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Title
Interview with Elinor Ochs

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8tw5p4pg

Journal
Issues in Applied Linguistics, 10(1)

ISSN
1050-4273

Author
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Publication Date
1999-07-30

DOI
10.5070/L4101005012

Peer reviewed

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Interview with Elinor Ochs

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Dr. Elinor Ochs, Professor of Applied Linguistics at UCLA, is co-founder, along with Dr. Bambi Schieffelin and Dr. Shirley Brice Heath, of the field of language socialization. Dr. Ochs was educated at the University of Pennsylvania, where she studied with Dell Hymes, and earned a Ph.D. in anthropology. Her work takes an interdisciplinary approach to language in social context, bridging scholarship in the areas of linguistic anthropology, psycholinguistics, and applied linguistics. Her early groundbreaking study of child language acquisition in Western Samoa yielded important discoveries about the connection between cultural practices and children's pragmatic development. In Dr. Ochs's subsequent studies of grammar and discourse as resources for constructing identities and activities, she has explored what it means to become a culturally competent member of a community.

Dr. Ochs has examined how language is used to organize social interaction and construct knowledge in a variety of settings. In addition to her work in Western Samoa, Dr. Ochs has conducted ethnographic research in Madagascar, Italy, and the United States. Her current project involves examining high-functioning autistic children's discourse practices at home and in school in order to better understand these children's social, cognitive, and linguistic abilities. Dr. Ochs is a 1998 recipient of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Her publications include *Developmental Pragmatics* (1979, with Bambi Schieffelin, Editors), *Language Socialization Across Cultures* (1986, with Bambi Schieffelin, Editors), *Culture and Language Development: Language Acquisition and Language Socialization in a Samoan Village* (1988), *Constructing Panic: The Discourse of Agoraphobia* (1995, with Lisa Capps), *Interaction and Grammar* (with E. Schegloff, S. Thompson, Editors, 1996), as well as numerous other collections, articles, and book chapters on language socialization, and narrative and discourse practices across cultures.

Klein: *Did something in your own experience or past make it meaningful for you to pursue the development of language socialization as an area of inquiry?*

Ochs: The language socialization study developed most immediately from doing fieldwork in Western Samoa, and it is indirectly related to my past because when you go to do fieldwork, you start to notice the things that are not obvious or not part of your own expectations. One of the things I began to notice is that people

Issues in Applied Linguistics
ISSN 1050-4273
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Vol. 10 No. 1, 75-81

were talking to children and around children in a way that was different from the way in which I believed people talked to me when I was little, and also the way in which I talked to my own children. So that became very noticeable and took more and more of my focus of attention. I was then spending a lot of time trying to reconcile what they were doing, and how they were speaking to children with what I believed to be quote — normal — unquote to do around kids.

There are two things that happened. One was an accounting of how talk to children is not something that is automatic, but rather is something that is deeply cultural. Trying to understand this got me thinking about looking at children's interactions with others as a cultural phenomenon and not simply as language development, not simply looking at linguistic input and linguistic output but looking at the communicative practices as cultural input and cultural output. I spent a lot of time situating the children's communication with other people in terms of larger dynamics that were running across different situations in the Western Samoan community where I lived. And then, at the same time, the more enduring consequence was to look back over my shoulder at my own cultural orientation to try to understand what was deeply cultural about the way in which my own community, which I would describe as mainstream upper middle class Euro-American, English speaking, and so on — to look at that community and try to understand it from an ethnographic and cultural perspective.

Klein: *Do you think that the cultural expectations that you brought to the Samoan study and the conflict that occurred between these expectations and what you observed somehow created a construct for analysis?*

Ochs: Yes, definitely, and that's when, well there were two things that happened — I wrote a piece called *Talking to Children in Western Samoa*, which brought out that issue, and I also wrote a piece called *Clarification and Culture*, and both of those pieces were about baby talk in Western Samoa. And then Bambi Schieffelin and I got together because she also found a very similar kind of dynamic that was happening among the Kaluli. We wrote the piece, *Language Acquisition and Socialization: Three Developmental Stories*, where we brought in not just the Kaluli and Samoan, but the United States situation and looked at that as just another developmental story, but one that was so prevailing. We deconstructed what is normal and natural into something that's cultural as well, and we drew on a notion that Sue Philips promoted in her study looking at American Indian children in school. She had this very interesting idea of "invisible cultures," in describing Indians who were using English, who were monolingual in some cases. Philips had the idea that even though they were using English, they were using it in culturally different ways. She suggested that Indian culture is invisibilized, because they're not dressed in obviously different clothes or speaking a completely different language — they were speaking English and they look like everybody else but they're not like everybody else — so there are cultures of English.

We took the notion of invisible culture, saying that when you have a situation where the researcher is studying people from his or her own background and writing for an audience of the same background, there is taken for granted cultural information that is not specified but presupposed in the process of making sense of these interactions. But if you take an interaction from some other community then you have to specify all that information. We were looking at how the cultural nature of the dialogues, between, let's say, a mother and her child, in the psycholinguistic literature is invisibilized and then proceeded to make cultural underpinnings visible.

