

Translation in ethnography

Representing Latin American studies in English

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Ethnography refers to in-depth participant observation research and to the written report that results, and is often described metaphorically as a type of “cultural translation.” Little attention has been paid, however, to the actual linguistic translation that occurs in the process of research and writing, even in the interdisciplinary field of Latin American Studies, in which research is often conducted in a language other than English and written up in English. The privileging of academic Standard English in ethnographic texts creates dilemmas for ethnographers whose research participants speak “foreign” languages. These dilemmas are rarely discussed in the ethnographic texts or the literature on ethnographic methodology. Based on content analysis of 47 book-length ethnographies on Latin Americans, we investigate how ethnographers typically deal with language difference in their texts and why language matters. Language is intimately connected to power dynamics in the field, and ethnographers’ decisions about how to represent language can indicate rigor and thoughtfulness about their position vis-à-vis participants, yet such *linguistic reflexivity* is rare.

Keywords: ethnography, translation, Latin American Studies

Introduction

The politics of translation takes on a massive life of its own if you see language as the process of meaning construction.
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Politics of Translation* (1993)

It is an accepted cliché that the job of ethnography is to translate culture.¹ Anthropologist George Marcus (1998) called cultural translation “one of the favored metaphors for characterizing the interpretive task in ethnography,” a metaphor

1. Ethnography is: (1) a method of data collection used in social science and related fields, based on participant observation conducted over time (fieldwork), and (2) the written text produced by the researcher, reporting the findings of this fieldwork (plural: ethnographies).

used in anthropology, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory (Asad 1986; Behar 2003; Behar and Gordon 1996; Crapanzano 1986; Geertz 1971; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2006).

Yet most ethnographic writing makes actual interlinguistic translation – the focus of this article – invisible. Readers assume that the “agent” of translation will “remain so discreet as to vanish altogether” (Hermans 2002: 12). Ethnographies of Latin America often include words in brackets, provided to explain some difficult-to-translate term or phrase. However, the presence of the brackets serves as a reminder that “everything not bracketed is translated” (Hermans 2002: 12). The translations that brackets indicate represent the move from the participants’ “world of knowledge” (Navarro Smith 2012) to that of the researcher and the intended reader.

Refocusing attention onto linguistic rather than cultural translation, we explore how ethnographers treat the language of their research participants. Examining recent English-language ethnographies of Latin America that have garnered mainstream attention, we find little evidence of what we call *linguistic reflexivity*: recognition of linguistic boundaries and language-based identities in fieldwork. But why pay attention to language?

Linguistic difference is seen as a meaningful basis for people’s status, and is associated with socioeconomic, religious, ethnic, and national group membership. Language matters in ethnographic research because the people whose lives ethnographers study are classified in society by how and what language they speak (Irvine and Gal 2000), and because researchers and participants already have an unequal power relationship. Based on a content analysis of 47 recent, well-known English-language ethnographies of Latin America, we outline common patterns for dealing with the challenges of representing “foreign” languages in ethnographic texts written in academic English. We find that ethnographers of Latin America writing in English usually neglect to include language in their reflexive discussions of their own positions, which can have consequences for readers’ understanding.

Aim of the study

Our goal was to identify the conventions for dealing with language in the sampled ethnographies, and to discuss the potential consequences of various approaches. We asked: How do ethnographers deal with translating Latin American participants’ speech across language divides?² Focusing primarily on the denotative

2. This question is especially pertinent since only 1.7% of scholarly research on Latin America is produced within the region; most scholarship is done by scholars who are not from or not based in Latin America (Mu and Pereyra-Rojas 2015: 216).

aspect of verbal language, we examine the concrete task of translating the words used by participants. Confronted with the immensity of language,³ we chose to analyze an activity that all cross-language researchers engage in: translating words that are spoken during field encounters, interviews, and observations. Despite abundant discussion of ethnography as cultural translation, linguistic translation of this type is rarely addressed in the literature on ethnographic methodology.

Ethnographers need to understand and communicate how meanings are constructed by participants, who are often members of marginalized social groups. In explaining the process by which these meanings are represented in the text, ethnographers reveal their attempts to reconstruct participants' social worlds for readers. Whether used for spoken or written texts, translation is always "concerned with the recovery and representation of meaning" (Gentzler 1997: xi). We set out to learn how ethnographers discuss translation in their texts, keeping in mind the power imbalance between researcher and researched and the different statuses of languages in the world system.

