in Romani studies, which generally favours a narrative approach where the ethnographer ‘tells the tale’ of how he/she encountered and made sense of certain Roma communities. Writing such a

narrative could have led me to slip into writing about the area/people as self-contained and undifferentiated, which even the most anti-homogenising approaches in Romani studies still tend to do (Tremlett, 2009).

Recorded data also allows some accountability for my fieldwork, a way to ‘tie down’ ethnography, enhancing the usual anecdotal evidence or quotations from fieldnotes that ethnography often relies on,

‘tying ethnography down’, pushing ethnography towards the analysis of clearly delimitable processes, increasing the amount of reported data that is open to falsification (Rampton 2006, 394-395) [Author’s italics].

However, decisions about what data to ‘tie down’ had to reflect the fact that I was ‘less-than-fluent’ in Hungarian. After five months of participant observation, I recorded one-to-one interviews with six teachers and 39 children from the 4th and 6th grade (ages 10-11, and 13-14). These interviews were carried out in an ethnographic style, and I felt as though they represented a culmination of knowledge about, and a relationship with, teachers and children. Data chapters in my PhD thesis focused on these interviews, describing the conditions under which they were recorded and attempted to contextualise them according to what I had understood from everyday observations along with wider discourses on education, class and identity. Exposing the data in this way was aimed at showing the reader the type of data that was produced under certain conditions, foregrounding the voices of the participants rather than allowing the researcher’s voice to dominate.

Although I felt capable of carrying out interviews, I was nevertheless still concerned that my language limitations might not be able to sensitively deal with children’s self-representations. I was aware of the literature on the ethics of doing research with children and how easy it could be to manipulate their voices. I was particularly concerned that my lack of nuanced language skills might make my interviews with children clumsy or insensitive. I therefore wished to give children some autonomy over their representations, as noted by Thomas and O’Kane:

Part of the task is to redress the power imbalance between child participant and adult researcher, in order to enable children to participate on their own terms. (1998, 337)

One method I used for the 4th grade children was a method termed ‘photo elicitation’, which involved the handing out of disposable cameras to 19 children, 13 non-Roma and 6 Roma¹⁴, of similar low socio-economic backgrounds from the same school and local area. I asked these children to take photographs of their everyday lives, which were then used to elicit conversations with them. The photography project used in the data collection was aimed at giving children some freedom to represent their lives in ‘their own terms’ as well as allowing for some data not wholly dependent on my linguistic fluency¹⁵.

However, despite the photography project producing data alternative to language-based data, this did not make it unproblematic. I was particularly aware of the potential of Roma families being reticent at being photographed, as academics report that Roma keep a strict boundary from non-Roma. For example, Stewart said that when at home, the Vlach Rom wanted to live away from the ‘prying eyes’ of non-Gypsy (*gažo*) people, creating ‘a social space composed according to their own ethic of relatedness’ (1997, 28-29). Dean also reported that in her project with traveller children in the UK, some mothers took the cameras away from the children to monitor the subjects being photographed and jealous siblings demanded they ‘have a go’ with the camera (2007, 18). In fact, these possible limitations were for the majority unfounded in the specific context of my project. A total of 451 photographs were produced by the 19 children. In most photo projects, the children took pictures of a variety of people and areas of the home. Rather than banning or limiting pictures of themselves, parents, siblings and relatives seemed to often be

¹⁴ Using the categories ‘Roma’ and ‘non-Roma’ to group the children themselves is problematic and could be seen as pre-empting or fixing their own sense of identities. However, in my research I used them as broad, existing analytic categories in order to investigate the strong assumption of ‘difference’ in literature on Roma. It was locally known who came from a ‘Roma’ family, and indeed, at the time of research in 2004 this was still being recorded in school records (an illegal act according to the Data Protection Act of Hungary 1993). The imposition of these terms should not lead the reader to assume they relate to an essentialised ‘Roma’ or ‘non-Roma’ identity, and in fact, the whole point of the research was to investigate and problematise these assumptions.

¹⁵ Prior to the photography project, I had obtained signed letters of consent from each parent to allow their child to be a part of the project which would include photographing and being interviewed. All 19 consent forms were returned with signatures.

posing for the camera, the majority in their homes which could be clearly seen in the backgrounds¹⁶.

