

# An Ethnography By Any Other Name...

Michael Agar  
Presentation #1  
UCSB Theme Course  
PRELIMINARY VERSION

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This first presentation responds to suggestions from members of the educational research community, especially those who work in ethnographic and linguistic areas of specialty. Those suggestions centered on debates over what constitutes ethnography in general, linguistic ethnography in particular. In this presentation I'll offer my take on an answer to the question, "What is Ethnography?"

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## Hey, We Need To Do Something Qualitative

- The light at the end of the tunnel may be an oncoming train
- The value of high level concealed contradictions
- Only clear meaning is kind of raw data, and both kinds amenable to any epistemology
- Let's just use "ethnography" here

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## Will The “Real” Ethnography Please Stand Up

Some of the classic debates

- Community vs problem focus
- Emic vs etic
- Ethnometh vs historical materialism
- The “new” institutional focus vs the village
- Anthropology vs the aliens

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## Some More Recent “versus”...

- Post-structuralism vs science
- Identity vs blurred edges/blends
- Local vs global
- Nature vs nurture

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## Meta-Versus

- Some good issues, some academic politics
- Clearly an argument with a pedigree
- But what if “the right stuff” isn’t a point, but rather a space of possibilities?
- What if ethnography is a co-evolutionary system with reference to an environment of problem and world?

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## You Expected Necessary and Sufficient Conditions?

Consider just a few sample parameters of an ethnographic "run":

Control	Priors, including the ethnographer
Focus	
Scope	Deliverables
Chronotope	Interests
Dimensions	

The "right stuff" is a space, and parameters can vary depending on the ecology of the ethnographic point in that space as it begins and contingencies as it develops.

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## But It Isn't Just "Here's How I See It"

- Clearly more than one ethnography is possible
- Clearly not all ethnography is acceptable
- If we "run" ethnography under all possible variations in parameter settings, what are the boundaries of the space that includes them?

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Ethnography, nowadays, boils down to a logic, a couple of questions, and a lot of parameters that can change a "run."

The logic and the couple of questions are the key variables in the fuzzy set membership function

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## First, The Logic, An Old Story

This logic dates back to *Speaking Of Ethnography*, summarized in the first chapter of the 1996 *Professional Stranger*. It needs development, but it serves as a bird's eye view of a logic compatible with process/context approaches. So bear with me for the next six slides, or take a coffee break if you've heard it before and can't stand it anymore. I'll speed through them.

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## Ethnography Iterative and Recursive



- Participant Observation
- Rich Points
- Coherence Assumption
- New Perspective
- Validate and Modify
- Culture

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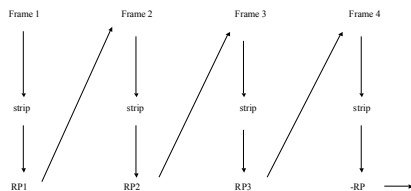
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## Single Strip Resolution



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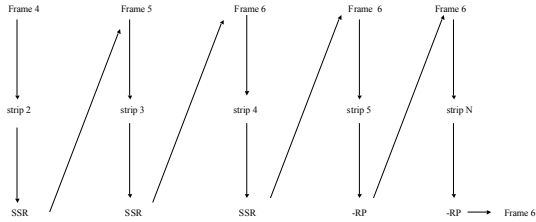
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## Multiple Strip Resolution



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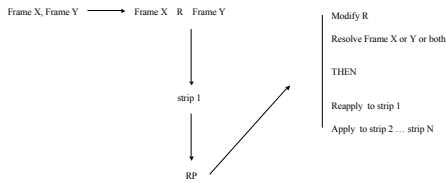
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## Frame Resolution



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## Pierce's Abduction

The surprising fact, F, is observed

If H were true, F would be a matter of course

Hence, there is reason to suspect that H is true

Valid if consequences capable of test through experimentation and F follows as a necessary conclusion

Mode of perception an ordered set of contexts

H a function of historically available contexts

Hoffman--Link to evolutionary process

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## Massive Overdetermination of Pattern (MOPS)

- Houses and Cars
- Puzzle-Solving, or
- Constraint Propagation Technique
- Maximize Differences
- Dialectic
- Validity

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## Ethnographic Analysis



How much is enough?  
Which lines do you take?

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## Ethnographic Analysis



New concepts, new patterns  
Then make the case

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## What Do These Have in Common?

- King Heroin vs. Honky Tonk Bud
- Health Care vs. Caring
- Deal vs. Capotear
- Museum vs. Closed Factory
- Independent vs. Dependent Truckers
- Jokes vs. Schmääh
- Epidemics vs. Social Change

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## The Common Ethno-Space

- An initial view from  $POV_1$  changes through the iterative and recursive application of abductive logic into a different view grounded in context and meaning of  $POV_2$

POV = Point of View

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## Your IRA

- Ethnography rests on an iterative, recursive abductive logic, *IRA* for short
- It isn't the only kind of logic used in ethnography, but as far as social research goes, only in ethnography is it *officially* used
- Unofficially it's used all over the place

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## IRA Marginality

- IRA logic is a threat to those who control, those who plan, those who predict.
- It can, in fact, be destructive or dysfunctional or at least inappropriate
- It is also an engine of creativity and innovation and, in social research, new theory and new programs.

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## IRA In Daily Life

- It is characteristic of good science, good art, good business
- It is more characteristic of Ur-science (Galileo, say) than it is of modern social science
- It is a regular feature of some professions besides ethnography, like journalists, historians, intelligence analysts, detectives.
- It is a skill that separates the good craftsperson from the bad.

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## A Learning Logic

Like the Moliere character who discovered that he'd been speaking in prose all his life, we've all been using IRA since we were little kids. IRA is how you learn something new based on experience.

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## From The IRA Pan Into The Semiotic Fire

- IRA logic is one limit to the space of possible ethnographies. If it doesn't have IRA in it, it isn't in that space
- But IRA doesn't mean it looks like traditional ethnography. See the readings for partial to minimal applications
- IRA, like everything else in this game, is never clearly just present or absent. It is a fuzzy more or less

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Now let's foreshadow a second boundary of ethnographic space, the *two questions*, about *context* and *meaning*.

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## Fore!

- Foreshadow because meaning and context lead into Presentation #2
- Foreshadow because ethnography is at base learning and translating language
- Foreshadow because meaning and context require the language/culture link

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**The Meaning Question**

Within a specific chronotope, I ask:

Did that sign X, which I assume signifies Y, also signify Y to interpretant Z?

Often the most important questions will be asked for you, with a clear *no* answer, as in rich points

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**The Context Question**

Within a specific chronotope, I ask:

Does sign X have any co-occurrence relations with other signs  $Y_1 \dots Y_n$  within chronotope dimensions as bound by a particular study?

Context is much more complicated, and for that we move to Presentation #2

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**Culture?**

- Asking meaning and context questions is what culture is all about
- The traditional concept is a mess, fails on old functions of describing, generalizing and explaining
- But still works to foreground questions of meaning and context
- In this sense, ethno still bound with culture in process/product relation

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## Ending Presentation #1...

- What is a “real” ethnography has been a question for decades
- More acute now with diffusion, different applications, and our pomo world
- We’re recovering from the heartbreak of the law of the excluded middle
- Arguing that one point IS the space--an error
- But what are the boundaries of the space? IRA and C/M

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## ...And on to Presentation #2

- IRA is a learning logic
- Context and meaning are pointers to a necessary link between ethnography, culture, and language
- Not to mention intercultural communication, translation theory, language learning, and learning in general

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