

**Michael Agar's Preamble:** Colleagues and I worked out the sequence of October presentations. I'd like to foreground a couple of things before I start in with descriptions and reading suggestions. The general plan is to take a presenter who shares with most of you an interest in and experience of language-based ethnography, but who has worked for the most part outside your community of researchers and practitioners. Presentations will feature material from outside the realm of education with the goal of casting internal issues in a different light, just as the presenter expects the same effect in reverse once the presentations change to a different speech act, conversations.

The three presentations vary in terms of their fit with presenter's biography. The first presentation, on ethnography, deals with an area he has worked in continuously for decades. It is his primary and preferred professional identity tag.

The second presentation, on language and culture, is also a lifelong thread, beginning with his graduate training at the Language Behavior Research Lab at UC Berkeley. The last seven years or so, though, he has worked on an NIH epidemiology/economic history project. So this presentation is a mix of the old and a return to it after an interruption with something new, a mix of many of the established practices of "languacultural" research with new thoughts on how to enrich language-based ethnography with the third presentation topic, complexity.

That third presentation introduces a topic in which the presenter has been active for about six years. His initial interest in complexity was by way of the NIH project, to integrate epidemiology, history and ethnography. More recent work involved use of complexity to articulate ethnographic epistemology, summarized in an article that was placed on the UCSB web page for his previous visit. Now he means to explore use of complexity in language-oriented ethnography. In this third presentation, an overview and critique of complexity will be offered, followed by a return to the language, ethnography, and complexity themes.

#### Day One: Abstract & Suggested Readings

We start with a question that for most of us is the heart of it all, a question that has become contentious in dozens of fields. The question is, what counts as an ethnography? Put more broadly, what counts as "qualitative" research, the use of that term and its relation to "ethnography" adding yet more levels of dispute. I've been wondering about this question since kismet landed me in an institution for narcotics addicts in 1968, and the wondering became more acute when I left the university in the mid 1990s to plant ethnographic ideas in the non-academic world.

We'll first consider why this question is being asked, who cares about it and why. Then we'll look at ethnography as a kind of logic, a couple of required questions, and a set of issues. The logic represents a different epistemology, the questions have to do with context and meaning, and the issues will be multiple, but will apply to human understanding of any kind. We'll see that any ethnography is partial and struggle with the indeterminacy that this implies together with the need for credibility of our results. We'll wonder if we haven't gotten carried away with methodology at the expense of our role in public discourse. The nasty comment I heard at a recent project was, "You hire a qualitative researcher to find something out and all they do is publish an article on methodology." We'll explore the rise in interest in "qualitative"

over the last decade or so and it's sporadic decline, since there is more at stake here than an internal debate.

As optional historical background, you can read the first chapter of the 1996 second edition of *The Professional Stranger*, though the most important pieces will be repeated in an article listed below. The book is overpriced, so check it out of the library if you do look at it. The chapter was new for that edition, and it lays out the basic logic and some of the issues then current for ethnographic research. A more recent summary is in my entry for "ethnography" that appeared in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* which is available here on the Papers and Resources sub-forum of the Agar and Ethnography Forum.

<http://kady.education.ucsb.edu:85/forums>. If you are not already registered for the forum, please email Audra Skukauskaite ([audra@education.ucsb.edu](mailto:audra@education.ucsb.edu)) your email address with which to sign you up for the Forum. Alternately, you may go to the Forum main (<http://kady.education.ucsb.edu:85/forums>) site, register/create your login and then email Audra your login ID so Audra can add you to the Agar & Ethnography Forum. Once entered into the Forum as a participant, you will be able to access the materials provided and participate in the discussions.

Posted on the Papers and Resources sub-forum are copies of two articles, both published in a journal called *Qualitative Health Research*, both written versions of invited plenary lectures. The first, "How To Ask For A Study In Qualitativish" 9(5) 1999, looks at social research as capable of being more or less "qualitative" and tries to specify how to tell in which direction it went. The second, "Know When To Hold 'Em, Know When To Fold 'Em: Qualitative Thinking Outside the University 14(1) 2004, asks the question that no one asked in grad school, namely, what is it possible to do if you don't do traditional academic ethnography, and should you do it? These articles received both extremely negative and extremely positive reactions. They are built on the same terminology used in the first chapter of *The Professional Stranger*. A third article looks at the quantitative/qualitative issue in a different way, on the occasion of wondering what role agent-based models might play in ethnographic research, My Kingdom for a Function: Modeling Misadventures of the Innumerate, JASSS 6(3), 2003, <http://jasss.soc.surrey.ac.uk/6/3/8.html>.

