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Methodology in biographical approaches in applied linguistics

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Abstract

In multilingualism research a shift of paradigm can be observed: the idea of languages as distinct categories is being abandoned in favour of the notion of linguistic repertoire, which seems more apt to grasp the complexity of heteroglossic practices. For the repertoire approach, biographical methods can be particularly interesting as they emphasize the perspective of the experiencing and speaking subject. They can contribute to an understanding of the linguistic repertoire as reflecting individual life trajectories, heterogeneous life worlds and discourses about language and language use referring to specific timespaces. Benefiting from a strong tradition in phenomenological thought, biographical methods have developed particularly in the German speaking scientific space over the last decades. The paper gives a brief overview of studies in multilingualism that employ a biographical approach, drawing on different kinds of data such as diaries, autobiographical texts, language memoirs, biographical interviews, and multimodal representations. It then situates biographical research within the interpretative paradigm in social and cultural studies. Schematically I shall contrast three theoretical positions within the interpretative paradigm: approaches based on interactionist, on phenomenological and on poststructuralist thinking. The paper also discusses aspects of data collection and interpretation as well as ethical implications. Referring to examples from my own research I will argue that such approaches can be particularly productive in addressing topics such as language and emotion, language and subject positions or identity constructions, or language attitudes linked to language ideologies and discourses on language and language use.

Introduction

Linguistic diversity has become a central feature in daily lives even in societies which in self-understandings were or still are deeply rooted in a monolingual paradigm. In sociolinguistics, traditional approaches which assumed a stable link between language and national, ethnic or social belonging and which were based on the idea of languages conceived as pre-established, clear cut, bounded entities, are increasingly abandoned in favour of approaches that foreground speakers' heteroglossic language practices and repertoires. Whereas Gumperz's (1964) original notion of linguistic repertoire takes the outside perspective of the observer, biographical approaches emphasize the perspective of the experiencing and speaking subject. They contribute to an understanding of the linguistic repertoire as reflecting individual life trajectories, heterogenous life worlds and discourses about language and linguistic practices referring to specific time-spaces (Blommaert 2008, Busch 2010). Biographical research has proven to be particularly productive in addressing topics such as subject positions or identity constructions, language and emotion, fears and desires associated with ways of speaking or language attitudes linked to language ideologies or discourses on language (Kramsch 2009, Busch 2015).

The interest in language biographies is related to developments, sometimes referred to as the 'biographical turn', that have since the 1980s been taking place in other disciplines such as ethnography, sociology or history. A particular stimulus came from feminist and post-colonial studies interested in 'hidden' symbolic power relations in everyday practices. One of the aims of biographical research is to give voice to positions excluded from dominant discourse, and – in the light of the collapse of the Grand Narratives postulated by Jean François Lyotard (1979) – to give recognition to the heterogeneity and singularity expressed in individual stories. However, it is worth noting that in sociology, the first works drawing on biographical data go back to the 1920s, when

Thomas and Znaniecki (1996 [1918-1920]) published their ground-breaking migration study *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. A further incentive for biographically oriented research and oral history narratives came from the interest in collecting and understanding first-hand experiences on nazism, exile and the Holocaust. Over the last decades, biographical methods have been developed particularly in the German-speaking scientific space, benefiting from a strong tradition in phenomenological thought. As Fischer-Rosenthal (1995: 259), one of the promoters of biographical research in sociology states: "Biographical research moved from being a mere tool for empirical social research (like the interview, questionnaire, participant observation) into a full-fledged sociological sub-discipline, aimed at developing empirically grounded theories on contemporary society". Fischer-Rosenthal understands biographical work as dialogical and interactive, and as offering an alternative to the concept of stable identities: in contrast to the concept of identity that assumes belonging in a once-for-all sense, "[b]iography refers to an interpretatively open process of 'becoming'." (ibd.: 258). In his view the notion of biography does not reproduce the split between individual and society, but rather structures both spheres (ibid.: 259).