Klein: *In your work you cover an incredibly diverse number of topics — language acquisition in Western Samoa, interactions in family dinners, the discourse of agoraphobia, reformulations among physicists, and it seems that problem-solving is a core theme throughout your work. How do you view the relationship between problem-solving and language socialization?*

Ochs: I've often reflected myself, — what is the theme that holds all these things together? People often ask — what have you studied? And I think to myself — what should I tell them? Should I tell them about this? Or should I tell them about that? Or if I told them about this, can I tell them about how this is related to that? I think that problem-solving is something that not just the human species but all species have to do and that social organization is a dynamic that exists largely for problem-solving. I mean, you have a society — I don't want to have a teleological notion of society here — but the viability of a society rests on its ability to cope with ever-changing problems and is there to distribute problem-solving across a range of more or less competent persons, and that it's also the case that societies organize problem-solving in terms of rights and responsibilities in problem-solving activities.

Formal schooling is dedicated specifically to inculcating competence in problem-solving in a number of different topical domains, therefore, I would say that problem-solving is absolutely essential to culture. I'm not saying that culture is coterminous with collective problem-solving, but it's integral to it. So looking at socialization into problem-solving, I think, is a central part of what it means to become a member of a community, a viable agentive member of a community, and I think it is what makes us not just cognitively competent, but also able to participate in a number of different social activities. And I think a lot of the identities, social personae, that people assume have a lot to do with problem-solving.

There are so many different kinds of problem-solving activities. Basically, you have story-telling as a kind of problem-solving activity, planning, arguments are also problem-solving activities. You have error-correction and clarification as a problem-solving activity. Then there are many sub-genres of these four basic kinds of problem-solving activities, and that covers an awful lot of communication.

Klein: *So the process of examining problem-solving strategies like those you've just mentioned has played a central role in defining some of your previous projects...*

Ochs: Yes, the focus on problem-solving activities really came about with the family dinner material and looking at how families problem-solve around personal experiences of different family members by initiating and participating in narratives of their personal experiences — in shaping the ways of figuring out what happended and why it happened, and what that speaks to for future experience. Family narrative activity is extremely important in developing children's understandings of how to handle life problems and for socializing them into culturally preferred ways of handling those problems. Narratives define certain ways of behaving as reprehensible and certain ways of behaving as expected and preferred, defining violations and so on. This kind of collaborative problem-solving of personal experience is the bedrock for building community, family, friendships, institutions. It also socializes ways of thinking that we tend to think of as academic, where the material is not necessarily a personal life experience but some other kind of topic that's more academic in nature, like scientists trying to understand events in the physical world, for example. I relate how families problem-solve to how scientists or academics problem-solve.

In the agoraphobia study with Lisa Capps, the emphasis is also on problem-solving in the sense that the narratives of someone who is suffering from agoraphobia suggest a very different way in which problems are handled. First of all, sufferers display a lot of difficulty in defining what the problem is. Secondly, there's a sense that the narrator/protagonist can't solve the problem, can't handle the problem, that the problem is overwhelming. The sufferer has no internal control over some dilemma that exists and is instead a passive victim of a menacing situation. So there's a kind of dominant narrative construction of experience where instead of being an agent, the protagonist is swept away by anxiety. Because the agoraphobic can't cope, she doesn't put herself into any situation where she could possibly find herself being helpless. So she stays around very familiar spaces, often confined to home or very close proximity of home and becomes imprisoned in what is deemed secure.

This kind of problem-solving can be transmitted to kids through family narrative activity. If a parent suffers from this kind of syndrome, the kids are drawn into narratives of helplessness. When children try to suggest a way of handling a problem, the parent who suffers from an anxiety disorder will often dismiss that suggestion. So you have, for example, narratives about pit bulls, what to do if the neighbor has a pit bull and the pit bull gets loose, and the kids suggesting that they would call the dog pound and the mother saying no, that it would be too late, there'd be nothing to do. Or if a kid tells a story about some problematic situation, where the child did act agentively to handle the situation, the mother criticizes the child for being too aggressive or speaking out her mind, or the mother will dismiss

the threat as not being a real threat, minimize it, minimize the situation. There are a lot of different ways in which you get families socializing the inability to problem-solve. Not all problem-solving activity is great and helpful, but instead can lead to mental suffering. That's the problem-solving thread in the agoraphobia study.

Klein: *What is it that usually initiates your interest in a research topic? How do you focus in on and decide on a specific area of research, does it develop over time, or is there usually something that sparks your interest ? For example, in your current study-*

Ochs: Most of the time, it's something that sparks my interest but there are many different paths. Generally, for diverse historical autobiographical reasons I write a proposal to look at a particular phenomenon. Like language development in Samoan children or problem-solving discourse in family interactions, or problem-solving discourse among the physicists, etcetera, and usually what happens in those cases is that something in one project leads me to do another project. But I can't tell you in the beginning...why I- sometimes it's just very serendipitous why I'm doing a particular thing, but then that thing leads me to something else.