We identified full-length ethnographic books reviewed by a top generalist journal in the field of Latin American studies, then analyzed their treatment of language (see the methods section for details). Our findings show that few authors engage in linguistic reflexivity, as they do not discuss how they represent the language of their fieldwork, nor the sociocultural contexts of language difference. Ignoring language and its connection to power dynamics can exacerbate existing inequalities between the researcher, readers, and research participants.

Language in ethnography

We see at least two reasons to examine linguistic translation in ethnographic research and writing. First, how ethnographers manage language speaks to the accuracy of their accounts. Although there is no such thing as a perfect or transparent translation (Haviland 2003; Selim 2009; Silverstein 2014), writers of ethnographic texts have choices about whether and how to represent the source language. Even when translations exclude source language terms, they are related

3. Language goes beyond spoken or written words to encompass and embody worldviews, ideologies, and social practices (Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Garrett and Baquedano-López 2002; Haviland 2003; Irvine and Gal 2000; Kroskrity 2000; Sapir 1963; Schieffelin et al. 1998; Silverstein 2004; Silverstein 1979; Silverstein and Urban 1996; Whorf 2012; Woolard 1992). Fieldworkers' accounts of immersion and gradual understanding of the group under study support this expansive definition of language (e.g., Roseman 2014). Looking first at the textual representation of participants' speech can help us understand the larger implications that language-as-worldview has for ethnographers' practices.

to the ethnography's rendering of a social reality. These invisible translations do not allow readers to check the ethnographer-as-translator's work of representing research participants' speech. If an ethnographer writing about fieldwork with Portuguese speakers in Brazil presents the research participants' speech in Standard English, readers do not know about the decisions made in the behind-the-scenes translation process, which are nevertheless significant for readers' understanding of the social world under study. In some disciplines, the potential for checking authors' translations may seem unimportant, but most research in interdisciplinary Latin American Studies is conducted in Spanish or Portuguese, and the intended audience typically includes many linguistically savvy readers who use these languages.

Second, the way language is represented in an ethnographic text can indicate how "in" the researcher was with the social group studied. Whether an ethnographic project succeeds "has as much or more to do with [the ethnographer's] ability to translate himself [*sic*] into [the participants'] world as with his ability to translate their world into an ethnographic report" (Churchill 2005: 13). Native speakers of the language of the participants – insider researchers – may claim greater credibility than non-native researchers.⁴ Native speaker status can affect fieldwork interactions as well as reports of study findings (Jacobs-Huey 2002), but there is no guarantee that these researchers will employ linguistic reflexivity. What would linguistic reflexivity look like for non-native speakers? Perhaps it would involve discussing the challenges posed by gaps in vocabulary or the process of learning the participants' language (e.g., Kulick 1998; Roseman 2014).⁵ Our content analysis finds that both native speakers and non-native speakers overlook the importance of language and linguistic boundaries in their texts.

Decades after "the reflexive turn" in ethnographic methodology and writing, ethnographers are trained to think carefully about how they represent "others" – those who differ from them in race/ethnicity, class, or other ascribed characteristics. Feminist methodology and critical ethnography address how gender roles and stereotypes figure into fieldwork interactions, encouraging ethnographers to incorporate this awareness into their research and writing process (Behar and

4. Although we coded whether an author self-identified as a native speaker of the research participants' language, as a non-native speaker, or neither, we acknowledge that "native speaker" is a contested term among linguists (Davies 2003; Kramsch 1997; Medgyes 2001; Paikeday 2003; Piller 2002; Roberts and Harden 1997).

5. Linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar (2008) compared the entire ethnographic research process to learning a second language; the similarity is especially marked for those conducting research across divides of language.

Gordon 1996; Mose Brown and Casanova 2009; Mose Brown and Dreby 2013; Naples and Sachs 2000). Researchers are expected to consider the ethical issues and power dynamics inherent in studying members of vulnerable populations, whether within or beyond the borders of their own countries. We argue that authors' decisions about how and what to translate when publishing studies of Latin America in English should be justified and explained, as they go to the heart of representing others. Linguistic reflexivity means accounting for these decisions.

