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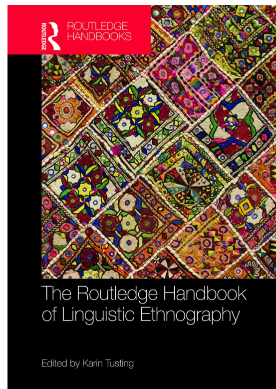

The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Ethnography

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Policy

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24
Policy

Sara Shaw and Laura Eyre

Introduction

This chapter is about policy and policy analysis. The meaning of policy varies according to the perspective adopted. For those working in linguistic ethnography, 'policy' might be thought of as a set of processes and actions (or inactions) that have some broad purpose (rather than, say, a discrete decision or programme administered at one moment in time) (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003; Shaw, 2010). And policy analysis involves attention to the social actions, interactions, language, values and processes that contribute to the meaning of policy (Edelman, 1985; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). This focus on social action stands in stark contrast to the dominant view of policy as a formal, rational process that can be planned in advance.

It is vital for any researcher or reflexive practitioner who is active or interested in linguistic ethnography to appreciate the tension between these different approaches. Our chapter therefore opens with a historical overview of debates about the 'best' way to conceptualise policy. Honing in on an interpretive approach we then: describe how, where and why linguistic and ethnographic perspectives have been brought to bear on issues of policy; present an overview of current work in linguistic ethnography that takes policy as a prime analytic interest; and consider relevant methodological frameworks that align with (but have not traditionally been considered under the umbrella of) linguistic ethnography. We pay particular attention to interpretive policy analysis, an emerging field which recognises the importance of discourse, meaning-making, interpretation and the performance of social practices in devising and in enacting policy.

Our aim is to give a solid introduction to policy sites and situations and ways of understanding and studying them from a linguistic ethnography perspective. In the second part of our chapter, we focus on health and social policy and draw on worked examples from our own work in the UK – on the role of think tanks in shaping health policy, and the role of local government in shaping recent policy on the 'big society' – to illustrate current contributions to policy research from those working in linguistic ethnography and the kind of methods and approaches to analysis that are employed. We conclude by considering the relevance of linguistic ethnography for future directions in policy research and encourage readers to think differently about the question, 'what is data?'.

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Historical perspectives, critical issues and debates

The way in which we conceive of policy is the crux of much historical and contemporary debate. Harold Lasswell (1951) set out a grand vision of policy studies geared to dealing with the complexities of modern government and corporatism, laying out a framework for the development of policy science and the training of 'policy experts' capable of bringing what he saw as the necessary knowledge to the decision-making process. His vision was of an interdisciplinary enterprise. However, most policy inquiry has since been permeated with a strong empirical identity that is heavily indebted to systems analysis and microeconomics. Scholars have tended to align themselves with an instrumental approach, grounded in positivism, that situates individuals and institutions within a rational choice framework. What follows is a dominant tendency to see policy as somehow separate from politics, and policymaking as a linear process involving problem identification, collection of data on alternative solutions and selection of the alternative that best resolves the problem (Fischer, 2003; Wagenaar, 2011). Such an approach focusses on the instrumental goals that people seek to achieve (e.g. influencing specific policies); assumes that policy actors generate objective, policy-relevant knowledge in a void and tends to adopt quasi-experimental designs and quantitative methods to evaluate the goals of policy programmes.

More pluralist and incremental approaches to policy and policymaking have also developed, reflecting an interest in processes of interaction and negotiation and requiring a different conceptualisation of policy and alternative methods of inquiry (see, for instance, Pressman & Wildavksy's, 1973 account of how centrally planned policy to promote economic development failed in the face of local implementation processes that, they argued, necessarily involved adaptation and learning). However, it is only since the 1990s that a post-positivist approach to policy studies has begun to evolve that rejects any notion that public policy intervention should be seen as a discovery process which uncovers 'real' social problems that require state intervention. This is an interpretive approach that recognises policy as discourse in which both problems and solutions are constructed (Bacchi, 2000) and which is negotiated and renegotiated in the social practices and daily encounters of administrators, planners, regulators, teachers, social workers and other street level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980; Wagenaar, 2011).