The volume of photographs generated by the photography project (451) meant that a statistical analysis of the numbers of photographs taken in different categories was a possibility. I categorised the photographs according to broad themes they seemed to fall into. This can be seen as moving towards a ‘supplemental’ analysis as the photos were graded according to their content and not according to a research question (Rose 2007, 239). However, after categorising them¹⁷ I did impose my research question on the results - a ‘subordinated’ approach as the photos become evidence to answer a research question (Rose 2007, 239). In my project the question was: is there something recognisably ‘Roma’ about the homes in the pictures, considering that the ‘Gypsy-way’ and ‘Gypsy taste’ are said to be a strong characteristics of Roma people (see Stewart 1997, 31)? How does evidence of the academic writings on ‘Gypsy taste’ compare to the ethnic and gender groupings of the children? These questions were answered through comparing the numbers in each category taken by Roma and non-Roma children, and comparing this to other possible groupings of children such as gender and number of siblings.

This focus on the visual led me to differing angles on the interface between public and local representations of ‘Roma’ that complemented the language-based interview data. The photography project did produce some surprising results. Considering the prevalence of the idea

¹⁶ There were only a few reported tensions: Sára (a non-Roma girl) reported that her mother had not wanted her to take any pictures inside her house, so she had gone to her grandma’s house next door, and indeed there were no pictures of her parents in her album. However, her twin brother Antal (also in the same class) *had* taken pictures in the home, although only of his father as he said his mother was not keen to be photographed. Ferenc (a Roma boy) told me that his mother had also not been keen to be photographed, although she let him take pictures of the house, and in fact there was one picture of her posing in the kitchen.

¹⁷ There were photos that did not fit into the versions of ‘Roma’ written about in academic literature, which gave me plenty of other material to think about. For example, the television appeared in many photos of family homes, and frequently it was switched on. From interviewing children, I found out that a lot of their ideas of morals and behaviour were shaped by TV shows, and these photographs went some way to help me appreciate that. In fact, television, which is hardly mentioned in Romani studies literature, was widely watched and enjoyed by all the children. This has led me to write a paper looking at the interface between ethnicity, nationalism and popular culture in collaboration with Aniko Imre, which goes a long way to demolish some prominent generalisations both of ‘post-socialist’ Hungary itself and introduce ideas of position of Roma minorities as both entertainers as well as consumers in a national and global market (see Imre and Tremlett, under review).

of 'Roma as different' in the literature on Roma minorities, we might have expected some core differences between the types of photographs taken by Roma and non-Roma children. However, in the ensuing statistical analysis of the types of content of photographs taken by different ethnic and gender groups, the results showed no statistical significance between Roma and non-Roma children in each photographic category of this project. Furthermore, where one statistical significance was apparent was in fact between gender groups, which occurred in one category, 'family at home'¹⁸. This category was the most important both in terms of the over-representation of 'family at home' in comparison to any other category (41% of the photographs - 184 out of 451 - featured 'family at home'), along with the fact that literature on Roma minorities often cites 'home' as the central heart of Roma identity and reproduction of the 'Gypsy way' (see Gay y Blasco 1999, Okely 1983, Stewart 1997). On a dimension where we might, at least according to the existing literature, assume Roma identity to be at its strongest, it was in fact gender difference that appeared more salient.

In a similar vein, the qualitative analysis brought up questions about the fixation of 'Roma as different' in Romani studies and other public discourses. The signs of 'Gypsy taste' often described in the academic literature were not solely characteristic of Roma children's homes; rather, they could be seen in homes across the ethnic groupings, and actually were not found in all Roma family homes. In fact, the one 'classic' example of a 'typical Gypsy taste' home was from a non-Roma child. The results of the project unsettle the notion that Roma and non-Roma identities are always so contrasting as fixed opposites, and indeed led me to consider whether other differences (e.g. gender/class status) may be at times more salient than ethnicity for looking at the way these children represented their daily lives.

Holding up the photographs as the first step of analysis in the presentation of my data and then moving on to the recorded interviews sensitised me to listening to the children's talk and to further investigate what 'difference' might mean. Through comparing extracts from Roma and non-Roma children's interviews, I showed how it would take a big leap to say that a 'Gypsy way'

¹⁸ The results showed that girls were more likely than boys to take photographs in the category 'family at home'.

(as written in the literature) was typical of the way Roma children described their lives, as it would be false to say that elements of the ‘Gypsy way’ were absent from non-Roma children’s interviews. Not only had anti-essentialism made me aware of language as central to fieldwork, causing me to look for ways to supplement and complement audio recordings with visual methodologies, but anti-essentialism had also led to questioning the idea that a study about Roma identity and representations necessarily had to end up being solely about Roma. This line of thinking also allowed the recognition that widely considered Roma identity traits could also be applicable to non-Roma.