Finally, if you'd like to browse a useful book in an ocean of qualitative musings, take a look at a chapter or two in *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, edited by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (University of California Press, 1997). I found some of the musings helpful in puzzling through the ethnography/history/globalization intersection during the NIH project.

#### Day Two: Abstract & Suggested Readings

This second presentation continues the first with a second question: Given that doing an ethnography (of one form or another) is the purpose, what view of language and culture makes sense and serves that purpose?

This presentation will have a clear biographical source and an unclear destination that will suggest newer answers. The biographical source will derive from decades of work as a "linguistically oriented ethnographer," a phrase that will be defined and discussed as it

follows on from the first presentation. This work is grounded in the rise of sociolinguistics, ethnoscience, and ethnomethodology in the 1960s, follows through into various forms of conversation and discourse analysis in the 1970s, natural language work in AI in the 1980s and finally intercultural communication/second language learning in the 1990s. The results of this path through various meta-language games of the second half of the twentieth century is summarized in my book *Language Shock*, intended to be accessible to a general reader. It can be read as background for this presentation. It is economically priced.

The unclear destination is work just beginning that blends linguistically oriented ethnography with complexity science. This part of the presentation will spill into the next one, just as the previous did into this one. It will represent my hope to use these presentations to think about new directions rather than just report on past work. The following readings are relevant to both this presentation and the next.

As a presenter at the recent summer school in applied linguistics at Penn State, I had the chance to meet Diane Larsen-Freeman who pioneered thinking about the relationship between complexity and second language learning. Her 1997 article, "Chaos/Complexity Science and Second Language Acquisition" in *Applied Linguistics* 18(2) is posted on the Forum site <http://kady.education.ucsb.edu:85/forums>.

While there I also came across a book used in the summer school, *The Ecology and Semiotics of Language Learning: A Sociocultural Perspective*, by Leo van Lier (Kluwer 2004). This book is ridiculously expensive, but its "ecological" angle coupled with the author's comments and cited background readings in complexity make it a fascinating text to have a conversation with. I plan to use this presentation to do that, so if you can get a library copy please have a look.

### Day Three: Abstract & Suggested Readings

This third presentation continues the mix of ethnography, language and culture, and complexity by first putting complexity itself in the foreground. Complexity needs to be understood as a development out of, but a dramatic change from, traditional systems theory, especially for social researchers who wearied of the functional equilibrium states that systems theory focused on. Next we will look at complexity as an epistemology for linguistically oriented ethnography, both its conduct and the nature of the representation of its object. Then we will consider it as a "qualitative holistic math," as Waldrop called it. Finally, we will loop back into the complexity and language readings listed at the end of the previous presentation to take a look at language and culture one last time.

Though it is now dated, I still like Dan Waldrop's book *Complexity* as an introduction. He is a science writer who tells the story of the development of the Santa Fe Institute, where much of complexity was originated in the 1980s and early 1990s. It is a well-written story available in paperback, appealing to ethnographic types because he tells the story of some ideas together with the stories of people who had them and institutions where they flourished. But there are many other introductions now so you might want to browse a bit and see if you find one more to your liking.

As background to the lecture I gave at UCSB during my first visit my article from the journal *Complexity* was posted, “We Have Met The Other And We’re All Nonlinear.” That article is available on the Papers & Resources sub-topic of the Agar and Ethnography Forum <http://kady.education.ucsb.edu:85/forums> (follow directions for signing in described in Day One description). .

In response to questions last time I posted the web address of a popular article in Atlantic Monthly called “Seeing Around Corners.” It was <http://www.brookings.edu/views/articles/rauch/20020401.pdf>. If you haven’t looked at it, please do so. It covers some of the classics of “agent-based modeling” that I’ll discuss in the presentation. Two references I don’t have electronic versions of: An article in the July 2005 *Scientific American* reports on SFI work attempting to explain the Anasazi collapse with complexity models. It is called “Simulating Ancient Societies” by Timothy A. Kohler, George J. Gumerman, and Robert G. Reynolds. Yaneer Bar-Yam, a complexity theorist who runs the New England Complex Systems Institute, has written an accessible book about applications, called *Making Things Work: Solving Complex Problems in a Complex World* (NECSI Press, 2004). Chapters 12 and 13 are about applications in the educational system.

Finally, if you’re at all computationally inclined, download the Netlogo software package, available free on the web at <http://ccl.northwestern.edu/netlogo/>. It is an accessible language designed for social researchers. If you do the tutorials and look at a few of the already built models that come with the program, you’ll get a first hand feel for the language and culture of this perspective.