To give an example from our own research: working in an interpretive tradition has meant understanding the role of think tanks in health policy (the focus of Sara's research) in terms of social practice – focussing on how think tanks actively engage with a social situation and how that situation is framed and enacted by participants. Rather than getting caught up in what health policy should or should not include (often under the banner of abstract values such as 'efficiency'), such an approach embraces the variability of think tanks and refocusses analysis on how health policy is enacted. This approach recognises the centrality of human interaction; engages with what practitioners actually do; focusses on meaning-making and contextuality rather than measurement and involves developing practical wisdom rather than law-like explanations (Yanow, 2000; Wagenaar, 2011; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014).

Current contributions and research areas

So how does linguistic ethnography fit into these debates about policy and policy analysis? The short answer is that there is a considerable amount of work in linguistic ethnography that appears relevant to policy, but far less that takes policy or policymaking as its prime analytic focus. Given the relatively short time span in which linguistic ethnography has evolved (Snell et al., 2015), some concerns and approaches have received more attention than others.

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In short, policy studies have yet to feature strongly in linguistic ethnography, and linguistic ethnography has yet to feature strongly in studies of public policy. However, there are examples of research in which linguistic and ethnographic perspectives have been brought to bear on issues of policy, as we describe below. These fields of research have tended to evolve separately, at least in part due to individual scholars' histories and the development of disciplinary communities. We seek to widen those disciplinary boundaries by providing readers with a flavour of recent linguistic and ethnographic contributions with a particular focus on health and social policy (the focus of our own work). We then consider whether and how these bodies of work might together be taken up under the rubric of linguistic ethnography.

Policy ethnography

The policy literature is dominated by research assessing the general processes of policy development, often focussing on the differences between intent and outcomes. There is far less that explores the *details* of macro policy development or of micro implementation, nor the connections between them. The field of policy ethnography (Griffiths & Hughes, 2000) aims for close examination of these details. Broadly influenced by earlier work from scholars such as Wildavsky or Lipsky (who deliberately focussed on the process of implementing policy and those front-line administrators negotiating it (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Wildavsky, 1979; Lipsky, 1980)), policy ethnography embraces policy as a social practice that is negotiated in the everyday work of street level bureaucrats (e.g. civil servants who translate policy statements into guidelines) and has encouraged researchers to focus more on the people, places, practices, technologies and artefacts involved in implementing policy on the front line of local service delivery. By using ethnography (typically studying a single case) to observe the ways in which policy unfolds, work in this field has helped to reveal the processes involved in formulating, developing, understanding and implementing policy.

Studies at the micro level have proliferated in recent years, but these also look upwards to shed light on and deepen understanding of processes at the macro level. Take, for instance, the work of Schmidt (2000) that focusses on the drive to make English the official language in the US. Whilst his policy ethnography led him to focus on the minutiae of everyday life, his analysis came to see the policy debates he observed there as disputes about issues of national and group identity.

There has been a considerable amount of policy ethnography across disciplines, covering diverse topics from environmental politics (Hajer, 2005) to the use of evidence in policymaking (Stevens, 2011). Much of this work might be thought of as sitting under the umbrella of interpretive policy analysis, a field of inquiry that homes in on 'the work of policy' (Colebatch, 2006) and attends to matters of representation through language, text and symbol in the constitution of social life (Yanow, 2000). However, whilst we welcome the importance of language and discourse as a common interest amongst scholars working in interpretive policy analysis, we have at times been frustrated by a lack of detailed micro-analysis. For instance, whilst many IPA handbooks outline the linguistic turn in policy studies and political science, they tend to hold back from undertaking or engaging with micro-level linguistic analysis (see Heinrichsmeier, this volume).