Surprisingly, we found that even researchers who are quite reflexive in other ways generally do not discuss how they represent their own language and the language of the research participants. We were also surprised that native speaker status did not matter. Most authors in our sample who identified themselves as native speakers (of Spanish, Portuguese, etc.) did not include specific or detailed discussions of language or the translation process. Like most of the non-native speaker researchers, these writers largely decided not to discuss language as an axis of difference, or the work of translating participants' speech into English.⁶ "Insiders" do not discuss language more thoughtfully or with more detail than those who are "outsiders;" thus, a common language background seems to be irrelevant for linguistic reflexivity.

Translation theory

Translation studies is shaped by scholars of linguistics, anthropology, literature, cultural studies, and philosophy, and by practitioners. Here we highlight two of this literature's major concerns that are relevant to ethnographic methodology. These are: (1) the relative status of languages; and, (2) the invisibility of translation.

Some difficulties in translation stem from the different statuses assigned to languages within the world system or within a single country. Not all languages are created equal, as debates in the U.S. over English-only policies have underscored (Lippi-Green 1997). Languages are linked to histories of colonialism and conquest, interethnic conflict, and unequally distributed economic, social, and

6. Likewise, in a separate but related study (Mose Brown and Casanova 2014) of recent ethnographies of African Americans, we found no clear correlation between authors' self-identified racial/ethnic background or use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and their level of attention to language. Most of these works overlooked the salience of language in the field and the treatment of subjects' words as fieldnotes evolved into books. In the rare cases that attention was paid to language and translation, both black and non-black researchers formed part of the more linguistically-aware group.

cultural power (Navarro Smith 2012). A language's status must be taken into account "when teasing out the politics of translation" (Spivak 2008: 407). The relative status of languages may be the reason that translation is undertaken in the first place: "there always are power-related reasons justifying why something 'needs' to be spoken or written in another language" (Maranhão 2003: 64).

Social scientists working in the U.S. and elsewhere must contend with the dominance in academia of Standard English (Alleyne 2003; Quirk 2003; Rickford 2003) over non-English languages (Cronin 1998; Heilbron 1999; Jaffe 1999; Ortiz 2009; Roseman 2014) and non-standard forms of English (Mose Brown and Casanova 2014). This privileging of a certain type of language affects how ethnographers decide to present their subjects' speech. Since most translations move out of rather than into languages of countries at the center of the world system (Casanova 2010; Heilbron 1999; Massardier-Kenney 2010), the small number of texts based on interactions in "peripheral" languages do the weighty work of representing the other. These texts allow privileged readers, far from the life-world of the research participants, to learn about these others.

Ethnographers may be trying to live up to the ideal of making translation invisible, a notion famously critiqued by translation scholar Lawrence Venuti (2008[1995]). Even when the act of translation is not discussed or shown in the translated text, it is still shaping readers' understanding. Venuti calls translation "violent" because it is a process that is embedded in power relations. The representations in the translated text, and ideas about the culture in which the original text was produced, are "always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality" (Venuti 2008: 14). This violence is based in the relative status of languages, as "translation wields enormous power in the construction of identities for foreign cultures" (Venuti 1995/2008: 15), a role that ethnography also occupies when we see it as cultural translation. An invisible translation, often held up as the ideal, does three things: (1) hides the work of the translator, (2) obscures power relations, and (3) smooths out any differences between the original culture and the receiving culture (the culture of the reader). Instead of translating invisibly, Venuti encourages us to make the work of translation visible, thus laying bare the power relations in play. Such an approach to translation seems to fit well with the ethic of reflexivity that guides ethnographers' discussions of their research methods. Yet invisible translations abound, and linguistic reflexivity is rare.

Methods

To examine patterns in representation of Latin American languages in English texts, we sampled book-length ethnographies reviewed in *Latin American Research Review* (LARR) between 1999 and 2009. LARR is the official journal of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), an international organization with a strong presence in North America. These works of broad scholarly interest had received some attention in Latin American Studies, as indicated by having been reviewed in one of the field's flagship journals. They are books that are thus highly visible in the mainstream interdisciplinary sphere of Latin American Studies. Since we were interested in navigation of linguistic boundaries, we selected only single-authored, English-language books in which the research had been conducted with a non-English-speaking population. This did not limit our pool of potential ethnographies much, as most of the ethnographic works reviewed in LARR during the selected time period were in English and based on studies of Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking Latin Americans.