The following section will give a brief overview of studies in multilingualism which employ a biographical approach. I will then situate biographical research within the interpretative paradigm in social and cultural studies, discuss data collection and interpretation as well as ethical implications. In the last section, drawing on own research, I will develop the account of how (multimodal) biographical approaches can contribute to a better understanding of heteroglossic life worlds and multilayered linguistic repertoires.

An overview of language biographical research

Biographically oriented research in applied linguistics first established itself in the fields of second language acquisition and foreign language learning where it continues to be prolific. It is remarkable that some early works on bilingualism already followed a biographical approach and yielded results that diverged from the monolingual paradigm prevalent at the time. Ronjat's (1913) and Leopold's (1939–1949) famous diary studies, considered as milestones in psycholinguistic research, do not only document the language development of their respective children but, to some extent, also their own reactions, sorrows and joys. Both works highlight that in different phases, the children tended sometimes more towards one, sometimes to the other language and suggest that their languages could not simply be considered as clearly separated. Since these early studies, there has been a series of diaries observing children's bi- or multilingual language development.

Language learning diaries and other biographical texts written by learners¹ continue to provide important data for multilingualism research (for an overview see Pavlenko 2007). Working with migrants in Canada and taking a poststructuralist and feminist approach, Norton (2000), used language learning diaries to initiate a process in which the participants reflected collectively on their individual experiences and explored their suppressed potentials. In a similar line of thought, Kramsch (2009) has been working for many years with learners' autobiographical texts which demonstrate "heightened perceptions and emotions, imagined identities, projected selves, idealizations or stereotypes of the other, awareness of one's body, feelings of loss or enhanced power" (Kramsch 2006: 99).

An early, unjustly neglected publication that contrasted with the then dominant paradigm in bilingualism studies was published in French in 1985 under the title *Du bilinguisme* (Collectif 1985). This derived from a colloquium in Morocco, which brought together writers, linguists and psychotherapists, many of them with a North African background. Most of the authors reflect on their own experience of lived bilingualism under the conditions of (post-)colonialism and migration, thereby addressing the interrelations of language, subjectivity and power. Derrida's essay

¹ Keeping language learning diaries is also suggested by the European Language Portfolio: http://www.coe.int/portfolio (accessed 12.02.2014)

Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin (Derrida 1998) can be read as an echo to the Rabat colloquium. He draws on his own experience as a French-speaking Algerian Jew to discuss the colonial mechanisms of traumatically lived exclusions from language. In recent research on multilingualism, literary texts and language memoires have also become an important resource for the exploration on how linguistic diversity is experienced and lived (Pavlenko 2007, Busch and Busch 2008, Kramsch 2009).

Since the 1990, there has been increasing interest in establishing research based on qualitative narrative interviews as a biographical method in applied linguistics. This method is indebted to the above mentioned German sociological tradition in biography studies. Studies within this strand revolve around questions of language learning, language practices and identity constructions in multilingual environments in the context of migration and minority situations (e.g. Nekvapil 2001, Franceschini 2003, Treichel 2004). Some studies focus more on social dimensions of language change linked to political disruptions and reconfigurations (e.g. Fix and Barth 2000) others more on individual language maintenance, transmission and loss (e.g. Betten 2010). Corresponding to the growing interest in multimodal approaches in applied linguistics, in biographically oriented research visual and creative methods, in particular so called language portraits, are increasingly employed to explore speakers' heteroglossic repertoires (e.g. Krumm and Jenkins 2001, Busch 2006 and 2012, Farmer 2012). I will come back to this approach later in this paper.

Epistemological and methodological considerations

Biographical research is located within the broader framework of qualitative and interpretative approaches² what basically means that they aim not at detecting laws that allow for prognostics but at an 'understanding reconstruction' of social phenomena. Though interpretative approaches agree on the assumption that (social) reality cannot be observed objectively but only mediated by perception, they differ considerably in how they conceive the biographical subject, how they understand the notions of experience, memory and narration. Which basic perspective to adopt, which stance to take will depend on the phenomena researchers are interested in, on the specific research question and on preferred theoretical orientations. When combining elements and methods linked to different approaches, one must obviously be aware of these different perspectives and reflect on how they can be integrated with regard to the underlying theoretical assumptions. Schematically I shall contrast three theoretical positions within the interpretative paradigm: approaches based on interactionist, on phenomenological and on poststructuralist thinking.