Policy-as-discourse

There has been a recent discursive turn in policy studies (Bacchi, 2000; Shaw, 2010), representing an explicit attempt to move the focus of policy-based work to the political construction

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of social problems and the meanings attached to them. Discursively based policy inquiry adopts a range of positions, from treating discourses as frames or conceptual frameworks for seeing the world (Schon & Rein, 1995) – and therefore treating policy discourses as variables that can be subject to empirical testing – through to more interpretive approaches in which discourse is not simply a measure of social relations but is constitutive of them (Fischer & Forrester, 1993; Bacchi, 2000; Fischer, 2003).

Such a diverse area of research draws together writers interested in different areas, for instance affirmative action (Bacchi, 2004) or environmental politics (Ockwell & Rydin, 2005), and adopts approaches that involve identifying and analysing policy discourse, political symbols, policy storylines, discourse coalitions, the interplay of ideologies and power relations, policy rhetoric and argumentation. What ties this group of researchers together is the commitment to examining and explaining how language is used in all of these different contexts in order to reveal aspects of social and political processes that were previously obscured or misunderstood (Shaw, 2010). Through this lens, understanding policy-as-discourse not only enables appreciation of the role of policy actors and the dynamics of policy processes, but also allows for "the possibility for devising new modes of communication to achieve normatively better policy outcomes" (Ockwell & Rydin, 2005, p. 4). This focus on addressing social wrongs and possible ways of mitigating them is a characteristic of much discourse analysis (Bacchi, 2000; Fairclough, 2010).

Linguistic ethnography and policy

The above sections have outlined a growing body of interpretive inquiry into policy and policymaking. However, to date those concerned with the broad areas of policy ethnography and policy-as-discourse have tended to be situated in different (albeit overlapping) camps. The result is an apparent policy void in linguistic ethnography (Shaw & Russell, 2015). To our knowledge there are currently few researchers who take public policy as a prime analytic focus and incorporate linguistic ethnography into their policy analysis (although there are many who are interested in policy within their research programmes and the relevance of their emerging findings for policymakers). Likewise, few researchers explore the interface between the detailed nuance of evolving social interaction at the micro and/or meso-level and the broader institutional and socio-political contexts within which interactions are situated (what some might call transcontextual analysis). Nor are there many who engage in close analysis of linguistic and ethnographic data as an integral part of their interpretive policy analysis. Having said that, there are pockets of inquiry that are starting to fill this void (though not all self-identify as doing linguistic ethnography), such as work on 'the rationality of rationing in healthcare' (Russell et al., 2014) or the construction of language policy (Hornberger, 2002).

We now draw on concrete examples from two research studies to highlight the kinds of methods and analytic processes that those working in linguistic ethnography might employ in attempting to further address this policy void. Our intention is to open up the debate about what kinds of work can be done, how and why.

Main research methods

Interpretive approaches (including linguistic ethnography) draw on analytic methods that bring the practices and voices of 'actors on the ground' (Yanow & Shea-Schwartz, 2014, p. 259) to the fore, along with the language, objects and acts that make up policy (Yanow,

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Table 24.1 Overview of the two research studies

	Title	*Rationale*	*Aims/questions*	*Study design*	*Data collection*	*Further reading*
Study 1	The role of think tanks in shaping health policy.	Few studies have explored the work of think tanks in public policy. Those that do tend to present them as a source of 'independent' evidence.	How do think tanks frame and represent their work when they seek to shape health policy? And how do they account for and manage their decisions?	Collective case study of four think tanks that had undertaken work that was relevant to a programme of NHS reforms in England.	Autoethnography of Sara's experience of working in a think tank. Informal interviews in each site, followed by 10 in-depth narrative interviews with purposively selected senior think tank representatives. 30 documents, including overarching strategy, governing document, and work relevant to current NHS reforms.	Shaw and Russell (2015). Shaw, Russell, Parsons & Greenhalgh (2015).
Study 2	Recontextualising the 'big society' – from central imaginaries to local realities.	Understanding the role and influence of local government in translating government's imagined future society into a local reality for communities and residents.	What discourses are drawn on in official government documentation relating to the goals of the imagined big society? How are discourses representing the imagined big society recontextualised at a local level?	Longitudinal, multiple embedded case study, with one central case (a local council) and two embedded units (two 'localism' pilot projects).	15 documents, including a mix of local internal/ public and national policy documents. 90 hours of observation (as a 'peripheral observer', Addler and Adler 1994) of key forums and events during development and implementation of localism pilots. 30 interviews with (where possible) the same participants at three points during the study.	Eyre (2014).