Once sampling was complete, we had identified 47 ethnographic works on Latin Americans for further analysis (see appendix). We employed content analysis, a widely used social science method (Neuman 2012). We used a primarily qualitative method of content analysis, choosing manifest coding over latent coding to categorize the patterns in the ethnographies (Neuman 2012: 243). Based on our review of the literature on sociolinguistics, ethnographic methodology, and ethnographic writing, and our own experiences as writers and readers of ethnography, we devised a coding scheme to help us analyze the books. We coded each book for the following: (1) which language(s) were used in the field; (2) whether language and representing participants' speech in the text was explicitly discussed; (3) whether a special section of the book was dedicated to discussing translation practices; (4) whether a special section dealt with the orthography of non-English language(s); (5) whether a glossary of non-English terms was present; (6) whether the author self-identified as a native speaker of the participants' language, a non-native speaker, or did not say; (7) whether there were extended passages of text in the original source language (at least three printed lines); and (8) whether the author mentioned using a translator. Two coders participated in the coding phase, working separately and then consulting with each other and a third coder in the rare event of disagreement over how to code some aspect of the books. The codes were used to obtain general descriptive statistics on patterns in the treatment of language. We also took notes on other relevant language issues, for example, making observations on the use of italics and brackets, or fieldwork interactions in which language seemed to be particularly significant. After outlining broad patterns, we will discuss in greater depth three ethnographies from our sample, in order to show different approaches to linguistic reflexivity.

Results: Patterns in Latin American ethnographies

Figure 1 provides basic information about the language divides navigated by the authors of these ethnographies. Most of the books were based on research conducted with Spanish speakers (58 percent) or with speakers of both Spanish and indigenous languages (i.e., Maya, Quechua; 19 percent).⁷ Not surprisingly, given the size and cultural influence of Brazil, 17 percent of the ethnographies were conducted with speakers of Portuguese. Only 6 percent of the ethnographies focused on monolingual speakers of indigenous languages.

Source language in Latin American Ethnographies

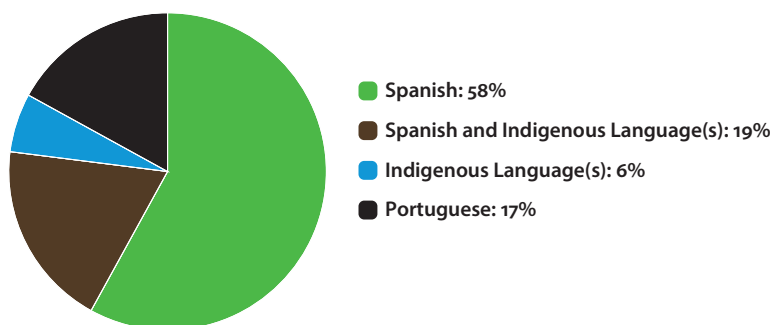


Figure 1. Languages represented in Latin American ethnographies

Source: Book-length, English-language ethnographies reviewed in *Latin American Research Review*, 1999–2009. $N = 47$

In the 47 ethnographies, explicit discussion of how informants' language was translated appeared in just 30 percent of the books, although translation obviously took place in all cases in order to produce an English-language text. A special section (an appendix or a subsection of an introductory chapter) was dedicated to translation in only 6 percent of cases. Less than one-third provided a glossary of non-English words or phrases used in the text. In 17 percent of cases, the author identified as a native speaker of the language in which research was conducted; 30 percent of authors claimed non-native speaker status. Yet 53 percent (25 authors

7. Latin American Spanish has many regional, national, and local variations (Zentella 1997) and should not be thought of as a monolithic entity. It is worth pointing out that in Latin America, Spanish and Portuguese are privileged relative to indigenous languages in most social institutions and interactions. Indigenous languages are spoken by approximately 589 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean. Hence the issues of cross-linguistic ethnographic research that we discuss with regard to the sampled ethnographies could also apply to, say, studies of indigenous Latin Americans written in Spanish.

out of 47 total) did not discuss their language background – that is, whether or not they considered themselves native speakers of the participants’ language – so we cannot estimate the proportion of native speaker authors. Nine percent of authors mentioned using a translator; this does not preclude the possibility that others used translators without reporting it.