I will first turn to studies that rely on **interactional approaches**. These approaches are among others inspired by Symbolic Interactionism (e.g. Goffman 1959), Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) and Dialogism (Bakhtin 1981a [1934-35]). They focus on phenomena of social interaction that are situated in a here and now and are conceived as a dialogical process in which the interlocutors, explicitly or implicitly, constantly refer to other persons, things, times and spaces by means of indexicality (Silverstein 2006). In this view the subject is not a stable category but is seen as continuously (co-)constructed in interaction with and in relation to others. In this view experience has an explicitly social dimension because experience itself already implies an interpretation (of the sign) according to an already acquired referential, socio-ideological framework (Vološinov 1973 [1929]: 36). Memory is accessible only by the detour of looking at (biographical) accounts as situated reenactments of the past. Borrowing Jakobson's (1960) terminology regarding functions of communication, interactional approaches can be described as being distinctively interested in the referential function of language that links the interaction to the (social) context as well as to the phatic function, i.e. the means by which social contact is established and constantly re-negotiated between the inter-actors. The researcher takes the stance of

² A few studies in research on multilingualism employ biographical data in combination with quantitative methods, e.g. Schmid (2004) or Stevenson (2013).

an outside observer – so to say a third-person perspective. Biographical interviews tend to be considered as providing additional data about how speakers interpret their own linguistic behaviour (Hymes 1977: 31) than as a reliable source on how they act. Biographically oriented research on multilingualism rooted in Conversation Analysis or Linguistic Anthropology is fairly scarce,³ but these approaches offer a rich set of analytical tools for the micro-analysis of narrative features – such as framing, indexicality, sequencing, turn taking or (double-)voicing – that is frequently borrowed from biographical research following other epistemological approaches.

The bulk of biographical studies in social sciences, mainly in the German speaking area, is located within phenomenological approaches that draw on Husserl's (1982 [1913]) idea of the intersubjective nature of perception. They take the bodily constituted, perceiving, feeling, speaking and meaning making subject as point of departure and thereby open the path to a first-person perspective allowing for the exploration of lived experiences, feelings, emotions and reflections. While bodily lived experience is conceived as a central category, memory is understood as an effort to re-open the past starting from the implications of the present. In a phenomenological view, time is centred in the present and embodies recollections of the past and anticipations of the future. The biographical account is thus seen as a process that results in the retrospective reconstruction of a coherent, meaning making life trajectory. Referring again to Jakobson's (1960) terminology, the main interest in this case is on the expressive function of language, the addresser's representation of self. Language is, before anything else, seen as the bodily-gestural capacity to relate oneself to the world and to the other (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945]). Research in sociology within this paradigm has developed a rigorous methodology for conducting, processing and analysing biographical interviews (e.g. Rosenthal 1995 and 2006). However, Rosenthal's (1995) assumption that the coherence of biographical accounts is a (normative) goal that has to be achieved⁴ seems problematic, as is his assumption that case reconstructions can establish a sort of truth 'outside' of the account. Phenomenological approaches are applied successfully in studies on multilingualism (e.g. Treichel 2004). The strength of this approach is that it can contribute substantially to our understanding of how living in multilingual lifeworlds is experienced.