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2000; Russell et al., 2014). Listening to these voices helps to reveal the importance of people and, consequently, of values in the processes of negotiating (and renegotiating) policy. A variety of methods continue to evolve to enable this, generally and in the specific context of policy inquiry. In this section, we focus on four issues of concern to policy analysts working in linguistic ethnography. We describe two studies that we have undertaken (Table 24.1), teasing out the ethnographic and linguistic methods adopted, the rationale for their use and the ways in which we have combined them to enable a detailed examination of social and political life. Descriptions are necessarily brief and we guide readers to other published work for further detail.

Policy analysis requires close analysis of dispersed micro-level policy practices as well as the broader architectures of policy

Linguistic ethnography has been heavily influenced by research on literacy, ethnicity and identity, classroom discourse and language teaching. It aims to use discourse analytic tools in creative ways to extend our understanding of the role language plays in social life (Snell et al., 2015). Little attention has yet been given to how public policy is formulated, negotiated and (to a lesser extent) enacted. This kind of policy analysis – informed by linguistic ethnography – involves close analysis of dispersed micro-level policy practices as well as the broader architectures of policy. It necessarily involves collecting and analysing data that reflect something about the nature of policy and politics. Whereas studies in linguistic ethnography often focus on extended sections of text and social interaction, it is not always desirable or feasible to find that in policy. We tend to find 'policy' not in a single recording of a meeting or observation, but in fragments across a range of documents and interactions. Take Study 1 (Table 24.1) in which Sara drew on data from autoethnography, interviews and documents. Her focus on different sources of data provided a rich picture of the context, people, artefacts, activities, ideas and values that make up think tanks' work in relation to health policy. No one extended section of text provided the basis for the detailed analysis subsequently undertaken.

Similarly, take Study 2 (Table 24.1) in which Laura developed an empirically based critique of 'the big society' via exploration of the potential incompatibilities between successive governments' imagined big society and the lived experience of society in one local authority. Given that the concept of 'big society' is an intersubjectively constructed phenomenon, it cannot be directly observed 'as policy' but instead involves using a variety of methods (Table 24.1) to explore how it is assembled, understood, negotiated and practised. In brief, this involved understanding the vision for the big society as set out in a range of central government policy documentation and speeches; appreciating the mediating role of local government through analysis of documents, commissioning activities and announcements; and exploring representations and recontextualisations of 'the big society' through observation of meetings and events, collection of internal local authority documentation and interviews. Together, these data enabled Laura to examine in detail the various moments in time through which the big society was imagined, reimagined and recontextualised as it moved from conception at a central government level, through interpretation and mediation at a local government level, and realisation (or not) at a community level.

This wide-ranging approach to generating data enabled Laura to closely examine, in particular, the role of local authorities in mediating the vision of a big society. Linguistic analysis (e.g. of documents) helped to understand how local government bodies were represented as a compliant and mediating force, a necessary level through which power needed to pass in order to reach communities. Their role was broadly represented as an enabling one: freed

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from central government control, local government actors were envisaged as accountable to local people and working on their behalf to fix 'broken Britain'. Analysis of ethnographic data, in combination with interviews and local documents, challenged this 'imagined role' of local government as an enabling and empowering organisation through which power must necessarily pass on its way to communities and local people. This vision was not borne out in local officials' development of localism during the research project: despite making an initial commitment to devolve services and budgets to a local level, in reality, local government officials were reluctant to devolve power to other local government tiers, let alone to local communities. Far from being a collectively compliant and mediating tier of government, local government was revealed as obstructive, ultimately contributing to the failure to realise the imagined big society.

In both studies, a mix of data enabled a nuanced and interpretive analysis of the complex and messy realities of policy development through the various scales and contexts of government. It also allowed us to zoom in on the micro-level interactions that contribute to policy work (and undertake detailed analysis of language, see below), whilst simultaneously zooming out to take a helicopter view of the overall architectures that come together to make up policy.