Of course the use of photographic images produced by participants does not ‘correct’ researcher bias or linguistic lack of fluency (Packard 2008, Rose 2007). Nevertheless, the use of photographs alongside interviews made for an interesting mix of produced and recorded data. Aiming at being more accountable to the reader by being upfront about the richness and diversity of language-in-the-field, whilst broadening the possibilities of produced data to include the visual, led to further awareness of anti-essentialist thinking. The process of research in a second language encouraged me to become more critical and reflexive, to elucidate further and justify the choices made methodologically as well as analytically.

Conclusion

This article has shown how a critical engagement with issues of language in ethnographic fieldwork can heighten the researcher’s ability to explore the characteristics and limitations of claims made from fieldwork. In the case of this particular research, recognising the position of being ‘less-than-fluent’ in the primary language of the participants led to a certain fastidious attachment to problematising and investigating knowledge claims. Not only did this lead to a deep consideration of approaches to research, including what participants to include, but also led me to further illuminate and justify the choices of analysis and presentation of data from the field. Recorded data, although not infallible (and of course with its own representational issues in the

processes of production, translation and analysis), at least could be put on view, re-played, re-checked and displayed more confidently word-by-word (albeit translated from the Hungarian¹⁹), or image-by-image, to the reader. The photography project not only offered an alternative to purely interactional data, but also opened up possibilities of trying out varying data analyses that enriched the presentation of data and the conclusions that could be drawn.

Furthermore, reflexivity on being ‘less-than-fluent’ highlighted the importance of engaging with theory to inform and debate the status of empirical research. This article has shown how attention to language and interactions in fieldwork can lead to a further appreciation of theory such as anti-essentialism, and vice versa. In my research this particularly resulted in my awareness of being unable to profess to having carried out a holistic ethnography, and neither did I claim to offer the reader a complete view of people’s lives. Even though I had known some of my research participants for more than four years prior to the start of my fieldwork, I still would not presume to know everything about them. Making the path(s) of my language learning more visible, holding that up as a means to show to the reader the difficulties and triumphs of understanding interactions and thus the goings-on in everyday life is perhaps a way towards dispelling some of the ‘fieldwork mystique’ that has so far shrouded much ethnographic literature.

Finally, considering that the subject of my research was to compare and contrast how Roma people are represented in public discourses and local practices, I want to end by summarising what the process taught me about researching ethnic minorities. From the outset of my research I wished to be particularly careful of not reproducing age-old stereotypes - what Willems has called the ‘search of the true Gypsy’:

Gypsies appear to appeal to the imagination simply as social outcasts and scapegoats, or, in a flattering but no more illuminating light, as romantic outsiders. The world is patently intrigued by them, yet at the same time regards them with anxiety as ‘undesirable aliens’ (1997, vii)

¹⁹ The politics of translation are dealt with more fully in the thesis itself, and the original transcripts in Hungarian are included in the appendix of the thesis.

In recognition of the symbolism attached to Roma people, I did not want to slip into producing an appealing positive portrayal of a Roma community, nor indeed an image of a hapless, poverty stricken, deficient minority. As an ethnographer, I argue that we should be careful in carrying out more well thought out, close, empirical research that foregrounds the everyday lives of ordinary people without being seduced by current political orientations, whilst still recognising the importance of these orientations and the need to speak and react to them. And that is more complicated than I ever thought possible. In this article, I have shown a way in through an attention to language. This can lead to a questioning and refining of data collection and presentation, increasing the accountability of claims made in the research process.

To reiterate a very important consideration, I did not want to fall into the trap of finding ethnicity because I was looking for it, as Moerman commented about anthropologists:

Anthropologists at work observe the world under the aspect of ethnicity. We are far more obsessive about it than our natives are. (1993, 87)

Having ‘Roma’ as a research object, yet not wishing to objectify participants as ‘Roma’ (or not), was the crux of my concerns as a new researcher embarking on her first major research project. An anti-essentialist, language-sensitive approach allowed me to avoid the trap of being ‘obsessed’ by ethnicity. Recognising my status as ‘less-than-fluent’ in the primary language of research, led to a sensitising framework which illuminated my choices in the fieldwork process and opened up new possibilities for thinking about accountability in ethnographic research.

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