

## Realising Anti-essentialism through a Critical Reflection on Language Acquisition in Fieldwork

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### 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.

**Keywords:** heads of schools, regular teachers, inclusive education, children with hearing impairment, secondary level

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### 1. 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'<sup>1</sup>. 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-

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.

In Inclusive Education programme hearing impaired children are educated along with non-disabled peer groups in general schools in the assistance of special teachers. The Inclusive Education for the Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme, started in 1974, to cater children with disabilities under the regular system of education in India. However DPEP, SSA and RMSA schemes also supported community mobilization and early detection, in service teacher training and provision of resource support, provision of educational aids and appliances, removal of architectural barriers etc. has extended to identified regular schools in India including Andhra Pradesh (MHRD, 2012). All these activities are now visualizes through above said schemes providing quality elementary and secondary education to all children including children with special needs. The key objective of the above mentioned programmes is inclusion of the children with special needs. This goal has further been facilitated by the Constitutional (86th Amendment) Act, making free and compulsory elementary education a Fundamental Right, for all the children in the age group of 6-14 years. This Amendment has given a new thrust to the education of Children with Special Needs (CWSN), as without their inclusion, the objective of UEE cannot be achieved. Hence, education of CWSN is an important component of SSA and RMSA. But being educators of the typically developed children heads of schools and regular teachers have their own attitude towards the education of children with hearing impairment in inclusive schools

## **2. 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.

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.

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).

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).

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:

### 3. PROBLEMATISING KNOWLEDGE CLAIMS

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- accentuality' (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 Chapters 13 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 made in my fieldwork methods and presentation in order to take into account an awareness of the complexities involved in being ‘less-than-fluent’.

#### **4. 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.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

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.

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':

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