Ethnographic methods are central but direct observation is not always feasible

Ethnographic methods were central in both of our studies and are useful for the kinds of policy inquiry that we do, which seeks to explore the *meanings* of particular policies and political practices, concepts or processes to situational actors (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). Such methods help to illuminate wide-ranging issues of political concern (e.g. how policymakers think about the decisions they make or how organisational administrators implement national policies). Case studies provide a vital means of exploring policy issues in depth and combining ethnographic with linguistic approaches. For instance, in Study 2, the multiple embedded case study design, fusing the features of case study research and ethnographic methods within an interpretive and discursive framework, enabled Laura to observe, *in situ*, the various processes and practices of policymaking in three tiers of local government and connect this with wider government initiatives. However, such methodological foci often bring restrictions in terms of access to policy worlds.

Given the ways in which policy works (e.g. the often rapid speed in which policy evolves), and the lack of ready access to 'back-stage' policy worlds (Shaw et al., 2015), it is not always feasible or desirable to do an in-depth multi-year ethnographic study. Hence, in contrast to traditional ethnography that is defined largely by the researcher's prolonged immersion in a single geographical locale and a focus on the everyday lives of the people present there, contemporary policy analysts often use interpretive ethnography (Denzin, 1997) – a flexible methodology that can accommodate the various places, people, objects and predicaments that make up contemporary policy and politics and our relationships with it. In some cases, as with the use of autoethnography in Study 2 which generated a natural record of events as they unfolded in the course of Sara's work within a think tank, this might involve adopting new or alternative approaches. Such approaches do not diminish the value of policy inquiry, but provide a much-needed way in to being part of the process of interacting, thinking and relating in policy worlds. For instance, alternative access routes (e.g. routes that skirt around the political hierarchy) might generate stories from front-line workers that give more nuanced and detailed accounts of policy development.

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In sum, there are often limitations to observing and studying communication as a way of knowing about policy. This means that, for policy inquiry at least, methods used in linguistic ethnography tend to be characterised as much by absences as presences (e.g. not being able to directly observe Board meetings in the think tanks study). As we set out above, this often (but not always) necessitates a variety of corresponding data – interviews, policy documents, archival documents, artefacts, media materials and more – in order to explore processes that are not always accessible through observation.

The importance of 'studying up'

Those doing the work of policy inquiry need to have an interest in – even an overt commitment to – understanding the processes by means of which power and responsibility are exercised. For policy analysts, this might involve focussing on regional, national or transnational policies – and the role of states, corporate entities and other networks in negotiating these – and how such policies are interpreted and are (or are not) put into practice. Writing in the 1970s, Nader (1972) urged us to home in on the most powerful strata of society, and to flip anthropology – her discipline – on its head. "What if", she asked, "anthropologists were to study the colonizers rather than the colonised, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty?" (1972, p. 289).

Of course, the kinds of question asked in policy inquiry (see Table 24.1 for examples) are what guide researchers to focus on power and responsibility or the culture of affluence. Those interested in studying public policy need to frame their questions with this in mind. As with any interpretive research, social and political theory also has an important role to play. In both of our studies, data analysis and theory development were simultaneous – "the one shaping the other in a dialectical manner" (Wagenaar, 2011, p. 247). But what is relevant theory in policy inquiry? And how does it inform the process of analysing and interpreting data?