	Percentage	Total No.
Explicit discussion of translation	30%	14
Special section devoted to translation	6%	3
Glossary of non-English words and phrases	32%	15
Author identifies as native speaker	17%	8
Author identifies as a non-native speaker	30%	14
Author mentions using a translator	9%	4

Figure 2. Treatment of language in Latin American ethnographies

As Figure 1 shows, language and language divides were generally not addressed by these authors. In the 30 percent of books that did address this issue, it is usually included as: (a) a brief mention of how original language quotes or source materials are represented in the text or a brief discussion of the difficulties inherent in translation (usually in a footnote or in the introductory chapters); or (b) a short glossary of non-English terms. The most surprising finding here is that, despite the reflexivity shown by many of the authors, and the difficulties posed by inter-linguistic translation, most ethnographers chose not to mention how they decided what to translate, how they performed translation, and how their linguistic competency may have affected their fieldwork and study results. This is reflected most starkly in the 70 percent of books that did neither (a) nor (b) above; and in 53 percent, readers could not know whether the authors identify as native speakers of the fieldwork language.

Ethnographic representations of the language divide: An in-depth analysis of three books

We found varying degrees of attention to language in the sampled ethnographies. Of the 30 percent that discussed issues of language and translation, some were attentive to the challenges of reproducing participants’ speech in a text written in academic Standard English. These ethnographies included dedicated sections on participants’ language, transcription, translation, or references to linguistic studies, giving readers an explanation of how participants’ (and researchers’) language mattered during the research process and how it came to be presented in

the book. An example of this approach that we discuss in some detail here is Carol Hendrickson's *Weaving Identities*. Other authors mentioned some literature on linguistics and some key features of participants' language, yet were somewhat inconsistent when transcribing or translating their own language and that of their participants. In these cases, linguistic divides were highlighted, but readers were not told how they were managed. Here we provide an analysis of Victoria Sanford's *Buried Secrets* as an example of this approach to language. Some books addressed neither how authors handled translation nor the effects of language differences between researcher and participants. We discuss Leslie Salzinger's *Genders in Production* as an example of this minimalist approach to language.

Foregrounding languages' varying statuses: *Weaving Identities*

From page xiii of Carol Hendrickson's (1995) book *Weaving Identities: Construction of Dress and Self in a Highland Guatemala Town*, readers can see that she takes language seriously. In a brief section entitled "Note on Kaqchikel Orthography," she discusses how sounds in that indigenous language are rendered in the English text. Hendrickson portrays Kaqchikel as a difficult language for non-native speakers, mentioning her efforts to learn Kaqchikel in two different periods of study in Guatemala: "nearly all my field research has been done in Spanish... I could manage well in Spanish" (Hendrickson 1995: 28). She knew some basic Kaqchikel, including words typically borrowed by local Spanish speakers, and when she needed help communicating with older residents, monolingual in Kaqchikel, she "asked friends to translate" (Hendrickson 1995: 28).

Hendrickson explicitly defines her ethnographic writing as a process of "organiz[ing] and translat[ing] my field experiences in Mesoamerica into text for an English-language audience" (1995: 41). She helps that audience understand her frequent use of Spanish and Kaqchikel terms through a glossary at the end of the book, and by translating non-English words in parentheses upon their first use. In this way, readers unfamiliar with the setting can learn the words that Hendrickson's research participants use to describe their everyday lives. Throughout the book, Hendrickson keeps parts of subjects' quotes in Spanish (while always providing the English translation). A sense of how the townspeople understand their reality in their own linguistic terms emerges through the incorporation of colloquial words and phrases into the mostly-English text. Including such words or phrases shows readers the nuances of participants' reality, especially if they are familiar with the source language(s).

Hendrickson describes her research participants as occupying different positions in hierarchies of language. In a discussion of words used to refer to indigenous people, she shows how Spanish terms become common (and are sometimes

rejected by indigenous Guatemalans) because of unequal relations between non-indigenous and indigenous people. She quotes a Maya intellectual as saying that non-indigenous people govern the indigenous, and they “govern them in Spanish” (1995: 203). She also shows how products with English names, such as “a hand cream called ‘Oil of Ulay’ [*sic*] and a chocolate bar... labeled ‘Milky Best’” are preferred because they are seen as U.S. rather than Guatemalan products (Hendrickson 1995: 72). This description illustrates the global inequality among languages in a postcolonial context. Certainly Hendrickson’s book could have had more discussion of how her own language use was received in the research setting. Yet linguistic reflexivity is evident in the discussions of translation and languages’ relative status.