It has always been the case that when I set out to do what I said I was going to do, that in the course of recording and or transcribing, that I notice something that I hadn't intended to study but seems really incredibly wonderfully interesting, and I start jabbering about it for a long time. And I usually end up writing about that more than the topic that I was going to pursue.

So, for example, in the physics study I started out looking at the relation between the collaborative narration of physicists and during the family dinner, and I ended up looking at how physicists use graphs, and problem-solve through using graphs, and taking liminal interpretative journeys and using a kind of language that is extremely unusual in everyday discourse, because that seemed to be an incredibly interesting thing to look at. So I spent a lot of time looking at that. And then Sally Jacoby and I also looked at the way in which physicists working out the rhetoric of a scientific presentation got co-authors who disagreed about the basic ideas to form a consensus about the ideas by working out what should come first and what should be left out because it's a ten-minute presentation. That was a really interesting phenomenon. But anyway, those two topics were not in the grant proposal. But fortunately, the Spencer Foundation is a wonderful institution because it encourages that kind of noticing and writing. In fact, after I got my MacArthur, one of the first people I wrote to was a person at the Spencer Foundation, because I thought Spencer was really directly responsible in that they've been so incredibly supportive of spontaneity.

A similar thing is happening now with the autism study, which is to look at high-functioning autistic children's involvement in interactions at school and at home. There are two things we've become very interested in. Little did we know

that we were going to find children from diverse language and cultural backgrounds being high-functioning autistic children, and little did we know that parents would be told, once the children were diagnosed, to speak only English to their children, having spoken a completely different language to the child up to that point. That seemed so pressing and important to look at. And Tami Kremer-Sadlik wrote a qualifying paper on this pressing topic.

We have also looked at autistic children playing games — seeing that they seemed to understand the rules of a game but didn't have the strategies of the game, and which has, I think, tremendous implications for a notion of what it means to be culturally competent. And I have been trying to get every book I can get my hands on about rules. What's a rule? And what does it mean to follow a rule? And what's the difference between a rule and a strategy? Looking at autistic children is an incredible way of understanding culture. It's not just that they are culturally impaired but that actually they are revealing to me that a lot of things about culture — again it is this invisiblizing aspect — when you look at another population it makes visible this level of cultural knowledge.

The last thing I've become interested in — I was looking at a videotape that Olga Solomon had made in the house of a high-functioning autistic girl. The girl is looking at a video of a dance recital that she and her sister participated in, which she has looked at many, many times. This is something that autistic kids do a lot — they like to see things over and over and over again. She's looking at a dance performance by her younger sister, who is sitting on the couch next to her, and after it is over, she says, "That's a lovely dance. That's a lovely number," and then Olga repeats, "Yes, that was a lovely dance." I am struck by how different Olga's saying of the assessment is from the autistic child's assessment. Olga was saying it in such a way that it was to be overheard by the younger sister, and it was a way of giving a compliment. It was positive politeness. But when the autistic child was saying it, it seemed like she was only giving an assessment but wasn't necessarily doing it intentionally to make her younger sister feel good.

A similar phenomenon transpired when Tami and I went to another autistic child's house to film a dinner. When the door opened, the little boy who has autism answered the door and had the biggest smile from ear to ear on his face. It was incredible, just complete sheer joy at seeing us, which is great. But I was thinking that this was different from producing a social smile as a greeting to make the person that you're greeting feel good — doing something for the other person's face — it was different — it was that he was just feeling great and then we felt great because he felt great. But this effect was not necessarily part of his intention. I've become really interested in the connection of politeness with theory of mind, that people who are interested in theory of mind should really look at politeness. It struck me that it may be the case that negative politeness may require actually more theory of mind than positive politeness, because negative politeness is about not intruding on another person. Of course, you could teach a child who has autism a formulaic set of things to say like "please" — to learn as rote, but barring

that, it seems to me that negative politeness does require more theory of mind than a lot of these things thought of as positive politeness. So now I'm thinking that I want to see if the autistic kids have negative politeness as a way of seeing that they have theory of mind.

Klein: *Will the MacArthur fellowship allow you to pursue other areas of research that are not connected to language socialization — what are some your plans?*

Ochs: Yes, there are some things that are non-fundable, I suppose, and I'm looking forward to doing them. For example, I have been secretly accumulating information to do a project with a friend of mine on the making of a saint — looking at Dorothy Day, who was written about in the New York Times Magazine. She was the head of a publication called the Catholic Worker and was a very left wing radical. Some of her followers are saying that she should not be made a saint — that was last thing she'd want, she was an anarchist. There is negotiation about her identity. I'm fascinated that after somebody dies, their identity is continuously constructed. Being a saint is categorical — either you are a saint or you are not a saint. There is no idea that you could be a saint and an anarchist (laughter). You're either an anarchist or you're a saint. The way in which this dialogue is going is really, really, interesting and so I've been documenting it.

I've also become interested in the whole process of becoming a saint, requirements like having to perform a miracle. It's just fascinating how one actually determines if one is a saint — and I want to compare the process of becoming a saint to the process of becoming a star. A Hollywood star. And I'd actually like to compare the construction of the identity of Dorothy Day with the construction of Madonna. I think that would be interesting.

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