In Study 1, readers will recall that we drew on data from autoethnography, interviews and documents. Early analysis (using corpus analysis, see Shaw et al., 2015) revealed how think tank ideas and values appeared to be talked about in different ways and in different contexts – for instance in think tanks' formal publications or actors' accounts of their work – and that this process needed to be managed by think tanks through a range of neutralising strategies. To make sense of emerging analysis, Sara introduced two sensitising concepts – 'front-stage' and 'back-stage' healthcare planning and 'sacred' and 'profane' language (Degeling, 1996; following Goffman, 1959). Using these concepts to guide analysis drew her to examine the more public and private settings in which health policy takes place, and (much as we did at the start of this chapter) to distinguish between the theory of policymaking – with its language of objectivity and rationality – from accounts of how things work in practice. As is usual in linguistic ethnography (though unusual in studies of public policy), we now turn to an extract from Study 1 to illustrate this process. The extract is from an interview with a senior executive at one of the participating think tanks, discussing what has enabled them to influence evolving NHS reforms:

> I have come to realise that writing it down actually does matter a great deal, oddly.
>
> Why do you think that is?
>
> So, I think it gives you the authority. And in a lot of the process, well, people either want something to go, you know, in a lot of these processes they want something to go back to – why are you doing this?', 'in response to…' – and with a kind of, a kind of audit

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trail.... There's a sort of seemliness to that process. So I think, I think it's very difficult actually to influence without the sort of, without having the written analysis to underpin it, which you have published. And actually, of course, in the parliamentary discussions where our work was quoted, they don't quote a conversation they've had with you, they quote what you've written ... And that discourse is a very important part of this. Now what is really helpful is combining that writing with the explaining personally. And also the warming people up to the fact that you're going to write, and in many cases I had prior conversations with people about how I was going to word this – sought their advice on [specific reforms]. And I changed some of the wording to, having reflected on their advice.

Okay, almost framing of what you were going to say?

Yes. So I iterated. So I did, I didn't, I didn't do things quite so sequentially ... I guess the engagement with people was a two-way process where I was trying to influence them, but I was also taking their advice. So that what we would say was capable of being more influential.

OK. And you felt that process worked very well with what came out at the end of it?

Yes. Because I mean I think what we recommended then was things that, you know, and that is a classic Civil Service, you know, kind of: 'So if I change that word here, will you sign up to that? Right, I'll check that with that person there'. And 'if we do that, can you live with that?' 'Yes, check that back.'

(This extract was originally published in Shaw et al. (2015) The view from nowhere? How think tanks work to shape health policy, in Critical Policy Studies and is reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Ltd, www.tandfonline.com))

This interviewee emphasises the importance of formal written accounts in providing legitimacy and weight to think tanks' arguments (e.g. "writing it down actually does matter a great deal", "it gives you the authority"). They also talk about how this gives them a citable source of ideas that decision-makers are able to draw on ("they quote what you've written", "a kind of audit trail", "having the written analysis to underpin it") and how that's useful, for instance, "in the parliamentary discussions". The production of formal front-stage accounts involves, they say, an interactive process ("a two-way process", "combining that writing with the explaining personally", "warming people up") which establishes common ground between think tank actors and decision-makers ("changed some of the wording", "reflected on their advice") and enables them to work together back-stage to co-produce accounts of NHS reforms ("So if I change that word here, will you sign up to that?"). This production of written accounts was visible (to varying degrees) in the activities of each of the four think tanks in Study 1.

Moving beyond this extract to focus on the wider data set: think tanks' formal accounts of their work – like the formal written accounts that this interviewee refers to – mirrored the sacred language of policy and planning, drawing on modernist conceptions of health policy that describe the policy process as informed problem-solving in which a problem is identified, data collected and analysed, and evidence provided to policymakers on which they can then base decisions. In their front-stage accounts, think tanks emphasised a set of technical skills and activities (e.g. 'experimental intervention'), which informed exacting 'research and policy analysis', which then fed into policy.

By employing such sacred planning discourse front-stage, think tanks publicly deferred to values such as technical rationality and objectivity and established a sense of commonality with healthcare planners and decision-makers. This reinforced think tanks' self-presentation as

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independent organisations, and situated them as legitimate advisors on the problems of NHS reform.

Studying up and engaging with relevant social theory enabled Sara to foreground policy and planning as the objects of study, theorise them (particularly appreciating the ways in which policy practices rarely take place in single defined spaces) and then connect with relevant sensitising concepts to guide analysis. Findings revealed how, on the one hand, think tanks' deference to sacred planning discourse signalled to decision-makers that they knew about and adhered to the rules of the game front-stage. On the other, this enabled them to identify and interact with decision-makers back stage, and to speak about and practise planning in ways that gave more explicit recognition to its political dimensions.