The phenomenological assumption of a pre-existing, coherent subject is contested by poststructuralist approaches which in turn draw on post-Marxist and post-Freudian thinking. In a poststructuralist view, subjectivity can only be considered in terms of subjectivation, i.e. how, in a specific historical-political context, the subject is constituted in being addressed by ideological interpellation (Althusser 1971) and the performative power (Butler 1997) of already uttered discourses, norms and categorisations. Poststructuralist approaches, one might say, focus on what Jakobson (1960) termed the conative function of language, i.e. the way in which the addressee is constructed through language. They address the biographic subject from a second-person perspective, submitting it to a deconstructive reading and rewriting of the biography as "a product of the historical processes to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces without leaving an inventory" (Gramsci 1971 [1932-33]: 324). In working with biographical accounts, importance is attached to the ways in which the narrator's and the researcher's perceptions, experiences, memories, thoughts and narratives are shaped by historically determined power relations and subject practices. Poststructuralist approaches attach less importance to the construction of biographical continuity and coherence and focus more on what is excluded or made invisible by dominant discourses and "techniques of the self" (Foucault 1982). Due to the profound scepticism of Poststructuralism vis-à-vis any kind of consolidated methodology, research in this field does not draw on a pre-established toolset. In sociology (Völter and Schäfer 2005; Tuider 2007) as well as in multilingualism research (McNamara 2010; Busch 2012), possibilities of how to theoretically integrate biographical research and poststructuralist understandings of discourse are on the agenda. In his essay mentioned above, Derrida (1998) exemplifies practices of deconstruction by submitting his own language biography to a critical reading.

³ Examples for such studies are e.g. Blommaert (2008), Koven (2001).

⁴ For a critical discussion of narrative coherence see Adamzik and Roos (2002).

Although the majority of current biographical studies in multilingualism research are based on extensive biographical interviews, I will not discuss in any detail how such interviews are conducted and analysed, as biographical interviews can be considered as a specific form of the qualitative interview which is amply discussed in different manuals.

Of course audio or video recording of the interviews, the choice of an appropriate transcription system, and careful transcriptions corresponding to linguistic criteria are indispensable.

In research on multilingualism, attention should also be paid to the question of which language biographical interviews are conducted in, as this may influence the ways in which something is told or in which subjectivity is constructed (Koven 2001, Pavlenko 2007). If possible, the language choice should not be imposed but negotiated. Opening a space for code switching or language crossing (Rampton 1995) will not only ease the interaction but can also be highly significant for its analysis (Tylim 2002).

In any case, working with other's biographies requires particular attention and awareness about the imbalance in power that is inherent in the relationship between researcher and informant (Bourdieu 1999): the researcher has the power to 'select' participants, to impose the topic and the rules of the game, to irrupt in the participants' lives, to expose them to traumatic memories, to interpret, use and publish the obtained information at discretion and for any objective. The loss of ownership of one's life story can be experienced as extremely harmful and disrespectful (Cuellar 2005). Particularly in feminist (e.g. Haug 1990) and post-colonial (e.g. Tuhiwai Smith 2012) studies, stories related to biographic experiences are valued as an important source (Chilisa 2012) and participatory forms of research are developed that are highly relevant when working with others' biographies. Inspiring recommendations on how to conduct biographical interviews can also be found in Bourdieu's (1999) methodological contribution to the collection of interviews published under the title *The Weight of the World*, in which he argues that the interviewer should take the role of an empathic, active and methodical listener who adopts the subject perspective of the interviewee during the interviewe.

Language ideologies, language experience and the linguistic repertoire

As shown above, biographical approaches are applied in a range of fields in multilingualism research, and differ considerably in their theoretical and methodological foundations. In this section, I will discuss an approach developed within the framework of my research based on the concepts of language experience and the linguistic repertoire, briefly illustrating how it was applied in two research projects, one in a school, the other in a therapeutic environment.

The notion of the linguistic repertoire, a traditional sociolinguistic concept, is associated with the work of Gumperz who linked it to particular speech communities: "[the verbal repertoire] contains all the accepted ways of formulating messages. It provides the weapons of everyday communication. Speakers choose among this arsenal in accordance with the meanings they wish to convey" (Gumperz 1964: 138). Recent research on multilingualism frequently refers to the notion of repertoire, as Gumperz already conceived it as multilayered. In his view languages and dialects "form a behavioural whole, regardless of grammatical distinctness, and must be considered constituent varieties of the same verbal repertoire" (Gumperz 1964: 140). Later, Gumperz (2001: 37) concedes that in his earlier work, he had underestimated the influence of "ideology in relation to subconsciously internalized background knowledge", enabling an account of basic issues such as hegemony or symbolic domination.