Moderate attention to language divides: *Buried secrets*

In researching her 2003 book, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala*, anthropologist Victoria Sanford confronted multiple language boundaries. Some research participants spoke Mayan languages (Aché, K’iché, Kaqchikel, Q’eqchi’, and Ixil); some also or only spoke Spanish, and the final text is written in academic Standard English. The book documents the effects of political and military violence on Guatemalans through personal narratives. Sanford found that many people bilingual in Spanish and indigenous languages found it easier to speak about traumatic events in their native indigenous language (2003: 21). Conducting interviews with Maya speakers required translators, and Sanford remarks on her translators’ role in representing her research to possible participants: “In a sense, my translators translated me, not just my words, so that I was understandable to the community” (2003: 21). This ethnographer also mentions how working with translators alleviated some of the loneliness associated with fieldwork, especially in research on difficult topics: violence, trauma, and war.

Despite the early discussion of using translators, “foreign” languages do not intrude much into the English text. When they do, they often take the form of an italicized Spanish word followed by the English translation in parentheses. Although many interviews were conducted in Mayan languages, virtually no traces of these languages appear in the book. Sanford does not employ the extensive borrowing that we see in Hendrickson’s work. However, the end of the book brings the reader back to the space between multiple languages that researcher, participants, and text inhabit, with a discussion of the cultural meanings of the term “forgiveness” in Spanish, English, and Aché that takes place over the space of about ten pages. Thus, opening and closing the book with attention to language, Sanford reminds readers of the multilingual context of her fieldwork and the possibility of different interpretations, while not providing the details necessary to evaluate

those interpretations. *Buried Secrets* sets out to convey intimate histories of violence with the goal of achieving social justice and avoiding similar tragedies in the future. Viewed this way, it makes sense that Sanford would not fixate on linguistic difference, which could make her task of highlighting the universal humanity of the research participants more difficult. Yet she incorporates some awareness of the significance of linguistic divides in the field.

Minimal language inclusion: *Genders in production*

Leslie Salzinger's (2003) *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories* examines social constructions of gender in *maquiladoras*⁸ in Mexico. On the dimensions of linguistic awareness that we examined, this book did not address language much in either methodological or substantive discussions, and was thus typical of most of the ethnographies in the sample. Language differences between researcher and subjects, and fieldwork and final text, are not discussed. Part of this inattention to language may stem from the author's stated concern that much theoretical work on gender is overly focused on "linguistic structures" and discourse, locating gender categories "in a universe filled only by language" and thus neglecting daily practices (Salzinger 2003: 22). Reflexive analysis, found primarily in the book's first chapter, is presented as an "attempt to define my position" and "clarify my location" (Salzinger 2003: 2). This position/location is ambiguous when it comes to language, as the author refers to herself as a "Spanish-speaking woman" without mentioning whether she identifies as a native or fluent Spanish speaker (Salzinger 2003: 4). Presumably, the words attributed to Mexican research participants were originally spoken in Spanish and then translated into English for the book, but this translation work is not discussed and is thus invisible. The invisible translation prevents readers from getting a sense of how participants speak. Bilingual readers may find themselves wondering about the exact words used by research subjects, as in the case of the English term "stuck up" (Salzinger 2003: 91), which may represent a number of possible (Mexican) Spanish colloquialisms.

In Mexico as elsewhere, accent and vocabulary are linked to class and regional identity, affecting how one is perceived by others. We get an interesting glimpse into the diversity of Mexican Spanish when Salzinger describes Roberto Gómez, a manager at one of the companies studied: "His conversation is peppered with local, typically masculine slang (*guey*, *jale*, *lana* [all defined in a footnote]) and his inflections echo the street" (Salzinger 2003: 110). Other research subjects' language is not described, so it is difficult for a reader to judge how typical Gómez's

8. Factories producing for export markets, usually owned by foreign or multinational companies.

use of language was. Another small window into the importance of language appears in a description of an American manager of a Mexican factory, who has a “poor command of Spanish” and “can speak, or even understand, very little” (Salzinger 2003: 131). His lack of Spanish skills is seen as signaling disrespect for Mexicans and their culture. This discussion of language divides between managers and workers occupies less than a paragraph in the book’s penultimate chapter.