Focussing on political language as a social practice

As Murray Edelman wrote back in 1985: "political language *is* political reality" (p. 10). What he meant is that political language is key in creating the social practices that make up public policy. It is the *meaning* that is created through political language (according to Edelman, a crucial element of any political move for advantage) that helps to construct beliefs about the significance of events or problems, legitimise certain public policies or encourage people to support or resist particular courses of action. What follows is that much analysis of public policy needs to include an understanding of political language and how it is used in different contexts. Doing so can help to reveal how policy is negotiated and renegotiated in the social practices and discourses of politicians, planners and street-level bureaucrats.

This focus on political language and social practices might involve, for instance, focussing on the ways in which 'being rational' is negotiated in decisions about local healthcare provision (Russell et al., 2014). In Study 2, Laura adapted critical discourse analysis to inform her analysis of the processes by which decentralisation of power was imagined by central government and the representations of local people and communities as the intended recipients of that power. Her focus on discourse was a way of understanding how people, groups and organisations involved in political reforms (in this case decentralisation) organise and are organised through their use of language.

We have already outlined how policy is made up of dispersed practices and that ethnographic observation of the evolution of a specific policy is often neither desirable nor feasible. In Study 2, it was political texts – speeches, manifestos, parliamentary papers – that were of particular interest in understanding the architecture of evolving policy and the language and practices that make it. Laura wanted to find out whether, in framing and introducing decentralisation reforms in the context of the big society, the Conservative Party and Coalition Government at the time had given any consideration to the complexities of *how* power could be successfully devolved to local people and communities. By focussing on government texts (February 2009 to December 2010), she was able to take a close look at references to the concept of decentralisation and examine how the process of decentralising power was represented as an imagined social practice. Take the following extract from a Conservative Party paper outlining a new programme of decentralisation and strategy to shift power away from the state and back to local people:

> This is a different vision of Britain, one where power is shared and communities are once again trusted to be in charge of their own destinies.
>
> *(Control Shift: Returning Power to Local Communities, Conservative Party, 2009: 2)*

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This extract projects a "different vision" of Britain and summarises the part that communities were thought to play in the imagined big society. The brevity of the text combined with the limited use of language conceals the complex dynamics involved in the processes of decentralisation. For instance, the relationship between communities and different tiers of government is oversimplified; the extract excludes reference to local or central government and effectively ignores the institutions from which the power must be shared. This is important because power cannot just 'be shared' – it must be shared *by someone*, in this case central government and local government – and yet the text fails to identify actors or processes involved. The term "power is shared" is abstracted (van Leeuwen, 2008) with no detail given as to how power will be shared, by whom or even what that power will be. This oversimplification alludes to the straightforward handover of a concrete and identifiable item – far from the 'apparent complexity' that is the reality of decentralisation (see Eyre, 2014). The concept of communities is also oversimplified, with no differentiation in terms of, for example, resources or levels of deprivation and communities presented as homogenous, willing and able recipients of power.

Further analysis of contextual data from local government level allowed Laura to explore the tension between the political language employed by the Conservative Party (that oversimplified communities), and that used by officials at the local government level (that distinguished communities in terms of those that were active and able and those that were lacking in social capital or disadvantaged in some way – "chalk and cheese", as one official put it). This stark contrast between the oversimplified representation of communities at national and local levels of government was crucial in revealing the barriers to any redistribution of power and to making the vision for a big society a reality.

Implications for practice

Earlier, we drew attention to a policy void in linguistic ethnography. What follows from this is that there remains considerable scope and opportunity for researchers and reflexive practitioners to undertake further conceptual, methodological, empirical and practical work focussed on how public policy is formulated, negotiated and enacted. In terms of practice – in the sense of *doing* linguistic ethnography with policy as primary focus – there is much that we could focus on. Given space limitations, we simply want to encourage researchers to think differently about 'what is data?'.