Whereas Gumperz' concept is rooted in an interactional paradigm, I suggest elaborating on the concept by drawing on thinking inspired by poststructuralism and phenomenology, in order to seek for an understanding of how the linguistic repertoire is affected by ideology – or discourse – translated into bodily and emotionally lived language experience. Discourses that tell us who we are exert power in a twofold way (Foucault 1982): by coercion or interdiction, and through the

process of subjectivation, i.e. ways in which we appropriate or subvert identifications as (mis-)recognitions by discourse. Language ideologies or discourses on language and language use, on linguistic normativity, appropriateness, hierarchies, taboos etc., translate into attitudes and perceptions of ourselves and others as speakers, enacted in language practices that confirm, subvert, transform categorisations, norms and rules (Busch 2012). This translation into embodied attitudes and practices presupposes, following Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945], that language is not only seen as a conventionalised, sedimented system of signifiers, but primarily as an intersubjective bodilyemotional gesture which relates the experiencing/speaking subject to the other and to the world. Whereas language experience can hardly be observed from an outside perspective, it can be approached through biographical first-person accounts. To give an example, such accounts frequently mention feelings of shame that arise in situations when one becomes aware of using a 'wrong' accent or making a 'mistake'. From a phenomenological point of view, shame is a bodily feeling that is experienced as a move of withdrawal from the world which sometimes results in (momentary) falling silent. From a discourse perspective, the 'mistake' is not a personal shortcoming but an infringement against a discursively set norm that can become internalized precisely through such experiences. Language experience (Spracherleben) thus plays a pivotal role in mediating between discourses and the linguistic repertoire.

From this perspective, the linguistic repertoire cannot simply be considered as a toolbox or a reservoir of competences. The repertoire is oriented towards the present but it also points towards the past and the future. Discontinuities in one's personal biography (e.g. a change of location) have inscribed their traces into the corporal memory in the same way as social discontinuities (e.g. regime change). Drawing on a broad range of earlier voices, discourses and codes, the linguistic repertoire thus forms a contingent space both of restrictions and of potentialities which includes anticipations, imaginations, fears and desires. The co-presence of different time-space structures in language was termed by Bakhtin (1981b: 252) as chronotope. With regard to the linguistic repertoire, this means that with every situated linguistic interaction we position ourselves not only in relation to what is directly present – i.e. the respective interaction partners and interaction contexts – but also implicitly always in relation to what is absent. This absence runs or resonates in the background and is therefore, whether welcome or not, also present: relevant others, other spaces and times by which we orientate ourselves or which demand our loyalty.

Biographical approaches based on the notions of language experience and the linguistic repertoire seem particularly productive for multilingualism research as they allow us to consider languages not as bounded and separated entities but rather embrace a concept which is best captured in Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia (Todorov 1984: 56): linguistic diversity understood as a multiplicity of discourses in relation to which we position ourselves, as voices which we appropriate as styles, and language varieties which reflect socio-cultural spaces. The concept of the heteroglossic repertoire allows to capture such phenomena as the appropriation of language, language shift or linguistic creativity from a speaker-oriented perspective (Busch 2015). The starting point is not a single language but a "dialog of languages" (Bakhtin 1981a [1934-35]: 294), a "highly specific unity of several 'languages' that have established contact and mutual recognition with each other" (Bakhtin 1981a [1934-35]: 295).

A multimodal creative method to explore heteroglossic repertoires

The Research Group Spracherleben [Language Experience] at the Institute of Linguistics at the University of Vienna began ten years ago to use a multimodal biographic method in research on linguistic diversity (Busch 2006) and has since collected and evaluated several hundred of these language portraits in the context of various projects.