For a book addressing globalization and cultural contact among different groups who come together in Mexican factories – including U.S.-born managers and migrants from rural areas of Mexico – there is little reference to inter-linguistic or intra-linguistic difference. Mexicans are affected by a global hierarchy of languages that values English more highly than Spanish, and standard Spanish more highly than colloquial Spanish. As a U.S.-based researcher who speaks and writes in English, while using Spanish in the field, the author is implicated in this global language system, as are the readers of the English text. Attention to language and its ties to status, in both methodological and substantive discussions, would have enriched this fascinating study’s exploration of status within factories and within multinational corporations. Greater linguistic reflexivity would further illuminate the power dynamics at play between researcher and researched, which contributes to rigor when ethnographers “study down.”

Why language matters

There are several reasons why the treatment of Latin American languages in English-language ethnographic texts is worth discussing. The first, to which we have already alluded, has to do with ethical and political concerns arising with “first-world” researchers – including those with roots in Latin America who are now based in the U.S. and Europe – bringing their ethnographic findings across divides of language. Languages differ in level of social prestige and status in the world system. In the social sciences, as in other realms, English is the dominant global language (Cronin 1998; *Forum* 2009; Ortiz 2009); other languages tend to be seen as lower status. Even in South America, for example, English is preferred for second language instruction over Portuguese or Spanish (Bugel 2012). In this unequal linguistic terrain, ethnographers’ decisions about how to represent speakers of less-prestigious languages are inseparable from pre-existing value judgments about languages.⁹ These decisions are made in the context of asymmetrical power dynamics between researcher and researched, between languages, and between

9. E.g., Spanish and Portuguese in the world system, or Quechua, Guaraní, etc. in Latin America.

developed nations as privileged producers of standardized academic knowledge and developing nations as study sites. In such a context, “every translation act involves ethics” (Delabastita and Grutman 2005:23).

Based on our findings, we question why more ethnographers do not exercise linguistic reflexivity, which would entail reflecting on the meanings of their linguistic privilege and how it manifests itself in interactions within and outside the field. More thoughtful discussion of language will not erase these power imbalances, but will show how they structure ethnographic fieldwork and writing. Ethnographers are by now expected to discuss how their race, class, and gender matter in their dealings with research participants, and we propose that linguistic difference (or affinity) and language-related identities be incorporated into this reflexive analysis.

Second, language matters because one of the principal warrants (Katz 1997) for doing ethnography involves giving voice to the experience of research participants, particularly those from marginalized or oppressed groups (DeVault 1999). Giving voice, a term commonly used by feminist ethnographers, allows members of the group being studied to collaborate in the telling of their own stories. This research motivation was specifically mentioned by at least one of the authors in our sample. Textually, giving voice takes the form of direct quotes or extended narratives from research participants (e.g., Behar 2003; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). Researchers face the dilemma of how to present voices in English that originally spoke their stories, beliefs, and opinions in another (an “other”) language. As this representation of participants’ voices – literally, their speech – in their everyday social settings makes “an irreplaceable contribution to our understanding of society, part of doing good [ethnographic] research is explaining how these voices were captured and... manipulated as they were placed into a text written primarily in Standard English” (Mose Brown and Casanova 2014).

It is important to note that all ethnographers (and many other qualitative researchers) are *already* making decisions about how to represent participants’ speech. However, as our empirical work here shows, they are generally not informing readers about how the participants’ language changes from spontaneous utterance to transcribed words to translated words on a page in a book written in English. If giving voice is one of ethnographers’ primary tasks, then we would expect more detail about this process in the final text, especially when the researcher is a linguistic outsider. We are not prescribing specific methods or practices, and we recognize that there could be various ways to incorporate language and demonstrate linguistic reflexivity. If we consider that language encompasses more than just speech, including participants’ worldviews, ideologies, social norms, and perceptions of reality (Duranti 1997; Whorf 2012), then the work of giving voice becomes even more consequential.