To date, the ideal in linguistic ethnography has often been to focus on extended sections of observed activity (drawn from, for instance, classroom interaction). A focus on public policy as the primary object of study requires a wider understanding of data, one that is grounded in theories of policy, that recognises the dispersed nature of policy and policymaking and gives permission to those working in linguistic ethnography to seek out the different spaces and places in which policies evolve and the kinds of data emerging from these. Collecting and analysing a mix of data that reflects the dispersed nature of policy will enable a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex and messy realities of policy development through the various scales and contexts of government. Uncovering the processes of meaning-making in public policy, and the ways in which political language is employed, might also entail linguistic ethnographers engaging with different kinds of linguistic analysis (e.g. grounded in rhetorical theory or argumentation, see Russell et al., 2014 and Shaw et al., 2015 for examples) that appear to have been side-lined to date.

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Future directions

There is clearly an opportunity for those employing linguistic ethnography to extend their work to the fields of public policy and to develop a more detailed understanding of the processes whereby power and responsibility are exercised and the practices and people involved. We strongly encourage them to do so. It is an area where technical and empiricist methods (e.g. cost-effectiveness analysis) have dominated. These approaches are often not feasible or relevant to strategic policy and decision-making, especially in the context of wicked problems (e.g. the use of technology to augment or prolong lives), which are complex, multifaceted and often raise ethical and moral issues. Those who are prepared to embrace public policy as a primary object of study in linguistic ethnography (or take up the mantle of linguistic ethnography in their studies of public policy) can explicitly embrace the political realities in which such wicked problems are grounded, and incorporate questions regarding the construction of policy and the role of language, values and emotions.

There is an argument for bringing linguistic ethnography and interpretive policy analysis closer. Whilst both are emerging and diverse fields they embody theoretical and methodological work, and, together, might allow for a productive relationship across interpretive methodologies, political theories and public policies. Such a combination offers a means of analysing policy qualitatively, in a political context, and accounting for social processes and interactions, and for a more holistic understanding of how and why public policies evolve, how political language and socio-political processes configure environments like schools or hospitals and how local meanings of policy are constructed and evolve over time.

Linguistic ethnography and interpretive studies of public policy both have an interest in the potential links between research and practical intervention (Bacchi, 2000; Snell et al., 2015). This echoes a more generalised call for increased democratic deliberation and co-creation of policy relevant knowledge, to which we hope that linguistic ethnography will actively contribute in the future. Attending to the linguistic resources by which the socio-political realm is (re)produced and providing contextualised accounts of policy processes might help decision-makers to look in different ways at the nature of the social problems they are to address and open up further possibilities for social change (Bacchi, 2000; Yanow, 2000; Fischer, 2003). And moving towards more collaborative working with decision-makers and publics to jointly problematise public policy might ease the process by means of which a range of political values can be translated into changes in society.

Further reading

Shaw, S.E., & Russell, J. (2015). Narrating healthcare planning: The influence of linguistic ethnography. In J. Snell, S. Shaw, & F. Copland (Eds.), *Linguistic ethnography: Interdisciplinary explorations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. (This chapter sets out the contribution of linguistic ethnography to recent work on think tanks, using worked analysis of language and interaction to demonstrate how linguistic ethnography has informed the research. It includes a section on bringing linguistic ethnography and interpretive policy analysis together.)

Wagenaar, H. (2011). *Meaning in action. Interpretation and dialogue in policy analysis*. New York: M.E. Sharpe. (This book offers a valuable insight into the field of interpretive policy analysis, setting out the role that interpretation plays in policy analysis, the relevance of diverse theoretical perspectives and the need to examine practice, meaning and dialogue.)

Yanow, D., & Schwartz-Shea, P. (2014). *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn*. New York: M.E. Sharpe. (This book focusses on interpretive methods in the context

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of policy analysis. Whilst not primarily focussed on analysing language and discourse, it offers a comprehensive discussion of a range of interpretive methods that acknowledge the importance of social interaction.)

Related topics

The ethnographic interview; Ethics; Collaborative ethnography; Scale.

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