Participants are asked to either use the supplied body silhouette (see figure 1) or draw one themselves, to choose different colours for their different languages and ways of speaking, and to place them on the body silhouette. They are invited to think about ways of speaking that are

relevant for them in their daily life but also about languages that were important in the past or might become important in the future as well as about languages which they relate to particular persons, places or situations. The prompt leaves it to the participants what they consider a 'language or way of speaking'. It is not only conventional languages and dialects that are represented in the portraits and the explanatory glosses, but often also other ways of categorising speech and communication, such as e.g. 'sister language', 'secret language', 'language of anger', 'musical language'. Through the body silhouette on the white paper, a framing is laid down for the language portrait, one that is usually taken up, exhausted or supplemented. The picture repeatedly serves as a point of reference in the account elicited by the drawing, and these references to the picture – such as body or colour metaphors – structure the interpreting and reconstructing narrative in a way that is different from questions concerning the participant's language biography. As a multimodal method, the language portrait provides two sets of data that permit inferences to be drawn about how speakers interpret their linguistic repertoire: a visual one and a narrative one. Meaning is created through both modes; one is neither the translation nor simply the illustration of the other. Whereas narrations are structured in a linear and sequential way, the visual mode steers one's vision toward the whole and toward the relationality of the parts. Whereas the verbal mode favours diachronic continuity and synchronic coherence, the visual mode allows contradictions, fractures, overlappings and ambiguities more easily to remain unresolved (Breckner 2007). As in any kind of biographical representation, the language portrait cannot be considered as a depiction of the repertoire 'as it is' but as a production corresponding to a specific interactional situation. Selection, interpretation and evaluation take place in the visual mode as much as in the verbal mode, and representation and reconstruction do not occur independently of social discourses.



Figure 1: Body silhouette

Today, language portraits are widely applied in language awareness and in teacher training, and they function as an empirical method in a range of research projects on multilingualism. In her arts-informed work on migration and school in Canada, Farmer 2012 has developed a modified form of the language portrait using a body silhouette derived from photographies taken by the students. Using language portraits in their sociolinguistic study on language survival among speakers in a highly multilingual Australian indigenous community, Singer and Harris (forthcoming), identify features of small scale multilingualism which do not correspond to expectations derived from established knowledge about societal multilingualism. In Cape Town and Vienna we have developed a modular approach, what we have called 'school language profiles', which use language portraits created in workshop with learners in combination with other ethnographic methods to explore the current local language regime and to negotiate a tailor made school language policy (Busch 2010). The research project "Multilingualism and Resilience", an interdisciplinary project involving psychiatrists, trauma therapists and linguists, aims at identifying linguistic resources that can be mobilized to strengthen resilience through conversations with patients following the drawing of language portraits. We hope that this project brings new impetus to diagnostic and therapeutic

practice in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder, and also deepens the understanding of the significance of emotion in the linguistic repertoire (Busch forthcoming).

Even a brief discussion of language biographical approaches as presented in this paper can give an idea of the interesting avenues that open up when the perspective of observing language in interaction is brought into dialogue with a perspective that foregrounds the speaking subject. Although biographic approaches rely on individual accounts, they are not primarily interested in the uniqueness of the particular life story as such, but in what its apparent singularity can reveal about specific dimensions of language practices and ideologies that are neglected when taking an assumed 'average' speaker as representative for a certain group. Exploring situations that have so far rarely been in the focus because they were considered as exceptional or marginal can lead to a deeper understanding of language in linguistically diverse contexts more generally. It is not least in accounts of experiences of social exclusion and precarity, in situations in which the liminality of speech is lived or in which it becomes vital to develop strategies of trans-lingual understanding that participants bring forward unexpected language practices, resources, fears and desires. Especially when framed as action research, biographical research can contribute to an awareness not only of power relations and language ideologies that label certain linguistic practices as deficient, but also of the potentially transformative power of linguistic resources and strategies speakers can rely on. Taking the speakers' perspective and linguistic repertoire as point of departure helps to avoid overhasty 'objectivizations' with pre-established categories such as first, second or foreign languages. Instead, it develops a stance that understands linguistic diversity in the Bakhtinian sense as heteroglossia, as an entanglement of multiple discourses, voices and languages.

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