Third, ethnography is sometimes maligned among other methods of data collection. When compared to more positivist or quantitative approaches, ethnography seems more loosely structured. Even some ethnographers have used phrases such as “deep hanging out” to describe what they do (Geertz 1998). Yet ethnography can and should be conducted in a systematic and rigorous manner. Carefully recording observations and interactions that take place in the field can help justify the researcher’s choice of this methodology to investigate a topic and can help ensure the accuracy of ethnographers’ reports. Rather than judge ethnography by the standards of quantitative social science research, ethnographers have developed their own criteria of “accuracy and precision and breadth” (Becker 2001 [1996]). Getting the details right helps build the credibility of ethnographic researchers and defend this method of inquiry against detractors who claim that it is not rigorous. If ethnographers were more open about how they translate or otherwise manipulate participants’ speech, it could enrich and support their accounts. Even adding a few sentences about language divides and the process of moving the spoken (non-English) word to the page of the (English-language) book would be preferable to the current practice of sweeping linguistic issues under the rug. “Rigorous attention to language in fieldwork and writing will help to bridge gaps between practitioners of different research methods within the academy” (Mose Brown and Casanova 2014), a particularly worthy and necessary goal in interdisciplinary fields such as Latin American Studies.

Conclusion

Cultural translation means interpreting the worldviews and realities of participants in ethnographic research. These worldviews and realities are shaped and expressed through language, and some cultural translation requires linguistic translation. In translating the words of Latin American research participants, ethnographers working in North America (and Europe) face a challenge: representing non-English-speaking people in academic texts written in Standard English. As translation scholars have pointed out, such representation takes place within a “transnational cultural field” in which languages occupy different statuses (Heilbron 1999: 432). Both ethnography and translation have historically been linked to colonial and neocolonial social and economic relations between the West/Global North and its “others” (Robinson 1997: 19). Ethnographers of Latin America thus take on an ethically fraught task in endeavoring to represent the spoken accounts and interactions – never mind the social realities and ways of thinking – of racialized, disadvantaged, or stigmatized others. Despite the salience of the political context in which such translation occurs, *more than*

two-thirds of the ethnographies of Latin America we examined did not address the representation of subjects' language and thus neglected the power dynamics of translator and translated.

For ethnographers conducting research in Latin America and publishing primarily in English, such as those whose work we studied, linguistic divides matter in fieldwork and writing. This is true even for native speakers of Latin American languages who must publish in English to advance their careers. Language, tied as it is to cultural meaning systems, social hierarchies, and interpersonal interactions, is a significant part of the ethnographic enterprise and the building of relationships between researcher and researched. Yet, in the texts analyzed here, we saw little acknowledgment of the theoretical import or the difficult practical aspects of translation. In these well-known, mainstream Latin American ethnographies, the work of translation was generally invisible in the final texts. Most did not question or examine linguistic privilege. They did not explain how data collected in participants' languages came to be presented in the language of educated readers in the Global North. We found this lack of linguistic reflexivity even among researchers who were reflexive regarding other axes of difference (i.e., gender, nationality).

As ethnographers who conduct research among linguistically marginalized people, we admit that we have not always incorporated linguistic reflexivity into our texts. Yet efforts to write our linguistic selves into the text and explain the basic procedures of translating participants' speech into written evidence for our claims is "preparation for the intimacy of cultural translation" (Spivak 1993). We do not mean to suggest that ethnographers become experts in the intricacies of sociolinguistics, or provide conversation analysis-style transcripts of all interactions with research participants. Efforts to discuss language at length or present partially bilingual texts may not be feasible, especially given pressures from publishers to produce shorter books. Such efforts also may remain invisible, since readers "don't have access to the editing process" that might wipe away sections of the text (Bush 2014: 37).

There can be, however, greater reflexivity about language and how it matters in interactions between researcher and researched, and among members of the social groups being studied. There can be more information on the process of translation and decisions about how to represent participants' speech. Such actions help bolster ethnographers' claims that they conduct research that is rigorous, accurate, and – for understanding everyday life – indispensable. These practices also empower the reader rather than reify the authority of the ethnographer as writer and cultural translator. In translating into a language of privilege, in representing the speech of the other, ethnographers must acknowledge the power dynamics inherent in their research, including characteristics such as age, race, gender, class, and language.

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